

## Article

# For My Daughter Kakuya: Imagining Children at the End(s) of the World

Candace Y. Simpson

Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL 60201, USA; candace.simpson@garrett.edu

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic revealed individual and institutional anxieties about the apocalypse. Pastors and activists alike turned to the depiction of the apocalypse in popular media to describe the urgency of decisive action. Implicitly, these depictions offer a curious method for engaging and imagining children. Assata Shakur writes compelling poetry in her autobiography about her hopes for the world. In one poem, entitled *For My Daughter Kakuya*, I argue that Shakur engages in Afrofuturist speculative fiction as she envisions a future world for her daughter. This paper explores how writers living through these times themselves imagine Black children at the end of the world. What would happen if we took seriously the notion that the “end of the world” is always at hand for Black people? This article explores the stomach-turning warning that Jesus offers in Mark 13:14–19 regarding those who are “pregnant and nursing in those days”. Using a reproductive justice lens, this paper explores the eternal challenge of imagining and stewarding a future in which Black children are safe and thriving. It also explores the limits and possibilities of partnering with radical Black faith traditions to this end.

**Keywords:** reproductive justice; dystopian fiction; Afrofuturism; Black family; apocalypse; Octavia Butler; Assata Shakur



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## 1. Introduction

Like many procrastinating graduate students, I found myself enthralled by the latest binge-worthy series on television. HBO Max’s *The Last of Us* is a dystopian future limited series in which a breed of invasive and parasitic mushrooms begin to ravage human flesh and society. When infected by the spores, human beings turn into zombies. The series, adapted from a video game, follows years of human suffering in the wake of this event. Initially, local governments attempt to contain the mushroom and those infected, but eventually, such efforts are useless. The finale drew over eight million viewers (Campione 2023). Those of us living through the COVID-19 pandemic could immediately see parallels between that fictional era and our real one.

Viewers come to learn that the world has been in zombie mushroom chaos for years. By the point of the bulk of the series’ telling, a teenager born to an infected woman takes the center role. This detail was haunting. It meant that this parent intentionally carried a baby to term during a uniquely precarious moment in the political history of the series.

Embarrassingly, my first thought at this plot twist was, “Why would someone have children when the world is ending? You knew there were mushroom zombies outside and still chose to get pregnant? Why would people knowingly birth children when social and political infrastructure will not properly nurture the children we have?”

Immediately, I was convicted. A second voice entered my head.

“When was it not the end of the world for Black children and their families? Isn’t the core belief of eugenics that certain people should and should not have children?” In my reaction to this dystopian fiction, I had accidentally surfaced what I have been programmed to believe about children and the choice to conceive and parent them. These were not the socialist, feminist, or queer ideals I believed I had. They were reactionary beliefs, primarily triggered by my own fear about the kind of world I know future children will inherit.

While trying to keep balance on this spinning ball of confusion, how do we think of the future these children will inherit? What do we hold as core values for the futures our children should have? What do we learn about the very sacred moment in which someone decides to raise children, or the equally sacred decision to remain child-free? What place do children, ours or others if we make a distinction, have in our futures as adults today?

## 2. Methods

This paper explores the messages offered in dystopian fiction regarding raising Black children. In this article, I focus primarily on Black dystopian writing through Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and, with less attention, other dystopian fiction that impacts Black people. Future work will include interviews with Black parents of Black children. The voices of Black parents (and hopeful parents) are quite important to this present work; however, I want to focus on the artistic and theological landscape of raising Black children.

My essential question is, how do dystopian fiction narratives illuminate the choice to conceive and parent Black children? In this way, art (and public reception to art) becomes critical data. Toni Cade Bambara said in an interview, "as a culture worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible" (Tillet 2015). Good art makes revolution irresistible. In doing so, good art also reflects the anxieties of its audience. Though we "look through a glass dimly", art reflects the possibilities not yet achieved and the ongoing realities of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Statement of Positionality

As a matter of transparency, I am a Black femme in their early 30s. I am not a parent, though it is a hope for me someday. I am a Baptist minister and an educator, often working with children. Though I do not feel called to serve as a youth minister, my work centers Black children. In this essay, I engage Afrofuturist curiosities, Biblical narratives, and the words of Assata Shakur to reveal assumptions about what Black children (and the choice to bring them to this realm) mean to us during the ever-present apocalypse.

## 4. The End of the World and Time Bending

How we mark time is telling. One may say, "before the pandemic hit" or "after COVID". Or, one may say "at the beginning of the pandemic" or "now that we are in this stage of the pandemic". People use years to denote a moment of significance, too. We find ourselves struggling for a landing place. What was the year that set everything off? Where do we start? Was it 2020? 2017? 2014? 2013? 1968? 1939? 1929? 1914? 1865? 1776? 1619? 1492? Some other time before then?

Such an effort to pinpoint the beginning of suffering misses that time is, in many cultures, not linear but cyclical (Womack 2013). The mushiness of time is a principle found in Afrofuturist fiction narratives. Because we, as Black people, often feel "hostage to time", we find ways to "control time and your place in it" thereby controlling "the course of history" itself. Referring to the Asante image of the Sankofa bird, Khari B., president of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, argued,

*It's that Sankofa effect . . . One step into the future while looking back. It's not that we're going backward, but we're evolving using the strength and characteristics of things that are why we're here today. We get to pull from our past to build our future. That's what Afrofuturism is about, going back to ancient traditions so that we can move more correctly into the future. (Womack 2013, p. 160)*

The Sankofa symbol is stylized by a bird reaching back to an egg on its back. In the context of this paper, we can imagine that the bird is the parent of the egg. Or, that the bird was once the egg. Either way, there is a connection between past, present, and future that is symbolized by the old and young self, or the guardian and child. In this essay, this metaphor also helps us think about conceptions of time and futurity through children. They are here and not yet here. They have "been here before" and are also very new to this

world.<sup>2</sup> What we say about children, therefore, is also a reflection about what we think and feel about our adult selves. The Sankofa loop helps to ground our concept of time.

### 5. What Is Afrofuturism?

In her *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack describes Afrofuturism as the combination of elements of “science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (Womack 2013).

Because Afrofuturism attempts to make use of the Black imaginary, it must find references and homes in everyday examples of art. As an artistic visionary, Missy Elliott’s catalog of music and video productions serves as the quintessential example of Afrofuturist art (Womack 2013, pp. 147–48). By warping sound and image (and sometimes even reversing them), Missy Elliott pushes back on what is possible in the present realm. In content, she fights tropes of misogynoir, fatphobia, and sexual repression by engaging in sharp wordplay and lyrical genius.

One might also consider the 1978 movie adaptation of *The Wiz*, which is an all-Black remix of the 1974 all-Black musical, a remix of Frank L. Baum’s 1900 children’s all-white book, *The Wizard of Oz*. In *The Wiz*, the story of Dorothy trying to get home takes on new meaning. As an all-Black cast sings Luther Vandross’ “Everybody Rejoice”, one cannot help but notice the new multilayered story that the ensemble is telling. As they unzip themselves from their sweatshop clothes, joyous faces and smiles are revealed. Black audiences begin to wonder what would happen if we could do the same. It does not resonate the same way as Judy Garland’s “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”, and for good reason.

Unless Patti Labelle is covering the song.

### 6. Time Travel of Critical Thinking

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* series felt like a fulfilled prediction. However, in her own words, Butler did not create anything that did not already exist. In her writing process, Butler engaged in a creative imagination that would be profoundly grounded in the truth of U.S. American violence. When asked how she researched for the series, she said that she listened to her “local National Public Radio and Pacifica stations and read newspapers and magazines” (Butler 2000). As Butler created a world of horror, she engaged in well-navigated time travel. She saw the future because she understood the present.

*The idea in Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents is to consider a possible future unaffected by parapsychological abilities such as telepathy or telekinesis, unaffected by alien intervention, unaffected by magic. It is to look at where we are now, what we are doing now, and to consider where some of our current behaviors and unattended problems might take us. I considered drugs and the effects of drugs on children of drug addicts. I looked at the growing rich/poor gap, at throwaway labor, at our willingness to build and fill prisons, our reluctance to build and repair schools and libraries, and at our assault on the environment. In particular, I looked at global warming and the ways in which it’s likely to change things for us. There’s food-price driven inflation that’s likely because, as the climate changes, some of the foods we’re used to won’t grow as well in the places we’re used to growing them. Not only will temperatures be too high, not only will there not be enough water, but the increase in carbon dioxide won’t affect all plants in the same way . . . I considered spreading hunger as a reason for increased vulnerability to disease. And there would be less money for inoculations or treatment. Also, thanks to rising temperatures, tropical diseases like malaria and dengue would move north. I considered the loss of coastline as the level of the sea rises. I imagined the United States becoming, slowly, through the combined effects of lack of foresight and short-term unenlightened self-interest, a third-world country. (Butler 2000, p. 337)*

In other words: the monster looks like us.

Butler's metacognitive clarity of her own writing process is instructive. In each of these examples, Butler considers the logical conclusion of social injustice if left to fester. It is not that Butler had some direct connection to the stars and the sands of time that enabled her to build a world that would resonate nearly thirty years after its publishing, although one could argue that Butler was profoundly fluent in the goings-on of the spirit realm. The scariest part of this life is not the invisible supernatural, but the billionaires, presidents, pastors, and celebrity class who manufacture crisis and evil. Butler's work becomes timeless because its truths are eternal. Likewise, Christians return to Biblical narratives because they speak to an eternal truth.

Dystopian fiction allows us to imagine the future as we wrestle with the present. All our fears and anxieties about what is happening now are present as we make future-tense worlds.

The good news is that there are prophets among us who can witness the future.

## 7. Assata Shakur and Her Daughter Kakuya

Assata Shakur is a mother, and was a political prisoner freed by the love of comrades (Shakur 1987). Her poetry, found in her autobiography *Assata*, is compelling and heart-wrenching. Shakur writes about the journey into parenthood while imprisoned. The "special" diet at Rikers for pregnant people included the standard meal plus "powdered milk, juice, and a hard-boiled egg" (Shakur 1987, p. 142). Still, Shakur was anemic throughout her entire pregnancy. When Shakur tried to advocate for a different doctor, the court argued that her status as a prisoner precluded her from having a say (Ibid.). Appropriate prenatal care was impossible and for Shakur, a thing much like hell. I invoke Shakur's story in this article because it helps to articulate the present "end of the world" that human beings endure across time. The world ends for so many people daily.

Shakur reminds us that she was giving birth as a ward of the state. An entire motorcade escorted her to Elmhurst Hospital (Shakur 1987, p. 143). A demonstration took place outside the hospital in support of her "right to choose the doctor" (Ibid.). Eventually, she insisted that she would deliver her own baby. On the matter of giving birth, Shakur argued that it is important for people to "go through the birth experience with people [they trust]" (Shakur 1987, p. 144).

Postpartum, however, Shakur continued to be harassed by the medical establishment. They insisted on examinations, and when she refused, they dragged her and cuffed her hands and feet (Shakur 1987, p. 145). They provided no methods for her to attend to her postpartum hygiene. The entire matter of Shakur's pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum care is an indictment on the system. Shakur, like many other pregnant incarcerated people, experienced continuous violations of her body and mind. She wanted her daughter Kakuya, and thankfully Kakuya was healthy.

Even before becoming a mother, Shakur had a passion for children. She explored that passion while briefly associated with the Black Panther Party.

*I was assigned to the [children's education] project. I was really ecstatic about it because I love working with children and I was really tired of adults at the time. I collected books, materials, paints, photographs, children's Black history stories, children's records, etc.* (Shakur 1987, p. 227)

We get a glimpse of the care Shakur has for children as she thinks of other people's children. It is central to her life outlook even before Kakuya enters the picture. Where she otherwise felt "reserved", she felt this was the project to which she could give all her energy (Ibid.).

Assata's mother would bring Kakuya to visit at the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women in New Jersey. Assata often felt guilty and sorrowful that her child had grown so tall while she was caged. In as many words, Assata found that her daughter, Kakuya, was traumatized. She does not want to play "baby elephant or tiger" (Shakur 1987, p. 257). Four-year-old Kakuya tells Assata, "you're not my mother", and bangs her tiny fists of

toddler rage on Assata's body (Ibid.). They both cry for they are both heartbroken. All within the view of Assata's mother, who likely is heartbroken, too.

As Shakur reflects, it was this moment that propelled her to commit to an escape plan. She writes, "I decided that it is time to leave" (Shakur 1987, p. 258). Kakuya's tears watered Assata's freedom path.

Grieved, Shakur writes a poem for Kakuya.

*i have shabby dreams for you  
of some vague freedom  
i have never known.  
Baby,  
i don't want you hungry or thirsty  
or out in the cold.  
and i don't want the frost  
to kill your fruit  
before it ripens.  
i can see a sunny place-  
Life exploding green.  
i can see your bright, bronze skin at ease with all the flowers  
and the centipedes.  
i can hear laughter,  
not grown from ridicule*

*And words not prompted  
by ego or greed or jealousy.  
i see a world where hatred  
has been replaced by love.  
and ME replaced by WE.  
And I can see a world replaced  
where you,  
building and exploring,  
strong and fulfilled,  
will understand.  
And go beyond  
my little shabby dreams. (Shakur 1987, p. 259)*

In her imagination, Shakur can see what is not here yet. She can see the world that Kakuya deserves. Shakur's poem dances with *The Wiz's* "Home". Stephanie Mills and Diana Ross in the Broadway debut and film version, respectively, sing about "living in a brand-new world" which might be a "fantasy".<sup>3</sup> But because it has "taught them to love", it "is real" to them (Ibid.). Shakur can see a world of communal support, in which ego, greed, and jealousy are part of the former things that have passed away.<sup>4</sup>

Shakur has an imagination of the future that exists, if only for the sake of her child. There are flowers and centipedes, and the frost will not kill our fruit. As the Earth endures its own crisis, spurred primarily by the actions of the US Military and careless billionaires, one can imagine that a world of centipedes, exploding green, and fruits-not-frosted is an exercise in the impossible. Still, Shakur realizes that these are "shabby". They are not the biggest possible dreams that Kakuya can have. They are the biggest dreams that her mother can have.



Given Shakur's testimony in her autobiography, she believes her sacred call is in stewarding a tradition of resistance. In the very last poem of her autobiography, Assata Shakur plays with the idea of legacy. In a poem called "The Tradition", she names slave ships, arsenic apple pies, newspapers, meetings, classrooms, churches, sit-ins, die-ins, chants, songs, and folk tales as mechanisms and elements of the tradition (Shakur 1987, p. 263). She insists that we "pass it down to the children" (Ibid.).

The bird, moving forward, looks backward at the egg on its back. Sankofa.

## 8. Octavia Butler's Lauren Olamina

In 1993, Octavia Butler published the first book of the *Parable of the Sower* series. The series follows a Black teenager named Lauren Olamina who lives in a gated community with her family. Amidst ecological and economic crises, political leaders have exploited the lives of the masses. The news comes in short and skewed paragraphs. Rape and robbery are common. Water is difficult to find, so much so that people are selling it to turn a profit. President Christopher Donner is the newly elected president with a plan to "put people back to work" (Butler 2000, p. 27). He is going to "get laws changed, suspend 'overly restrictive' minimum wage, environmental and worker protection laws" (Ibid.).

The first date in Lauren Olamina's journal is Saturday, 20 July 2024. Lauren is Octavia Butler's prophetic and headstrong vessel in her *Parable of the Sower* series. When we meet her, Lauren is on the eve of her fifteenth birthday. She shares this day with her father, who is soon turning fifty-five. The very first words Lauren speaks to us are of guilt and transparent lament. She feels pressured to please her father "and the community and God" (Butler 2000, p. 3).

Lauren's father is a Baptist minister. Rev. Olamina is concerned about Lauren's posture in this hell of a world. As a steward of weekly meetings (which Lauren eventually adapts for her own spiritual community), Rev. Olamina understands the rhythms of human life, even in these times. He begs her to pace herself and to work with intention.

*People are bored. They wouldn't mind another informal class now that they've lost the Yannis television. If you can think of ways to entertain them and teach them at the same time, you'll get your information out. And all without making anyone look down . . . into the abyss, Daughter . . . You've just noticed the abyss . . . The adults in this community have been balancing at the edge of it for more years than you've been alive.* (Butler 2000, p. 66)

In this advice, Rev. Olamina is teaching Lauren about sustainability and about generational struggle. Perhaps if Rev. Olamina could time travel, he would have loved to read Assata Shakur's *The Tradition*. In this vignette, Rev. Olamina reminds Lauren (and the readers) that the end times did not just begin yesterday. Adults have been grappling with such a dynamic for ages. In this fatherly advice, Rev. Olamina is trying to make sure his daughter does not lose herself in the project. He urges, "talk to them about classes, not about Armageddon" (Butler 2000, p. 67). Immediately after this warning, he invites Lauren to come see some "important things" in sealed containers in the backyard.

"Just in case", of course (Ibid.).

Lauren wonders about what a worthwhile life might be. Is this the kind of world she wants to live in?

*What's adequate, I wonder: a house or apartment? A room? A bed in a shared room? A barracks bed? Space on a floor? Space on the ground? And what about people with big families? Won't they be seen as bad investments? Won't it make much more sense for companies to hire single people, childless couples, or at most, people with only one or two kids?* (Butler 2000, p. 27)

She later has an interaction with her brother, Keith, which demonstrates to the reader just how horrifying the future is for people in Lauren's world. Lauren reveals to Keith that she was sexually active at twelve, to which Keith responds, "you're lucky you didn't get pregnant" (Butler 2000, p. 106). Lauren later tells her brother that she wants to get out of

the gated community. Keith says, “what, instead of marrying Curtis and having a bunch of babies?” and Lauren responds, “yeah. Instead of that” (Butler 2000, pp. 107–9). Keith insists that Lauren is better off marrying Curtis and having babies because “outside, you wouldn’t last a day” (Butler 2000, p. 110)

But Lauren is not interested in having children with Curtis.

*We’ve been very careful, Curtis and I, but from somewhere or other, he’s gotten a supply of condoms. They’re old-fashioned but they work. And there’s an unused darkroom in a corner of the Talcott garage.*

Lauren is still interested in pleasure and intimacy, but she intentionally engages in less risky sex. Even at the end of the world, condoms can be found. Lauren makes the decision to be intimate with Curtis and considers it a “careful” endeavor. I will now turn to the words of Jesus as a time-bending warning. Given that Lauren is trapped in a Christofascist society, it is worth exploring the theological foundations for the terror she and her people face.

## 9. Let The Reader Understand: Jesus and Warnings

I intentionally invite the wisdom of Jesus in this article because hell on Earth must be addressed by those who create it. Rather than allow religious conservatives and centrists to own the scripture, it is important for Afrofuturists, socialists, communists, Pan Africanists, and otherwise radical thinkers to engage the text on its own terms. Michael Brandon McCormack invites us to take the faith seriously as we critique those who claim ownership of his written word (McCormack 2016).

*On the one hand, Butler argues for a need to “outgrow” religion—or at least certain modalities and expressions of religiosity. On the other hand, she recognizes the persistence of religion, and uses her novels to explore the possibilities of constructing more “mature” forms of religious thought and communities that can sustain individuals across radical lines of difference. (McCormack 2016, p. 18)*

Mark 13:14–19 depicts a rare side of Jesus. He is standing before his people with a cardboard sign proclaiming “The End is Nigh”.

*14 “But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; 15 the one on the housetop must not go down or enter to take anything from the house; 16 the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. 17 Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! 18 Pray that it may not be in winter. 19 For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now and never will be.*

In this chapter, Jesus is describing the suffering that is to come. He warns the people to keep alert and awake and to watch for the signs of the fig trees. He warns people to remember the prophecy that those days will be marked by the darkening of the sun and moon, and stars will fall from heaven. Those days are marked by great supernatural and cosmic upheaval.

Within this passage, Jesus takes the time to wonder about what it must be like to be pregnant and nursing. It must be challenging to endure the end of the world while you have a gut full of human, a strained back, swollen feet, and a constantly emptying bladder. It must be a unique kind of suffering to think about feeding a child in those days. But knowing Jesus, he is not just referring to the logistical challenges, but also of the spiritual and emotional work of caring for children, too. Jesus is thinking about the practical challenges of parenting and remembering our community’s children in the suffering days to come.

In *Parable of the Sower*, a nursing mother finds a creative way to quiet a child as a stranger came closer to the caravan.

*A lone, dark figure came away from the truck and took several steps toward us. At that moment, Natividad took the new child, and in spite of his age, gave him one breast and Dominic the other. It worked. Both children were comforted almost at once. They made a few small sounds, then settled down to nursing. (Butler 2000, p. 254)*

Where Jesus imagines that nursing is something woe-worthy, Butler imagines that nursing keeps children quiet and thus the caravan safe from unfriendly strangers. Jesus and Butler are at least aligned on one thing. It is something that Shakur's testimony illuminates as truth. It is a uniquely frightening thing to be a pregnant person "in those days".

*At last, somewhat cleaner, resupplied with food, water, ammunition for all three guns, and by the way, condoms for my own future, we headed out of town. (Butler 2000, p. 241)*

Butler uses every word intentionally. *For my own future*. We do not know if her primary use of condoms is for the sake of avoiding sexually transmitted diseases and infections, for contraceptive use, or both. We can imagine that even the slightest sex-related mishap (like a yeast infection or urinary tract infection) would be devastatingly difficult to treat in Lauren Olamina's world. After all, this is the same world where water is sold like gasoline. But Butler uses the words "my own future", giving readers a clue that Lauren is not ready for any future changes to her life at this point. Including children. Exercising agency over her own body, which she knows not everyone is able to do in her neighborhood, she insists on controlling at least one thing that she can.

Her future.

## 10. What Does Reproductive Justice Look Like at the End of the World?

In the summer of 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. It triggered a series of protests, community responses, sermons, and general discourse among all kinds of people. Since that decision was made, the damage has been difficult to estimate. What is the best way to account for the number of people who have decided not to conceive due to this decision? We can attempt to obtain a figure for the number of people who sought long-term contraceptive mechanisms since the decision. We can try to find out what clinics like Planned Parenthood say about demand and supply for appointments. We can see a list of closed clinics and doctors who no longer practice.

But these figures only tell us a story that is legible. We do not have a sense of people who have revised their dating habits or qualities they seek in a potential mate due to this news. We do not know how many people have chosen to have different kinds of sex besides sex that results in children. We do not know how many people have resigned to the reality that their body does not belong to them. We do not know how this news has impacted sexual behaviors yet although there are promising discussions. These numbers are not as easy to investigate.

As a framework, reproductive justice helps us to think more creatively about our bodies and our futures (Tam 2021).

*RJ recognizes reproductive oppression as inherently interconnected with multiple intersections of oppression including racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, health status, and access to healthcare. Beyond an analytical framework, RJ is a movement aimed at challenging white supremacist structures and systems that control populations through regulation of bodies, sexuality, labour, and reproduction. The movement is concerned with the day-to-day conditions constituting a person's reproductive decisions including access to resources and healthcare, familial elements, cultural values, educational opportunities, and other familial and community needs. (Tam 2021, p. 2)*

To be distinguished from white feminist insistence on "choice", reproductive justice considers reproductive oppression a deciding factor in what brings people to raising children. Reproductive justice is a lens, then, on "integrative, rather than additive, impacts of racism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, and classism in reproductive politics" (Tam 2021). Rather than a theoretical posture alone, it attempts to be a "praxis-based" framework. Reproductive justice as a framework, as opposed to liberal sloganeering,



insists that “legal rights are meaningless without ensuring practical access to reproductive healthcare”.

Founded in 1997 as a coalition among women of color, SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective organizes to “build an effective network of individuals and organizations to improve institutional policies and systems that impact the reproductive lives of marginalized communities”.<sup>5</sup> According to the origin story told on their website, reproductive justice was born under unique circumstances.

*Right before attending the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, where the entire world agreed that the individual right to plan your own family must be central to global development, a group of black women gathered in Chicago in June of 1994. They recognized that the women’s rights movement, led by and representing middle-class and wealthy white women, could not defend the needs of women of color and other marginalized women and [trans] people. (Ibid.)*

To illustrate, let us turn to the critical and popular reception of *Handmaid’s Tale* on Hulu. Also within the realm of dystopian fiction, the story follows a white cisgender woman named June Osborne as she attempts to escape the Christofascist Gilead to Canada. Though the series did well to illuminate the role of Christian supremacy in the rise of fascist authoritarian movements, it failed to take seriously the meaning of race in that time.

When *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, on brand and like clockwork, “comments like ‘Welcome to *The Handmaid’s Tale*’ and images of protestors in handmaid costumes have spread online”. Meredith [Neville-Shepard \(2023\)](#) argued,

*While many increasingly gravitate toward *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the hope that its affective import will help galvanize support for reproductive justice, the impulse to deploy this text as a protest symbol is . . . detrimental to the cause of inclusive and coalitional feminisms. (Neville-Shepard 2023, p. 18)*

Media critics had much to say on this issue, citing a consistent pattern of “refusing to meaningfully examine race”, which allows “white privilege—and white feminist audiences—utterly off the hook”, and perpetuates “a particular strand of feminist critique that assumes all women suffer equally under patriarchal systems” ([Neville-Shepard 2023](#), p. 3).

White feminist imaginations are limited. With limited imaginations, we can barely reach the strategies necessary for survival. Thus, we turn to Black voice and Black verse.

## 11. On the Mic: Black Verse

I include Mary because her narration of the dreams she has for her child are eternally applicable. Though her journey into pregnancy raises questions about consent and bodily autonomy, her song in Luke behaves as a protection spell for the child who is not yet here.

Published the same year as *Parable of the Sower*, Delores Williams’ *Sisters in the Wilderness* helps us to wonder if Mary could have consented to the birth of Jesus Christ ([Williams 1993](#)).

*In Matthew’s account of Mary’s pregnancy, she is not presented as a free adult consenting in the matter of bearing the child Jesus. . . . Can servants disagree or refuse the jobs their masters assign them and still stay in relation and favor with their employers/masters? Does the language Mary uses to describe herself as servant suggest free womanhood? Did Mary have a real choice? Could she have said no, given the command language used by Gabriel? Is there danger of this female servanthood language being appropriated socially in the male-dominated societies in which most women live, so that women’s “servanthood” is made to look like women’s choice? (Williams 1993, pp. 182–83)*

In the gospel of Luke, Mary is visited by an angel who “uses command language” to tell her that she is God’s favored one. Mary will “conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus”. Never in the dialogue recorded in Luke does Gabriel ask Mary what she wants. Mary responds, “How can this be since I am a virgin”, and the angel

Gabriel replies with logistics. We can assume Mary is asking a question deeper than the *how*, and instead, is asking an existential question. It is the same question people ask upon seeing the pregnancy test say “positive” when they were not anticipating it.

We know “how”, we are asking something else.

Mary eventually visits Elizabeth, and we do not know what they talked about. There is little recorded about their interaction. We do know that both Mary and Elizabeth find themselves pregnant in curious circumstances. We do not have much information about what Mary truly believes about being pregnant, but we do know that she has dreams for what her child’s life should be. The circumstances surrounding the pregnancy may be unethical, but since she is now at this juncture, Mary does get to imagine what kind of life her child will have.

Whatever happened during their visit prompts Mary to offer an Afrofuturistic lullaby in which she imagines the possibilities her son will inherit *and* the world he will usher in. Luke 1:46–55 is an unusually long and uninterrupted selection of speech from a woman, making it significant both in content and in its refutation of gendered norms. Women simply do not have their voices recorded as long in the Bible. Mary sings,

*He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.*<sup>6</sup>

What a poem to sing at a baby shower.

Mary conjures a future in which Jesus brings down the powerful and lifts the lowly. She believes that her son will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. We do not receive a Jesus who argues that the last shall be first without first meeting a parent who conjures such a spell. These poetic verses have power.

Assata Shakur is no stranger to poetic verses. She captures what is impossible to describe in prose through precise poetic verses. She writes on love, other times on mental illness, childhood, death, prison, protest, and more. The poetic verse as a genre allows Shakur to reach the deepest part of her wonder.

Octavia Butler also deals in verse. As part of her research process, she used Tao de Ching as a model for the Earthseed verses.

*The Self must create  
Its own reasons for being.  
To shape God,  
Shape Self. (Butler 2000, p. 258)*

Butler provides us an open verse. We can interpret as we need. Which self? What being? Which God? Butler sees that the Self and God are related entities. What we say about God is what we say about ourselves, and how we come to know ourselves is how we shape God.

All three women, fictional, historical, or a little of both—Lauren Olamina, Assata Shakur, and Mary—use poetic verses to describe the world they desire for their children. Art has the power to give voice to ideas in ways that other genres cannot. And thus, these offerings require our attention.

## 12. Looking Forward

Because the church is arguably *the* reason for catastrophe, there must be an ecclesial move towards an ethical imagination of children and their paths Earthside. Some may argue because Christian supremacy is so entangled in church practice, the church can never be a positive force. Some may argue that investment in Black children can help us grow our

churches, and therefore, we must center children if we want to have a job ten years from now. And some say that “children are our future”.

I am arguing that who we are as a society, and certainly as a church, is made clear through our treatment of children and our thoughts around their arrival. I am arguing for a more literal understanding of the word “apocalypse”, as in “revealing” (Dein 2021). As Simon Dein reminds us, quoting Aldrovandi,

*Apokalypsis’ in the original, etymological understanding of the word: a sudden breaking point in human destiny unveiling an ultimate truth (aleitheia) that has always been present, but remains most of the time hidden, denied or forgotten. (Dein 2021, p. 7)*

The COVID-19 pandemic (and what it revealed about the world’s superpower’s priorities) combines elements of religious apocalypticism as well as secular apocalypticism. COVID-19 and its associated social ills like supply chain issues, hospital infrastructure collapse, and ongoing police brutality that never takes a break presented an opportunity for religious conservatives to claim the end is nigh.

According to Dein, “some Christians claim that COVID-19 is proof that the plagues of the book of Revelation, and in particular the seven Seals of Revelation 6:1–8:1, are occurring now and Jesus’ return is imminent” (Dein 2021, p. 9). But in a secular way, Dein argues that “the Covid-19 pandemic has been viewed in apocalyptic terms signifying a radical societal change” (Dein 2021, p. 10). Even in a secular way, there is a sense that we are living in the end times. If the end is here, what do we do with the time we have? What is the call to action for Black Christians as we live through what feels like the season finale of civilization?

We cannot know who we are if we refuse to understand the conditions of Black children and the decisions that bring them to this realm. And if we cannot know who we are, then we cannot be of service to the children in our lives.

A more robust and critical Christian education, including Freedom Schools and other social justice programs, will help to create the conditions for the radicalization of both children and families. It is only upon investigating one’s possibilities that one can develop a plan towards that future. For example, when movies and television shows are released that capture the imagination of Black people, it is the responsibility of educators and artists to partner in making room to explore them. Put simply, it is one matter to take busloads of Black children to see *Black Panther*. It is another matter entirely to devote critical educational opportunities to explore topics of race, gender, imperialism, romanticized notions of the African continent, ancestral veneration, ability, and the significance of technological advances for Black people globally. The latter provides an opportunity for children (and families) to step into history and imagine the kind of world they want to see. Even if that world does not materialize, it is a worthy project because it helps to shape critical thinkers who become critical actors.

In churches, Black and otherwise, there are a good number of “Keiths”, who insist that people marry and have babies. People with the perceived ability to become pregnant are expected to do so, and there are uninterrogated biblical and theological justifications toward that end. Are we asking people to have children for the sake of building God’s army? More importantly, if we want to honor the reproductive and caregiving agency of all people, we must create worlds in which hopeful parents are supported in that endeavor.

If the church is worthwhile, Black or otherwise, then it must have some useful witness regarding resources, healthcare, education, economics, abolition, the mass disabling event of COVID-19, and more. If it is worthwhile, there will be room including and beyond the preaching moment to collectively wrestle with the question of freedom. In this effort, people must begin (and continue) to organize.

*Your kids’ bus route is inconsistent? Let’s carpool.*

*Your children have been getting demerits for minor behavioral issues? I thought it was just my kid. Let’s talk to the principal together.*

*I’ve got a harvest of greens ready if you want to pick some up from my backyard garden.*

I have witnessed these interactions and more as a community educator and minister. Octavia Butler offered a word to all of us, but I hope the church heeds each word:

*Respect God:*

*Pray working.*

*Pray learning,*

*Planning,*

*Doing.*

*Pray creating,*

*Teaching,*

*Reaching.*

*Pray working.*

*Pray to focus your thoughts,*

*Still your fears,*

*Strengthen your purpose.*

*Respect God.*

*Shape God.*

*Pray working.* (Butler 2000, p. 295)

Pray working, for the children already here and those on their way.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV.

<sup>2</sup> This is a saying in Black families. “That baby been here before” is what one says when a child displays traits that are developmentally beyond their Earth-age years. For example, a small child who belts Aretha Franklin with just as much soul would be said to have “been here before.”

<sup>3</sup> Diana Ross—Home. *Genius*. Available online: <https://genius.com/Diana-ross-home-lyrics> (accessed on 25 July 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 21:4, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> Reproductive Justice. *Sister Song*. Last Modified 2023. Available online: <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice> (accessed on 25 July 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:51–53.

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