

Precarious Bodies and Ecologies of Survival: Biopolitical Violence and Slow Environmental Devastation in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

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Abstract:

The accelerating convergence of ecological collapse, political instability, and systemic inequality positions contemporary dystopian fiction as a vital site for interrogating survival in the Anthropocene. This comparative study analyses Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* to examine how environmental catastrophe engenders biopolitical regimes that render human bodies differentially precarious and disposable. Synthesising Judith Butler's ontology of precarity, Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, Giorgio Agamben's bare life, and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, this paper investigates the reciprocal relationship between environmental devastation and corporeal vulnerability. Methodologically, the study adopts an ecocritical and political literary approach to analyse narrative strategies, spatial imaginaries, representations of violence, and ethical subjectivities. It argues that McCarthy and Butler challenge anthropocentric paradigms by depicting catastrophe not as a singular apocalyptic event, but as an ongoing process of environmental attrition and sovereign abandonment. While McCarthy's *The Road* projects catastrophe onto an absolute, post-apocalyptic scale that contracts ethics into an atomised, defensive struggle for survival within a sterile cosmos, Butler's *Parable of the Sower* conceptualises collapse as an attritional process of neoliberal decay where shared precarity catalyses Earthseed theology, multi-ethnic defence, and collectivist resilience. By situating these texts within environmental humanities and political philosophy, this study demonstrates that speculative fiction critiques systemic precarity while envisioning alternative ethical horizons grounded in interdependency, ecological responsibility, and radical solidarity.

Keywords: Biopolitics; Precarious Life; Slow Violence; Environmental Humanities; Dystopian Fiction; Anthropocene.

1. Introduction

The accelerating convergence of planetary ecological collapse, political instability and systemic inequality in the Anthropocene has transformed contemporary speculative fiction into an indispensable arena for re-evaluating human survival (Arias-Maldonado, 2020, p. 1025). As Kyle Powys Whyte (2018, p. 224) demonstrates, the environmental crises of the current geological epoch are not merely future anxieties but ongoing structural realities that reconfigure social vulnerability and ecological relations. Rather than serving as mere escapist entertainment, dystopian literature manages human imagination by exposing the material mechanisms through which environmental degradation erodes institutional stability (Gajewska, 2021, p. 15). Within this speculative terrain, narratives of environmental catastrophe interrogate how civilizational breakdown alters the ethical status of human bodies and collective existence (Pohl, 2019, p. 67). These imaginative frameworks allow critical scholars to analyse how environmental ruin unsettles established political orders and forces a radical re-examination of planetary cohabitation. Crucially, the literary representation of ecological disaster fluctuates between apocalyptic fatalism and speculative utopianism (Alberro et al., 2024, p. 14). While traditional dystopian tropes depict sudden civilizational

collapse as an unprecedented shock, Indigenous and environmental humanities perspectives reveal that marginalised communities have long inhabited what Kyle Powys Whyte (2017, p. 223) terms "ancestral dystopias" marked by resource dispossession, systemic violence and environmental degradation. Mark Featherstone (2024, p. 334) observes that contemporary dystopian writing must navigate the tragedy of utopian ambition in an age where catastrophic futures threaten to foreclose collective political action. Far from presenting catastrophe as a uniform or democratic event, contemporary dystopian narratives demonstrate that ecological ruin manifests unevenly across social hierarchies. Consequently, speculative fiction functions as a diagnostic tool that renders visible the entrenched structural inequalities that dictate who is protected and who is abandoned during planetary breakdown.

In contemporary American literature, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006, p. 12) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993, p. 3) stand as two foundational yet contrasting visions of survival within ruined landscapes. McCarthy (2006, p. 52) constructs an elegiac post-apocalyptic narrative set in a biologically sterile North America where an unnamed father and son trek through ash and cold toward an uncertain ocean. Conversely, Butler (1993, p. 15) presents a near-future California deteriorating under the attritional strain of climate change, water scarcity, hyper-inflation and civic decay. As Greg Garrard (2012, p. 104) notes in his ecocritical taxonomy, apocalyptic narratives operate through distinct imaginative registers that shape whether disaster leads to existential despair or socio-political reorganisation. Though both novels depict devastated topographies, their divergent spatial and temporal scales reveal fundamental disagreements regarding the nature of violence, community and human agency. These contrasting imaginative orientations provide a fertile ground for comparative ecocritical and political inquiry. To articulate the political and ecological dimensions of these literary landscapes, this study synthesises Judith Butler's ontology of precarity with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence. Butler (2004, p. 25) distinguishes between existential precariousness and politically induced precarity, showing how normative frames of recognition selectively allocate social protection to favoured groups while exposing disposable populations to harm. Rob Nixon (2011, p. 2) expands this socio-political critique into the environmental realm by defining slow violence as an attritional, delayed destruction that unfolds gradually across space, time and institutional structures, disproportionately afflicting marginalised communities. When integrated with Giorgio Agamben's (1998, p. 8) theory of "bare life" and Achille Mbembe's (2003, p. 11) formulation of necropolitics, these frameworks elucidate how environmental collapse transforms sovereign governance into a mechanism for managing death and corporeal disposal. Combining these theoretical paradigms allows for a rigorous interrogation of the reciprocal relationship between ecological attrition and bodily vulnerability. This theoretical synthesis illuminates how dystopian fiction exposes the institutional structures that systematically produce disposable bodies in times of crisis.

Despite extensive scholarly attention devoted individually to McCarthy's post-apocalyptic prose and Butler's speculative fiction, comparative scholarship frequently overlooks how their divergent representations of violence reconfigure biopolitical governance and ethical agency. Adeline Johns-Putra (2019, p. 55) points out that climate fiction scholarship often privileges global atmospheric trends over localised, embodied experiences of precarity. Similarly, Antonia Mehnert (2016, p. 32) argues that literary studies must pay closer attention to how environmental injustice intersects with racial and economic hierarchies. Addressing this critical gap, this paper adopts a comparative textual analysis informed by ecocriticism, political philosophy and biopolitical theory to examine narrative strategies, spatial imaginaries and ethical subjectivities in both novels. By systematically juxtaposing McCarthy's elemental isolation against Butler's collectivist adaptation, this research demonstrates how environmental collapse operates as both an engine of biopolitical exclusion and a catalyst for reconfigured relational ethics. This comparative approach ultimately clarifies the distinct political horizons embedded within contemporary environmental fiction. This paper argues that McCarthy and Butler challenge anthropocentric understandings of survival by demonstrating how ecological collapse engenders biopolitical regimes that render human bodies differentially vulnerable, precarious and disposable. While McCarthy's *The Road* portrays catastrophe as an absolute, post-apocalyptic event that reduces human existence to atomised moral preservation within a sterile cosmos, Butler's *Parable of the Sower* conceptualises disaster as an attritional process of slow violence where shared precarity fosters Earthseed theology, collectivist resilience and intergenerational care. The remainder of this study is structured into four primary sections. First, it details the theoretical synthesis of precarity, slow violence and biopolitics. Second, it analyses environmental attrition and the differential distribution of vulnerability across the ruined landscapes of both novels. Third, it examines sovereign abandonment, bare life and necropolitical death-worlds. Finally, it evaluates the divergent ethical subjectivities and communitarian practices that emerge from the ruins, offering a concluding reflection on

the future of collective survival in the Anthropocene.

Beyond their thematic focus on environmental destruction, McCarthy and Butler employ contrasting formal strategies that reflect their distinct diagnoses of Anthropocene precarity. While classical apocalyptic literature often relies on sudden, spectacular cataclysms that erase historical continuity in an instant, contemporary climate fiction (cli-fi) increasingly engages with the complex aesthetic challenge of representing delayed, incremental ecological ruin. McCarthy addresses this aesthetic dilemma by adopting a minimalist, paratactic prose style devoid of standard punctuation and formal chapter breaks, thereby mirroring the metabolic depletion and atmospheric sterility of a dying biosphere. Butler, conversely, utilises a first-person epistolary journal format through the consciousness of Lauren Olamina, a narrative choice that encapsulates the slow, cumulative accumulation of historical awareness and theological reflection required to navigate structural decay. By aligning narrative syntax with the temporal velocity of environmental breakdown, both authors demonstrate that speculative literary form is itself a political technology capable of making visible the invisible mechanics of biopolitical exposure.

Environmental Attrition and the Differential Distribution of Vulnerability

Environmental destruction within speculative literature manifests across distinct spatial and temporal scales that determine how human vulnerability is distributed (Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 58). As Rob Nixon (2011, p. 2) argues, slow violence operates as an attritional process that unfolds gradually across space, time and institutional structures, disproportionately afflicting disempowered populations who lack the capital to escape degraded environments. This environmental degradation intersects with Judith Butler's (2009, p. 25) ontology of precarity, wherein sovereign entities selectively withdraw infrastructural support and render specific groups exposed to systemic harm (Butler, 2004, p. 30). Rather than treating ecological disaster as a uniform crisis, contemporary climate fiction demonstrates that civilizational decay reshapes sovereign authority into mechanisms for managing disposable bodies (Agamben, 1998, p. 18; Mbembe, 2003, p. 14). Consequently, examining the spatial and temporal scales of environmental ruin illuminates the structural inequalities that dictate survival during planetary breakdown.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler depicts environmental catastrophe as an attritional process embedded within neoliberal decay, where historical nostalgia prevents older generations from confronting ecological reality (Mehnert, 2016, p. 42). Lauren Olamina critiques this refusal to accept systemic change, noting that adults view going to church as "stepping back into the good old days when there were churches all over the place and too many lights" (Butler, 1993, p. 12). Rather than fostering social cohesion, environmental attrition exacerbates pre-existing racialised and class divides, transforming public spaces into sites of hostility (Whyte, 2017, p. 225). While travelling outside walled neighbourhoods, Lauren observes that "on the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind" (Butler, 1993, p. 31). This socio-spatial fragmentation reinforces Achille Mbembe's (2003, p. 18) necropolitical framework, showing how environmental degradation magnifies racialised hostility and spatial segregation. Ultimately, Butler demonstrates that the gradual breakdown of civic institutions weaponises environmental scarcity against marginalised communities.

The distribution of vulnerability in *Parable of the Sower* is further complicated by Lauren's hyperempathy, which serves as a somatic embodiment of relational precarity (Butler, 2004, p. 22). Hyperempathy forces Lauren to physically absorb the agony of surrounding bodies, turning interpersonal violence into a reflexive bodily injury (Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 85). Recounting her childhood struggles with this condition, Lauren explains that "I felt every blow that I struck, just as though I'd hit myself" (Butler, 1993, p. 14). This inescapable physical interdependency prevents Lauren from adopting an insular or predatory ethos, forcing her to construct an adaptive ethics grounded in collective care (Alberro et al., 2024, p. 38). By linking biological vulnerability directly to social survival, Butler reconfigures precarity from a passive state of exposure into a catalyst for collectivist resilience. Shared corporeal vulnerability becomes the essential foundation for building anti-necropolitical communities.

In contrast to Butler's sociological focus, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presents environmental collapse as an absolute, biosphere-wide extinction that reduces human life to elemental physical exposure (Garrard, 2012, p. 108). The father and son traverse a scorched North America where nature no longer generates life, confronting temperatures "cold beyond anything they'd yet encountered" that threaten "to crack the stones" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 17). As they scavenge through ruined topographies, the father remains haunted by nostalgic memories of pre-collapse abundance, pausing at his childhood home to remark, "This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 23). This haunting attachment to historical memory culminates at a mountain pass where the father declares "It's the gap. This is it" while

listening to the wind in dead hemlocks, underscoring the irreversible gulf between past civilizational stability and present post-apocalyptic void (McCarthy, 2006, p. 27; Featherstone, 2024, p. 338). McCarthy demonstrates how complete biosphere death strips away political status (*bios*) and reduces remaining survivors to Giorgio Agamben's (1998, p. 88) condition of bare life (*zoē*). Traversing this ash-covered landscape reveals that the total loss of non-human life forecloses the possibility of human history and social renewal.

A comparative analysis of both texts illustrates how different scales of environmental destruction reconfigure the politics of survival in dystopian literature (Gajewska, 2021, p. 18). Butler (1993, p. 31) frames precarity as a structural consequence of market deregulation, racial division and slow environmental attrition, revealing that marginalised populations experience catastrophe long before privileged enclaves collapse (Nixon, 2011, p. 11; Mehnert, 2016, p. 50). McCarthy (2006, p. 17), conversely, projects catastrophe onto a cosmic plane where atmospheric sterility levels social hierarchies and forces remaining individuals into a zero-sum struggle for raw calories (Agamben, 1998, p. 102). While Butler's protagonists respond to slow violence through collectivist organisation and adaptive theology, McCarthy's characters undergo an elegiac contraction of ethics centred on atomised self-preservation (Arias-Maldonado, 2020, p. 1030; Pohl, 2019, p. 74). Both narratives show that the decay of ecological support systems fundamentally reshapes human agency and social obligation.

Sovereign Abandonment, Bare Life and Necropolitical Death-Worlds

The structural collapse of environmental support systems in dystopian literature alters the nature of political sovereignty, transforming traditional state institutions into predatory entities or exposing their total absence (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). In Michel Foucault's (1978, p. 138) classic biopolitical model, modern state power operates through mechanisms designed to manage life, optimise population health and regulate biological processes. However, in contexts of acute ecological breakdown, biopolitics metastasises into what Achille Mbembe (2003, p. 11) conceptualises as necropolitics, a regime where sovereignty is exercised primarily through the power to dictate exposure to death. Under necropolitical conditions, sovereign entities manage populations not by sustaining life, but by creating "death-worlds" where vast groups are subjected to conditions that reduce them to the status of the living dead (Mbembe, 2003, p. 21). Complementing Mbembe's spatial formulation, Giorgio Agamben (1998, p. 8) identifies the "state of exception" as the mechanism through which sovereign power strips individuals of their political rights (*bios*), reducing them to "bare life" (*zoē*) that can be destroyed without legal consequence. Both Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* construct speculative landscapes where sovereign abandonment accelerates bodily vulnerability, forcing characters to navigate topographies defined by institutional collapse, predatory exploitation and corporeal disposal (Agamben, 1998, p. 88; Mbembe, 2003, p. 25). These imaginative worlds compel readers to confront the terrifying possibilities of modern sovereign collapse.

The theoretical convergence of bare life and necropolitics clarifies how dystopian environments dismantle the normative frames that render human lives grievable (Butler, 2004, p. 32; Butler, 2009, p. 24). As Roberto Esposito (2008, p. 45) observes, when the protective immune mechanisms of the state fail or turn self-destructive, biological existence becomes exposed to unmediated physical threats. Slavoj Žižek (2008, p. 2) distinguishes between visible "subjective violence", such as physical assaults or crime and systemic "objective violence," which includes the silent, institutional arrangements that systematically produce human suffering. In climate-devastated landscapes, objective violence manifests as sovereign abandonment, wherein state institutions selectively withdraw infrastructural protection from disfavored populations (Nixon, 2011, p. 15; Mehnert, 2016, p. 52). Deprived of legal recognition and institutional support, marginalised bodies are forced into spatial corridors where survival depends entirely on tactical violence, resource scavenging and precarious solidarity (Whyte, 2018, p. 228). Under these conditions, political governance dissolves into the raw management of corporeal extinction.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, sovereign power has completely evaporated, leaving an absolute state of exception that has become the permanent, universal norm (Agamben, 1998, p. 102; Dečo, 2012, p. 23). Deprived of state institutions, judicial oversight or social infrastructure, the burnt North American continent operates as a totalizing death-world where all human subjects are reduced to Agamben's (1998, p. 88) bare life (*zoē*). McCarthy demonstrates the stark, metabolic reality of this collapse during scenes of basic foraging, where the father searches dead forests for residual organic matter (Garrard, 2012, p. 109). Discovering dried fungi in a dead riverbed, the father stoops into "the mulch and ash" to inspect a "small colony of them, shrunk, dried and wrinkled" before he "bit a piece from the edge and chewed" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 31). In this sterile landscape, the absence of active plant or animal life forces human existence to depend on scavenging dead organic remnants, illustrating how ecological extinction strips away political status and

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reduces life to raw caloric intake (Pohl, 2019, p. 71). Foraging among ash highlights the complete reduction of human life to basic biological metabolism. The ultimate manifestation of Mbembe's (2003, p. 21) necropolitical death-world in *The Road* occurs when the father and son encounter organised cannibalism in an abandoned grand mansion. Exploring a locked cellar beneath the house, the father discovers a subterranean prison where living captives are held as livestock for a roving band of cannibals (Snyder, 2008, p. 5; Dečo, 2012, p. 24). Upon opening the hatch, captives raise their voices in absolute terror and desperation, calling out, "Help us, they whispered. Please help us," while a "bearded face appeared blinking at the foot of the stairs" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 71). McCarthy literalizes Mbembe's (2003, p. 25) assertion that necropolitics reduces human bodies to pure utility and raw material, showing how the destruction of the biosphere collapses social ethics into predatory harvesting. These captives exist in a state of ultimate sovereign abandonment: they are completely ungrievable, stripped of political identity and kept alive solely to provide fresh meat for others (Butler, 2004, p. 35; Agamben, 1998, p. 112). The cellar scene exposes the horrific boundary where human subjects are stripped of political existence and converted into consumable matter.

Faced with this pervasive threat of cannibalistic predation, the father in *The Road* must continuously improvise instruments of atomised sovereign defence (Snyder, 2008, p. 8). In the absence of state law or public security, individual subjects assume the sovereign prerogative over life and death to protect themselves against hostile scavengers (Agamben, 1998, p. 102). This defensive weaponisation of residual industrial materials is demonstrated when the father crafts an improvised incendiary weapon in a deserted shed (Featherstone, 2024, p. 339). Mixing old engine oil with gasoline inside a glass bottle, he rakes sparks from a piece of flint until the fuel "bloomed into flame with a low whoosh" before handing the smoking weapon to his son (McCarthy, 2006, p. 86). McCarthy illustrates how industrial detritus- motor oil, gasoline and seed packets- is stripped of its original agricultural or economic function and repurposed for tactical self-defence (Gajewska, 2021, p. 42). In a landscape devoid of sovereign protection, fire becomes both a literal tool for biological heat and a defensive weapon against predatory bands (Arias-Maldonado, 2020, p. 1033). Repurposing industrial detritus into protective flame reveals the terrifying burden of self-preservation in a lawless void.

In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, necropolitics operates not through total civilizational extinction, but through the deliberate, neoliberal privatisation of public goods and state functions (Mehnert, 2016, p. 50; Nixon, 2011, p. 14). Butler presents a society where federal and state authorities retain administrative capacity but intentionally abandon impoverished populations to environmental hazards, inflation and disease (Whyte, 2017, p. 226). Lauren Olamina tracks this gradual disintegration of public infrastructure through media reports, noting that catastrophic weather events and epidemics devastate marginalised communities without prompting government intervention (Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 88). Discussing the collapse of public health systems, Lauren observes that "tornadoes are smashing hell out of Alabama" while a severe "measles epidemic is killing people" in New York and New Jersey despite measles being a fully preventable illness (Butler, 1993, p. 44). Butler demonstrates how neoliberal biopolitics leverages environmental collapse to withdraw state-funded healthcare and emergency relief, allowing market forces and natural attrition to eliminate unprofitable or redundant populations (Mbembe, 2003, p. 28; Agamben, 1998, p. 115). State abandonment converts treatable public health challenges into fatal structural hazards for vulnerable populations. This systemic production of precarity in *Parable of the Sower* is exacerbated by the rise of new social pathologies, most notably the spread of the drug Pyro (Gajewska, 2021, p. 40). Butler uses Pyro, a narcotic that induces intense pyromaniacal euphoria, to dramatise how social despair and environmental degradation produce destructive, irrational forms of subjective violence (Žižek, 2008, p. 4; Mehnert, 2016, p. 53). Lauren analyses news broadcasts regarding the drug's rapid proliferation across major urban centres, remarking that "it's spreading again... the reports say that it makes watching a fire better than sex" (Butler, 1993, p. 44). Pyro addicts routinely set fire to residential neighbourhoods, gated communities and public institutions, transforming urban spaces into literal infernos (Whyte, 2018, p. 230). Butler shows that when state institutions abandon their duty to protect citizens, social cohesion fractures entirely, giving rise to nihilistic violence that accelerates the destruction of the built environment (Nixon, 2011, p. 18; Alberro et al., 2024, p. 44). The popularity of Pyro reveals how systemic breakdown can mutate social despair into destructive spectacle.

Outside the precarious protection of walled neighbourhoods, sovereign power in *Parable of the Sower* is enforced directly through interpersonal violence along the highway death-world (Mbembe, 2003, p. 19; Butler, 1993, p. 31). Travellers on California's highways must constantly defend themselves against feral animal packs, desperate thieves and hostile bands of migrants (Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 91). Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome turns every act of tactical self-defence into an agonising somatic trauma,

illustrating the profound embodied cost of survival in an unpoliced territory (Butler, 2004, p. 26). When her group is attacked by wild dogs, Lauren is forced to shoot a feral animal, experiencing its death as a physical blow to her own body: "I felt the impact of the bullet as a hard, solid blow—something beyond pain. Then I felt the dog die... It went out like a match in a sudden vanishing of pain" (Butler, 1993, p. 38). Here, Butler underscores how sovereign violence in a lawless landscape forces individuals to enact fatal force while suffering the immediate physical repercussions of that violence through hyperempathic resonance (Alberro et al., 2024, p. 46). Lauren's physical reaction to taking life demonstrates how hyperempathy complicates tactical survival on the road.

Synthesising these narrative depictions reveals how McCarthy and Butler utilise distinct spatial and theoretical registers to critique sovereign abandonment in the Anthropocene (Arias-Maldonado, 2020, p. 1034; Pohl, 2019, p. 75). McCarthy (2006, p. 71) creates a totalizing death-world where the complete absence of state power and ecological vitality reduces humanity to Agamben's (1998, p. 88) state of bare life, exemplified by the horrific commodification of captive bodies in dark basements (Snyder, 2008, p. 6; Dečo, 2012, p. 25). Butler (1993, p. 44), conversely, depicts a fragmented, highly stratified death-world where residual state authority collaborates with corporate capital to enforce spatial segregation, privatise public utilities and abandon vulnerable populations to disease and arson (Mbembe, 2003, p. 22; Nixon, 2011, p. 16). While McCarthy highlights the existential isolation of surviving within a universal void of bare life, Butler exposes how neoliberal governance weaponises environmental decay and systemic neglect to dictate who may live and who must be left to die (Foucault, 1978, p. 138; Whyte, 2017, p. 227). Both narrative strategies expose how contemporary power structures exploit environmental ruin to redefine the limits of human value.

Ultimately, both novels demonstrate that environmental disaster operates as a powerful catalyst for biopolitical exclusion and sovereign violence (Gajewska, 2021, p. 45; Featherstone, 2024, p. 341). By stripping away the legal and institutional structures that normally protect human bodies, ecological breakdown forces subjects into precarious spatial realms where their lives are rendered ungrievable and disposable (Butler, 2004, p. 30; Butler, 2009, p. 28). Whether through McCarthy's (2006, p. 86) vision of elemental self-defence in a sterile void or Butler's (1993, p. 38) depiction of hyperempathic trauma along ruined highways, both texts argue that survival in the Anthropocene requires navigating landscapes where traditional human rights no longer apply. These speculative representations serve as vital warnings regarding the ease with which civilizational breakdown converts living subjects into disposable bodies (Agamben, 1998, p. 115; Mbembe, 2003, p. 27). In both speculative visions, sovereign abandonment forces a critical re-evaluation of the boundaries separating political life from biological disposal.

Reconfigured Communitarian Practices and Ethical Subjectivities in the Ruins

In the wake of ecological devastation and sovereign abandonment, human communities must reconfigure their ethical subjectivities and social structures to navigate planetary ruin (Arias-Maldonado, 2020, p. 1028; Gajewska, 2021, p. 22). As Judith Butler (2004, p. 28) asserts, bodily vulnerability is fundamentally relational, meaning that individual survival depends on the social and infrastructural conditions that sustain interdependency. When modern state institutions fail, the allocation of social protection fractures, forcing marginalised subjects to either construct localised networks of mutual aid or withdraw into atomised self-preservation (Butler, 2009, p. 32; Nixon, 2011, p. 18). While Octavia E. Butler depicts shared precarity as a catalyst for grassroots community building, multi-ethnic defence and adaptive theology, Cormac McCarthy presents an environment so depleted that ethical agency contracts into an insular, zero-sum struggle between the self and the hostile stranger (Mehnert, 2016, p. 55; Snyder, 2008, p. 72). Examining how these works portray social organisation reveals contrasting possibilities for collective survival in the Anthropocene. Re-evaluating these social structures demonstrates that civilizational ruin fundamentally transforms moral obligation and collective agency.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler illustrates how local communities respond to state failure by establishing grassroots security structures that foster interethnic cooperation and collective responsibility (Whyte, 2018, p. 229). Faced with systemic police corruption and constant threats from outside intruders, the residents of Robledo replace privatised law enforcement with an organised, egalitarian defence system (Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 89). Lauren Olamina details this transition toward democratic self-defence: "It's official. Now we have a regular neighbourhood watch—a roster of people from every household who are over eighteen, good with guns" (Butler, 1993, p. 57). By organising patrol rosters, shared training sessions and weekly discussions, the community converts individual vulnerability into an organised collective defence (Alberro et al., 2024, p. 41). Butler demonstrates that grassroots self-organisation provides an alternative to neoliberal privatisation, creating spaces where cross-cultural collaboration and mutual aid sustain fragile

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social order (Featherstone, 2024, p. 336). Organising shared security measures transforms passive vulnerability into an active mechanism for community preservation.

Beyond immediate physical defence, Octavia Butler critiques traditional modes of social reproduction that fail to address long-term environmental decay, emphasising the necessity of adaptive migration and structural innovation (Mehnert, 2016, p. 52; Nixon, 2011, p. 20). Lauren recognises that remaining inside the crumbling neighbourhood to follow conventional life paths, such as early marriage and domestic confinement without employment, offers no viable future in a collapsing economy (Whyte, 2017, p. 228). Reflecting on her peers' choices, Lauren observes:

"Bianca's chosen life is one of my options. It's not one that I intend to exercise, but it is pretty much what the neighbourhood expects of me—of anyone my age. Grow up a little more, get married, have babies... Two couples, and not one paying job among them. The best they could hope for would be to move into some rich people's compound as domestic servants and work for room and board. There's no way to save any money or ever do any better. And what if they wanted to go north, try for a better life in Oregon or Washington or Canada?" (Butler, 1993, p. 69).

Butler exposes how traditional expectations of domesticity trap impoverished youth in cycles of debt peonage and corporate servitude (Gajewska, 2021, p. 43). Rather than submitting to economic stagnation or indentured labour, Lauren formulates a forward-looking strategy centred on northward migration and the development of Earthseed theology (Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 92). Rejecting reactionary nostalgia allows Lauren to conceptualise survival as an active, mobile practice of community creation and ecological adaptation.

Conversely, in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the destruction of the biosphere forecloses collective organisation, reducing ethics to an insular, defensive struggle centred on the father-son dyad (Garrard, 2012, p. 110; Dečo, 2012, p. 24). In a world devoid of agricultural production or state institutions, strangers are perceived primarily as mortal threats or competing scavengers, making hospitality virtually impossible (Snyder, 2008, p. 74). This existential isolation is foregrounded during an encounter with an old traveller named Ely across a night campfire:

"Nobody wants to be here, and nobody wants to leave. He lifted his head and looked across the fire at the boy. Then he looked at the man. The man could see his small eyes watching him in the firelight. God knows what those eyes saw. He got up to pile more wood on the fire, and he raked the coals back from the dead leaves" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 106).

McCarthy illustrates the deep atmosphere of mutual suspicion that governs social interactions in a post-apocalyptic void (Pohl, 2019, p. 73). Although the boy urges his father to share food and companionship with the old stranger, the father maintains a rigid, zero-sum moral logic that prioritises his son's biological survival above all external claims of solidarity (Agamben, 1998, p. 102; Žižek, 2008, p. 8). Extreme environmental scarcity transforms every encounter with an outsider into a precarious negotiation between residual empathy and lethal paranoia. McCarthy further interrogates the human tendency to respond to fear and existential dread with destructive, reactionary violence rather than ethical understanding (Featherstone, 2024, p. 339). Through a haunting memory from the father's youth, the novel reflects on how human groups attempt to eradicate perceived evil through senseless destruction: "Standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men. The boy's age. A little older. Watching while they opened up up the snakes... killing them as though they were the evil itself..." (McCarthy, 2006, p. 118). This vivid memory serves as a critique of anthropocentric violence and moral blindness (Garrard, 2012, p. 112). The men's decision to immolate hibernating snakes reveals a reactionary impulse to destroy living organisms that provoke fear, mistaking the destruction of the image of evil for a genuine ethical solution (Žižek, 2008, p. 12). McCarthy demonstrates that when human societies lack constructive ethical frameworks, they succumb to reactive violence that further devastates the natural world and corrupts moral agency. Reactive cruelty against non-human life exposes the spiritual impoverishment that precedes civilizational collapse.

Comparing the ethical trajectories of both novels underscores how narrative form and ecological scale dictate speculative visions of human survival (Arias-Maldonado, 2020, p. 1035; Gajewska, 2021, p. 48). In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler uses the gradual pace of slow violence to demonstrate that precarity can foster relational ethics, multi-ethnic defence and collectivist resilience through Earthseed theology (Nixon, 2011, p. 22; Butler, 2004, p. 34). Butler insists that surviving planetary breakdown requires dismantling patriarchal domesticity, rejecting corporate indentured servitude and building mobile, egalitarian communities grounded in mutual aid (Whyte, 2018, p. 232). McCarthy's *The Road*, conversely, presents an elegiac meditation on moral preservation within a sterile, post-ecological void, where the absence of living nature reduces ethics to an atomised, tragic duty to "carry the fire" within the nuclear dyad

(McCarthy, 2006, p. 129; Dečo, 2012, p. 27; Snyder, 2008, p. 82). While McCarthy warns against the tragic erosion of human warmth when planetary ecology dies, Butler provides a speculative roadmap for transforming shared precarity into transformative social agency. Both texts ultimately challenge readers to recognise that long-term survival in the Anthropocene demands an unwavering commitment to relational ethics and ecological care.

Conclusion: Towards an Ecocritical Ethics of Shared Vulnerability

This comparative study has examined how Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* re-evaluate the ethics of human survival by exposing the biopolitical mechanisms that produce differential vulnerability during ecological collapse (Arias-Maldonado, 2020, p. 1038). By synthesising Judith Butler's (2004, p. 28) social ontology of precarity with Rob Nixon's (2011, p. 2) concept of slow violence, the analysis demonstrates that environmental ruin is never a neutral or democratizing force; rather, it amplifies existing socio-political inequalities and restructures state power into necropolitical regimes (Mbembe, 2003, p. 14; Mehnert, 2016, p. 58). While both texts depict landscapes fractured by environmental ruin, they construct divergent speculative diagnoses regarding the fate of human sociality and institutional authority (Gajewska, 2021, p. 52; Johns-Putra, 2019, p. 95). Ultimately, both novels reveal that planetary breakdown fundamentally transforms social obligation and forces a radical reconsideration of what constitutes a livable life.

McCarthy (2006, p. 17) projects catastrophe onto an absolute, post-apocalyptic scale where the total extinction of the biosphere strips away political qualification (*bios*) and reduces remaining human subjects to Giorgio Agamben's (1998, p. 88) condition of bare life (*zoē*). In this sterile landscape where nature no longer regenerates, moral agency undergoes an elegiac contraction, confining ethical duty to atomised self-preservation within the nuclear father-son dyad (Snyder, 2008, p. 76; Dečo, 2012, p. 26). Conversely, Butler (1993, p. 31) conceptualises collapse as an attritional process of slow violence driven by neoliberal deregulation, privatised security and systemic state abandonment (Nixon, 2011, p. 14; Whyte, 2017, p. 226). In response to this gradual disintegration, Butler positions Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy and Earthseed theology as adaptive mechanisms that convert shared vulnerability into collectivist resilience, cross-racial solidarity and intergenerational care (Alberro et al., 2024, p. 45; Featherstone, 2024, p. 340). These contrasting narrative trajectories demonstrate that while absolute biosphere death leads to moral isolation, ongoing social attrition can inspire transformative practices of community renewal. By situating these literary works within the interdisciplinary theoretical matrix of environmental humanities, biopolitics and postcolonial ecocriticism, this research contributes significantly to emerging scholarship on climate fiction (Garrard, 2012, p. 115; Pohl, 2019, p. 78). The study demonstrates that dystopian literature serves as a crucial diagnostic tool for making visible the invisible, delayed destruction that characterises contemporary ecological crises (Nixon, 2011, p. 11; Whyte, 2018, p. 235). Furthermore, integrating Agamben's bare life and Mbembe's necropolitics with Butler's precarity enriches ecocritical methodology, allowing scholars to evaluate how planetary breakdown reshapes sovereign power, spatial segregation and human recognition (Butler, 2009, p. 35; Esposito, 2008, p. 48). The comparative framework provides a nuanced understanding of how speculative fiction critiques contemporary environmental injustice while interrogating the boundaries of political sovereignty.

In an era defined by accelerating climate destabilisation and growing socio-economic precarity, the speculative visions of McCarthy and Butler offer urgent cultural and philosophical lessons for the Anthropocene (Arias-Maldonado, 2020, p. 1040; Gajewska, 2021, p. 55). They caution against the hyper-individualist and survivalist impulses that arise during crisis, demonstrating that insular self-preservation ultimately leads to social death and ethical paralysis (Žižek, 2008, p. 15; Snyder, 2008, p. 80). Instead, these texts compel readers to embrace an ecocritical ethics of shared vulnerability that recognises the deep interdependency connecting human bodies, political systems and the non-human environment (Butler, 2004, p. 38; Nixon, 2011, p. 24). Navigating the uncertainties of planetary ruin ultimately requires abandoning anthropocentric mastery in favour of radical solidarity, mutual aid and collective responsibility for our shared ecological future. Future scholarly inquiries can expand this comparative framework beyond North American literature to examine how postcolonial climate fictions from the Global South represent the intersections of slow violence, resource extraction and transnational migration. Integrating new materialist and critical posthumanist approaches would further illuminate how non-human actants, synthetic technologies and degraded ecosystems shape human agency during civilizational breakdown. Additionally, investigating Indigenous speculative counter-narratives offers promising avenues for theorising intergenerational resilience and ecological stewardship beyond Eurocentric models of sovereignty. Scholars might also examine how contemporary speculative media translate these complex theoretical tensions into

visual and interactive modes of public engagement. Broadening these analytical perspectives will ensure that environmental humanities remains a responsive and vital field for addressing the evolving realities of global ecological crisis.

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