

# A VULNERABLE SENSE OF PLACE: RE-ADAPTING POST-APOCALYPTIC DYSTOPIA IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *PARABLE OF THE SOWER* AND COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *ZONE ONE*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on a number of theoretical works by space, trauma and dystopian studies scholars, this paper reconsiders the post-apocalyptic novels of Octavia E. Butler and Colson Whitehead, *Parable of the Sower* and *Zone One* respectively, as instances of “narrative vulnerability” that reformulate dystopian conventions to denounce precariousness and social chaos in twenty-first century America. It is argued that these novels re-adapt dystopia (understood in terms of genre and space: *dys-topos*) to denounce the futurelessness and fragility of corporate (bio)political systems, which can easily turn into posthuman regimes that cannibalize and impinge on the rights of those deemed Other. My aim with this paper is to trace the authors’ depictions of time and space as reconsidered genre components that problematize narrative resolution, adhering

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to narrative closure and spatial vulnerability in an attempt to critically portray the victimhood and hopelessness of those for whom nation and home will always be inaccessible, merely dystopian land.

### **RESUMEN**

Debido al reciente auge de la ficción post-apocalíptica, este artículo pretende reconsiderar las novelas de Octavia Butler y Colson Whitehead, *Parable of the Sower* and *Zone One* respectivamente, como ejemplos de “vulnerabilidad narrativa” que reformulan las convenciones del género para denunciar la precariedad y el caos social en América a lo largo del siglo XXI. Trataré de ofrecer una visión teórica de la adaptación que estas novelas hacen del género (y el espacio) post-apocalíptico para denunciar la ausencia de un futuro esperanzador que conlleven los sistemas (bio)políticos que gobiernan nuestra sociedad. Son precisamente estos sistemas los que pueden transformarse en regímenes *post-humanos* que canibalizan y vulneran los derechos que aquellas personas consideradas como OTRAS. El propósito de este artículo es analizar la representación del tiempo y el espacio en las novelas como componentes clave en la re-adaptación de su género post-apocalíptico, logrando así evitar la resolución del conflicto para abogar por un cierre narrativo. A través de la vulnerabilidad de los espacios narrativos, estas novelas motivan al lector a analizar tanto la sociedad en la que vive, como las emociones conflictivas que en ella residen (tanto propias como ajenas). Se consigue así representar la violencia a la que algunos colectivos sociales se ven sometidos, recalcando la ausencia que algunos sufren de un refugio al que poder llamar hogar.

## **INTRODUCTION: WHY POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION?**

The ubiquity of post-apocalyptic fiction during the last decades presents itself as the only logical conclusion to the difficulties imposed by a highly capitalized world.<sup>2</sup> This literature

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst the author of this paper acknowledges the nuanced differences between *post-apocalyptic* and *dystopian* narratives, both terms will be used almost interchangeably throughout the text. Given that the novels can be considered primarily post-apocalyptic but also dystopian –for they are both set in the aftermath of catastrophe but give insight into new social orders and systems of oppression, it does not seem very relevant to make a clear distinction. For clarifications on their difference, see Jones, Clint. *A Genealogy of Social Violence: Founding Murder, Rawlsian Fairness, and the Future of the Family*. Routledge, 2013, p. 138. If interested in dystopian/post-apocalyptic crossovers, see Kember, Sarah. *Virtual Anxiety: Photography, New Technologies and Subjectivity*. Manchester U.P., 1998, p. 2.

speaks of different types of crises that intersect and intermingle in our globalized world. From a generalized ethical detachment from others to “wars on terror,” unprecedented violence, progressive environmental collapse and new forms of slavery that deem human relationality an economic transaction, the gap between our present and the dystopian futures these novels examine has been bridged. We are but one step away from destruction. On the brink of catastrophe. And yet, even when reality and the future of such narratives are no longer distant, the production of dystopian literature does not seem to stir social conscience. Rather than causing distress, science fiction has gained popularity over the years as reality feels more and more dystopian.<sup>3</sup> This wide acceptance of post-apocalyptic fiction relies on the fact that these novels do not unnerve society anymore. They rather serve a twofold social purpose: they are the catalysts into which social fear is dealt with “see[ing] the origins of this plight in ourselves” (Snyder 479) – they can salve a reader’s conscience or wrong them and they open ways into a reconceptualized notion of the fantastical, paths into a magic of the plausible.<sup>4</sup> Post-apocalyptic narratives have become the fairy tales of contemporary society and, just like fairy tales (Zipes 120), they are but counternarratives denouncing contemporary class conflict through its very reflections in imagined futures. Feeling on the verge of collapse and surrounded by clues hinting toward the end of life as we know it, (post)apocalyptic fiction provides a degree of comfort for those “whose lives are, or who perceive their lives to be, overwhelmed by historical or social disruption” (Rosen xii); that is, apocalypse understood as “a means by which to understand the world and one’s place in it” (xi). Post-apocalypses help make sense of a damaged world, providing a second order *after the end* that, as Diletta de Cristofaro argues, responds to the “apocalyptic logic [...] of imposing

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<sup>3</sup> Many are the scholars who affirm that apocalyptic fiction is a response to sociopolitical crises (Dewey 10, Kermode 94, Rosen xxx) and “abruptly changing social conditions” that encourage writers to anticipate the future (Ketterer 24).

<sup>4</sup> Whilst the potential to challenge convention and catalyze social change lies within the genre’s possibilities, the omnipresence of “the dystopian” together with the repetition of conventional structures has trivialized its purpose, giving scholars cause for debate on the actual point of contemporary dystopic fiction. Ursula Heise, in her article “What’s the Matter with Dystopia?” argues against the value of this genre drawing on the structural inefficacy of repetition without innovation. She recognizes its role as a “powerful political tool” in the past but does not perceive the same type of effectiveness in more recent writings where she sees recycled patterns and motifs.

an order on a time of disorder and crisis” (30), be it one of reconstruction or of sheer survival.

In this sense, post-apocalyptic fiction aims to restore a sense of normality amid chaos; a dystopic new normal that can bring hope and a way out of oppressive social structures. These narratives, initially produced to make readers reconsider their social behavior – presuming elicited fear would encourage a response that prevented the real world from *enjoying* the same fate as the fictional one– also warn them against the dangers and anxieties of a corrupt present (Moylan 136, Berger 35, Atwood 94, Snyder 479). Nevertheless, the pervasiveness and hyper-visibility of these “state-of-exception” narratives in our day-to-day lives have turned the unknown into the ordinary, the expected. We are so exposed to the aftermath of terror and its challenges that we might have developed a taste for the end of the world. This predisposition to relish the unexpected and the malign is contingent upon the specific narratological construction of the post-apocalyptic genre. That, briefly explained, is the construction and continuation of a narrative sequence that allows an exploration of “the world after the end of the world” commonly referred to as “narrative continuity.”<sup>5</sup> It could be said that one only enjoys the end of the world because (s)he is certain there is another world awaiting him/her. One indulges in post-apocalyptic fiction because deep down (s)he believes catastrophe will be overcome or reversed. There are expectations, result of formulaic patterns, to be met (Heise). When considering the positive reception of end-of-the-world narratives, one cannot help but wonder if what makes them so popular and widely accepted is the fact that, in their very continuity, they give us hope for a (better) future, a sense of security that ensures a happy ending (Curtis 164), or, as Belén Martín-Lucas suggests, a warning to “prevent [the apocalypse from actually] happening” (69). In the end, it is difficult to think of other narrative strategy that could make us enjoy our very destruction.

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<sup>5</sup> This narratological strategy is what seems to give concrete meaning to the prefix “post” in some post-apocalyptic narratives. The word could be absent of meaning had narrative continuity been denied (for these narratives would only portray the world as a collection of snapshots showcasing destruction and death, rather than a transition towards new forms of societal living. Yet this paper will argue against narrative continuity and for “narrative vulnerability,” which makes sense of the prefix through the scope of cultural trauma recovery without embedding the story into cyclic repetition. The extent to which other depictions of post-apocalypse could or should be considered post-apocalyptic is a discussion for a different study.

Ironically enough, these narratives showcase both the best and worst aspects of humankind and, in so doing, these stories show us a way out of destruction and into (a certain degree of) light. This necessarily implies that destructive force will precede a creative one. In fiction, we seem only capable of rebuilding society from its very ashes. Anticipated by Walter Benjamin's perennial words, "[m]ankind, [...] can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (242), artistic creation seems to go hand in hand with its sociopolitical momentum, representing current affairs in fictional form. As discriminatory politics expand and develop in the US, more writers feel compelled to depict the decay of civilization and its subsequent reconstruction. Literary dystopia hence reflects a desire to undo sociopolitical practices, to reconstruct public space in a time when a considerable amount of Americans chant for the building of walls. The fictionalization of social life can be a dangerous game, though, especially for the most vulnerable sectors of society, as it plays out cultural trauma, diminishes social shock and normalizes violence into a narrative cycle that resolves satisfactorily for a majority. The reader finds pleasure in the destruction of society, for (s)he assumes that, in post-apocalyptic fiction, horror and wreckage are the necessary preconditions for a happy ending. But we could wonder what the implications of a hopeful ending for those whose suffering was initially mirrored are, and think if they would find hope or terror in the possibility of (b)order reconstruction; if violence can ever lead to utopia.

In "Reflections for a New Ethos of Europe," Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of voicing the stories of others. He affirms that we must go beyond "clichés and anathemas concerning tradition" and take "responsibility, in imagination and in sympathy, for the story of the other, through the life narratives that concern that other" (6-7). That is; we must give visibility and representation to silenced life experiences, by means of narrative and emotion, always allowing those stories to speak for/by themselves. In the case of African American fiction, many are the interpretations given to the telling of a life narrative, particularly as an afterlife. The emphasis put on the future in (post)apocalyptic fiction apparently resonates with the need of African Americans to find "a meaningful [alternative] space and time" in which black communities –and America in wider terms– can be reimagined (Page 19). Maxine Lavon Montgomery furthers this argument defining the apocalyptic tradition as a route out of "oppressive sociopolitical system[s]" and towards "a new world

where racial justice prevails” (1). Leaving aside its religious implications, the story of the Other therefore turns into a fantastical retelling of the present, the past and the future that serves as social critique of a reality untold. This seems to be the case in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*, two dystopic narratives that act as social catalysts to blend past, present and future into a single tense that reimagines temporality, privileges spatiality and breaks linearity in the name of truthful representation. If one can claim that post-apocalyptic fiction by definition seeks to restore a sense of after-apocalypse, then, I want to argue for a reconfiguration of the said new normal as seen in African American tradition. As Gerald Home facetiously proposes in *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism*, one must reconsider slave trade as an apocalyptic event (179), which, in fiction, implies rethinking the narrative timeline to understand that post-apocalypse is not only an unknown future, but might indeed refer to what the African American community has been experiencing for centuries. From this perspective, neither the sense of security Curtis subscribes to a happy ending (164), nor the understanding of dystopia as a “dire warning” (Atwood 94) seem in place. For, as Montgomery points out, “to be black in America is to experience calamity as an ever-present reality, to live on the brink of apocalypse,” which Butler’s and Whitehead’s novels most certainly depict, focusing on questions of class, gender, race and, particularly, vulnerability and hope. The only force left in the novels is change, and only in change there is hope.

## **PRESENT FUTURES, FUTURE PASTS**

Both Butler’s and Whitehead’s novels question the validity of genre impositions, defying narrative resolution in an attempt to redefine vulnerability in post-apocalyptic times. *Parable of the Sower* portrays a post-apocalyptic society that seems to be adapting to the scarcity of resources driven by biopolitics and late-stage capitalism. The novel, written in the format of a diary, keeps a record of Lauren Olamina’s experiences throughout the falling of the world. It recounts the invasion of her community and the traumatic loss of all her relatives, friends and neighbors to murder, arson and even cannibalism. Lauren, who at the beginning of the book insists on the need to be prepared to run away when the wall falls, finds herself in an alien world where she has to resist her human impulses to trust

and help others. This task becomes particularly daring because of her “hyper-empathy syndrome,” a post-apocalyptic disease that makes her vulnerable to the pain of others and predisposed to share their emotions. Throughout the narrative, Lauren occupies a plethora of different spaces, constantly trying to reach security and find a new home to build Earthseed, a spiritual community working under the premise that “God is change” (153), in change there is hope and hope is found in community. Lauren’s desires, though, are repeatedly proven impossible. The US scenario Butler designs for her does not give characters the option of permanent shelter. They can only move from one gated community to another, the demolition of the previous weighing too heavily on the shelters to come.

Contrary to Butler’s ethics’ revival, Whitehead’s narrative tells the story of Mark Spitz, a protagonist that insists on defining himself as average. Mark works as a “sweeper of stragglers,” meaning that he kills semi-human zombies for a living –and quite literally so, as this task is what ensures his survival. Mark inhabits Zone One, a safe zone in New York City where he incessantly patrols with one of the many militarized groups of survivors, seeking to neutralize the zombie plague that has infested the city. Though the novel does not focus on the relational dilemmas raised from the normalization of unethical social practice as directly as *Parable*, it still challenges fully commodified perceptions of post-apocalypse, questioning the biopolitical powers and hierarchies that re-arrange spaces and bodies. Characterized by a sense of nostalgia that he repeatedly suppresses –“he avoided looking at the family pictures” (14)–, Mark Spitz comes to represent the average person trying to make an insignificant, unheroic living in a city infested by zombies. To compensate for the protagonist’s indifference, Whitehead reproduces nostalgia into the zombie population too, dividing them into two different categories: stragglers and skels. The former a humanoid zombie version so stuck in their past that they cannot physically escape trauma, the latter aggressive, skeletal and deadly.

If there is one thing both novels have in common, that is an original approach to post-apocalypse based on the protagonists’ sense of dystopian normalcy that allows for unethical acts that seem unfathomable to happen. Yet, as James Berger maintains, “unspeakable and portentous events have occurred, are occurring, as we were looking the other way, or even watching directly” (217). It is the authors’ insistence upon precariousness that merges the tenses, forcing the reader to reconsider her/his ethical role. This article is an

attempt at offering a theoretical overview of “narrative vulnerability” applied to Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*. With it, I intend to show the narrative roads that lead to Ricoeurian “narrative hospitality” through a vulnerable sense of place. Marc Augé defines the non-place as a “space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (77-78). Following his line of thought, this paper examines post-apocalyptic space as the ultimate non-place, wherein characters cannot take root, thus denying narrative continuity. The article aims to explore the effects of undoing genre conventions, denying narrative resolution to subscribe to a “radical narrative closure” (Sorensen 560) that elicits the emotional response of their readers, to raise vulnerable emotions, to help others understand, through spatial layout and ethical compromise, that the absence of conflict resolution stirs conscience and allows us to access social justice in real life. For that is *the magic of the plausible*: the possibility of escaping from “the liberal fantasy” of belonging (Gilman 2) –or from a DuBoisian “double consciousness” (5)– into relational forms of living. To do so, I will first explore the complexities of literary convention and genre through the prism of trauma theory to later apply it to different representations of space and vulnerability. It is my contention that, thanks to their willful denial of narrative continuity (plot development away from the conflict) and their application of “narrative vulnerability” instead (defined as insistence upon the rupture with space and language, representative of trauma, taken to its most far-reaching consequences) that these novels elicit empathy, forcing readers to rethink sociopolitical paradigms, mobilize their own vulnerabilities into the fictional space of writing, and acknowledge the suffering of others whom they now perceive *as themselves* (Ricoeur). In their apparent reproduction of generic conventions, these two novels actually rethink genre, working from human vulnerability, not against it. They provoke an ontological shift in our understanding of narrative space that brings forth the fallibility of sociopolitical systems and the relevance of relationality.

### **“NARRATIVE VULNERABILITY”: BREAKING THE CIRCLE**

In his book *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability*, Jean Ganteau argues for a re-assessment of contemporary British fiction through the lens of vulnerability. He traces a series of narrative devices that are evocative of it (40, 49, 140), and, in so doing,



approaches vulnerability from the perspective of trauma theory. Ganteau defines “vulnerable narratives” as testimonial writing, which, according to Dori Laub and Cathy Caruth, is the act of facing loss, of “going through the pain of [...] witnessing and of the ending of the act of witnessing –which entails yet another repetition of the experience of separation and loss” (Laub 74). This theory seems relevant to the study of Whitehead’s and Butler’s novels, as they tackle issues of trauma recovery from the innovative perspective of “narrative vulnerability.” Both novels access memory, nostalgia and loss from a survivalist stand that, despite the novels’ different approaches, manage to break the silence and voice the precarious, inhumane conditions in which “disposable populations” live:

We rode past people stretched out, sleeping on sidewalks [...] I saw at least three people who weren’t going to wake up again, ever. One of them was headless. I caught myself looking around for the head. After that, I tried not to look around at all.

A woman, young, naked, and filthy stumbled along past us. I got a look at her slack expression and realized that she was dazed or drunk or something.

Maybe she had been raped so much that she was crazy. (Butler 9).

Lauren’s description of homeless people and a female survivor are a great example of how her status as a post-apocalyptic native makes her partially immune to a stark reality. In this depiction, Butler challenges heroic preconceptions and offers a truthful rendering of her protagonist’s thoughts. For Lauren, witnessing death, extreme vulnerability and brutality is customary, so she is partially desensitized to it. It is the reader who might get shocked. Similarly, Mark introduces the zombies working at an office by their previous human status, pointing to the *decomposing* remnants of their humanity: “After all this time, they were a thin membrane of meat stretched over bone. Their skirts were bunched on the floor, having slid off their shrunken hips long ago” (Whitehead 16). Both depictions are clearly caught up in a dance between dehumanization and rehumanizing practices. The former echoing social negligence in a very prominent manner, the latter in the protagonists’ individual desire to reassemble the dead bodies, to look for the missing pieces (be they a head or a skirt) and imagine them in place. This approach to the Other falls close to Katherine Hayles’ definition of posthumanism as

the end of certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to a fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. (286).

These novels openly criticize and make visible the effects of structural violence and the existence of a sociopolitical, capitalist machinery that decides who is disposable and who is not inside the nation-state. Understanding disposability as the first characteristic towards narrative vulnerability, Butler's and Whitehead's writings insist upon a rupture with space and language, signaling a paradigm shift that points towards the absence of true relational bonds. In this line, narrative vulnerability feeds on the reconfiguration of the (post)human category as a unifying principle that makes everyone (liable to being) disposable in post-apocalyptic scenarios. After apocalypse, with the downfall of power structures, all lives can be equally spared. By clarifying this shared fallibility, the novels draw attention to an existential vulnerability that equalizes all (post)human experience to comment on the actual life conditions of vulnerable groups as it revives and repeats the initial loss of agency. In these dystopic lands, power is scarce and temporal, repeatedly snatched for the characters to openly expose their vulnerability and yield to kinship demands. In the case of Whitehead's narrative, reader empathy is elicited towards zombies, in an attempt, perhaps, to give visibility to those who, in this case, literally do not have a voice. They are infectious and threatening, "bodies [tossed] out the windows" (Whitehead 74), victims of a structural violence in the making.

Both novels tackle gender representation and nudity, too. Even though the previous examples may be confused with recent narrative trends "reinforcing gender binaries and glorifying the [white] masculine" heterosexual hero (Lavigne 8) with secondary female roles, these novels focus on the commodification of the female body and its dire aftereffects in real life. As Butler herself affirms, "SF, more than any other genre, deals with change [...] But SF itself changes slowly, often under protest. You can still go to conventions and hear deliberately sexist remarks" (in Canavan). The exposure of naked female bodies therefore stands for an image of powerlessness and vulnerability in these works; an act of protest against the common representation of female characters and bodies—primarily on screen (Lavigne). The authors' decision may still seem potentially

ambivalent, though. For it responds to what Anne Whitehead defines as vulnerable narratives, “narratives burdened by the incoherences of trauma” (7), of “[s]peaking beyond understanding” (7), of voicing pain from the agony of re-enacting loss, as Laub indicates (74), in an attempt to simply be heard and acknowledged. And that evidently implies a certain degree of discomfort. If we consider post-apocalyptic fiction under this light, a whole new range of possibilities arises. First, one could wonder to what extent language can fully represent the violences encountered in dystopian settings. Then, one would ponder the idea of speaking of testimony when a narrative, like *Zone One*, does not intend to bring order back, to set the bits and pieces back into sequence. Or if it partakes of the desire to constitute a fairer society and rather describes the emotional devastation of those “incoherences” that render it impossible to reunite and thrive in community, as is Butler’s case. After all, it is now without reason that James Berger defines post-apocalyptic representation as “a paradoxical, oxymoronic discourse that measures the incommensurable and speaks the unspeakable; a discourse that impossibly straddles the boundary between before and after some event that has obliterated what went before and yet defines what will come after” (19), anticipating this discursive incoherence.

Despite being science fictional accounts of imagined futures, these stories *account* for the suffering of many individuals in the US. They lay bare the socioeconomic conditions that oppress these populations and reconsider the political grounds that normalize the mute existence of trauma. In many ways, they contest these institutions and refute their praxis, leading to their imminent elimination<sup>6</sup>. Post-apocalyptic fiction advocates for an ontological change of the first order, which necessarily implies code destruction and reconstitution –a process easily comparable to the de/reconstruction language undergoes after trauma. If post-apocalyptic novels are indeed deemed testimonial writing, then the act of writing “out and through” (Henke xi) traumatic memory could be expected to shift into new purpose. As it enables the survivor to verbally articulate the event, bringing it back into a logical sequence that gives her/him insight and pause (LaCapra 90; Vickroy xi), post-

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<sup>6</sup> Though imminent, this suppression of political systems is not normally permanent. As Colson Whitehead puts it in an interview by Alyssa Rosenberg, “the gaudier the structure, the quicker it comes back” (“New Zombie Novel” 85). For further analysis on this matter see Kermode.

apocalyptic testimony narrativizes the past in (im)possible futures, blending the tenses to expose the cyclic pattern of abuse survivors face. This is particularly significant in Butler's novel, which is written in the form of a diary, each entry preceded by an epigraph. Aside from the healing influence of "scriptotherapy" (Henke xii) for Lauren, the very form of the novel is consciously post-apocalyptic. It is in the epigraphs that tenses blend and overlap, for these texts figure as spiritual proverbs and poems that anticipate the actions to come. The diary's self-consciousness appears as an example of the temporal continuum in which Lauren lives; of the oppressive situation African Americans still endure in the US nowadays.

Cathy Caruth suggests that the traumatic experience of the wound is inescapably confined to repetition "through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will, [...] the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth 2), then, we could understand post-apocalyptic fiction as a representation of the very fear lying underneath the experience of the unknown. In other words, if post-apocalyptic fiction is, by its very nature, an attempt at healing –hence the prefix "post," we could argue for a reassessment of the science fiction paradigm understanding its purpose not as mere elucidation or escapism, but as a reflection on a type of social and cultural distress, traumatic in essence, that cannot be dealt with in realistic terms and must thus attain coherence and consistency through the language of the (im)possible. We would then speak of an ethical writing that, in fear of the "act of seeing-too-late" (Caruth 110), engages with the future to talk about present uncertainty and past terror; a code that, desensitized as it may seem, renders vulnerability at linguistic levels. It is not that Lauren or Mark do not care about the dead, but that the only subjectivity accessible to them is the agonic agency of those forced to survive in impossible situations.

Science fiction deals with the unknown as testimonial writing. The former because it is built from conjecture, the latter due to the repression of a past that seems too foreign, too impossible to be put into words or made sense of. Yet dystopian conjecture is positioned within the larger historical discourse of the nation. Dystopian fiction, Tom Moylan argues,

is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century. A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, depression, debt, and the steady weakening of humanity

through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of utopian imagination (xi).

As such, dystopian post-apocalyptic narratives are the result of the social quandaries of the time and place they are produced in, even when they can relate to the future shapes those very systems might take. Both *Parable* and *Zone One* are reflexive of this, echoing systemic structures in the production of surveilled/private/past vs. social/public/future spaces. Whereas Lauren's first memories set her childhood home inside a gated community *protected* by a wall, "a massive, looming presence nearby" (5) and a simile of social ghettoization; Mark's early memories are relegated to the world before apocalypse, where he remembers what New York City was like seen from his uncle's apartment's window in Lafayette (Whitehead 3, 7). Both instances coincide with the depiction of initial spaces as enclosed, private shelters. Even as Butler's wall is quite literally a fortress –controlled and geopolitically demarcated in Mike Davis' sense, and Whitehead's description is far from becoming so, the latter's imbrications with class and gender politics within the privatized environment call for a critical comparison. These first spaces are likewise marked by a monotony that foresees chaos. Posing for the same family photograph "year after year" while daydreaming about "an uninhabited city, where no one lived behind all those miles and miles of glass" (4-7), or having a "recurrent dream" in which your room catches fire to defy control and the need "to pretend that nothing unusual is happening" (Butler 3-4), these spaces are but the pitfalls of neoliberalism and Foucauldian surveillance, which, in the name of "preserv[ing] the integrity of a society, system or self" (Bracke 56), enable militarized planning against a so-called exterior menace. In *Parable* this is a life threat: drug addicts seeking to possess, occupy and burn walled states; In *Zone One*, a *miles-long* glass ceiling (window) that prevents outsiders from accessing the home(land)–strangers and women alike.<sup>7</sup> The main difference encountered lies on the scenes' temporal setting: Butler's is located in an (after)apocalypse while Whitehead's delves into tensions hidden under the familiar guise of urban harmony.

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<sup>7</sup> It is implied that Mark's uncle's girlfriends never stay long (Whitehead 5), they neither have a name nor constitute a solid, individualized memory in the child's recollections. This is interesting with regards to the politics of disposability to be examined below. It makes us think who counts as human for the child and why.

As both novels advance, the representation of other spaces becomes equally significant. Open, frightening and dangerous as they are, these post-apocalyptic spaces become sites of social communion, where the ethics previously ignored play a vital part for the reconstitution of society. Just as in trauma fiction, the unknown and the frightening merge to produce alternative scenarios in which difficult emotions can be addressed. These landscapes, born from the remnants of previous terror and ontological collapse, solidify into “a trauma culture” that studies the characters’ collective psyche to assess that which is latent but has not fully materialized yet, and conjure it in spatial (rather than linguistic) form. As an unconscious representation of trauma, the post-apocalyptic spaces produced by the characters are initially restricted to nightmares or daydreaming. They reinforce or debunk preexistent physical boundaries. For Lauren, her nightmares are an act of self-instruction where she prepares to escape and be finally free. In her dream, the “persistent” image of herself crossing the doorway –threshold to an enclosed dreamland that soon burns anticipates the action to take place (3-4): the fall of the wall, the deaths by fire, the urge to escape into freedom only to find isolation, vulnerability and loss. In their current “compulsive return,” these *repetitive* “scenes of the destruction of the world” become “symptomatic of a traumatized culture” incapable of dealing with unpleasant emotions on its own (Heffernan 66-67). As Lauren herself explains to her reader: “I dreamed a reminder that it’s all a lie” (3), that life has very much changed since the apocalypse and that her community’s long-sought new normal cannot be sustained. Teresa Heffernan insists that the violence of World War I has scarred in the collective unconscious, giving way to re-articulation(s) of its violence time and again. The haunting presence of a ghost from the past denied in social discourse is made present, Heffernan maintains, in the simultaneous praise and condemnation of scientific advances and technology futuristic fiction lays bare. If we were to extrapolate this to the African American community, then, the compulsion to welcome heroic dystopias and suppress haunting stories from slavery onwards would deny vulnerability and be read as an act of narrative hostility that favors narrative resolution over narrative closure, survival and strength over averageness and panic, a happy ending over actual depictions of human suffering. Heffernan then posits the inextricability between post-apocalyptic *futures* and the past. In her own words, “the traumatized cultural imaginary [...] obsessively returns in fiction to scenes of wreckage and catastrophe.

Paradoxically, we continue to invest in the idea that the technology produced by this unholy alliance *is about the future*" (67; *emphasis mine*). Even as the actual correlation between fictional and real temporalities is case-specific, the rupture of a clear linear progression appears as a common trait of the post-apocalyptic. After cataclysm, the progression of time changes, it jumps forward and slows down. The narrative emphasis commonly put on the temporal is then placed in the spatial configuration of the future: walls are built to avoid past apocalypse, conceptualized as a single external threat, from happening again. It is *how* we reimagine ourselves, not the exact *when* that matters. Dystopic fiction absorbs (all possible) collective trauma and projects it onto an alternative arena in an attempt to, first, access linguistic expression attaining a sense of logic and atemporal linearity<sup>8</sup>; second, it aims to avoid/break the silence that characterizes trauma repression and, with it, the circle of violence that rises from social silencing—which Jenny Edkins associates with a hegemonic discourse that testimony has the potential to undo (2-5); and third, it helps assess the vulnerable parts of ourselves we unconsciously deny, be they characterized by a revenant or by fear of the future. In so doing, these fictions offer what Hirsch terms "connective stories", narratives that share common roots even as they seem impossible to put into *words*, tales that bring us together, not apart.

The basis of post-apocalyptic fiction is as cautionary as it is therapeutic. It translates emotional disorientation into spatial one, memory wreckage into landscape destruction. It relies in a reconceptualization of the notions of state, nation and home to encompass alternative scenarios that point to their fallibility and gives way to visual testimonies that reflect the formal rupture of language in trauma. These testimonies might simply be the visual rendering of humankind as a plague that spreads out decimating humanity. "[B]iological or metaphysical" (Whitehead 27), it is the vulnerability of the epidemic, its value as a social equalizer and the

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<sup>8</sup> These narratives attempt to restore a traumatic sequence that has not yet taken place (be it a reliving of past decay or a new form of social downfall). In doing so, a sense of progression is established even as the characters are stuck in the absence of socially constructed time: days, weeks, months continue to pass by, but are no longer interlocked with social meaning. The ordinary is surpassed by the extraordinary and the state of exception forces characters to move in space in order to survive, not in time. The primacy of time in the novel is thus undone in these fictions; what could perhaps be termed "post-apocalyptic chronotope" drawing on Bakhtin's theories.

figurative questions it poses that denounces the false sense of security we were raised in and celebrates vulnerability in any and all forms.

In “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” Judith Butler explains how politicized the notion of vulnerability is nowadays. We conceive it a something inherently negative that defines the Other, and thus repress our own fragility in an attempt to remain agentic and in control. As Butler herself puts it: “if nothing acts on me against my will or without my advanced knowledge, then there is only sovereignty, the posture of control over the property that I have and that I am” (24). Vulnerability, nevertheless, is a condition of humanity. An equalizing force that reminds us that, despite sociopolitical framing, we are all fallible, disposable, and it is in the recognition of our shared exposure that we can undo the outcomes of social division. Embracing vulnerability is then seen as acting towards better life conditions for all (21)—an ethical posture contesting unethical passivity.

In Whitehead’s *Zone One* this contestation takes place in the protagonist’s wanderings through New York City. Walking through the wrecked city becomes an act of ethical visibility that allows the reader to glimpse into the most private aspects of the most vulnerable ones. Justified by Mark’s job as a sweeper, the mapping of the city becomes a gradual discovery and a truthful encounter with the many faces of vulnerability. As a post-apocalyptic *flâneur*, Mark Spitz traverses space as a form of social reparation that obviates the economic and political diversions of urban life (no longer available after apocalypse) to identify the blind spots of representation and history that, as Michel de Certeau argues, remain unseen in our intra-urban journeys, “daily and indefinitely other” (93). Mark Spitz’s movement is meaningful, every step a conscious act, every room an acknowledged and re-membered site where death or survival may battle, but it is a vulnerable accountability that reigns.

No form of operational space survives post-apocalyptic contagion. Yet, even when political boundaries get destroyed in the initial collapse of urban space, hinting at the destruction of oppressive systems, their latter renegotiation is bound to take place. Two waves of menace coexist in this fiction: first, the conceptual threat of oppressive systems, which “has virtually lost every *showplace*” (Han 5), and, after, the personified specter that jeopardizes its survival/reconstitution. Hence, as new outsides and



insides are reset to distinguish where it is safe and where it is dangerous, the archetypal enemy in post-apocalyptic fiction –the infected, the murderer, the zombie– gains enough agency to destabilize social orders. The minute safe and dangerous zones are demarcated, a social hierarchy of place is at work leading to the capitalization of security. Walls are built, security teams are put together and guns distributed. These novels, though, reject said economy of the body and, instead, embrace danger in an attempt to escape a sociopolitical categorization. In *Zone One*, Mark ends up giving up, standing, as a hoard of skels run towards him. In *Parable*, Lauren refuses to kill or abandon Others, building a small community on the move that may never find a place to settle and shelter, but would neither take part in biopolitical practices. Lauren's community will not yield to the pressures of a system promoting structural violence based on hierarchic discrimination and aimed at achieving economic/political goals, even when that may result in their own decimation. One gives in to disposable equity, the Other wishes for a new order based on respect, affect and support. The political forces casting social vulnerability are, then, at risk in these post-apocalyptic narratives, where they are exposed and deconstructed. This allows characters to live outside political constraints and find hope amidst fear and barren relationality, in a hopeless place.

Social space remains wounded and infected by metaphysical monsters conceived in pre-apocalyptic times. And, although the institutions sustaining the previous order have been vanquished, their remains continue in effect long after they are gone. In this regard, narrative closure plays a major role, for it limits the state of exception in time turning the sequels of apocalypse into nothing more than a liminal transition. As Frank Kermode implies, crises are transitional, "immanent rather than imminent" (101). The reason why we obsessively consume post-apocalyptic narratives if we are not under an open, public, recognized threat of war, physically under attack, is then to be discerned. Perhaps it is a response to a rhetorical sense of threat. Likewise, the way in which we have become willing witnesses of our own destruction and indulged in observing unethical practices that go against our self-preservation should be descried. Kermode ties our tolerance for apocalypse to this "sense of an ending," a series of prefabricated narrative expectations that give us the certainty that, even when sacrifices are made and horror and loss are endured, humanity will be saved and civilization

will rise from its ashes. If one follows Kermode's theory closely, "crisis fiction" becomes narrative in transition resisting its logical ending (101), working cyclically, incessantly moving from social order to man-made catastrophe, and "curv[ing] back on themselves, in a pattern of cyclical return" (Wagar 185) towards Leif Sorensen's "return to normalcy" (562), which sets the apocalyptic cycle back in motion. If the previous order is beyond salvation, if new social ontologies must be devised (562), then, it is the task of the writer to decide the kind of post-apocalypse they wish to create.

Whitehead's and Butler's novels never reintegrate into new social structures. Instead, they move toward a recognition of the vulnerable/disposable status of those who do not have a voice. As violence escalates by the end of both novels (an imminent death for Mark, a funeral for Lauren's companions), the possibility to hint at the survival of humankind is never taken. It is the novels' uncertainty that makes us rethink binary categories and question the validity of a system that allows for such a vulnerable sense of place: homeless citizens in a shattered nowhere. By implementing narrative vulnerability over conflict resolution and plot development, these novels manage to make post-apocalypse permanent, not transitory, breaking the circle of violence and the reproduction of systemic orders. Whilst both narratives take divergent steps to avoid future retaliation, it is in their embrace of narrative vulnerability that Butler and Whitehead readapt the post-apocalyptic genre, bringing forth (maybe back) its potential to question absolute truths, acknowledge socially induced suffering, start a cultural healing process, and represent other experiences and voices in a movement across the hopeless vulnerable landscapes that might salvage our present.

### **DYS-TOPOS: POST-APOCALYPTIC CITYSCAPES AND THE ZOMBIE PARADIGM**

As they break away from post-apocalyptic convention, both *Parable of the Sower* and *Zone One* showcase narrative vulnerability in spatialized form. They produce social ruins that repeatedly deny any process of full systemic reconstitution. There will be no walls, no homes, no fortresses. Though hinted at through the partial regrouping of micro-societies that function as a reduction of the nation, the reconstruction of governmental structures is never complete in these novels. Whitehead and Butler aim at denouncing

the bare-life status of oppressed individuals representing the cultural precariousness post-apocalyptic fiction contains, their approaches diverge and are not equally transgressive. Both novels delve into the meaning of human existence, (post-)modernity and power structures to question the validity of capitalism and biopolitical corpora. To do so, they either draw on an “affective post-humanism” (Giles 330, Hayles 283-285) inherently bound to Ricoeur’s and Hayles’ theories on relationality or reimagine a human future for those lost to the post-apocalyptic machine: as in Mark Spitz naming of the lady skulls he finds at HR (Whitehead 17). Both novels echo indiscriminate violence in an attempt to make visible the degree of vulnerability to which some social groups are subjected: cannibalism, rape, brutal murder, arson are some examples. This is perhaps rooted in a common desire to raise narrative vulnerability, for which both novels devise similar narrative trajectories aimed at raising awareness in a time of cultural amnesia. Despite their difference, both novels rely on extreme narrative closure<sup>9</sup> to short-circuit the traditional structure of the post-apocalyptic novel, as examined by Sorensen.

*Parable of the Sower* introduces a post-apocalyptic society that attempts to subsist in adversity, scarcity, social and economic slavery result of fierce capitalism. Set in the age of social and economic slavery, the novel “show[s] that fear stems from the multiple ways in which we are vulnerable (Curtis 162), rendering the protagonists homeless in their native land. This, of course, resonates with the African American slave trade experience, the feelings of duality and non-belonging Dubois talks about. Focusing directly on space, *Parable* denies the possibility of settlement. In a different context, Ana Manzananas (179) suggests that there is a spatial representation of the semantic association between refuge and refuse, which might be connected to the characters’ impossibility to reach cultural reconstruction. Their spaces are only temporal, dangerous, treacherous. They are not meant to last. In spite of Lauren’s unwavering optimism, the configuration of landscape together with the deception other characters feel, leads me to affirm that *Parable of the Sower*, as a standalone text, could be an example

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<sup>9</sup> It is true that *Parable of the Sower* does have a more hopeful ending than *Zone One*. In fact, it even has a sequel. However, this second part of the story required of a substantial time lapse, which leads me to think that narrative closure serves its purpose, supported by the application of narrative vulnerability and its resultant absence of shelters to settle in.

of narrative closure thanks to the author's application of narrative vulnerability. It is the characters' desolation that points to the only logical conclusion one can draw from post-apocalypse, that it is inescapable. As the characters themselves argue:

"God is Change," I said.

"Olamina, that doesn't mean anything." [...] "I wish I believed that," he said. Perhaps it was his grief talking. "I don't think we have a hope in hell of succeeding here." [...] Then we buried our dead and we planted oak trees. Afterward, we sat together and talked and ate a meal and decided to call this place Acorn.

*A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bore fruit an hundredfold. (310-311).*

The final reference to the *Bible* works, in my view, as an example of post-apocalyptic incoherence reflexive of trauma denial (Berger, Whitehead) that leads to double interpretation. We cannot forget that *Parable of the Sower* is written to replicate Lauren Olamina's diary and, considering that she is the only narrator to the story, we should cast the reliability of her beliefs into question. The intertextual reference that initially brings hope to the optimist reader, rather works as a reminder of all the probable scenarios in which the characters surrender to despair. Though Lauren's narrative optimism cushions the shock of reality, the spatial cues –namely the just buried corpses under the oak trees– point to an emotional deception that, in the best of cases, leaves the reader with questions and a troubling sense of alienation. From one gated community to another, Butler's protagonists can never find home, only temporal dys-topos.

Where *Parable* resorts to an incongruous communal survivalism that seems to be directed towards disaster, *Zone One* places a "deadening, yet possibly utopian, consumer culture, along with the aesthetic modes of kitsch and the sublime," (Hicks 14). It is a horde of skels that rushes towards Mark Spitz as he moves forward. It is this final decision that would deny narrative resolution and activate narrative closure, coming full circle with narrative vulnerability:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a full study on narrative closure in *Zone One*, see Sorensen.

They were really coming down out there. No, he didn't like his chances of making it to the terminal at all. The river was closer. Maybe he should swim for it [...] He needed every second regardless of his unrivaled mediocrity and the advantages this adaptation conferred in a mediocre world.

Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead. (322).

Once again, it is through the implication of the only logical outcome of post-apocalypse that narrative resolution is rejected, in a more direct manner in this novel. Whilst the penultimate paragraph gives the reader a (deceptive) sense of hope, the final sentence clarifies that, even when it is not uttered, Mark Spitz's survival seems barely possible.

In "The Imagination of Disaster" Susan Sontag masterfully maps out the road to understanding post-apocalyptic fiction. Like Kermodé, she observes that, in these narratives, terror becomes a distraction that overshadows social ethics and morality (42-44). For her, dystopian science fiction encourages an "extreme moral." These novels partake of this trend in that they adhere to strong morals. Yet, they do not simply state them. Instead, through a vulnerable sense of place that leaves characters stateless, both novels hint at the existence of agonic sensibilities in need of reassessment. In her analysis of space and migration, Sarah Ahmed gives visibility to the "encounter with strangeness [that is] at stake, even within the home" (340). In it, she identifies the social production of the nation (Lefebvre) as a home space not available for those considered threatening outsiders (whether they actually come from the outside seems irrelevant here, as both categories –outside/inside– are in perpetual reproduction. Under this light, Ahmed examines our definitions of home and nation to bring them together as one. She discerns a new ontology of space that functions through relationality and the transmission of otherness. In her matryoshka-like geography, the nation figures as a home space where "there are always encounters with others already recognized as strangers within" (340). These "interiorized outsides" (Butler and Spivak 16) – bodies or otherwise, work as concentric borders where "the differences within" is exposed, cancelling the conception of the exterior menace, the understanding that strangers are only encountered "at the border" (340).

Ahmed takes it a step further and analyzes the implications of homelessness in the context of migration. She argues that the

“narrative of leaving home produces too many homes and hence, no place in which memory can allow the past to reach the present (in which the “I” could declare itself as having a home)” (330-331). If we apply this context to the novels here considered, the status of perpetual migrants conferred to the protagonists implies an impossibility to reach authentic community constitution. Lauren Olamina and Mark Spitz are but eternal outsiders, flâneurs in fact, bound to multidirectional, even non-directional, movement through post-apocalyptic landscapes that reflect their very vulnerabilities. For Ahmed there is always an affective component in every movement (341), in this search for shelter or home. Constrained to temporary settlements, movement for the protagonist is not an affective journey, at least not in a positive way. Yet, in their disorientation and senseless travelling, readers can perceive the affective detachment of their movements as a representation of an absence, of many absences perhaps, that allows them to reconsider where is home for those who, like the protagonists in these stories, keep migrating through hostile lands. We may wonder where home is for those who, like Whitehead’s stragglers are stuck in nostalgia, far away from their childhood homes. And for the addicts who wander California streets in Butler’s work. As empathy settles in, the purpose of the novels is fulfilled. Both novels open doors to unbearable experience. They enable social recognition and, in doing so, they reach “narrative hospitality” (Ricoeur), climaxing in the unsettling emotional contagion of the novels’ narrative closure. It is only in the wandering through text and map, hand-in-hand with Whitehead’s and Butler’s protagonists; in the dialogic understanding of writing as space, space as language of trauma, that these novels move into Harvey’s transformative “spaces of hope”; social platforms for acknowledgement and communion. It seems that only in the transcendence of generic boundaries through a web of interconnections can the fear and the anticipation of disaster produce ethical forms of contemporary relationality in post-apocalyptic fiction.

## **CONCLUSION: VULNERABLE ENCOUNTERS**

*Parable of the Sower* and *Zone One* are two post-apocalyptic novels that challenge the status quo of contemporary America. In their application of narrative strategies, both novels manage to depict

different forms of vulnerability that elicit emotional reactions. Even when they both seem to recreate formulaic narrative patterns characteristic of dystopia at points, in denying societal restoration, they both fail to conform to its canon, escaping genre norms and adopting new trends that contest the conventions they seem to reproduce. Instead, they adhere to narrative vulnerability, offering a wide amount of agonic agencies for readers to chew on. As vulnerability governs space, the characters are less likely to reach a happy ending. This wide-spread vulnerability permeates social landscapes, breaking away from notions of shelter and into temporal and unreliable refuge. In so doing, space becomes an equalizer that signals human fallibility and disposability, allowing for a reconceptualization of the human into an affective posthuman encounter devoid of sociopolitical boundaries.

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