

**All Mutual Aid is Speculative Fiction: Critical Fabulation and its Role  
in Achieving Abolition**

Adaylin Alvarez

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Adena Rivera-Dundas  
Department of English  
Supervising Professor

**All Mutual Aid is Speculative Fiction: Critical Fabulation and its Role  
in Achieving Abolition**

**by**

**Adaylin Alvarez**

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## **Dedication**

This is for my best friend and my greatest inspiration, my mother, who told me stories as a girl and inspired me to write for myself. This is also for a younger me, who spoke broken English and Spanish and believed she could never write anything that mattered.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	10
<b>Discussion</b> .....	15
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	39
<b>Preview to my unnamed creative story</b> .....	43
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	61

## **Introduction**

Growing up in a predominantly Mexican American neighborhood with an undocumented mother and brother saw our family finding solace within the undocumented communities near us. Families whose identity is often centered around their struggles with borders leaves them largely dependent on the stories of their ancestors in order to find their identity beyond a struggle. Not only does storytelling make us feel validated in our culture and identity, it also helps us understand and build a connection between the sociological and intangible aspects combined with the individually lived, personal aspects on which racism functions. Within those undocumented communities we belonged to, we were able to identify beyond the daily suffering we experienced.

Storytelling, in our case, is a form organizing within the undocumented communities we engaged with. The undocumented community prioritizes the telling of stories as a form of education and entertainment—we share stories with each other so that others can apply our experiences to their own in order to help them navigate through their journeys on foreign soil. My family told stories of triumph, joy, and love with the goal of providing support to other families who needed it. In return, we learned more from other families and were able to survive during times where the government's programs failed to provide substantial support. Storytelling then became a form of practicing mutual aid, where mutual aid is a reciprocal means of providing resources to one another and the

resources we provided were our stories. Through storytelling, we were unknowingly practicing mutual aid—something that I wouldn't be able to label until attending a post-secondary institution, a luxury not provided to many people within undocumented communities.

Without the central storytellers in my life, I would never have learned of my mother's experiences as an undocumented woman, my father's experience in picking grapes in California, and the many stories of my family's struggles with borders, white supremacy, and Indigeneity. While storytelling is a beautiful practice, the strength and comfort we found through stories is limited by the borders of the archive. The archive—also known as the white supremacist, colonial archive—whose goal is to document information deemed important by majority culture, transforms immigrant loss into longing for what we could not to, which is document our stories and retrace those of our ancestors beyond the past three generations we know of. The archive, instead of giving us the agency to determine what kinds of stories we want to share, who we can share them with, and where we want to share them, shares what the majority culture determines as worthy content. In stripping us of our agency, the archive perpetuates the very power imbalances it sought to expose—our stories are reduced to stories on the border crisis or the immigrant narrative—thereby committing further violence and re-traumatizing the people who are central to the story.

The stories taken from us are a form of compensation and reparation that will never undo the damage caused from being silenced. When the archive, and the agents

behind it, exploits our resources by taking and giving nothing in return, it violates the practice of mutual aid in its foundation. Because mutual aid is a reciprocal practice created to meet the needs of others as a result of failing systems designed help us in a transactional way, thereby causing those same failures and crises, storytelling within communities like the undocumented community is mutual aid. Storytelling is a form of connecting with other people, providing them with support or information needed to survive. Within my family, storytelling connects me to my roots no matter where I am. When I was far from home, phone calls with my mother allowed me to connect with her and other family members from a distance—I was connected to my roots even when I was in an institution that was built to keep me from succeeding. Those phone calls, the stories told from hundreds of miles away, helped me survive when I felt like I could no longer live. My being here to this day is attributed to the stories that allowed me connect with myself and my culture during times when I struggled with my identity. My family's stories provided me with support to continue living and those resources were reciprocated with whatever support I was able to provide—storytelling is a form of practicing mutual aid.

When the archive exploits our stories and causes further damage where it sought to support, it mimics other systems put in place in the physical world—the lack of support for undocumented communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, for houseless communities during the winter storm in Texas in February of the year 2021, or the centuries-long prison system designed to protect and to serve. Because stories are a form

of social justice organizing, those same systems—the archive—that were created to force the people to rely on them, would crumble if our stories gained too much traction and impact without its help. This has been seen through the delegitimization of social justice movements that have gained too much traction, from the co-optation of the Black Panther Party's free breakfast program by the Department of Homeland Security or the raids on No More Deaths' medical camps created to support immigrants by the Trump administration—mass mobilization threatens the systems of oppression we face, where the archive becomes threatened by the stories we share outside of it. The reliance of those systems on the existence of the borders, prisons, and poverty in order to exist means they expect to receive dependence in the transactional exchange of providing—we are forced to become dependent on governmental support programs. The archive provides information—limited by the exclusion of information deemed unworthy—with the intention of receiving information meant to sustain and maintain it thereby causing us to depend on it when in academia.

Although every community has their own name for the stories that go against the archive, *cuentas* in my culture, the archive depends on the need to label everything to distinguish between good and bad material. So, stories went from being called *cuentas* to being divided into genres that often don't represent the intention and full scope of the story. With their fiction-like nature and role in social justice organizing, stories, as I know them, came to be put under the genre of science fiction. The tales of *La Llorona* fell into science fiction because of the incorporation of the physical, natural world with

paranormal science, and other stories often fall into the category because they involve elements of an imagined sense of science, technology, or a combination of both with the intention of telling stories. The problem with labels is that often the content becomes too centered around what the majority culture deems as worthy, seen in the reliance of science fiction and its popularity within its mostly white, male audience. Stories of science and its incorporation to imagined species and worlds transformed into stories of reformed colonialism and the colonization of those imagined worlds and species. Years and years of reading the same narrative of getting revenge and captivating those who held you captive turned me from science fiction novels to different genres, for most of my childhood and years beyond it, until I came across stories like *Beloved* by Toni Morrison or *Dawn* by Octavia Butler. The introduction to their stories of imagined worlds introduced me to *speculative fiction*.

While I still believe that labeling things into accepted terms contributes to our reliance on the archive, the idea of speculative fiction makes me believe in a freer world where our joy is not limited to breaks from struggle. Speculative fiction and its role in organizing, though not something that is often acknowledged, provides ways for both the reader and author to see their ideas transform through methods they can practice in real life. Unlike science fiction, speculative fiction works toward creating liberated worlds that don't exist within the failing systems in place in our real world. Through immigrant loss and poverty, our families created stories where we transformed our imagination of a borderless, rich world and created stories of those freer worlds.

Because of the archive's position as central to the giving and accessing of information—and the exclusive accessibility of that information—I never realized how radical storytelling can be until attending a predominantly white institution. In doing what not many of my family members could do due to the lack of support, I attended the University of Texas at Austin. Coming to this university, I believed the only way to be successful was to become a doctor, where I only considered science as a means of providing substantial and meaningful change. To me, and many others, curing diseases was the only to discover and create meaningful work. But I learned, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, that science isn't the only means of supporting our most vulnerable communities. Simultaneously, doctors were coding for proteins and antibodies that could physically save us from the impact of this form of the coronavirus, meanwhile stories, music, and creativity saved us from emotional impact of being isolated as a result of the virus. Realizing this and reflecting on my past yearning to create and support outside of, or in combination with, science made me realize that I wanted to do what I was passionate about instead of what was expected of me. During the second semester of my freshman year, I wanted to be more than a typical science major because of my love for books and dependence on stories—I became a Biology and English double major.

Adding English was a blessing, not because I conquered the language forced down my throat at six years old, because it provided me with classes that introduced me to the idea of speculative fiction in the first place. The stories we grew up with reminded me of the initial speculative fiction books I read, but I never knew how big of a role those

stories played in the practice of mutual aid within my community until college. It's unfortunate how significant these stories are in discussions about mutual aid because those responsible for telling those stories, while unknowingly practicing mutual aid, don't even know what that term means.

Like the central storytellers in my life and those within the undocumented communities my family belonged to, I never knew what mutual aid was. Unlike many of those storytellers, I was fortunate enough to go to a post-secondary institution and put a name to something I have been practicing for years — the joy, happiness, hospitality, and comfort I found through stories about my childhood, stories about my family and known ancestors, stories about legends and myths within the Mexican community, and stories that were meant to heal us during hard times transformed from just being memories or fiction and became mutual aid.

Although attending university is a privilege in some ways, it can often mean facing struggle, disappointment, and fear. Putting a label to things makes you realize how long we, vulnerable communities, have been struggling to survive—storytelling as a form of practicing mutual aid has always been necessary for our survival, but labeling it mutual aid made me realize how much we have been relying on our community for support due to the shortcomings of the government. Storytelling became more than building and creating enjoyment and happiness, it also became tearing down the systems that created the need for happiness and support. In creating the necessary conditions for a safe, supportive, and healthy environment within our communities, we also abolish the

systems that have threatened those conditions—we practice mutual aid with the goal of achieving the abolition of the prison industrial complex and the non-profit industrial complex.

Storytelling, or creating in any kind of way, became a more fundamental practice within my life and I was able to use it to connect with other vulnerable communities on campus. Within the intersectional spaces located in a larger isolating campus-environment, I found people who wanted to provide support in times of crisis because they had the capacity to do so. We practiced mutual aid before I'd ever heard of the term itself and incorporated mutual aid practices to support each other whenever we needed it. Through this, *Mutual Aid Austin, Texas*—Mutual Aid ATX—was born as a result of large collective need and suffering at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

My family, including myself, and my friends within Mutual Aid ATX became activists for abolition through the practice of storytelling. The fear brought upon by natural disasters, exacerbated by the lack of help from the government, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the harsh Texan winter storm in March of 2021, resulted in the need for resources to physically survive, but the isolating factor created by the lack of human contact resulted in the need for a non-physical connection. Storytelling became more than resources of entertainment, or survival in some cases, and transformed into the only way we could connect with others.

The idea of speculative fiction combined with the practice of mutual aid are intertwined, yet speculative, which brought upon the need to create an accessible academic paper that addresses the importance of storytelling—under the genre of speculative fiction—in practicing mutual aid with the goal of achieving abolition. In creating this paper, I hope to provide a resource for people to look at when they need inspiration for ways to reimagine the future of abolition through the practice of mutual aid within speculative fiction. Much like Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, in my opinion, *can* be used as a survival guide during times of crisis, I hope this paper serves as a place to ground yourself in practicing mutual aid through activism, storytelling, or reading and writing stories of speculative fiction. In order to do so, I will need to establish the necessity of books in practicing mutual aid by proving the importance of reading fiction in order to think—imagine—and talk about big social change. Establishing the importance of the literary genre of speculative fiction requires an in-depth literary analysis of books that fall under that genre meanwhile reflecting on the genesis of this paper—my personal experiences within mutual aid organizations, writing speculative fiction, and connection to the central storytellers of my life.

## Literature Review

While the work I am doing within this paper focuses on the importance of speculative fiction in practicing mutual aid, I am not the first to come up with concept or acknowledge the importance of books in abolition. In order to understand the importance of mutual aid within speculative fiction, it is important to review already established definitions of mutual aid and speculative fiction as well as previous discussions on the importance of fiction in organizing. Many scholars have previously done so, though in different ways, and their work is the reason for my encountering this idea.

Before reviewing the work of scholars on the importance of books in activism, we must first understand why this has not been widely acknowledged. As I mentioned previously, the white supremacist, colonial archive has transformed the original archive—whose sole purpose was to document storytelling—and used it to control access to information deemed important meanwhile excluding the information essential to community building in order to push the white supremacist, colonial agenda. In doing so, this archive erased stories from colonized communities. From adrienne maree brown to Saidiya Hartman, many scholars have previously spoken on the absence of certain stories within the wide reach of the archive. In Hartman's case, the archive of slavery—which falls under the wider umbrella of the white supremacist, colonial archive—acts as a, "death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand

narrative of history." Hartman then introduces the practice of critical fabulation, where a writer will, "imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done"—in terms of both history and the future—when writing a story beyond the confines of the archive (Hartman 11). Critical fabulation then becomes a practice necessary to writing speculative fiction and in turn, practicing mutual aid with the goal of achieving abolition. Writers of speculative fiction then take the tangible information provided by the archive and create stories beyond what is known, thereby practicing critical fabulation.

Although Hartman specifically focuses on the archive of slavery when using critical fabulation when talking about the exclusion of stories essential to the survival of vulnerable communities, the archive of storytelling, as we know it now—transformed from storytelling as the original archive—acts in a different way than the archive of slavery, but both achieve the same goal. The archive of storytelling takes the stories of vulnerable communities and re-tells them in ways that we never had the opportunity of doing so. Established scholars, reporters, journalists, and outsiders tell our stories—sometimes without our consent, consultation, and crediting us—even though we have been telling them for many years and reach wider audiences than we ever could. In re-telling our stories, the archive then inadvertently perpetuates the very power imbalances it seeks to *expose*. Our stories are then manipulated and we become reduced to numbers, dates, and, whether we want to be identified or not, names. This reflects what the archive of slavery does to Black people in Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts*, where the stories of the

humans who were enslaved are reduced to, "numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved (Hartman 3)."

In defying the archive of storytelling as sculpted by the white supremacist, colonial archive, we—scholars, authors, readers, and organizers—must look at storytelling as the original archive. We conduct literary analyses to look at the meaning behind certain symbols, words, and phrases and share that transformative knowledge to others in our community and, in turn, defy the archive's exclusivity. In doing so, we share books, stories, and viable information that can support the survival and maintenance of our communities. This sharing of information and resources through storytelling allows us to re-imagine a future of freedom that can be achieved outside of the archive. As visual and oral storytellers, readers, and writers, we become organizers through the practice of mutual aid—the reciprocal sharing of resources. In *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Walidah Imarisha claims that, "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction." This statement provides the foundation for establishing the importance of speculative fiction in the abolitionist movement.

Through the sharing of stories and books of speculative fiction, ordinary people—storytellers, readers, or writers—are actually sharing resources with vulnerable communities as a result of the need to respond to disasters and violence. The prison

industrial complex and capitalism constantly recreates these disasters and transforms violence, which then leaves vulnerable communities in constant need of support and relief. According to *Abolition Is*, abolition is a, "political vision and everyday practice," and becomes a necessity that cannot yet be physically seen. In educating others about abolition, speculative fiction and critical fabulation become a necessity in imagining what abolition looks like and mutual aid becomes a necessary practice in achieving abolition. The use of critical fabulation and the sharing of speculative fiction with the goal of abolition of the prison industrial complex then requires mutual aid, where mutual aid is, according to Dean Spade in *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them (Spade 7)."

This sharing of resources within books of speculative fiction requires knowing that transformative knowledge cannot stay within the archive and must be shared within our communities. When we stay within the limits of the archive, we then contribute to its existence and maintenance. This requires knowing that both mutual aid and abolition—as well as their definitions—cannot be co-opted by the state and its archive. This paper aims to prove the necessity of critical fabulation within speculative fiction when practicing mutual aid, meanwhile working both with and against the archive. To do so, I will conduct a literary analysis of a few works of speculative fiction and discuss my personal experience in practicing on-the-ground mutual aid work and reading and writing stories of speculative fiction.

## Discussion

The purpose of this brief overview of different viewpoints on the separate ideas of mutual aid and speculative fiction was to identify previous examples and definitions of each theory as individual aspects. Doing so allows me to build upon those previous ideas made by scholars and authors in order to combine the individual aspects of each theory and prove the reliance of mutual aid on practicing critical fabulation within speculative fiction, and vice versa, in its genesis and for its existence. In order to combine both ideas together, I will build upon the definitions made by previous scholars in re-defining speculative fiction as a literary genre as well as proving the endless existence of mutual aid within speculative fiction. To achieve this, I must first provide examples of mutual aid practice within speculative fiction books—done through close readings of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*—to which I will follow with my personal experience in working with mutual aid organizations, and, finally, will apply these findings and connections to my own experience in writing a speculative fiction story.

After introducing us to speculative fiction, my African American literature professor required us to read Saidiya Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts*. This essay provided us with a foundation of what an archive is and what it can do, which then allowed us to pinpoint where smaller subsets of the archive connect to the roots of keeping and storing information. Though Hartman specifically talks about the archive of slavery, there are

similarities found across different archival genres— they all fall under the archive of storytelling and maintain existing capitalist, academic structures. The main similarity found across these smaller subsets of the general archive is the lack of cultural narratives caused by the isolation of people from their communities. In the archive of slavery, the isolation of Black people from their families and communities—created by slavery and its constant reform into new forms of *acceptable* policing—allows for their great erasure from documented information. Moments of Black laughter, connection, or sadness are lost into that void caused by the archive of slavery, and they are then remembered as a date of death, cause of death, and sometimes more or less than that. When translated to the archive of the undocumented, this void manifests itself to both a blessing and a curse, where your identity becomes the antithesis of being documented and remembered as a means of physically and emotionally surviving the state of surveillance, meanwhile robbing you of the experience of being freely open and identified. Undocumented people become reduced to their documentation status, their country of birth, and, in the worst-case scenario, the cause of death and place of burial.

When connecting the faults of the archive in telling the stories of people, we can see that both governmental and academic institutions fail to meet the intentions of storytelling as the original archive. After recognizing the isolation caused by this lack of genuine storytelling by the archive, our African American literature professor then introduced the case of Margaret Garner. Margaret Garner was an enslaved woman who was reduced to what many described as sensationalized case of infanticide. Though

Margaret Garner is known to not have been responsible for killing her child, the archive documented her story as, "A Slave Mother Murders her Child rather than see it Returned to Slavery. [sic]" The archive of slavery reduced Margaret Garner to a false claim and to her cause of death, typhoid fever in Mississippi in 1985 [Cincinnati History Library and Archives].

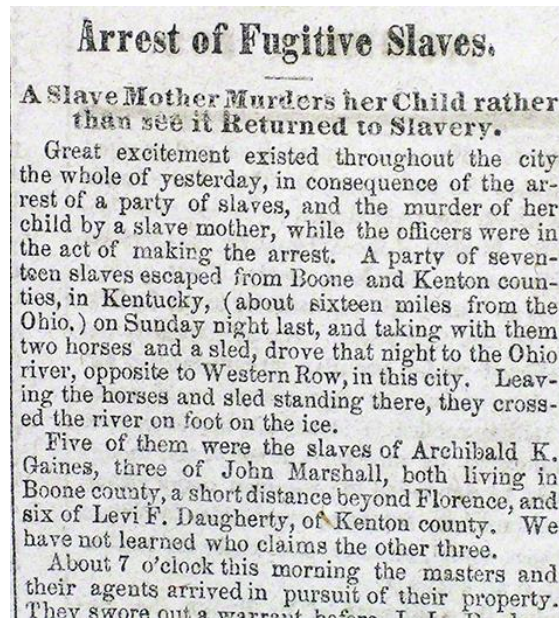


Figure 1: Arrest of Fugitive Slave. Article from the *Cincinnati Gazette*, January 29, 1856. Cincinnati History Library and Archives, Cincinnati Museum Center.

The story of Margaret Garner, though not documented, goes beyond the newspaper clipping found in the Cincinnati History Library and Archives. Like many other enslaved peoples—both from past and current forms of slavery—Margaret Garner was a human

who experienced emotions and connected with other members of her community. The question then becomes, who can adequately and respectfully tell the story of Margaret Garner without romanticizing the violence and trauma she went through? Though I don't have a direct answer to this question, I believe that practicing critical fabulation through speculative fiction, when used correctly without appropriation, can tell these stories that were lost in the void caused by the archive. A prime example of this can be seen in the manifestation of Margaret Garner's persona through Sethe by Toni Morrison in her novel, *Beloved*.

*Beloved* was the first novel I read after becoming aware of the existence of speculative fiction. Speculative fiction went from being an extension of science fiction to a genre that can be used to tell stories of the unknown. *Beloved* tells the unknown story of Margaret Garner, where Morrison allows readers to see the violence caused by the reduction of her story as an inhumane example of infanticide. Before knowing the reason behind why Margaret Garner allegedly killed her child, I, like many people before me, also considered her to be a horrible mother. The thoughts running through my head centered around what kind of circumstances would cause me to kill my children and I really couldn't come up with a justifiable answer. Morrison, in telling Margaret Garner's story, provided both context and reason for the justification of infanticide under slavery. Margaret Garner, justifiably, believed that death was a better alternative for her child than having them growing up under slavery.

The isolation from family and friends caused by slavery and, currently, borders can be very disconnected from the lives of those who have never experienced this. Because of that disconnect, people place blame upon slaves for killing their children and undocumented parents for being the reason their children are held in cages. In placing the blame upon the shoulders of people who are requesting help, we perpetuate the violence that caused them to need help in the first place. The prison industrial complex creates a need for redirecting blame onto people for their vulnerable status—where one's poorness is caused by laziness or lack of trying—instead of having blame placed upon the prison industrial complex, or capitalism, itself. Critical fabulation through speculative fiction—a genre that encompasses the envisioning of worlds, "without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism"—then allows us to imagine what a free place with genuine accountability looks like and that gives us the power to fight the systems that caused the isolating circumstances within our communities (Imarisha 3).

This connects back to *Beloved* in its ability to connect fictional stories to real life circumstances in the fight for abolition through mutual aid. *Beloved* becomes a speculative fiction novel with the incorporation of supernatural elements into a tangible world and because Morrison uses critical fabulation to imagine what could have been in regard to Margaret Garner's life. In doing so, Morrison then imagines a world that does not exist within the archive, thereby working with and against the archive in imagining a life for Margaret Garner and creating a world where she became more than just a crazy mother who allegedly killed her child. In creating an impossible story, Morrison

incorporates elements that are unknown to help the reader understand the circumstances that would cause justifiable infanticide. Within *Beloved*, there are many times where Morrison illustrates the isolation caused by slavery and what isolation from one's community can lead to, meanwhile recognizing that all forms of slavery are unacceptable. From moments where, "no colored people," were allowed near Sethe's place of residence to mentions of the robbing of Sethe's experience of motherhood seen in the taking of her milk, Morrison is able to illustrate the isolation that slaves felt as a result of being enslaved (Morrison 14).

This isolation from a community of people who look like them or who relate to them on a fundamental level leaves the family of *Sweet Home* broken and uncomfortable in their own identity. We can see that the isolation of a person from their community is just as violent and harmful as blatant murder through Denver's—Sethe's living daughter—constant feeling of fear and not belonging within her home and family. Denver's distrust of strangers causes her to develop feelings of fear and hatred for Sethe's lover, Paul D, due to the stunted emotional growth caused by living in the aftereffects of slavery, where his presence causes her to question her existence and presence within her own family. The "twosome" of Sethe and Paul D sees Denver question whether her father and *Sweet Home*, "belonged to them and not to her (Morrison 15)." The lack of connection to her father, from his physical and emotional absence in her life after his death, which is caused by slavery and its tendency to break up families and isolate them from each other leaves her feeling that, "her father's absence was not hers (Morrison 15)."

Although stories of Denver's father keep an image of him alive in her mind, the ultimate cause of her lack of connection to him—which leads to a stunt in her development—results from the isolation of her community. If it weren't for the stories of her father, shared between her paternal grandmother, Paul D, and Sethe, Denver would never have formed any sense of connection to him or some sense of identity within herself.

Ultimately, Denver finds herself connecting with the ghost of her baby sister, Beloved, to cope with the isolation caused by being ostracized as a result of her mother's misunderstood actions.

Everyone, it seems, from children to other adults, kept Denver and Sethe at arm's length. The first person to show any sort of genuine connection and sympathy, though not initially recognized by Denver, is Paul D, who—like Sethe—directly suffered at the hands of slavery. Slavery, both in its original form and in the wake of its absence, is the culprit responsible for the breaking of families and the isolation of vulnerable communities. In the peak of its first life, slavery severed the connections between blood-related family members, close friends, and communities of slaves. Not only did slavery cause a distinction between white and Black people, it also diminished the chances of unionizing within communities of slaves by distinguishing them between house or field slaves. In Sethe's case, her masters—Mr. and Mrs. Garner—at, "the place before Sweet Home" ran a, "special kind of slavery," where the Garners, "[treated] them like paid labor, [and listened] to what they said (Morrison 84, 165)." Though this does not make a

distinction between house and field slaves, it provides context for what many slaves saw as a preferred form of slavery.

Though Sethe and Halle, her husband, later discover that all types of slavery are the same in its foundation, where no matter what anyone called it, slavery, "is the same," the preferences for a nicer master or *good* slavery caused a divide within communities of slaves (Morrison 231). The ability of slavery to cause divides between good and bad slavery, or good and bad slaves, caused the further isolation of the enslaved from their communities during and after the *end* of slavery. Sethe and Denver, as a result of the aftereffects of slavery, were left with the want of, "belong[ing] to a community of other free Negroes—to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed (Morrison 209)." Unfortunately, the trauma of committing infanticide ostracized Sethe and Denver from the rest of the community, where that yearning for community care initially went unanswered and saw, "that community step back and hold itself at a distance (Morrison 209)."

This dire need for redemption and familiarity within an isolating environment manifests itself into a physical, supernatural being sculpted into the body of Sethe's murdered child—Beloved. Both Denver and Sethe ignore the danger that Beloved poses to them in favor of resuming the roles they never got to practice—Denver finally gets to take care of her little sister and Sethe gets to redeem herself by becoming the best mother she never got the chance to be. Beloved's need for retribution as a result of the life she never got to experience sees her isolating Denver even further meanwhile she physically

harms Sethe. Fortunately for both Denver and Sethe, the community of Black women hear their cries for relief from this supernatural being and come to their rescue. Thirty woman who resided in homes neighboring Sweet Home banded together and, "walked slowly, slowly toward 124," where they eventually, "caught up with each other, all thirty, and arrived at 124, [and] the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves (Morrison 303-304)." These women come together to welcome Sethe back into their community, forgiving her of her *wrongdoings*, and greet her and Denver with open arms.

In banishing the unwanted, malevolent ghost of Beloved from 124, these women begin to sing and create a, "combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words (Morrison 308)." The songs became stories that took life and the power behind them was strong enough to do the unimaginable—the words banished Beloved and welcomed Sethe back into the women's community. The power of storytelling, whether it be through the songs sung by these women or by Paul D and other slaves, manifests itself into a being powerful enough to band communities together to overcome trauma and harm. This community created a story that could only be told by them, one that was, "not to pass on (Morrison 323)." The power of community care combined with the power of storytelling allowed for the residents of Sweet Home to overcome isolation and harm caused by the infanticide of Beloved—the stories and the support given to Sethe and Denver allowed for the banishment of Beloved's ghost, and the trauma that the ghost caused, from their home and minds:

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise. (Morrison 323-324)

The power of storytelling and community care—mutual aid—allowed for the rewriting of Sweet Home's history and future. This then proves that mutual aid, in its practice through storytelling, is powerful enough to re-imagine our future when advocating for a world free of struggle and full of happiness. Morrison did what Hartman wanted to do with Venus in *Venus in Two Acts*—she used critical fabulation, not to give Margaret Garner a voice, but to instead, "imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death (Hartman 12)." In going beyond the confines of the archive of slavery—and the archive of storytelling as we know it now—Toni Morrison gave Margaret Garner life beyond the clippings of a newspaper and created a, "history written with and against the archive (Hartman 12)." In using critical fabulation to re-imagine the past when filling the gaps created by the archive of slavery, meanwhile working against the archive itself, Morrison provides readers with groundwork on how to go forward in working against the prison-industrial complex—through re-imagining the future of abolition by using critical fabulation within

speculative fiction. Though Morrison eloquently and successfully demonstrates the use of mutual aid, or community care, through speculative fiction, I wanted to analyze another work of speculative fiction that also does this without information provided by the archive. For this reason, I wanted to focus on Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, where the idea of a community—and mutual aid—is entirely created and Butler imagines what could be in terms of the future, whereas Morrison imagines what could've been in terms of the past.

Before critically analyzing the use of mutual aid within *Parable of the Sower*, it is necessary to state that speculative fiction is integral to the foundation of mutual aid. Mutual aid—popularized by philosopher Peter Kropotkin—has been defined by various scholars, such as Dean Spade or Harsha Walia, as a collective and reciprocal means of providing support to one another in the face of disaster, where disasters are typically caused by systems that claim, and fail, to support the people. One key component missing within the many definitions I found is the idea of practicing critical fabulation within speculative fiction, in any form, but especially as a literary genre, as the genesis of mutual aid and its connection to abolition. As someone who has been a part of two different mutual aid organizations—joining the first as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the second due to the needs created by the severe and unprecedented winter storm that occurred in Texas in February of 2021—through the role of a community organizer and a person who relied on mutual aid to survive, I have found that speculative fiction is integral in practicing mutual aid.

From the stories of survival told within the undocumented communities I belonged to in my early childhood to the books of speculative fiction shared within the communities I belong to now, a recurring key to our survival, both physical and mental, is the incorporation of speculative fiction into our lives. Anyone, from my mother, who doesn't know what speculative fiction is, to Octavia Butler, who many consider to be one of the faces of the speculative fiction literary genre, can practice mutual aid through storytelling. From Butler's *Dawn* to the story of my brother's survival of an unexpected and undiagnosed illness as told by my mother—where my mother includes instances of community care as necessary for her mental stability during this time of crisis—anyone can tell a story of speculative fiction in practicing mutual aid. Both of these factors prove that practicing mutual aid requires critical fabulation within speculative fiction in its foundation.

Although it took months—maybe even years—to fully understand this integral connection between mutual aid and speculative fiction in achieving abolition, reading *Parable of the Sower* helped me connect both ideas by helping me relate my experiences as a community organizer in both the traditional and non-traditional sense. In *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Walidah Imarisha claims that, "organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds (Imarisha 3)." In doing so, organizers and activists use, "their everyday realities and experiences of changing the world (Imarisha 3)." As an organizer within mutual aid organizations—an organizer in the traditional sense—I often

worked with my community in applying our personal experiences to imagining ways that we could meet the needs of the people we were trying to help. As a reader of speculative fiction—an organizer in the non-traditional sense—I combined my real-life experiences in practicing mutual aid and instances of mutual aid found within novels in order to bring certain ideas to reality, where those ideas were meant to meet the needs of the communities I was trying to help. This allowed me to see that practicing mutual aid can be done in any one of these three non-mutually exclusive forms: being an on-the-ground organizer, a storyteller—as a writer, author, or an oral storyteller—of speculative fiction, or a reader of speculative fiction.

Reading *Parable of the Sower* allowed me to make these connections because I first read it during a time of crisis, while I was both traditional and non-traditional community organizer. Instances of mutual aid within this novel, from the sharing of resources within the protagonist's—Lauren Olamina—community to the sharing of information through books, reflected the work I was doing in real time. Critical fabulation and speculative fiction are necessary to the survival of our communities, just as mutual aid is, and is proven through its ability to transform the world we live in beyond the confines of a page. During the severe and disastrous winter storm that took place in February of 2021, I began reading *Parable of the Sower* for the first time and used it as a survival guide. *Parable of the Sower* provided me with tips on the kinds of things I should include in a survival pack, from money to dry foods or medical supplies, and encouraged me to expand my garden from beautiful plants to include ones that can

provide my family with sustenance during times of food insecurity. From suggestions of what to include in a, "survival pack," to ones of looking at different, taboo-like, foods in order to sustain ourselves like Lauren does with, "acorn bread," *Parable of the Sower* is a perfect example of an accessible form of literature that a community can use when trying to organize in times of crisis (Butler 80, 64).

*Parable of the Sower* then becomes a learning model for what to do when a community is suffering as a result of a disaster. This novel showcases realistic instances in which humans deliberately distance themselves from other vulnerable communities as a result of society's tendency to isolate us in preventing mass mobilization meanwhile showcasing instances in which welcoming members into your community becomes necessary for both your and their survival—Butler uses fiction to illustrate the benefits of building a large community meanwhile showing the nuances of humanness and our tendency to isolate ourselves out of fear created by the prison industrial complex. Often times, both the prison industrial complex and the non-profit industrial complex, "frame the message around 'deserving' people within the population they serve," where the innocent, as determined by the policing systems, are the most deserving *people*. Prisoners, felons, the homeless, and many other vulnerable members in our society are dehumanized and *othered* with the intention of completely isolating them—from both governmental help and community care—and placing the blame for their state on their shoulders instead of on the systems that caused and allowed their criminal status and homelessness. Their otherness isolates their experiences from those of *normal* members

of society, thus creating a stigma and a clear divide between who deserves to be helped and who does not.

We constantly, even if unknowingly, distinguish ourselves from other vulnerable members of society—the homeless or the criminalized—out of fear of becoming like them and reaching the most vulnerable state. Unfortunately, this allows for both the prison industrial complex and the non-profit industrial complex to survive, which, in turn, often prevents mass mobilization. Within *Parable of the Sower*, Butler creates this same problem and translates it to the distinction between the almost homeless, already homeless, and the mentally ill "paints (Butler 110)." Lauren Olamina, in order to make herself feel better about their current living status, often distinguishes herself from the poor:

One day or another, we'll all be poor some day. The adults say things will get better, but they never have. How will God—my father's God—behave toward us when we're poor? Is there a God? If there is, does he (she? it?) care about us?  
(Butler 15)

Despite her poorness, there are still levels of poorness under her, which sees her constantly distinguish herself from other poor people. Instead of gathering with other poor members of society and increasing their strength in numbers, Lauren's inability to see herself as poor and similar in one aspect to the homeless prevents the increase in their chances of survival during these disastrous times. Initially, Lauren feels the need to rely

on herself and her community of neighbors instead of receiving help from others who have experience in mobilizing outside of her gated community, "Nothing is going to save us. If we don't save ourselves, we're dead (Butler 15)." Mutual aid is a reciprocal means of helping each other within a community when facing disaster, and Lauren's initial rejection of relying on others for help when the inevitable fall of their communal gates gets torn down is the rejection of mutual aid and the rejection of survival.

This distinction between states of being within vulnerable communities will be our inevitable downfall if it is not overcome. Butler showcases this possible real-life outcome through fictional means when Lauren's community, a non-homeless poor community, is destroyed by the paints, those who, "eat fire and kill rich people (Butler 110)."

The paints, instead of targeting the government and systems that allowed for their homelessness and stigmatization that causes their isolation from other communities, constantly target other vulnerable communities. To them, anyone outside of their community is considered rich, especially those who are housed even though they are close to homelessness like Lauren is. For these reasons, they decide to attack with fire and kill anyone they consider to be rich, which are those who are not like them. This separation of communities sees many members of Lauren's neighbor community killed as well as paint members sacrificing themselves for the sake of providing their community with resources necessary to survive—the problem with this is that both communities see each other as enemies instead of banding together and destroying the real enemy, the

systems of oppression that are actually responsible for their state of being. When seeing the destruction of their community at the hands of the paints, Lauren—unknowingly—points out the lack of understanding that they are just as poor as the paints, but continues to distinguish herself as not desperate in comparison to the fire-addict paints:

"She died for us," the scavenger woman had said of the green face. Some kind of insane burn-the-rich movement, Keith had said. We've never been rich, but to the desperate, we looked rich. We were surviving and we had our wall. Did our community die so that addicts could make a help the poor political statement?

(Butler 163)

The constant need to distinguish oneself from others who are equally just as vulnerable, or more, is one of the greatest obstacles in achieving mass mobilization of mutual aid movements. Butler creates this distinction within this novel that reflects the real-life distinction made by the prison industrial complex and the non-profit industrial complex—which encompasses all charitable organizations accepted by the government.

Although the non-profit industrial complex and the idea of a charity seem inviting at first glance, having worked in both mutual aid organizations and non-profit organizations, as well as having volunteered at different charities, has given me inside perspective on the deliberately hidden differences between the three types of organizations. It is important to discuss this distinction in order to understand the different kinds of support offered to characters within *Parable of the Sower*. Charities are

often tax breaks for the rich donors who get decide exactly how much money to donate, what causes to donate to, meanwhile having agency over how and who the money is distributed to. Often times, charities will align themselves on the sides of donors more than the people in need because of the need for donations and money. Non-profits on the other hand, though they still rely heavily on rich donors, oftentimes prevent mass distribution of their resources to the general population because of the stipulations of their organizations on what cause they focus on and who qualifies for them—this then turns into a fight between non-profits in which cause to prioritize even though all causes are equally important. My experience in fundraising and working for both charities and non-profit organizations often left me with a bitter taste because we, employees, had to tear other causes down in order to emphasize how much more important our cause was in comparison. The money raised was mostly raised by employees who never knew how it was distributed. Within *Parable of the Sower*, the idea of a charity is seen through assistance offered to, "registered nurses, credentialed teachers, and a few other skilled professionals," who are willing to move to work in Olivar, a town privatized by company looking to provide shelter and food in return for labor (Butler 120). Though it sounds like something similar to a mutual aid resource, support provided by corporations and the government seems unlikely because disastrous living conditions within California—Lauren's home state—have been caused by those same systems looking to provide *support*. This is a perfect example of the co-optation of the mutual aid movement by systems of oppression in delegitimizing other sources of support. Not only does KSF, the company responsible for privatizing Olivar, allegedly want to provide support to people

willing to work there, they have an extreme vetting process for recruiting people worthy of help—just as charities do—and seek to isolate those people from their communities—just as prisons do. KSF provides a new form of "slavery," disguised as support and continues to delegitimize other forms of help in doing so (Butler 121).

Unlike charities and non-profit organizations—or KSF—mutual aid organizations are much more transparent and all members within that organization have a voice in discussing and determining the method of distribution of resources for all kinds of causes. Though Lauren's Earthseed community—formed after the destruction of her home and surrounding neighborhood houses—still needs to realize how wrong it is to bring down other vulnerable communities in the fight for survival against systems of oppression, they do a great job of banding together with different kinds of people who are able to contribute to their community in different ways; Lauren's community is a great example of a small group working towards building a large community by practicing mutual aid. Lauren realizes that strength does come in numbers, especially when there is a need for people who can provide different kinds of resources to better their Earthseed community:

If there were a few more of us, and if we were better armed, we might provide security in exchange for living room. We might also provide education plus reading and writing services to adult illiterates. There might be a market for that kind of thing. So many people, children and adults, are illiterate these days... We might be able to do it—grow our own food, grow ourselves and our neighbors into something brand new. Into Earthseed. (Butler 224)

Lauren mentions different kinds of needs that are necessary to the survival of their Earthseed community, from the need to teach their members to read and write to the growth of food necessary to sustain their community, and describes the different kinds of ways those needs can be met by their community members. This is a perfect description of a mutual aid movement, where community members can provide what they can and receive whatever they need in any form.

Not only does Lauren's Earthseed community practice mutual aid in simple ways, from providing food and care to one another, they also provide readers with examples for as to why books—especially accessible books of fiction—are necessary in doing so. As previously mentioned, the need to read and write is necessary for the survival of a community and one of the most central things in one's literacy education is the presence of books. Starting from a young age, books of fiction are central to one's literacy education up unto adulthood and beyond. As a young reader, I would read simple books of fiction with repetitive words because of their accessibility to children and simplicity in honing our creativity. From Dr. Seuss' *Cat in the Hat* to Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy to Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* series, fiction has shaped and adapted to my life and continues to be necessary to my understanding of the world as it is now—fiction, especially speculative fiction, has provided me with joy, sadness, and different ways to translate fictional worlds into our real world. Too often, I am forced to rely on books to learn things I was never taught, and Lauren also describes a need to read in order to survive the disasters her community is facing. Because no one else in her community

really understands the power behind books, Lauren often secludes herself and finds herself alone once her neighboring community is destroyed and she becomes, "one of the street poor (Butler 156)." Though she still distinguishes herself from those who are poorer, she notes that she, too, is, "homeless, alone, full of books and ignorant of reality (Butler 156)." Lauren forgets, in this moment, that the sharing of knowledge is necessary in building a community and that, alone, books are not always enough to do so. Though Lauren did try to describe the necessity of books for a community's survival to someone she considered a friend, their immediate refusal to learn made Lauren give up from informing others:

"Nothing is going to save us. If we don't save ourselves, we're dead. Now use your imagination. Is there anything on your family bookshelves that might help you if you were stuck outside?"

"No."

"You answer too fast. Go home and look again. And like I said, use your imagination. Any kind of survival information from encyclopedias, biographies, anything that helps you learn to live off the land and defend ourselves. Even some fiction might be useful." (Butler 59)

Another problem that Lauren faces in this moment is the addition of fiction as an afterthought in gathering information necessary for their survival. Perhaps introducing fiction as a resource for survival first would have been a better way of educating her

friend on the necessity of books—fiction, especially when one needs to use their imagination as Lauren mentions, is a great accessible way of introducing people to concepts they don't know.

For this reason, I believe that fiction—especially speculative fiction—is necessary to practicing mutual aid. The accessibility of fiction, from its pricing to its wide range of subjects and its ability in bridging any possible age gap, allows for different kinds of people to be educated on various subjects and speculative fiction allows for one to use their imagination in envisioning newer and freer worlds. Stories created within vulnerable communities teach members within those communities different things because of their accessibility. Through storytelling, my mother taught me how to survive in a college setting hundreds of miles away from my hometown and family. In telling me stories about her experience leaving her family and incorporating otherworldly elements of our culture into those stories, I was able to imagine an unseen connection between my roots and my reach—I became a tree who planted roots in my family's home and grew to reach hundreds of miles away, where my family would water me and support me from wherever they were. My mother, my family, and my friends provided me with support and books of speculative fiction that I could use to supplement my survival.

Books went from tools of the most basic level of learning to read and write and became tools necessary to the survival of myself and my community. Books allowed me to envision ways that the mutual aid organizations I was in could extend our reach to a bigger communities. Books became my friends and my sources for joy and internal

reflection. Books transformed from something I never believed I could write into pages I was creating inside my head without even thinking. *Parable of the Sower* went from a book I read for research purposes and became the reason for my survival during the unprecedented winter storm—my garden grew beyond beautiful plants for decoration and became necessary to supplying our family with food when the grocery stores were empty. Like the Earthseed community, we, "prepare[d] a winter garden," and bought, "tools, more seed, supplies" necessary to maintain it (Butler 325). Since reading this book of speculative for entertainment and research purposes, *Parable of the Sower* has become a guide for survival that is accessible and easier to understand than most survival books available. *Parable of the Sower* differs from both academic theory and survival books because it includes elements of both and allows different kinds of people from different education levels to understand the basic elements of what it means to practice mutual aid in maintaining a community. Speculative fiction is central to the practicing of mutual aid and mutual aid cannot exist without speculative fiction—all mutual aid is speculative fiction.

My experience as a reader of speculative fiction combined with my past experience in working for mutual aid organizations and my coming from communities with, "historic collective trauma," now sees me becoming a writer of speculative fiction. As Walidah Imarisha explains within *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, anyone who comes from a community with historic collective trauma can become a writer of speculative fiction because, "each of us is already science

fiction walking around on two legs (Imarisha 5)." And I decided to further my reach as an organizer to create a story inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa's *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*. Like Anzaldúa, I too grew up in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas and have constantly been affected by the prison industrial complex—whose reach extends to the idea of borders and surveillance—through its physical manifestation as the U.S.-Mexico border. Borders, in every way, have affected my life and the life of my family, from instilling fear into our family when my mother and brother were undocumented to the separation from our family in Mexico and to creating the need to assimilate to a way of life—its language and culture—that can be revoked by those who claim it. The way I speak, *pocho* Spanish and broken English, is tied to the maintenance of borders and Anzaldúa's way of describing how we, "are made to feel ashamed of [our] own tongues," inspired me to write a story that transcends language. Within *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*, Anzaldúa creates a short story of speculative fiction about going to a dentist and having them pull your tongue out:

"We're going to have to control your tongue," the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth. Silver bits plop and tinkle into the basin. My mouth is a motherlode.

The dentist is cleaning out my roots. I get a whiff of the stench when I gasp. "I can't cap that tooth yet, you're still draining," he says.

"We're going to have to do something about your tongue," I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. "I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn," he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down? (Anzaldúa 33-34)

This short excerpt inspired me to use critical fabulation to imagine what could be if this story took place in an imaginary world. And so, I decided to write a story about loss of language, where the main character—an alternate version of myself—is removed from the ability to speak Spanish, which translates to a loss of communication with her family. The government targets her for her greater than normal creativity and removes the tooth responsible for the function of speaking and understanding languages other than English. This story will showcase the necessity of mutual aid and creativity—through books and writing—in finding one's identity and surviving in the face of disaster. Though I still struggle with feeling inadequate as an author, feelings brought upon by the lack of accessible resources in creative writing, I know that anyone can write any story they wish to write. Hopefully, my experience will provide others like me with the confidence necessary to use critical fabulation to become a writer of speculative fiction on their journey to understanding and practicing mutual aid and achieving abolition.

## Conclusion

Throughout my entire life, and those of marginalized people, oral stories have played a big role in sustaining my communities from one generation to the next. We provide each other with our histories when the archive could never do so. My family is more than the documents of our death dates found within Ancestry.com—we are people who experience sadness, happiness, and surprise among a plethora of emotions. Our stories are central to our identities and our cultures and to share those stories with each other is to provide each other with mutual aid, where our stories are necessary for our survival in working against our erasure. We remain known often through word of mouth, where no one else can tell our story without appropriating it. So, we continue to work against the archive by imagining the lives our ancestors lived—we speak of them as though they were in the room telling us their own stories. We create our own archive that meets the needs of our community, where this archive of storytelling provides us with mutual aid through the sharing of our stories.

Mutual aid then works to tear down the systems and institutions of oppression responsible for our erasure and isolation. We overcome those vulnerabilities by providing each other with mutual aid, where speculative fiction becomes necessary to practice mutual aid in advocating for abolition. When advocating for abolition, I've often heard from others—and shared their sentiments—about the uncertainty felt when imagining a

future of abolition. The prison industrial complex as we know it now has adapted and transformed from the beginning of time—from the Night Watch during the 1600's to the Slave Patrol of the 1700's up until the formation of the Police Force during the 1800's, the police and its surveillance has withstood the test of time—and it can be difficult to imagine a world without these systems in place because we've never experienced a world without them. Advocating for abolition then requires imagination, where imagination allows for us to envision a world of freedom and joy. Imagining free worlds, in turn, requires speculative fiction, where, "organizers and movement builders [are] be able to claim the vast space of possibility, to be birthing visionary stories," in advocating for abolition (Imarisha 3). We use our, "everyday realities and experiences of changing the world, [and] can form the foundation for the fantastic and, we hope, build a future where the fantastic liberates the mundane (Imarisha 3)."

Mutual aid—the sharing of our stories with each other and providing community care to one another—requires speculative fiction in achieving abolition. This idea then led me to the most important finding from my research: **All Mutual Aid is Speculative Fiction**. Though not all speculative fiction is mutual aid, all mutual aid is speculative fiction because mutual aid requires us to envision a world of possibility and freedom. Of course, speculative fiction on its own is not enough to sustain the mutual aid movement without on-the-ground activism and theory, but it is necessary to practice mutual aid in its foundation—speculative fiction is not an additive to this movement because it is necessary to its creation. Speculative fiction may not be enough to sustain this mutual aid

movement on its own, but it is enough to sustain our survival in the face of isolation, erasure, and surveillance. I was scrolling through Twitter the other day when I came across a tweet written by Victoria Law describing the importance of books in prison, where those imprisoned are isolated from their communities:

Date: 4/4/2021 12:59:58 PM  
To: Victoria Law

Attachments:

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Vikki,  
I wouldn't have made it this far without books. In prison, reading is not so much a means of escape as it is a survival mechanism. Books become tools of diverse purpose within the penitentiary; not only do they combat loneliness, but they are also barriers against isolation. Books will build you up more effectively than any time spent in the yard's weight pit, and the information they impart will protect you far better than a sharpened shiv. Organizations such as "Books Thru Bars" do much more than just provide reading material- in actuality, they furnish the incarcerated person with an individual survival kit, a way of getting from one day to the next, a little bit of hope bound up between the covers of books.

Figure 2. Email from a man recently out of solitary confinement: The importance of books in prison. Tweet from the @LVikkiml, April 14, 2021.

This realization then leaves me asking of you, the reader, to start or continue reading speculative fiction. Read Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, adrienne maree brown, Nnedi Okorafor, and other works not yet recognized by the majority because you need to read speculative fiction that uses critical fabulation in order to shape your imagination on your abolitionist journey. Write the books you want to read because you will, "write your living, and live your work," when you do so (Lorde 184). I never knew I could write something that was as powerful as this paper because my struggle with the English language often feels limiting, but I'm writing anyways. I'm writing, I'm writing, and I'm writing. I'm writing this paper meanwhile I'm writing a book inspired by a small excerpt

from another story—created by a vision that came to me in my dreams. I'm writing for me, for you, for anyone who wants to start writing or wants to read something important. I'm writing because my life depends on it. Please write, even if you think you can't.

Of course, this paper is not the answer to abolition, but it does provide us with three non-mutually exclusive ways to start advocating for freer worlds: read and write books and stories of speculative fiction and work with on-the-ground mutual aid organizations in distributing resources to people in need. I'm not exactly sure what the next steps are for myself and you, the reader, in our fight for freedom, but I'm going to continue using my imagination—hoping you use yours—to try to figure it out.

## **Preview to my unnamed creative story**

My parents are always afraid of dentist appointments, even if they are necessary to survive in our country. They still remember the way it used to be before the Conserved Republic of the Americas came to be, they call it the "good old days." After hearing their stories of how it used to be, I always try hard to tell the difference between how it was then and how it is now because the past, according to them, is supposed better—I usually don't find one. If the past was better than the present, how did we get here in the first place?

They told me I was blessed to be a late bloomer because that meant losing my baby teeth at an age later than what is considered normal. My little brother lost all of his baby teeth by the time he was ten, meanwhile I lost all of mine when I was 13.

After I lost my final deciduous tooth, the left-lower deciduous first molar, and grew out my adult teeth, I was finally put under and chipped—injected with a tracker where my adult teeth are now.

Initially, I was scared because my parents feared the process of having one of their children tracked, but the dentist insisted that it was necessary for my safety and finding my true sense of self.

The tracking system worked great for whenever I strayed too far from my designated region without permission, which happened more often than I wished it did.

Roaming too far from one's designated region is illegal, but I never did it on purpose. It was mostly a subconscious need to explore and create— create in whatever way I felt at that moment, whether it be drawing or writing. There have been people removed of their teeth, left to die without the functions they provide—removed of all brain function.

Last week was the most recent accidental transgression, but I was entranced by the vision of a blue jay that passed by the front steps of our casita. Because of the constant natural disasters that occur in the CRA, animals are rare to sight, which is why I took the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study every detail that I could catch of the blue jay so that I could paint it later.

By the time I realized how far I traveled, I was too late and felt the zap of my incisors in my mouth, a feeling that is not at all pleasant for three reasons: it hurt so much, my parents were gonna kill me, and the next dentist appointment (which is today) meant another scolding by the Brotherhood.

In the past, scoldings by The Brotherhood of Masons have been pretty lenient, but you never know what you're gonna get with those people.

The looming presence, though not outright, of the Brotherhood brings me back to the present.

My family - both of my parents, my little brother, and me - was on the way to the dentist's quarters to ask for permission to travel.

We don't travel often, but my mom missed her parents and they missed her and their grandchildren.

Because trespassing beyond our designated region is illegal and can lead to severe punishment for adults as defined by the Brotherhood, my parents are more careful than I am when it comes to tracking their location.

The designation of reasons is for our safety, safety from unknown dangers in areas we are not familiar with. The Brotherhood calls it taking precaution for our family, but my parents call it being caged like their parents were in the good ol' days.

Taking precautions against unknown dangers means getting a permit from our region's dentist, who then decides whether we are allowed to travel or not.

After allowing one to travel to another region within the CRA, the dentist then performs a routine checkup by testing whether our teeth are performing their respective abilities to the standard they require.

From a young age, we are taught on the different functions our teeth serve. Our upper teeth are mostly divided into controlling both halves of the brain, with the right side of the mouth controlling our right brain and the left side of the mouth controlling our left brain.

The central incisors are the two exceptions to that, with the left incisor tracking our location and the right incisor acting as a form of identification. My mom calls our right incisor a form of identification similar to forms of identification that used to exist—what she calls a passport, driver's license, and social security card all rolled up into one single tooth.

Teeth used to be replaceable by things like crowns, dentures, and implants, but those things don't exist anymore. The Brotherhood calls the practice of tooth-replacement unsanitary, unreliable, and a threat to our freedom.

As we approach the dentist's quarters, I notice that the colors of the sky seem a little bluer than normal. My parents talk about what sunsets used to look like back then—a blend of purples, oranges, pinks, and reds. Unlike then, another thing my parents have to complain about, today's skies are dull and yellow.

My imagination makes up for it enough and I have what my parents call color synesthesia, where I see colors wherever I can see letters. While I think it's an amazing way to see the world, seeing colors wherever I read, my parents call it a blessing and a curse.

"In this world," they say, "all forms of creativity are squandered and destroyed."

Even though I love to read and write to feel the colors form around in my brain so that I can paint whatever I see and feel later, I tend to keep those feelings to myself out of fear for what could happen to me if the Brotherhood ever found out.

This feeling of dread over what could happen brings me back to reality and I notice we've arrived at the dentist's headquarters.

Surprisingly, though we rarely travel anywhere by car, I feel most comfortable shielded from everything while enjoying the scenery. It shouldn't really surprise me but losing track of time because I've been too busy watching my surroundings made the short car ride feel hours long.

I catch a glimpse of my reflection on the car window as my parents park the car in the designated station, proud that I look like this is a routine visit—my face the perfect façade of boredom and disinterest.

As we get out of the car and approach the building, we have to stand and get screened using a device called an ID-Byte. The ID-Byte resembles a dental impression device, where we bite for a few seconds while our right, central incisor gets screened for our identification information.

While the ID-Byte is a normal thing in our daily lives, I always dread it because I feel the sensation of having my breath cut off. It's like having our air supply involuntarily

cut off for a few seconds, but what makes it worse is the feeling of having your mouth violated. The security guard screening us tells us to take a deep breath before putting the bite in our mouth, almost as if to reassure us that it's no big deal, but the looks he gives me feel predatory—coming to the dentist is already scary, but to have an older man, someone who can severely change our DNA with a pull of one tooth, touch me in one of the most intimate places feels *weird*.

Of course, our dentist touches our mouths all the time. My parents kiss each other, we eat strange foods, and we use our mouths to speak to anyone we can, but having an older man look at you so deeply while whispering for you to, "open your mouth," is a level of unwanted intimacy that makes me want to bite his finger off.

As the seconds pass by and the screening is completed, the security guard pulls the bite out of my mouth and touches the sides of my face so intimately that I cringe away from him and go to stand behind my parents. He looks at the computer screen cautiously before turning back to us and says, "Congratulations, your claimed identity matches the recorded identity in our records," he gestures to the doors of the main building, "you may pass through to these doors here, our dental assistant will go through the next steps before you meet with our dentist. Good luck."

He then turns away and faces forward, dismissing us completely as if we were insignificant and a waste of his precious time.

My parents let out a deep breath and the strong hold my dad had on me loosens up a bit before tightening again—almost as if realizing that the worst part of this visit wasn't over yet.

The doors we were told to go through open and close behind us as we approach the main desk of the dental assistant before us. Although the dentist is the person with the most political influence in this building or anywhere near us—dentists are a part of the Brotherhood—the dental assistant holds physical power.

The Liberal Protection of Citizens, the LPC, a federal entity comprised of all forms of law enforcement, covers the security guard we just met and the dental assistant we are about to meet. While the Brotherhood is one scary group, the LPC is a huge group that enables the CRA to be what it is today.

The face of our dental assistant remains cool and calculated as they scan us from head to toe, almost as if searching for any sign of weakness or defiance within our bodies.

They gesture us closer to them with their hands, ask us all to smile while they check for impurities the security guard may have missed, and then gesture to the side where our patient uniforms are, "Please undress in the room located next to your clothes before moving on to the next building."

We slowly move toward our clothes, afraid that one sudden movement will result in our punishment. Before going into our respective rooms to change, we turn to each

other and my dad holds my brother while my mom holds me, both of them whispering words of encouragement in our ears.

"Mija, por favor sigue las reglas y no digas nada que te pueda incriminar. I love you, okay? Acuérdate que en unos momentos, estarás en mis brazos y todo saldrá bien. Think of México and Abuelito, okay?" She begins to pray, quietly placing her hands on the sides of my head while whispering words meant to reassure me that the presence of God will accompany me through those doors.

We say goodbye, I hug my dad and my brother hugs our mom before we make our last goodbyes and head into the changing rooms. With the door closed behind me, separating me from the last piece of comfort I had in this cold building, I peel off my gray regional uniform and take a deep breath to calm down my rising anxiety. I then get dressed into my patient clothes, which consists of another gray suit meant to protect my skin from the radiation caused by getting our dental x-rays.

As I finish getting dressed and straighten out the loose ends of my hair, I look into the mirror placed within the changing room meant to remind us we must look presentable. What I see makes me feel like I am on a zero day—zero, a number detached from all other numbers associated on both the negative and positive side. Zero, a hole with no protection, wide open for anyone to see through. Zero, a number that, to me, resembles a lack of color and a lack of feeling.

I blow out a deep breath before reluctantly facing the other door and turn the knob that will lead me to the next step in this dehumanizing process.

I feel *zero*, devoid of anything.

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Walking without my parents was even more terrifying than I remember, it's as if my last line of defense and comfort has been stripped away and I'm completely open to any kind of threat waiting for me.

I feel kind of ridiculous because I know the dentist is just an older man who hides behind all the walls in this building, but I'd be naïve to underestimate him.

I think the worst part of this process is waiting—time runs and runs without my knowing how long it has been since we entered the dentist headquarters.

We get examined in a certain order dictated by age, where the oldest member of our family, my dad, gets examined first and the youngest, my brother, gets examined last.

My anxiety is at a full time high as I anticipate what comes next. I feel my heartbeat in my throat, slowly rising up to my cheeks, causing me to have what I imagine looks like blush, and moving to my ears. I hear my heart thumping in my chest, the perspiration forming on my forehead, back, and hands. The sense of dread is consuming

me because I know, somehow, that my time is approaching, and I feel as though there is something warning me for what is coming next.

Clenching my hands and breathing in at a pace meant to calm me down does nothing as I hear footsteps approach the steel doors in this long white corridor.

*Thump... thump... thump...*

The sounds of the foreign footsteps mixing with the sounds of my beating heart—both sounds reminding me of my being alive, yet one reminding me that I could die at the hands of those footsteps.

I lift my chin as straight as I can and stand from my seated position, almost as if I was preparing for battle—a ridiculous feeling considering the only fights I have ever gotten in were with my brother, but I guess it helps feeling as if I am preparing myself in some way.

Finally, the footsteps stop and the doors slowly open, revealing the dental assistant we just encountered moments ago. They gesture me to come toward them and I instantly know I'm in trouble. That sixth sense that told me my dental check was coming next rises once again and I feel true fear. For the first time in my life, I feel as though what will happen next is going to change me in a deep way.

As I approach them, they say, "We have a few things to discuss regarding the irreverent behavior you have displayed the past few months since you've last visited."

I feel the blush rise to my cheeks at their words, embarrassed for getting caught even though I know it's close to impossible to not be seen in this country. I go to speak and defend myself, but I don't get a chance before I'm interrupted—shushed like a child.

"Quiet. There are no excuses for your transgressions, we've been through this route with you many times before, but it seems as though you've never learned."

They then turn to the opposite side of the dentist's room and I know to follow them, no questions asked.

So, I follow, smoothing my hair and fidgeting in subtle ways, trying to find some way to calm myself down without letting the dental assistant exactly how nervous and scared I was.

We head for the dental engine, comprised of some computers, lights, and the chair designed to look comfortable for the patients being checked. Walking towards that chair was silent, my mind wandering to the look of my surroundings as I try to find something else to focus on to distract me for what is to come.

It's a high-tech looking room with bright white lights, a dome-like shape surrounding by lights everywhere designed to get rid of anywhere one can hide themselves.

There are cameras everywhere, I'm sure, because I feel something else watching me—my sense of privacy, whatever little I had, is gone and I feel completely open once

again. We pass by several tables containing different kinds of scary-looking utensils everywhere, from the normal scalpels and drills to guns and knives not meant to maintain dental hygiene.

The dental assistant motions me to sit down on the chair and hands me a blue liquid meant to wash away all impurities within my mouth, "Swirl this for 30 seconds," they gesture to the spit bowl connected to the chair, "and spit into there meanwhile we wait for our dentist to get in here."

I do what they ask and wait for him to get in here.

It's not long before I hear another set of footsteps approaching the doors we came in through moments ago. I look away from a light that I was examining for its unusual appearance and turn toward the dentist approaching where I'm sitting.

Maybe, sometime in the future, I will look back at this moment and laugh at myself for the fear I felt. Here I am sitting, expecting to see the dentist I've known since I lost all of my baby teeth—a broad, intimidating man who was not too mean—but instead see someone who could be my grandpa if I was white.

His height is the first thing I noticed. It seems as though gravity has done its work on him and forced him to shrink, creating a hump on his back after years of fighting back against the force meant to ground us. He has white hair and a greying mustache,

resembling, in an odd way, a beardless Santa Claus. The crow's feet are pronounced around his eyes, but he lacks smile lines, almost as if he's never smiled in his entire life.

The lack of smile lines is what makes me a bit apprehensive. As someone who is supposed to pride himself in his straight set of pearly-white teeth, he should have smile lines, but he doesn't.

In observing him, I forgot where I was for a few moments in time. But I'm reminded of where I am once he clears his throat and speaks in a deep, clear voice that sounds like it does not belong to him.

"Well, well, look at who we have here. Seti Cantú, 17 years old, five feet and three inches, 120 pounds, with a constant defiance of the rules set in place by the Brotherhood."

At his words, I feel the fear come back at full force, knowing there is nothing I can say to defend myself. The dentist pushes my shoulders back, forcing me to submit to him before he reads the rest of my chart quietly. As I lay back, I feel the most vulnerable I've ever felt in my entire life—I'm completely defenseless and the view of my surroundings is now limited to the bright lights on the dome ceiling, blinding me and forcing me to squint.

My breath is labored. I feel the dentist sit next to me, his breath smelling of stale coffee as he murmurs to himself quietly.

He blows out a big breath, the stale coffee smell amplified and caressing my face, "It's unfortunate, you know. You would have been a fine member of the LPC if you would have just behaved. But you had to go and draw outside of the lines" he tsks, admonishing me like a young child before continuing, "You're also very beautiful and mature-looking for your age and I'm sure you would have made a fine wife if you were willing."

He then caresses my head, holding a strand of my dark-brown hair between his fingertips before bringing his nose down to smell it.

I feel my heartbeat at my throat, preventing me from breathing too loudly and ridding me of the need to speak.

Abruptly, he lets go of my hair and turns toward the dental assistant who has been as quiet as a loyal servant while this violation of my personal space has been taking place.

The dentist stands and both of them head toward the sink I remember seeing when I walked in. They wash their hands, both of them taking their turn to do so as I hear the flow of water overpower any other sound in this room.

At this moment I question my belief in God, where is He when I need him most? I'm begging, praying prayers in both Spanish and English, for Him to save me at this moment, but I know that my attempts at getting His attention are futile.

Still, I pray and pray for something to save me in this moment. My prayers go unanswered as I hear the water being shut off and the two sets of footsteps approach me.

My heart thunders and I know my back is drenched in sweat, my shirt sticking to my skin, warming the leather chair I lie in.

The dentist's chair squeaks next to me, the only sign of weakness in the technology within this room. The dentist speaks to me, his voice seeming like background noise to my heartbeat, "We won't do anything too invasive today, but you must know that your actions cannot go unpunished."

He turns and reaches his hand out to the dental assistant, who places some sort of utensil in his hand. Usually, my past dentist appointments begin with some sort of anesthetic administered to me meant to reduce pain or put me to sleep, but not this time. This time, it's some sort of plier-like tool—a tool I've never seen before in my entire life.

I guess my punishment is pain, no anesthetic means they want me to feel the filling of cavities or the implanting of information within my DNA. My heartbeat slows, calming me, knowing that I can take whatever pain they make me feel. Pain can be temporary and dental pain, while usually serious, can be healed with the medicinal practices my mother grew up practicing as a child.

*I can take pain, I reassure myself, I know I can take pain.*

The dentist approaches my mouth and caresses my cheeks, "Open your mouth sweetheart, this should be over in no time."

So, I open my mouth, letting him access the one area of my body that I'm meant to keep protected from any kinds of danger. From the corner of my eye, I see the dental assistant smile for the first time, their teeth silver and shiny, reflecting the lights placed in this room.

I feel confused as to what would make this person smile at the sight of my mouth, *creep*. Then, my view of the dental assistant is obstructed by the dentist's hand holding the unusual tool.

What may be five seconds feels stretched into several minutes as the tool approaches my mouth. The sixth sense returns, and I feel something telling me to prepare for a feeling I've never experienced in my life. The tool enters my mouth, past my tongue and caresses each tooth slowly, almost as if the tool has a mind of its own and is choosing a single tooth to focus on.

The dentist's breath becomes labored, almost as if he's excited and aroused by the sight of my teeth, "We're going to have to control your tongue," the tool caresses my tongue and drags all the way to the back of my throat, "you need to be controlled, sweetheart."

The tool moves back to the tip of my tongue, slowly, before making its way to its destination, my left canine. I take a deep breath as I feel my eyes dampen, finally knowing what is happening to me as my punishment. I shake my head roughly, my tongue wild, pushing the tool out of my mouth before the dental assistant restrains my head. For some reason, I can't kick and move my body and the only kind of movement I had left within me is restrained by the dental assistant holding my head down and mouth open.

I hear the dentist curse at me, "Stop writhing, there is nothing you can do to stop this from happening, girl."

I try and try to move, but I can't. The tears come at full force, shaming me for showing some sign of emotion and fear to these horrible people.

The tool, what I now know are pliers, return to the inside of my mouth and clamp around my upper, left canine—the one tooth responsible for communicating through language. I know this moment is one I will never forget; I'm completely and utterly fucked.

The tears continue flowing out of my eyes as I feel the pull of my tooth, the pain overpowered by my thoughts.

At this moment, I know that no amount of pain can live up to the punishment that I am currently facing.

I feel blood dripping down my chin and onto the dentist's hand. I see the bright red color of my blood, the only lively color in this entire building, covers the tool held in the hand of my abuser. I see something I never thought I would see happen, my tooth is free from the confines of my mouth and is placed into a small silver dish.

My limbs ache to move and reach to the one tooth responsible for allowing me to communicate with my family. In another world, I would get up and smash the hands of this dentist, ruining his hands and any kind of future in dentistry. But that world is not this one and I lay still, crying pathetically.

Red, a color that usually reminds me of my mother's garden tomato plant and chiles, resembles pain at this moment. I feel suffocated, drinking my own blood—the taste of iron overpowering my taste buds. My face is drenched in tears and blood dribbles out of my mouth and down my chin. Slowly, the pain gradually increases, and I feel the dental assistant covering my mouth with a gas mask, anesthetizing me to shut me up.

My thoughts dwindle, pain begins to reside, and my cries decrease to hiccups as the anesthesia overpowers my senses and forces me to submit.

The last thought I have before everything goes black is the irony of coming here with the intention of traveling to speak to our extended family, in person, but now I won't be able to speak at all.

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