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Troubling Ecology

Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism

CHELSEA M. FRAZIER

The prevailing disciplinary and theoretical frameworks for comprehending black feminist subjectivity and its integral relationship to world/land/territory/earth ethics are impoverished. One way to address this impoverishment is by turning to black women cultural producers like author Octavia Butler and visual artist Wangechi Mutu to configure a heteromorphic understanding of the social, political, and physical worlds we currently inhabit. Through narrative and visual culture, Wangechi Mutu and Octavia Butler articulate social and political ecologies that move beyond the limited correctives made available through the standards and conventions of Western formal politics. Moreover, I argue that Octavia Butler and Wangechi Mutu disrupt environmental studies frameworks informed by colonial European notions of “the political.” These disruptions allow both Butler and Mutu to aesthetically reconstitute the (un)limits of humanity and construct alternative conceptions of ecological ethics within our present world and beyond it.

Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* is emblematic of the ways in which cultural critiques of racist, sexist, and classist practices are interwoven into and exceed central tenets within environmental studies. The pessimistic *Parable* transports us to a not-so-distant future in which the world has slowly but steadily descended into social, environmental, and economic chaos. Octavia Butler’s harrowing and seemingly apocalyptic depiction of the future centers the instability of the racial, spatial, and gendered organization of our present world. Along a similar vein, visual artist Wangechi Mutu’s boldly colored and richly textured collages featured in her touring 2013 exhibition, *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, detail far-off worlds and seemingly foreign protagonists that defy, challenge, and critique nearly all our racial, spatial, and gender assumptions. Characterizations of black

public figures in the mainstream—and sometimes within formal academic research—often reinforce the erroneous notion that black people do not care about or are indifferent to issues pertaining to the natural environment.¹ This conventional wisdom might explain, in part, why Mutu as an artist and public figure and Butler as a social theorist and author offer alternative perspectives that often go overlooked in feminist and environmentalist circles.

The logic behind linking these two black women cultural producers, who occupy very different *and* intersecting ethnic, cultural, and geographical social positions, emerges from my utilization of a black diasporic framework. The late Octavia Butler, despite her refusal to adhere to the color-blind or whitewashed conventions of science fiction writing, has occupied an exalted place within the genre since her first published novel, *Patternmaster*, in 1976. Across her extensive catalog of novels and short stories she has centered black female subjects and characterized them as “evolved human[s], the next evolutionary step.”² A focus on female subjectivity is one of the most obvious connectors between the two artists. As Mutu herself has clearly articulated, “The power for me is to keep the story of the female in the center, to keep discussing and talking about women as protagonists.”³

Despite their similarities, their differences are notable, especially as Butler is a writer hailing from (and often writing about) California and Mutu is a visual artist born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya. But I dwell on their shared preoccupations and creative commitments because their work lends itself so generously to understandings of black feminist critical culture across time, place, and genre within African diasporic formations.⁴ I also highlight their differences in nationalities and invoke the term “diaspora” to confront and critique comparative frameworks that abound in diaspora and critical ethnic studies. As Alexander Weheliye signals for us,

The particularities of national diasporic groupings occupy central positions in current diaspora discourse, and they do so through the lens of the comparative method. As a result, the empirical existence of national boundaries, or linguistic differences that often help define the national ones, become the ultimate indicators of differentiation and are in danger of entering the discourse record as transcendental truths, rather than as structures and institutions that have served repeatedly to relegate black subjects to the status of western modernity’s nonhuman other.⁵

Though I am investigating Mutu and Butler within and through conceptions of diaspora, a central intervention this essay aims to make in critical

ethnic studies and diaspora discourse is a commitment to resisting the comparative frameworks that presently flourish in the field(s). I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that Mutu and Butler's nationalities and cultural and geographic locations inform their visions and work. My investigation into their visual and literary contributions, however, refuses an analytic that focuses on the ways in which their national and cultural differences/particularities justify their connected exploration. Instead, this article focuses on the through-lines that bridge Mutu and Butler: centered black female subjectivity, attention to place and displacement, land connectivity, scrutinized notions of citizenship, and the reconfiguration of the human subject. These through-lines ultimately work to reorder rather than reify the "structures and institutions that have served repeatedly to relegate black subjects to the status of western modernity's nonhuman other."⁶

Furthermore, I make fundamental use of Richard Iton's critical notions of diaspora. As he explains,

Approaching diaspora as anaformative impulse, in other words, that which resists hierarchy, hegemony, and administration, suggests a different orientation toward this category of politics. From this perspective, which might be thought of as a temporally distinct stage from that characterized by the denial and desiring of "Africa," the primary focus is on deconstructing colonial sites and narratives and rearticulating them in ways that delink geography and power. This would require a politics not reducible to the language of citizenship and governance, and accordingly, allergic to the sensibilities underlying the national (and, to some extent, the international and transnational to the degree that they depend on or reinscribe the nation-state). Moreover, it would mean being suspicious of homeland narratives and indeed any authenticating geographies that demand fixity, hierarchy, and hegemony. Conceiving of diaspora as anaform, we are encouraged, then, to put (all) space into play.⁷

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Wangechi Mutu's *A Fantastic Journey*, read through the lens of "diaspora as anaformative impulse," perform the aesthetic work of "deconstructing colonial sites and narratives and rearticulating them in ways that delink geography and power." Additionally, in the worlds Butler and Mutu create, their protagonists are illegible within the confines of anything resembling a nation-state. Thusly, the politics—often explicitly stated by Butler's characters or embedded within Mutu's visual fields—are irreducible to the language of citizenship, cultural particularity,

and national governance as we currently conceive of it. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Mutu's *A Fantastic Journey* both bespeak "the denial and desiring" of their respective homelands (in ways that are legible and reducible to the language of citizenship, cultural particularity, and national governance) but often do so to signal the necessary transformation of these geographies. Through narrative and visual culture, Butler and Mutu delink geography and power and put all space into play in order to keep critical attention on black female subjectivity and resistive notions of ecological relationality.

Delinking geography and power is a significant step toward reconfiguring our earth ethics, particularly as environmental studies frameworks have traditionally been informed by colonial European notions of "the political."⁸ More specifically, I mean that environmental studies and activism has traditionally been aligned with mainstream political discourse in its emphasis on liberal reform as an ideal strategy for addressing its concerns. Sylvia Wynter reveals a key flaw in this line of reasoning. In her essay "Unsettling Coloniality," Wynter opens by asserting:

[My] argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conceptions of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy, of the human species itself/ourselves.⁹

Wynter argues that Western philosophy has constructed and continually reinforced the idea of Western Man as the measure of humanity. She also emphasizes that the securing of Western Man as an ethnoclass is fundamentally at odds with the securing of "the human species itself/ourselves." Elsewhere, Wynter has argued that

our present master discipline of economics discursively functions as a *secular priesthood* of the U.S. nation-state's economic system. As well as, therefore, of the overall globally incorporated world-systemic capitalist economic order in its now neoliberal and neo-imperial, homo-oeconomicus bourgeois ruling-class configuration at a world-systemic level—of which the United States is still its superpower hegemon.¹⁰

Here, Wynter explains that the United States and its role as global superpower facilitates the existence of a "world systemic capitalist economic

order” based on neoliberal and neoimperial ethics. These ethics are rooted in and inextricably linked to the notion of Western Man as human. The kind of environmental studies or activism that tethers itself to a neoliberal, neoimperial ethics that sustains our present “world systemic capitalist economic order” can never retard or alleviate our struggles rooted in environmental degradation. If anything, by uncritically relying on traditional approaches to environmental rehabilitation and conservation via legislative reform, for example, many environmentalist activists and scholars reinforce the very system they claim to be fighting. Wynter outlines this conflict quite clearly as she argues:

The correlated hypothesis here is that all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth’s resources (20 percent of the world’s peoples own 80 percent of its resources, consume two-thirds of its food, and are responsible for 75 percent of its ongoing pollution, with this leading to two billion of earth’s peoples living relatively affluent lives while four billion still on the edge of hunger and immiseration, to the dynamic of overconsumption on the part of the rich techno-industrial North paralleled by that overpopulation on the part of the dispossessed poor, still partly agrarian worlds of the South)—these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.¹¹

Following Wynter, I insist that “the West” itself—its divisions of space and its rigid notions of the human subject—are insufficient frameworks through which “global warming, severe climate change, and the sharply unequal distribution of the earth’s resources” can be effectively addressed. We must consider these issues while concurrently addressing a central conflict from which these issues emerge: a fraught and delimited understanding of human subjectivity.

In her effort to connect environmental struggles with a delimited understanding of human subjectivity, Jane Bennett questions the very necessity of an “environmentalist” stance entirely. In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett ponders “whether environmentalism remains the best way to frame the problems, whether it is the most persuasive rubric for challenging the American equation of prosperity with wanton consumption, or for inducing more generally, the political will to create more sustainable political economies in or adjacent to global capitalism.”¹² Bennett’s

questions about the persuasiveness of environmentalism, coupled with Wynter's critiques, implore me to consider Bennett's alternative for framing these problems: vital materialism. According to Bennett, traditional environmental ethics are reliant on an abstraction of human bodies from their "passive environments" and leave little room for "animals, vegetables, or minerals" to be considered fully acknowledged political subjects. Furthermore, according to Bennett, a vital materialist stance is more useful than an environmental one because it (1) makes human and nonhuman relationality horizontal as opposed to vertical/hierarchical, and (2) insists on the vitality or aliveness of all matter—drawing out the ways in which humanity in its bacterial and mineral makeup is not as distinct from "everything else" as we would like to believe. Bennett's vital materialism not only includes a far more nuanced understanding of our relationships to other forms of materiality but also aims at drawing out horizontalized connections to others—human and nonhuman. Given the history of racialized exclusion in mainstream environmental discourse, a horizontalized vital materialism seems to speak back to those inherent hierarchies that not only abstract human bodies from their "passive environments" but also agitate political structures and hierarchies "that have served repeatedly to relegate black subjects to the status of western modernity's nonhuman other."¹³

While Bennett's interventions are incredibly useful, at second glance, her proposition does have problems that she herself anticipates. There are dangers in an approach that seeks to lessen the distinctness between "humanity" and "the rest of matter." Despite her attempt to democratize all forms of materiality, Bennett's vital materialist stance retains the potential of opening the floodgates for even more ruthless forms of instrumentalizing human beings. Bennett tries to address these dangers, emphasizing the idea that "if matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated."¹⁴ Additionally, Bennett aims to demonstrate that vital materialism relies on an understanding that "all bodies become more than mere object, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief."¹⁵ Given the extensive colonial and Middle Passage histories of the violent instrumentalization of black subjects who have struggled for centuries to be recognized as "human," a restructuring of ecological ethics that retains the readied potential for *further* objectification is worrying at best and preposterous at worst. At the same time, given the messy (non) distinctions between so many different forms of materiality that Bennett highlights, it becomes difficult to completely dismiss her logic.

Both Wynter and Bennett signal that a “new” environmental politics cannot come as a result of liberal reform or black inclusivity within extant mainstream political discourse but only after understandings of relational human subjectivity are deeply scrutinized and restructured. Moreover, because of the roots of all the “isms” that Wynter coherently reports for us, a truly “new” environmental politics would render our present world unrecognizable. This article is concerned with the work of imagining this other world and other relationalities between material forms. In the pages that follow, I examine the ways Octavia Butler and Wangechi Mutu effectively *trouble ecology* as they lead us away from the limitations of traditional environmental studies while offering transgressive visions that center black female subjectivity, challenge the (dis)connections between human and non-human entities, and initiate alternative notions of environmental/ecological ethics.

BUTLER'S PARABLES

In this section I argue that in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* her protagonist Lauren Olamina troubles conceptions of environmentalism and offers a radical model of ecological ethics that exceeds and critiques assumptions outlined in ecology, political theory, and black feminist discourses. As Sylvia Mayer highlights, “Octavia Butler uses the genre of speculative fiction to delineate a plausible scenario of a future ecological and socioeconomic catastrophe and to tell stories of diverse attempts to come to terms with it.”¹⁶ I wholly agree with this assessment but pause when Mayer asserts that “the novel belongs to the tradition of apocalyptic ecologism that was started in the United States by Rachel Carson's publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962.”¹⁷ Though Mayer is interested in situating *Parable of the Sower* within a tradition of environmental literature, she is careful to distinguish Butler's work by pointing out that “like Carson's text, it focuses on the effects of largely anthropogenic ecological damage, but even more than Carson, Butler foregrounds issues of environmental justice.”¹⁸ Finally, Mayer reinforces her insistence on Butler's inclusion in a tradition of mainstream environmentalism by emphasizing that by “using a narrator from a socially marginalized group, the young, female, black Lauren Oya Olamina, and by focusing on the experiences of low income, multiethnic, largely though not exclusively, non-white communities [Butler] puts emphasis on the nexus of social justice and environmental degradation.”¹⁹ Mayer's characterizations of Butler's

novel are convincing, but the conceptual framing under which she builds her argument enables some limiting implications. The tradition of U.S. environmentalism has been very white and very wed to the notions of liberal reform that inevitably support a “world systemic capitalist economic order.” Mayer claims that Octavia Butler “belongs to the tradition” of U.S. environmentalism started by Rachel Carson but that “belonging” or inclusion in that tradition, according to Mayer’s logic, is predicated on the idea that environmental justice must be foregrounded. In the United States, the canon of environmental literature has historically been dominated by transcendentalist figures, such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and thus predominated with constructions of nature that emanate from a perspective of white male subjectivity. On the one hand, Mayer’s rhetorical move can be read as a necessary move that seeks to include a more diverse set of voices in environmental literary studies. On the other hand, the price of including a dynamic voice like Butler’s becomes the relegation of her literary and theoretical contributions to the proverbial “environmental justice corner.” This flattens the usefulness of her work and does little to acknowledge the ways in which *Parable of the Sower* gestures toward an abolishment of the larger white supremacist, capitalist-driven structure of American society and thus mainstream environmentalism with it. That said, my argument moves against the well-meaning intentions behind Mayer’s intervention and instead regards Butler’s novel as an articulation of strategic divestment (not improvement) of the gendered, spatialized, and racialized, structure of “the West.” Butler’s engagement with environmentalism troubles it, disallowing its seamless inclusion into a genre predicated on rigid racial and anthropocentric hierarchy.

The scorched and decayed landscape of a future California—the central setting in *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel, *Parable of the Talents*—serves as a physical representation of the terrifying world that Lauren Olamina struggles against both physically and emotionally. Lauren lives in the United States during and following the year 2024. Food and water are scarce, extremely severe natural disasters are commonplace, and the government infrastructure tasked to address these circumstances has completely collapsed. As Adam Johns points out, “Butler’s dystopia is created by continuing current trends, such as global warming or radicalizing Christian fundamentalism, to their logical extremes, without sudden transitions as no definitive cataclysm is ever experienced.”²⁰ Lauren’s world looks postapocalyptic, but is probably a world that Rob Nixon would say has fallen victim to “slow

violence”—which is environmental and social violence that moves gradually and often invisibly while enabling hellish conditions for poor, marginalized groups.²¹ The gap between the wealthy and the poor has widened beyond any kind of conceivable balance, and the only pockets of somewhat stable life are within small walled-in communities throughout the States. Lauren lives in one of these communities in Robledo, California. She narrates,

And we're in Robledo—20 miles from Los Angeles, and according to Dad, a once rich, green, unwall'd little city that he had been eager to abandon when he was a young man. . . . Crazy to live without a wall to protect you. Even in Robledo, most of the street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, and homeless people in general—are dangerous. They're desperate or crazy or both. That's enough to make anyone dangerous. . . . Worse for me, they have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms, and legs . . . they carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don't get enough to eat so they're malnourished—or they eat bad food and poison themselves. As I rode, I tried not to look around at them, but I couldn't help seeing—collecting—some of their general misery.²²

Misery, disease, and starvation run rampant, and services provided by firemen or police officers—services that are viewed in the modern West as basic human necessities—have become unaffordable to anyone who is not grossly wealthy. The most jarring element of Butler's future California is its similarities in aesthetics and patterns to the world we inhabit presently. The descriptions sound like the aforementioned pronouncements by Wynter as she details the “sharply unequal distribution of the earth's resources.”²³ Wynter's analysis reminds us that right now there are communities in the United States and globally in desperate conditions—conditions that propagate the kind of violent and disturbing behavior Lauren describes. The affective dimension of these conditions are intensified within the aesthetics of Butler's novels, where she narrates what Lance Newman²⁴ might identify as the material processes of exploitation that “prop-up” the untreated diseases and festering wounds of the poor—and with them white supremacy and patriarchy.

The obvious connection to present-day conditions has left many critics challenged by the myriad symbols that populate Butler's work. Slavery, across her novels, is a prominent component. As Madhu Dubey incisively points out,

The last of Butler's novels to contain direct and extended allusions to the fugitive-slave narrative, *Parable* marks a departure from *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* in its orientation toward the future rather than the past: the novel depicts a twenty-first-century dystopian society marked by widespread debt bondage to multinational corporations. Inserting repeated references to antebellum slavery into this futurist dystopia, Butler exploits the distinctive temporality of extrapolative science fiction in order to capture the novel forms of inequality spawned by global capitalism.²⁵

Dubey's argument connects directly to environmental justice themes elucidated through an engagement with slavery. The "novel forms of inequality spawned by global capitalism" in *Parable* of which Dubey speaks is a recurrent theme in radical minority discourse as well as in environmental discourse. The connections here are also conversant with the theoretical underpinnings of black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers. In her seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Spillers provides a synopsis of the re-configuration(s) of black female subjectivity within and after the Middle Passage. She notes that

in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of "female" and "male" adhere to no symbolic integrity. At a time when current critical discourses appear to compel us more and more decidedly toward gender "undecidability," it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the integrity of female/male gender. But undressing these conflation of meaning, as they appear under the rule of dominance, would restore, as figurative possibility, not only Power to the Female (for Maternity), but also Power to the Male (for Paternity). We would gain, in short, the potential for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture.²⁶

Essentially, Spillers explains how "the historic outline of dominance"—in another context possibly understood as global capitalism, or even modernity—male and female are emptied of their highly contingent symbolic meaning. For Spillers, acknowledging this point allows her to theorize the possibility of subjects to name and position their subjectivities outside of traditional gender-binaried expectations and "along a range of stress points, including biology in its intersection with the project of culture." When Spillers historicizes the unmaking of gender as we conceptualize it generally, her theoretical framing encourages a potential for dismissing the impulse to

“insist on the integrity of female/male gender”—especially for black subjects.²⁷ The theoretical contributions of Butler and Spillers are conversant with one another. Butler insists on unmaking the gender of her protagonist, Lauren Olamina, throughout the narrative. This not only becomes crucial to Lauren’s survival but also vital to her development of a critical ecological ethics and to her envisioning of a truly “new” ordering of the world.

Lauren is unique for many reasons; central among them are her disruptive gender identity and performance, her hyperempathy syndrome (a psychic delusion that allows her to feel/share the pain and pleasure of those around her), and her self-authored religion, Earthseed. All these deeply correlative elements are critical to the construction of the character and Butler’s imagining of a “new” black female subject.

Butler describes Lauren’s considerable height and intelligence as stand-out characteristics among her peers. Lauren’s differences, even as they are sometimes viewed as undesirable, prove fruitful for her in many respects. The ways in which Lauren responds to and uses both her biologically determined attributes and her subject position within the larger capitalist-driven, patriarchal, ecologically imbalanced, and Christian fundamentalist culture are emblematic of what Spillers calls for when she acknowledges “the potential for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture.”²⁸

In Lauren’s world, the “project of culture” includes a dizzying and disappointing array of conservative dynamics that frustrate and annoy her. As she narrates, “Not many girls in the neighborhood have babies before they drag some boy to my father and have him unite them in holy matrimony.”²⁹ In another explication of the gender dynamics in her Robledo community, Lauren accounts,

The Mosses don’t come to church. Richard Moss has put together his own religion—a combination of the Old Testament and historical West African practices. He claims that God wants men to be patriarchs, rulers, and protectors of women, and fathers of as many children as possible. He’s an engineer for one of the big commercial water companies, so he can afford to pick up beautiful, young, homeless women and live with them in polygamous relationships. He could pick up twenty women like that if he could afford to feed them. I hear there’s a lot of that kind of thing going on in other neighborhoods. Some middle class men prove they’re men by having a lot

of wives and temporary or permanent relationships. Some upper class men prove they're men by having one wife and a lot of beautiful, disposable young servant girls. Nasty. When the girls get pregnant, if their rich employers won't protect them, the employer's wives throw them out to starve.³⁰

In her indictment of the horribly unequal gender relations that crowd her time-space, Lauren continues the work of casting aside the symbolic integrity of male/female gender. The "manhood" of the subjects Lauren mentions is reduced to their behavior and the ways in which they "prove they're men" at the expense of not only the young, poor (though not necessarily black) women at their disposal, but their displeased wives. Butler exposes the inadequacies of these dynamics as she writes,

The Moss girls were both bullied and sheltered. They were almost never allowed to leave the walls of the neighborhood. They were educated at home by their mothers according to the religion their father assembled and they were warned away from the sin and contamination of the rest of the world. I'm surprised that Aura was allowed to come to us for gun handling instruction and target practice. I hope it will be good for her—and I hope the rest of us will survive.³¹

For some women, like the wives and children of Richard Moss, participation in the Robledo community-organized target practice falls outside of what is expected of women. Presumably, they do not need to learn to protect themselves because they have husbands and fathers to protect them. Lauren articulates these beliefs as silly and dangerous. Furthermore, Lauren's rejection of conservative gender roles and her recognition of the necessity of target practice allows her to gain a better understanding of how her hyperempathy syndrome works when she is forced to take a nonhuman life. As she explains,

I didn't like it, but it wasn't painful. It felt like a big soft, strange ghost blow, like getting hit with a huge ball of air, but with no coolness, no feeling of wind. The blow, though still soft, was a little harder with squirrels and sometimes rats than with birds. All three had to be killed, though. They ate our food or ruined it. Tree-crops were their special victims: Peaches, plums, figs, persimmons, nuts . . . and crops like strawberries, blackberries [and] grapes. . . . Whatever we planted, if they could get at it, they would.³²

Most importantly, her expanded knowledge of her hyperempathy syndrome is what shapes her understanding of her place in relationship to not only other human beings but other forms of nonhuman life as well. When describing the sensation/experience of shooting small animals like birds or squirrels, she explains that though shooting animals triggers her hyperempathy syndrome, it does so in a way that differs from her experiences that are triggered by humans. Her (over)attention to the feelings of others as a result of her hyperempathy syndrome (arguably her biology) as well as her attention to her subject position as a young, black woman result in the discrete moments where her ethical relationship to other forms of nonhuman life are most pronounced. In a later scene at target practice, Lauren explains:

I did some shooting today, and I was leaning against a boulder watching others shoot, when I realized there was a dog nearby watching me. Just one dog—male, yellow-brown, sharp-eared, shorthaired. He wasn't big enough to make a meal of me, and I still had the Smith & Wesson, so while he was looking me over, I took a good look at him. He was lean, but he didn't look starved. He looked alert and curious. He sniffed the air, and I remembered that dogs were supposed to be oriented more toward scent than sight.³³

While everyone else—particularly Aura Moss—becomes panicked at the sight of this wild dog, Lauren relies on her keen observations to try and make up her own mind. Here Butler continues the work of agitating symbolic gender rules by narrating the ways in which the Moss girls are at a disadvantage in contrast to Lauren. Because of their shelteredness as a result of being Richard's wives, their exposure to the outside world restricts their ability to accurately read the signs of their environment. Lauren's indifference and resistance to prescribed gender roles is what allows her to enthusiastically embrace an education about the outside world. Furthermore, she utilizes these learnings and skills in order to survive and preserve the time, ammunition, and energy she might otherwise waste being fearful. For Lauren, a panting-though-nonthreatening dog becomes an entity to be appreciated or learned from rather than feared and attacked.

In a later passage, Lauren's hyperempathy forces her to make a tough decision when a different wild dog does in fact pose a threat—though in a way one might not expect:

One by one, we came abreast of the dog that had been shot and walked past it. It was a bigger, grayer animal than the one I had seen. There was a beauty

to it. It looked like pictures I had seen of wolves. It was wedged against a hanging boulder just a few steps up the steep canyon wall from us. It moved. I saw its bloody wounds as it twisted. I bit my tongue as the pain I knew it must feel became my pain. What to do? Keep walking? I couldn't. One more step and I would fall and lie in the dirt, helpless against the pain. Or I might fall into the canyon. . . . I thought I would throw up. My belly hurt more and more until I felt skewered through the middle. I leaned on my bike with my left arm. With my right hand, I drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed, and shot the beautiful dog through its head. I felt the impact of the bullet as a hard, solid blow—something beyond pain. Then I felt the dog die. I saw it jerk, shudder, stretch, its body long, then freeze, I saw it die. I felt it die. It went out like a match in a sudden vanishing of pain. Its life flared up, then went out. I went a little numb. Without the bike, I would have collapsed.³⁴

Through its felt pain and death, Lauren's hyperempathy allows her, if even for a second, to become animal. It is important to note that my reading of Lauren's animality resists conceptions of animality that function at the level of analogy. For further elaboration on this distinction, I turn now to a brief critique outlined by Alexander Weheliye in *Habeas Viscus* that exposes some unfortunate trends that recur within the field of animal studies. As Weheliye notes,

It is remarkable, for instance, how the (not so) dreaded comparison between human and animal slavery is brandished about in the field of animal studies and how black liberation struggles serve as both the positive and negative foil for making a case for the sentience and therefore emancipation of non-human beings. This sleight of hand comes easy to those critics attempting to achieve animal rights and is frequently articulated comparatively vis-à-vis black subjects' enslavement in the Americas.³⁵

I highlight this moment in *Parable* and Weheliye's critique for a couple of reasons. To be clear, I am interested in investigating the way Butler theorizes different forms of relationality between humans and others. Included in that theorizing is an appreciation for and value of various forms of nonhuman life including plants and animals. I also have aimed to root those concerns within a diasporic black studies framework. Black studies discourse—particularly in the continental United States—has been extremely critical, if not outright resistant to, the use of analogy between black subjects (in this case, Lauren) and animals. As Christine Gerhardt points out, "Numerous

publications, mostly in the field of African-American studies, have emphasized how the symbolic association of blacks with wild, ‘beastly’ nature has reinforced the exploitation of blacks in American history.”³⁶ That said, thinking through this moment at the level of analogy would be insufficient and highly problematic—especially because the logic implies that blackness (often understood to be always already bestial) when compared to animal slavery signals devolution into animality.³⁷ This implied devolution, as well as the hesitancy on the part of most scholars in black studies discourse to engage notions of animality given its connection to the “reinforced exploitation of blacks,” often forecloses the opportunity for productively theorizing different forms of relationality between humans / black subjects and animals. That said, the productivity I seek to excavate becomes exemplified in Wangechi Mutu’s amalgamations of human and nonhuman animal symbols and also very clearly in this moment captured by Butler’s narrative where Lauren accounts: “The pain I knew [the dog] must feel became my pain” and “I saw it die. I felt it die.”³⁸ In this intimate moment, Lauren is not *like* an animal, but instead becomes animal—opening her to a different set of experiences that radically deepens her connection to another form of life.

Given her capacity for deeper connection, among other characteristics, Lauren offers a conception of humanity unwed to white, male, patriarchal, neoliberal, neoimperial conceptions of humanity. As I will now show, Lauren’s disruptive gender performance and her hyperempathy syndrome, in conjunction with her development of Earthseed, are the moments where her ecological ethics cohere further. It is important to note that her development of Earthseed directly challenges many of the sentiments held by those closest to her. Her immediate family and friends do not share Lauren’s beliefs in the slightest. To her best friend, Joanne, she explains how “three books on survival in the wilderness, three on guns and shooting, two each on handling medical emergencies, California native and naturalized plants and their uses, and basic living: log cabin-building, livestock raising, plant cultivation, soap-making—that kind of thing”³⁹ have undergirded her self-fashioned education on survival and self-preservation. When Joanne makes it clear that she thinks Lauren is crazy, Lauren retorts:

I’m trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there. I think we should all study books like these. I think we should bury money and other necessities in the ground where thieves won’t find them, I think we should all make emergency packs—grab and run packs—in case we have

to get out of here in a hurry. Money, food, clothes, matches, a blanket . . . I think we should fix places outside where we can meet in case we get separated. Hell, I think a lot of things. And I know—I know!—that no matter how many things I think of, they won't be enough. Every time I go outside, I try to imagine what it might be like to live out there without walls, and I realize I don't know anything.⁴⁰

Her plan for survival scares Joanne, and when Joanne betrays Lauren's trust and tells both their families about Lauren's line of reasoning, it causes problems for her and her father, Dr. Olamina. Her father is a man that has developed some sustainable ways for maintaining the safety of his family and himself, but his conversations with Lauren reveal that she does not entirely agree with his logic:

"I loaned a book about California plants and the ways Indians used them. It was one of your books. I'm sorry I loaned it to her. It's so neutral, I didn't think it could cause trouble. But I guess it has."

He looked startled, then he almost smiled. "Yes, I will have to have that one back all right. You wouldn't have the acorn bread you like so much without that one—not to mention a few other things we take for granted."

"Acorn bread . . . ?"

He nodded. "Most people in the country don't eat acorns, you know. They have no tradition of eating them, they don't know how to prepare them, and for some reason they find the idea of eating them disgusting. Some of our neighbors wanted to cut down all our big live oak trees and plant something useful. You wouldn't believe the time I had changing their minds."⁴¹

Dr. Olamina has clearly passed an appreciation for practical education to his daughter and even he has run into illogical resistance from uneducated peers regarding strategies for adaptation and survival. The difference between them, however, is that Lauren is not interested in using those strategies for adaptation for the purpose of improving her existing culture or hoping for its return to "better days." Lauren leans into the idea of her society's decay because of a desire to build something completely new from the destruction. Lauren's views contrast with those held by conservationists who seek to conserve environmental resources for the ultimate purpose of sustaining the economy and society as it presently functions. Though heavily centered on

themes of ecology, *Parable* does not advocate for a romanticized—though ultimately exploitative—preservation of or “return to nature.”

For Lauren, Earthseed becomes her blueprint for building a new world. Her new world unfortunately (but necessarily) costs her the comfort of the walled-in world she knows and many of the people in it. As she predicts, a number of tragedies plague her family: the disappearance and then death of her younger brother, the disappearance and presumed death of her father, and the total destruction of her Robledo community, including her stepmother and remaining younger brothers. The day she fears arrives and her preparation for it, though better than most, is still insufficient. The invasions and burning of her community sets her and the only other remaining members of her community—Richard Moss’s youngest wife, Zahra, and her childhood friend Harry—on a journey north in search of a better life. On this journey up the coast of California, nearly everything they know becomes unfamiliar to them—including their understanding of the advantages and pitfalls of their various subject positions and gender presentations. Their journey calls to mind more insights from Spillers and her delineation of the (un)gendering that occurred for black subjects as a result of the Middle Passage. She writes,

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all. In as much as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally “unmade,” thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that “exposed” their destinies to an unknown course. Often enough for the captains of these galleys, navigational science of the day was not sufficient to guarantee the intended destination. We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of possibility that is not interrupted, not “counted”/“accounted,” or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into “account” as quantities. The female in “Middle Passage,” as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies “less room” in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart.⁴²

The differences between the on-foot migration in *Parable* and the centuries-long Middle Passage that Spillers explains are many, but the two events do retain a few similarities that are helpful for theorizing these moments in Butler's text. In the nowhere-space of their journey, Lauren, Harry, and Zahra were "culturally 'unmade,' thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that 'exposed' their destinies to an unknown course." As Lauren and her companions undergo cultural mutations, their respective genders and racial identifications shift. When strategizing for the journey, Lauren reveals, "I was thinking of traveling as a man," and everyone agrees that it is the safest bet for them given the material conditions under which they must travel and the "figurative darkness" they must combat. As Zahra explains of these conditions, "Mixed couples catch hell whether people think they're gay or straight. Harry'll piss off all the blacks and you'll piss off all the whites."⁴³ Lauren, recognizing these constraints, replies, "We [Zahra and I] can be a black couple and their white friend. If Harry can get a reasonable tan, maybe we can claim him as a cousin."⁴⁴ It is striking that Zahra makes an assumption that traveling together would engender suspicion that Lauren (while presenting as a man) and Harry might be gay—but that that would not be their biggest problem. Zahra is more concerned about the fact that they are a mixed-race group of travelers. Considering the rampant conservatism of their time-space, it is telling that queerness would be less of a problem than an interracial romantic pairing. The juxtaposition of these two concerns suggests that blackness (on a conceptual level) functions as a foremost and polarizing signifier in what Butler arranges. It is also telling that, despite her own observations and warnings, Zahra remains steadfastly against cutting her own hair and attempting to pass as a man like Lauren intends to—even as it might offer her more safety. That said, it is no small thing that Lauren welcomes, if not prefers, the opportunity to pass. The disruption is not arbitrary and it is not the only moment where Butler continues to unloosen maleness and femaleness from their symbolic principles.

Their first real challenge comes when the group has to kill an attacker in self-defense. Harry has a hard time adjusting, not only to what will be required of him in terms of his actions, but also in his role as subordinate to Lauren:

"Do you want to break off with us," Zahra asked, "go your own way without us?"

His gaze softened as he looked at her. "No," he said. "Of course not. But we don't have to turn into animals, for godsake."

“In a way, we do,” I said. “We’re a pack, the three of us, and all those other people out there aren’t in it. If we’re a good pack, and we work together, we have a chance. You can be sure we aren’t the only pack out here.”

He leaned back against a rock, and said with amazement, “You damn sure talk macho enough to be a guy.”

I almost hit him. Maybe Zahra and I would be better off without him. But no, that wasn’t true. Numbers mattered. Friendship mattered. One real male presence mattered.⁴⁵

This moment is critical for all three characters. This is another moment where becoming animal does not signal devolution into animality but rather an appreciation for other animals from which survival skills might be learned. Moreover, Lauren’s role as leader becomes solidified. This is not Harry’s pack; it’s Lauren’s. She has the most resources, physical and mental strength, and willingness to make tough, quick decisions. Though male presence is appreciated, that maleness becomes disentangled from assumed leadership. Butler underscores this dynamic, as Lauren narrates,

Harry gave a wan smile. “I hate this world already,” he said. “It’s not so bad if people stick together.”

He looked from her to me and back to her again. He smiled at her and nodded. It occurred to me then that he liked her, was attracted to her. That could be a problem for her later. She was a beautiful woman, and I would never be beautiful—which didn’t bother me. Boys had always seemed to like me. But Zahra’s looks grabbed male attention. If she and Harry get together, she could end up carrying two heavy loads northward.⁴⁶

The contrast here between Lauren and Zahra is telling. Conceivably, both women are potential mates or sex partners for Harry, but in reality Zahra is the only viable option. There is no competition between the two, because the narrative demonstrates that Lauren, though she exhibits heterosexual desire, is disinterested and decidedly unavailable for a kind of partnering that would cause her to defer to the manipulations of the men in her life. This unavailability is not a result of arbitrary rebelliousness but instead reflects her need to protect her larger goals from any potential conflicts. Her dedication to her priorities, which aids in her leadership role, dismisses Harry before the inclination can be felt between either of them to be mates in this way. Additionally, Lauren’s other encounters with men show that despite her heterosexual desires, complicity within normative gender performance

is out of the question. Outside the walls of Robledo, in the desperate and dangerous conditions of their travels, she has even less incentive to compromise her resistance. For example, the potential burden of pregnancy that remains for Zahra once her attraction to Harry is revealed starkly contrasts the “heavy load” of Earthseed that gestates within Lauren as she carries it and gives birth to it on her journey northward.

Despite her disruptive gender performance, it is necessary to clarify that this reading of Lauren is based on her gender presentation rather than a suggestion of queer, same-gender loving desire. Unlike many of Octavia Butler’s protagonists in her other novels, Lauren is emphatically heterosexual. When meeting a man that becomes one of her new travel mates, Travis, Lauren waxes, “Looking at him makes me want to touch him and see how all that perfect skin feels. He’s young, good looking, and intense.”⁴⁷ Lauren’s attractions are important. As Butler underscores the intensity of Lauren’s desire, she points to the idea that although Lauren is not immune to her sexual cravings, she recognizes her circumstances and the ways that acting impulsively in response to her impulses might limit her larger goals for Earthseed. This self-discipline often allows room for further development of her independent thoughts, ideas, and responses to the rapidly changing landscape: “I felt alone between the two couples. I let them talk about their hopes and rumors of northern edens. I took out my notebook and began to write up the day’s events, still savoring the last of the chocolate.”⁴⁸ There is room for aloneness (though not necessarily loneliness), reflections, and pleasure in Lauren’s queered solitude. The space she occupies between the two more conventional couples leaves room for self-creation and imaginative thoughts about a world to come.

As a leader, Lauren decodes outdated maps, discovers places of refuge, and is charismatic enough to rally her steadily expanding group of travelers. Throughout the novel, many of the spaces where her group retreats from the bleak realities of their voyage are in the “wilderness.” Hidden by the cover of trees or next to the Pacific Ocean is where they talk, share, eat, relax, have sex, and debate about Earthseed together. Lauren accepts and confronts the realities of change in every single form of matter on Earth, and that acceptance allows her to articulate her religious beliefs that position humans as change agents. In the face of incredibly harrowing conditions, hopeful patience and liberal reform have never been viable options for improvement. Just as her hyperempathy syndrome allows her a deeper connection with animals and other humans, her attention to change allows her to develop an ecological ethics that respects the agency of other forms

of matter as well as her relationship to those entities. Furthermore, her beliefs, while self-authored, gestate in collaboration with other people's ideas and questions. She leads even as the hierarchical aspects of that leadership are troubled. Adam Johns sums up the effects of Lauren's Earthseed nicely, as he explains:

To return to the most explicit of the *Parable* novels: change isn't merely powerful. It is ceaseless. We cannot be fixed, even if we are limited. Because we cannot be static, we can have at least some influence on the direction of change. To change our environment is to change our body, or the bodies of our descendants. Changing the environmental can, in some cases, even lead to genetic changes, which is precisely the subject of the *Parable* novels: a dystopian environment gives rise to genetic mutations, one of which [Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome] appears to be maladaptive, but turns out to be adaptive because of the religious-communitarian vision which it enables. The highly adaptive mutation helps, in turn, to establish a new environment, rich (although hardly saturated) with utopian possibilities.⁴⁹

Johns's comments punctuate the notion that *Parable of the Sower* is about ecological ethics, yes—but an ethics that points to new and fundamentally different possibilities and not improvements of existing ones.

JOURNEYING WITH WANGECHI

Wangechi Mutu's work in many ways can be read as the visual counterpart to and representation of the kinds of "highly adaptive mutations" that Adam Johns describes above. In *Mutu*, we find another cultural producer imagining new mutations of humanity and constructing new ecologies "rich with utopian possibilities" that reflect and audaciously critique the racial, spatial, and gendered ordering of our present world. Trevor Schoonmaker highlights "the diptych *Yo Mama* created for the exhibition *Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art" in 2003 and featured in her exhibition *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey* as "one of Mutu's earliest and most overtly feminist works."⁵⁰ Schoonmaker goes on to point out that "this diptych retells the Christian story of Adam and Eve; this time, Eve defeats the conniving serpent and rules over her own kingdom."⁵¹ Schoonmaker's reading helps us to excavate the kind of political work that Mutu engages. Slightly resisting Schoonmaker, I suggest that in *Yo Mama*, Mutu takes up a fundamental origin story in the tradition



Figure 1. *Yo Mama*, 2003. Ink, mica flakes, pressure-sensitive synthetic. Polymer sheeting, cut-and-pasted printed paper, painted paper, and synthetic polymer paint on paper. Overall: 59.125 × 85 inches (150.2 × 215.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

of Western Judeo-Christian thought and not only provides a representation that omits Western “Man” as a primal figure but also displaces earth itself as an origin point for the whole of “humanity.” Sure, the protagonist in *Yo Mama* could be a reimagining of Eve, but I wonder what thinking of this figure as something or someone a bit less familiar might yield for us. The geography, ecology, and “humanity” signaled in the diptych are just as familiar as they are strange. I aim to highlight how Mutu’s critiques linger—not so subtly—in the interstitial familiar strangeness of blackness, spatial organization, and gender play, which is exactly where the concerns of this article lie.

It is quite extraordinary that Kenyan-born, Brooklyn-based Wangechi Mutu was featured prominently in the 2014 exhibition entitled *Earth Matters* at the National Museum of African Art located in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. An accompanying publication of the same name featured a short essay by Mutu entitled “The Power of Earth in My Work.”⁵² Of the dozens of brilliant African artists featured in the exhibit and publication, Mutu was one of only four other artists selected to have their remarks appear alongside critical discussions of their art. In a welcome departure from the conventional wisdom that would have us believe that black people are

unaware of or indifferent to issues regarding the environment, this *African and American*,⁵³ anointed by the Smithsonian Institute and the contemporary art scene, had indeed garnered enough recognition to speak authoritatively about nature. Mutu is the first contributor to appear in the volume and she is the only woman artist given a voice alongside three of her male contemporaries. The first words she offers in her essay are, “The people that I hail from are crop cultivators and landowners. We’re farmer people.”⁵⁴ Mutu’s opening statement purposely invokes an intergenerational lineage that underscores her authority to know intimately and make art explicitly on her expertise—the land, the earth. Given Mutu’s focus on land, constructions of nature, and earthliness more generally, I now turn to a deeper visual analysis of Mutu’s visual work. With my readings, I seek to highlight some elements of a vital materialist ethics that can productively inform black feminist alternatives to Western environmental ethics.

A DIFFERENT MODE OF LOOKING

Mutu’s 2006 piece *A Shady Promise* is displayed opposite. On the left there are the roots of a tree-like structure. Its hue is brown—reminiscent of bark—but a deeper, more penetrative gaze reveals that the tree bark seems to be made of something resembling stones—or perhaps storms? It isn’t really clear what this tree bark is made from or if it is tree bark at all. Protruding—perhaps from the ground or maybe from the tree itself—are small grass-like structures with an iridescent quality reminiscent of metal. But, unlike what we might assume about an inertness or lifelessness of metal, these shiny grass-like structures move, sway, and swing through this uncanny environment.

Rather than growing straight upward—as many trees do in our continental U.S. climate—this tree-like structure grows from one panel to another and into the roots of the ground on the opposing end. The double rootedness of the tree calls into question associations of verticalness with growth, and with it the “natural” logic of hierarchy. Seated at the roots of the tree is a centered humanoid figure that I, following language offered by Mutu herself, will refer to as the protagonist. The protagonist wears a cool yet confrontational gaze and squats legs-splayed. Through the gestures and corporeal composition of the protagonist, a host of raced and sexed signifiers that we cling to in our “postracial” and “posthuman” moment are unsettled.

The lack of hair on the figure demarcates an inability to use it as a racial marker. It is a noticeable but also negligible omission in the rich sea of symbols Mutu infuses in her piece. The noticeable/negligible absence of

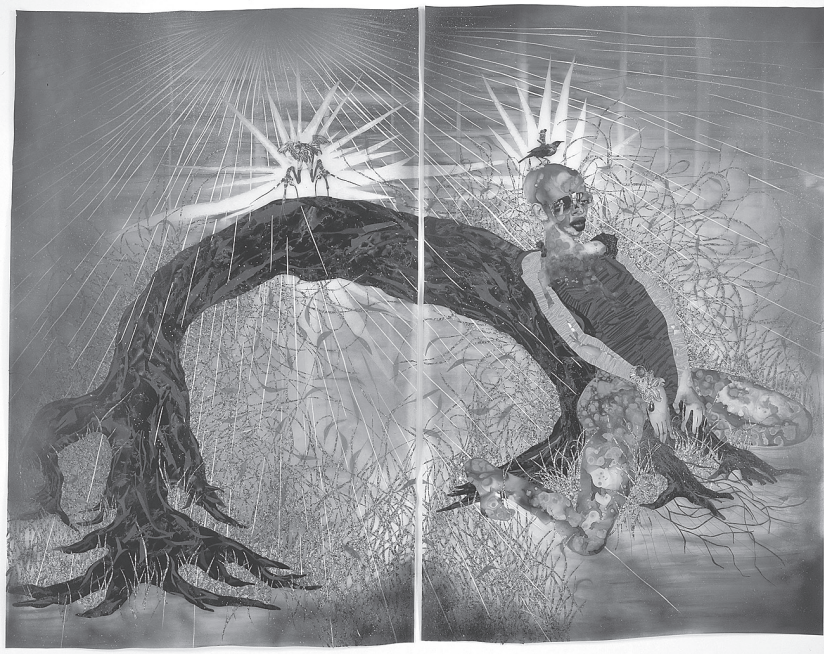


Figure 2. *A Shady Promise*, 2006. Mixed-media collage on Mylar. Overall: 87.5 × 108.75 inches (222.25 × 276.23 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

hair speaks to the absurdity or arbitrariness of using something like hair texture as a sufficient way to classify humans. Yet another marker of visualized black femininity can be found in the figure's lips—a key focus in the second panel. They are full and dark—signifying blackness, but it is also clear that the hue could be a matte lipstick by its texture. The lips further highlight the performativity and thus instability of blackness. Further, the figure is without skin—or at least the kind of thing we would readily identify as skin. Some parts of the body—the head, neck, bust, legs, and feet—appear to be covered in skin that has been flipped inside out. This perhaps signals the negligible differentiations—biologically speaking—between different races and ethnicities. Put differently, the ambiguity of the “skin” suggests that, “on the inside,” humans are all the same. Or perhaps the skin is an alien form of skin—foreign to this world. As we try to place what skin the figure is in, we fall deeper into the world Mutu has constructed that is so profoundly unfamiliar. It becomes clear that even if we did know the skin color of the figure, this racial marker would no better help us to make sense of the “person” in question or the environment they occupy.

In *A Shady Promise*, Mutu constructs a world where the process of our viewing destabilizes the assumed necessity of racial markers. Part of the reason why the effect of Mutu's destabilizing process of viewing works so well is because of the way she layers unfamiliar symbols on top of or next to more familiar ones. Though the skin and hair of the figure are gone, other characteristics of the protagonist invite their comparison to current representations of visualized black femininity. For example, the way the figure is positioned with her legs splayed. From *King Magazine* to *National Geographic* to myriad magazine covers and billboards, black women are routinely positioned with their legs splayed or squatting or on all fours. Often the images focus on their complacent faces, sexually explicit and inviting gestures, and awkward (but repetitive and to some extent naturalized) "sexy" poses. The protagonist in *A Shady Promise* also sits on her knees with her legs splayed, but a bit awkwardly. The awkwardness draws our attention to the performative "unnatural" quality of the pose. At the same time, while the relaxed positioning of the upper body does not necessarily signal resistance, the protagonist's cool, calm, yet confrontational gaze does suggest a criticism of the oversexualization of black female bodies.

Just as Mutu's protagonist unsettles various markers that draw lines between ethnicities and genders, *A Shady Promise* also asks us to question markers of humanity, animality, vegetation, and other forms of materiality as well. Many strides in environmental discourse, animal studies, and biology have been made that demonstrate the interrelatedness of humans, plants, and animals, as theorists like Timothy Morton have begun to consider *ecological thinking* beyond the divisions that the idea of "nature" engenders.⁵⁵ Donna Haraway told us in 1985 that we were cyborgs, and many others—particularly those partial to theories of posthumanism—have long since accepted themselves as such.⁵⁶ Yet illusory and often misleading representations of nature and/or the environment have prevailed in terms of how we make sense of our relations with other forms of materiality. As hierarchy curses traditional environmental ethics (according to Bennett), Mutu asks us to consider the limitations of rigid hierarchy as well.

Though it remains unclear where the tree-like structure ends and where the protagonist begins, it is clear that their relationship to each other—in this constructed moment and perhaps even beyond it—is significant. From beneath the figure's splayed legs, the roots of the tree-like structure reach outward. As the figure's hands gently rest on the roots (or perhaps they are the tree's forearms) there is an intimacy or perhaps consent that can be read

through the gentle touch the protagonist gives the tree's roots/forearms. Covering the protagonist's torso and arms could be either skin or clothing (a leotard perhaps) made of a bark-like substance but bears no resemblance to the tree-like structure in the background. Whether skin or clothing and whether the reference is to tree-bark or paper, the protagonist's clothing and positioning suggest boundary-blurring adjacency between plant and animal and human.

Finally, there is the presence of metal, or perhaps something formerly known as metal. The grass-like metal shines and splays about the tree lively and energetically from either the organic ground or from some built environment far away to which we have no access. Or perhaps the vitality of the shiny, metal-like grass that dances around the panels is a representation of the very alive shapes that our metals—in the way that they talk, act independently, and swirl all around us daily—have already taken. Something that could be metal is also attached to the figure's face in the shape of spectacles, but it is unclear whether the metal objects on her face are fashion, function, or prosthetic. The ambiguity again forces us to question whether these classifications matter. Mutu shifts our focus away from *why* particular classifications matter to *if* particular classifications matter—especially when it comes to “knowing” others and/or “knowing” our space.

Katherine McKittrick's concept of black women's geographies also provides much to an understanding of the interventions that Mutu engages. First, McKittrick alerts us to the idea that “the relationship between blacks and geography . . . allows us to engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic.”⁵⁷ The “ungeographic” rendering of black spaces calls to mind Trevor Schoonmaker's reading of Mutu's 2001 collage *Riding Death in My Sleep*.

Riding Death in My Sleep, for instance, sets the stage for Mutu's later explorations of cultural imbrication and displacement. She complicates notions of racial identity by creating a highly nuanced female figure: the skin is white; eyes, Asian, lips, full, perhaps African; and the hair as a key ethnic signifier, has been removed. Her body can be interpreted as being covered by a tight and psychedelic cat suit or diseased mottled skin. This fantastical woman perches on top of a mushroom-covered orb while hybrid bird-elephant and jellyfish-rabbit creatures fly above her head. As mushrooms are fleshy, fruit-bearing fungi that have no roots, do not require sunlight, and



Figure 3. *Riding Death in My Sleep*, 2002. Ink and collage on paper. 60 × 44 inches (152.4 × 111.76 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

are neither plant nor animal, Mutu uses them in her work as a metaphor for immigration, as people separated from their own countries often settle—whether by necessity or force—in areas seen as intolerable by others.⁵⁸

As Schoonmaker notes, mushrooms are a vital symbol for Mutu. What exactly is Mutu suggesting when she places a black woman, seductively and aggressively, centered on a mushroom and next to mushrooms, which are organisms that signify a challenging, intolerable, or inhabitable environment? McKittrick argues that “if identity and place are mutually constructed, the uninhabitable spatializes a human Other category of the unimaginable/native/black.”⁵⁹ The title of the collage, *Riding Death in My Sleep*, is significant for thinking through the “uninhabitable spatial[izing] of a human Other.” Mutu could be referring to death itself. Alternately, she could be cheekily playing with the idea of a “dead” African land. The knowing slight smirk Mutu’s protagonist wears suggests that they know others might find this mushroom-rich environment uninhabitable or intolerable. For the protagonist, however, the land might be so easy to navigate (or rather she is so well equipped to handle the environment) that she can “ride it in her sleep.” Mutu has publicly expressed her frustrations with stereotypical representations of Africa, and her training in fine art and anthropology offer her tools to address these frustrations formally in her work. When various documentaries profile Africa, particular regions are often described as “severe,” conditions are described as “hellish,” and the people, nonhuman animals, and vegetation are presented to the viewer through a tone of sheer awe at their biological and cultural “extremity.” *Riding Death in My Sleep* offers an alternative understanding of the ways in which “the uninhabitable spatializes a human Other category of the unimaginable/native/black.” Mutu’s collage cleverly redeploys these assumptions. Ultimately, her depictions of humanity and representations of geography challenge the overrepresentation of “Man’s geographies,” which seek to classify various people and spaces as always already Other.

CONCLUSION: TROUBLING ECOLOGY

Butler’s novel *Parable of the Sower* and Mutu’s exhibition *A Fantastic Journey* offer a radically altered conception of ecological ethics and articulations of ecological relationality between different forms of materials. Across their extensive bodies of work, they challenge and trouble our assumptions

regarding just about everything, leaving us with a posthumanist, poststructuralist, and postmodern understanding of our world and the categories within it. Obvious critiques of rigid hierarchy can be found across their work as their imaginings call for alternative visions of ecological relationality⁶⁰ that exceed the hierarchical myopia and politics of exclusion that have plagued environmental discourse—particularly in America—for the past century. I return to Bennett because this is where a vital materialist ethics, again, becomes useful. Bennett proposes:

Vital materialists will thus try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them. This sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically.⁶¹

The “fascination by objects” of which Bennett speaks calls to mind a particularly crucial moment in *Parable of the Sower* where Lauren finally begins making progress in explaining and even converting her traveling companions to Earthseed. As Lauren narrates,

Now we lounged in the shade of pines and sycamore, enjoyed the sea breeze, rested, and talked. I wrote, fleshing out my journal notes for the week. I was just finishing that when Travis sat down next to me and asked his question: “You really believe in all this Earthseed stuff, don’t you?”

“Every word,” I answered.

“But . . . you made it up.”

I reached down, picked up a small stone, and put it on the table between us. “If I could analyze this and tell you all what it was made of, would that mean I’d made up its contents?” . . . “Change is ongoing. Everything changes in some way—size, position, composition, frequency, velocity, thinking, whatever. Every living thing, every bit of matter, all the energy in the universe changes in some way. I don’t claim that everything changes in every way, but everything changes in some way.”⁶²

In this moment, Lauren uses the object, the stone, and takes a clue from it to help explain the vitality (in this context understood as its capacity for change) that she shares with it. Placing Butler and Mutu’s work in line with a vital materialist ethics highlights both their fascination with objects and, as I

have shown, their “sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side.” These political overtones seemingly place Butler’s and Mutu’s work squarely within—not an environmental stance—but rather a vital materialist one. This classification would be all well and good, save for the equally important black feminist overtones found in Butler’s novels and Mutu’s diptychs. As McKittrick eloquently points out, “Because female slave bodies [were] transformed into profitable sexual and reproductive technologies, they [came] to represent ‘New World’ inventions and are consequently rendered an axiomatic public object.”⁶³ Or, in other words, via slavery—and I extend this to other diasporic colonial histories as well—black subjects, and specifically black women, have already been put in a position where their humanity has not been assumed because of the racialized and sexualized public functions they have served. So, for black women, their “questionable” humanity and illusory subject/object status has always already paved the way for their extreme instrumentalization. Several black scholars have argued for decades about the harmful effects of the instrumentalization of black female bodies. The objectification of black subjects it is not a debate or set of concerns that will dissipate anytime soon—particularly as slavery and its afterlife continues to shape all of our present lives and ooze into the future. So, even as Butler and Mutu can be read as offering a vital materialist ethics as an alternative to an environmental one, I argue that those readings are contingent on the troubling of that vital materialist ethics. Hierarchy and classifications are destabilized and reshaped, but they are not absent in the specific novels and diptychs I have highlighted here or across Butler and Mutu’s work more generally. As we recognize their work for its ability to trouble our visual, spatial, and philosophical assumptions, it begins to take on a different mode of reception. As Spillers reminds us, “This problematizing of gender places [black female subjects], in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject.”⁶⁴ Engaging Mutu and Butler can aid in Spillers’s call for a “different social subject.” Furthermore, we can turn to Octavia Butler and Wangechi Mutu—not to decide whether or not environmentalism, or maybe even vital materialism, is the “best” form of ecological relationality for a black feminist political project. Butler and Mutu’s work is less productive when read as a neat endorsement of environmentalism or vital materialism or as correctives to black women’s discursive objectification—even as they both call attention to all these issues through their creative endeavors. But perhaps their aesthetic confrontations can be the guideposts to the to-be-named political theory in between.

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NOTES

1. Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010). Consult the introduction for a breakdown of this racist and exclusionary rhetoric within mainstream environmental discourse.
2. Adam Johns, "The Time Had Come for Us to Be Born: Octavia Butler's Darwinian Apocalypse," *Extrapolation* 51, no. 3 (2010): 403.
3. Nasher Museum, "Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey," YouTube video (April 24, 2013) https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Q-x9mdk13ds.
4. Hortense Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2006): 7–28. I use the phrase "black feminist critical culture" to acknowledge and extend Hortense Spillers's notion of black culture as "critical culture" in her 2006 essay, "The Idea of Black Culture."
5. Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 31.
6. Ibid.
7. Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 200.
8. See Steven Stoll's *US Environmentalism since 1945: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford's/St. Martin's, 2007). This text provides an overview of the ways in which environmental activism has pushed for liberal reform by staging interventions within the realm of mainstream political discourse.
9. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260.
10. Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 26.
11. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality," 261.
12. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 111.
13. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 31.
14. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.
15. Ibid.
16. Sylvia Mayer, "Genre and Environmentalism: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Speculative Fiction, and the African American Slave Narrative," in *Restoring the Connection to the Natural World: Essays of African American Environmental Imagination* (Münster: LIT, 2003), 175.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.
20. Johns, "The Time Had Come," 401.
21. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).
22. Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Time Warner Books, 1995), 9.
23. Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality," 261.
24. Lance Newman, *Our Common Dwelling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Newman's notion of "material processes of exploitation" are explored further here.
25. Madhu Dubey, "Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 46, no. 3 (2013): 357.
26. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 66.
27. Ibid., 72.
28. Ibid., 66.
29. Butler, *Parable*, 33.
30. Ibid., 37.
31. Ibid., 42.
32. Ibid., 38.
33. Ibid., 40.
34. Ibid., 45.
35. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 10.
36. Christine Gerhardt, "The Greening of African American Landscapes: Where Ecocriticism Meets Post-Colonial Theory," *Mississippi Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2002): 520.
37. The argument is guided by conceptualizations of animality offered by Sharon Holland's forthcoming book project on distinctions/continuities between the human and the animal.
38. Butler, *Parable*, 45.
39. Ibid., 58.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 64.
42. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 72.
43. Butler, *Parable*, 172.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 183.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 211.
48. Ibid.
49. Johns, "The Time Had Come," 410.
50. Trevor Schoonmaker, "Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey," in *A Fantastic Journey*, ed. Trevor Schoonmaker, Kristine Stiles, and Greg Tate (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 26.
51. Ibid.
52. Karen E. Milbourne, *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa* (New York: Monticelli Press, 2014).

53. Wangechi Mutu's nationality is Kenyan and she was trained and resides/works in New York City.

54. Wangechi Mutu, "The Power of Earth in My Work," in Schoonmaker, Stiles, and Tate, *Earth Matters*, 91.

55. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

56. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

57. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x.

58. Schoonmaker, "Wangechi Mutu," 26.

59. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 130.

60. Jane Bennett's conception of "vital materialism" informs the argument here.

61. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 18.

62. Butler, *Parable*, 218.

63. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 46.

64. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.