OCTAVIA BUTLER'S EXAMINATION OF RELIGIOUS VALUES AND THE HUMAN CONDITION IN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Octavia E. Butler is the most popular African-American, female science fiction writer to date. Her novels, Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents, are categorized as science fiction, but practically every event in the text is based on current or historical experiences. The intent of this thesis is to examine the world which Octavia Butler creates in the Parables, and perform textual analysis in order to explore whether or not the Parables are plausible and/or realistic. The principle hypothesis of this thesis is that Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents is in fact a critique of Christian values as well as the human condition in America. I researched some African-American history and reviewed a number of books, essays, and articles from scholarly sources regarding the Parables. The first chapter of this thesis focuses on Octavia Butler’s life and works in order to give the reader a better understanding of her perspective, values and beliefs. I also demonstrate how these values and beliefs are integrated into the Parables. The first chapter is also relevant because it demonstrates where the Parables fit into the overall framework of Butler’s writing. In the second chapter there is an analysis of the fictional religion used in the Parables, Earthseed. There is a comparison between the Christian tradition and the Earthseed belief system. This chapter demonstrates how Earthseed is heavily influenced by the Christian/Baptist tradition, but is drastically different from it. There is an analysis of how the protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, is
aligned with Jesus Christ, and is destined to lead individuals who are ready and willing to hear the truth. There is also a discussion of the utopian elements within the text such as the establishment of the utopian society, Acorn. In the third chapter there is an analysis of the current state of America, and an examination of how current dystopias can possibly lead to problems in the future. These dystopias, according to Butler, are a result of the actions of the American people. Unlike traditional post-apocalyptic literature, the world in the Parables has changed as a result of the carelessness of previous generations. Topics such as modern slavery, the destruction of the black family, and global warming are discussed in this chapter as well.
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INTRODUCTION

We are currently living in a day and time when many people are struggling to survive. In Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), she implies that there must be an examination of current dystopias as well as the establishment of a forward-thinking religion that motivates and focuses Americans before people can even begin to imagine a utopian existence. At first glance, the Parables seem to be a fictional account of a third world country that is in the midst of complete chaos. However, Butler argues that the world presented in the Parables is practically identical to occurrences that have happened, and in some cases are still happening, in the United States of America. Butler compiles information from both history and current news in order to make a statement about how history is in fact cyclical. The Parables include resemblances to historical events such as the Holocaust, African-American slavery, and Nazi Germany. Each of these histories demonstrates how minorities have been mistreated and abused in the past. Butler is suggesting that if one does not actively fight against such injustices then there will be consequences in the future.

The discussion of the role religion plays in America is examined throughout the entire series. *Parable of the Sower* deals with the establishment of the Earthseed religion, which represents a forward-thinking belief system that teaches modern Americans how to survive in the chaotic future of 2024 and beyond. Butler’s protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina is the daughter of a Baptist minister, and while she attends her father’s church,
she does not feel connected to his god. She cannot understand why a god that cares about her, or anyone else, would allow such destruction to come upon them. Her immediate concern is discovering ways in which to survive. Therefore, she begins writing and finds comfort in what she calls her “Earthseed verses.”

Earthseed is a collection of truths that promote independence and a reliance on community as well as the Earth to supply one’s needs. The most important premise of Earthseed is that “god is change.” This means that although change is sometimes difficult, it is necessary and one must learn to adapt to every circumstance. Lauren quickly learns to adapt when her family is killed and her walled community is destroyed. With this change, she begins to teach her belief system to others, and is able to establish a community that is accepting of all people despite their background, race, gender, or sexual orientation.

In the midst of Lauren’s establishment of the Acorn community, the notion of modern slavery and throw away labor is discussed in both Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents. On several occasions Lauren discusses privatized towns that are owned and operated by foreign transnational companies. Because the American government has lost its power, American middle class neighborhoods are turning to private corporations in order to gain funding to protect and revive their communities. Unfortunately, these corporations place a number of restrictions on these people, and yet they willingly agree to forfeit their freedom. Many of the people who join Lauren’s
community have either been victimized by privatization or traditional slavery.

Butler also offers a critique of the Christian institution in America. In *Parable of the Talents* Butler actually explores the possibility of fascism. Once Lauren’s community has begun to flourish, a Christian fundamentalist group (the Christian Crusaders) attacks the Acorn community. The Crusaders are a sect/branch of Christian America, which is a movement that seeks to reclaim America as a place where everyone serves the same Christian god. Convinced that the Acorn community is a cult, the Crusaders enslave the Acorn members in an attempt to convert everyone to Christianity. Their children are placed into Christian reeducation camps and orphanages. Future technological advancements have produced slave collars, which are placed around the necks of everyone in the reeducation camp so that the Crusaders can maintain control over each of them. After being raped and worked like animals, the Acorn community is finally freed due to a storm that destroys the control system of the slave collars. By the end of the novel, Earthseed’s two year enslavement has empowered them to become one of the leading religions in Butler’s fictional America.

Interestingly, Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are placed into the science fiction genre, which is usually considered to be fantastical with aliens or some other extraterrestrial beings or ideas. However, outside of sending Earthseed members to live in outer space at the end of *Talents*, what Butler has done in these works is absolutely plausible. This plausibility demonstrates that the *Parable* series
is much more than a mere science fiction tale.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on Octavia Butler’s life and works in order to give the reader a better understanding of her perspective, values and beliefs. I also demonstrate how these values and beliefs are integrated into the Parables. The first chapter is relevant because it demonstrates where the Parables fit into the overall framework of Butler’s writing. In the second chapter there is an analysis of the fictional religion used in the Parables, Earthseed. There is a comparison between the Christian tradition and the Earthseed belief system. This chapter demonstrates how Earthseed is heavily influenced by the Christian/Baptist tradition, but is drastically different from it. There is an analysis of how the protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, is aligned with Jesus Christ, and is destined to lead only those individuals who are ready and willing to hear the truth. Lastly, there is a discussion of the utopian elements within the text such as the establishment of the utopian society, Acorn.

In the third chapter there is an analysis of the state of America in the text, and an examination of how current dystopias can possibly lead to problems in the future. These dystopias, according to Butler, are a result of the actions of the American people. The world in the Parables has changed as a result of the carelessness of previous generations. Topics such as modern slavery, the destruction of the black family, and global warming are discussed in this chapter as well.

Finally, the conclusion will discuss the discoveries found in my research as well
as the significance of Butler's narrative and how it relates to the future of America. There
will be a discussion of what the Parables can teach modern Americans about the purpose
and importance of religion, community, and history. I argue that the stipulations
associated with the Christian tradition could easily be applied to any religious
organization, and does not have to be limited to Christianity alone. The conclusion will
reiterate that despite Butler's views on religion, she maintains that religion will always
continue to retain great value to humanity.
CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

I met Octavia Butler back in 2003 at a panel discussion entitled “A New Frontier: Blacks in Science Fiction.” At the time I was taking a Major Author course at Howard University with Dr. Gregory Hampton, and we had been studying some of Butler’s novels. We were all so engrossed in Butler’s work that we were beside ourselves at the thought of meeting her. My best friend and I volunteered to work at the registration desk and we were taken aback when Butler walked in. She was a very tall black woman, large in stature, and she wore a very short Afro. She was at least six feet tall, and she had such a commanding presence even though she seemed very shy. I was intrigued by her and captivated by her discussion as the keynote speaker. She, as well as the other panelist, discussed the importance of the African-American presence in the science fiction and fantasy genres. Other panel topics included “Identity in Octavia Butler’s Kindred,” “Black Vampirism in Contemporary Horror Films,” and “Interrogating Hybridity in Two Works by Octavia Butler,” to name a few. Other African-American science fiction writers in attendance included Steven Barnes, Nalo Hopkinson and Tananarive Due who have all been heavily influenced by Butler’s writing. Their works were also discussed throughout the conference. Prior to attending this conference it had never occurred to me that there were a number of African-American science fiction writers.

Several years later, I found myself at Georgetown University taking several
theological courses in the Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies program. During my Theological Issues in 20th and 21st Century Fiction course, in which we discussed books with theological elements, Octavia Butler’s Parable novels came to mind. We discussed works such as Sue Monk Kidd’s The Secret Life of Bees, Ian McEwan’s Atonment, and Shusaku Endo’s Silence.

We discussed the moral and ethical questions raised in each of the narratives. In many of the narratives we reviewed the protagonists were outsiders somehow, and the novels explored ways in which one could find some peace or serenity in the midst of chaos. Such complicated ethical questions reminded me of the works I read by Butler during my undergraduate studies. I had read Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents previously, but after this course I decided to revisit the works. After all, I simply wanted a good grade back then, and didn’t take a serious interest in the novels. Now that I am a bit older and am concerned with what the future holds, reading the Parable series was a completely different experience.

Octavia Butler’s Childhood

Born in Pasadena, California on June 22, 1947, Octavia Butler was raised by her mother and grandmother in a strict Baptist household. Her father passed away when Butler was very young. Her mother wanted her to be a secretary, a huge accomplishment in her mother’s opinion, but Butler had other plans. Like many children who are extremely shy and introverted, she took refuge in books. She had discovered that she
enjoyed reading science fiction when she was very young, and at the age of twelve she decided that she would become a science fiction writer. In Conversations with Octavia Butler, she talks very candidly about her childhood and discusses exactly how her writing career began. She states:

I was already reading science fiction, but I hadn’t thought of writing it—I was writing fantasy and romance, both of which you know a lot about at ten or eleven, right? What happened to me sounds like a cliché but it’s true: I was watching a movie on television, Devil Girls From Mars, and I thought, I can write a better story than that. So I turned off the TV and started writing what was actually an early version of one of my Patternist stories.¹

Butler’s feminist instincts had developed very early, and she felt like everything she read that was intended for women was boring and she could never recognize herself in it. As she was growing up there were no African-American protagonists, male or female. And if blacks were included in science fiction the only purpose they served was to “make a point about racism.”² Therefore, she set out to write about African-Americas within the genre of science fiction. However, she initially had trouble writing about women doing anything other than waiting on “Mr. Right” because she had no fictional examples to model her work after. She says that women in fiction were simply “waiting to be done unto.”³

¹ Consuela Francis, Conversations with Octavia Butler (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 13.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.
Butler faced many challenges during her childhood, as she was bullied and ostracized. As I mentioned, she was very tall and was often teased about her physical appearance. In several discussions about her childhood, she describes herself as an “out kid.” She states:

I was an out kid because, as an only child, I never really learned to be a part of a group. At first it didn’t matter. When you are four years old in preschool, kids tended to play by themselves anyway. I was like most of the kids. You know, the kids talked together but they didn’t exactly play together. Later on, I really knew more about being around adults than I knew about being around other kids. This made me very awkward and strange around kids, and, unfortunately, children have a pecking order and it was very much in effect. If you’re pecked and you don’t peck back, then you’ll go on being pecked. If you’re a little chicken you die of it, but if you’re a little kid, you only want to die of it. I spent a lot of time getting hit and kicked and not really knowing what to do about it . . . Later, when I realized I could fight back, I discovered that I was a lot stronger than I had thought. I hurt people by accident. I had a lot of empathy, and hurting somebody really bothered me.⁴

Butler recalls being called ugly for the first time when she was in the first grade. Children her age were not the problem. It was the children who were older and bigger than Butler who bullied her. It took her some time to learn how to fight these kids back, but she eventually learned how to defend herself. Because she had very few friends, to cure her loneliness she would use her notebook as her companion, carrying it with her everywhere she went so that she could write in it anytime she had a free moment. She says, “in a way, reading and writing helped me not to be lonely, but in another way they permitted me to go on being an oddball as far as other kids were concerned.”⁵ Perhaps this is why her

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⁴ Ibid., 14.
⁵ Ibid., 83.
writing was very grim as a child. It was so grim that her teachers thought she had copied the works from somewhere else. She admits that she did not have much of a sense of humor back then.

The ostracism continued into Butler’s high school years. She was sometimes mistaken for a boy, and this led to her struggle with her sexuality, which raised many questions for Butler. She says, “Because of the way I looked, when I was growing up, I was called various sundry unsavory names by people who thought I was gay.” Assuming that these people may have been right about her sexuality, Butler went to the Gay and Lesbian Service Center to explore the possibility of her being a homosexual. However, after a few visits she realized that she had no real interest in dating anyone of either sex, preferring her own company to the company of others. Even so, she does admit that she was “intrigued by gay sexuality” and she went on to use her writing to explore such curiosities. Butler’s plight as an “out kid” or an outsider is apparent in several of her literary works. Her pain seems to have fueled her purpose in that regard.

Butler’s Advice On Writing and Her Writing Process

Understandably, Butler does not disclose all of her writing secrets in any of her interviews. However, she does offer both common and uncommon advice to aspiring writers. She says that one must read, write on a daily basis and refrain from obsessing over whether or not one has talent. She states, “I don’t feel that I have any particular

\[\text{\textsuperscript{6}Ibid., 14.}\]

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literary talent at all. It was what I wanted to do, and I followed what I wanted to do as opposed to getting a job doing something else that would make more money, but it would make me miserable." The more uncommon advice she offers is that aspiring writers should major in subjects such as anthropology, sociology, history and psychology. She recommends any fields of study where one can learn about people and examine what motivates them and why. She maintains that great writers do not necessarily have to go to college or major in certain subjects. The main goal is to read, and to read various works about various people. She states:

Learn the kinds of things that we unfortunate human beings do over and over again. We don’t really learn from history, because from one generation to the next we tend to reproduce our errors. There are cycles in history. Even look at things like evolutionary biology; that goes back further, for instance, than history, further back than cultural anthropology would go. Learn all you can about the way we work, the way we tick.

Read all kinds of fiction. In school you’re going to be assigned to read classics, and that’s good, that’s useful. A lot of it is good writing and will help you with your writing. But a lot of it is archaic good writing that won’t necessarily help you with what you are doing now. So read current best sellers; read something that is maybe going to spark an interest in you.

She goes on to discuss her love for various encyclopedias on topics such as medicine, religion, and any other subject that interests her. Her writing is well rounded because of all the information she has at her disposal. These encyclopedias have helped her to develop many of the ideas present in her novels.

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Ibid., 37.
In order to begin her writing process, at the very least, Butler needs both a title and an ending. In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, she goes into great detail regarding her writing process. She often places signs on her walls when writing or developing a story so that she can remember to focus on developing the conflict. She says, "when I write, I sometimes put huge signs on the wall: Action, Struggle, Goal." She recommends *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lagos Egri, which is a book that has been instrumental in her writing life. Because she is sometimes guilty of being too nice to her characters, she often returns to this book for guidance. Although *The Art of Dramatic Writing* is geared towards inexperienced playwrights, beginning writers may find it useful as well.

In a later interview, Butler describes her writing process again in terms of struggle. She states,

> I tend to write about the struggles that people have between themselves, toward something or away from something, the struggle to grow up or deal with some change. Tension. Not so much that people want to get away from you and rest, but enough so they’re kept reading. My stories are not as fast-moving as some—I noticed that a lot of popular stuff tends to be very fast moving...I like to write about human struggles, people who are clearly needing to do something or reach something, people struggling with each other. I have a kind of slogan to remind myself what I’m to be doing: The chase, the game, the quest, the test."

Although she does not use each of these methods in every narrative, she does try to keep them in mind as she is writing. Although there is no absolute blueprint for fictional writing, Butler maintains that having a writing schedule and keeping such motivators in

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8 Ibid., 24.
9 Ibid., 46.
mind will help tremendously. She would often wake up at two or three o’clock in the morning and write until it was time for her to go to work.

Butler’s Education

While Butler’s dyslexia presented quite a challenge, she did not allow it to disrupt her goal of becoming a science fiction writer. If there were classes, especially free ones, Butler was in attendance. Although she graduated with an associate’s degree from Pasadena City College in 1968, she went on to take creative writing classes from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). One of the courses she had taken at UCLA was with Theodore Sturgeon, a well-known science fiction writer back in the 1950s and 1960s. Butler then went on to attend the Screen Writer’s Guild Open Door Program in Los Angeles in 1969. There she met Harlan Ellison, an instructor and a well-known author of speculative fiction, and he encouraged her to attend the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Workshop in Pennsylvania. In an interview from 1980 Butler states:

When I went to the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop, I was surprised to find myself surrounded by the out kids. People who are, or were, rejects. Science fiction in America began with a lot of young people, the weirdos, who were interested in science and technology. Their interest in people was not always encouraged by their social circumstances.10

At Clarion Butler had finally felt like she belonged amongst the “rejects” and “weirdos.” Immediately after Clarion, Butler began publishing her works, but was forced to take on various low paying jobs so that she could support herself.

10 Ibid., 4-6.
Octavia Butler’s Literary Works

After her attendance at Clarion, Butler went on to publish her first short story, “Crossover” (1971) in the Clarion anthology. Other short stories Butler published throughout her career included “Near of Kin” (1979), “Speech Sounds” (1983), “Bloodchild” (1984), and “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” (1987). In 1995 each of these works were compiled into a collection entitled Bloodchild and Other Stories. In 2005 a second edition was published to include Butler’s later works such as “Amnesty” (2003) and the “Book of Martha” (2004).11 What is unique about this compilation is that Butler actually includes commentary after each short story.

Butler’s first novel-length works, the Patternist series, consisted of Patternmaster (1976), Mind of My Mind (1977), Survivor (1978), Wild Seed (1980), and Clay’s Ark (1984). The entire series is now available as a compilation entitled Seed to Harvest. In Patternmaster, which is set in the distant future, there is a power struggle between the Patternmasters and the Clayarks. The Patternmasters are human beings with psychic abilities, and the Clayarks are human beings who have been infected with a disease contracted during the first space exploration. In Mind of My Mind, set in the present, there is a struggle between two immortals. Doro is a telepath who breeds other telepaths, and has the ability to jump in and out of their bodies while creating a “race of superhumans.” One of his offspring, Mary, is at odds with his breeding agenda, and eventually goes

against him. In *Survivor* the human beings who survived the war amongst the Patternists and Clayarks form a Christian fundamentalist group that is obsessed with maintaining the purity of humanity. In their haste to leave Earth and live in outer space, they struggle to coexist with another species. *Wild Seed* is again about Doro, and Anyanwu, a shape shifter. Again there is a power struggle. In *Clay’s Ark*, Butler tells the story of the human beings who were affected by the Clayark virus. She discusses their attempt to prevent the disease from spreading throughout society.

In the *Patternist* novels, there is no trace of the heroic African-American women that appear in Butler’s later works such as *Kindred*, the *Parable* series, and the *Fledgling*. However, she did manage to integrate African-Americans into the science fiction genre. Butler admits that the *Patternist* series was her attempt at writing like other science fiction writers. And she even refused to reprint later editions of *Survivor*, which is not included in *Seed to Harvest* compilation. *Kindred*, Butler’s most popular and widely taught novel, was published in 1979. She wrote *Kindred* prior to the completion of *Wild Seed* and *Clay’s Ark*. She had intended for it to be a part of the *Patternist* series but it did not quite fit.

*Kindred* was her response to an ignorant comment one of Butler’s classmates made about how he thought his ancestors should have responded to slavery. He had stated, “I wish I could kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so
long, but I can’t because I would have to start with my own parents.”12 Due to her mother’s occupation as a maid, Butler was privy to the sacrifices her forbearers had made in order for future generations to have a better life. Consequently, she decided to write something that demonstrated just how much African-Americans had endured and sacrificed during that time. In *Kindred*, Butler places a modern African-American woman (Dana) from the 1970s into the antebellum South via time travel. Every time Dana travels back in time, she struggles with saving the life of her white ancestor (Rufus) risking the preservation of her own legacy. Dana would be snatched back in time without any warning every time Rufus was in some sort of trouble or danger. During those times, Dana had to act like a slave in order to survive. She could only return home to the present when her life was in jeopardy.

Butler then went on to write the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, which consists of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). This series, too, is now available as a compilation entitled *Lilith’s Brood*. In this post-apocalyptic series, Lilith, a survivor of a nuclear war that devastated Earth, is faced with choosing sterilization or breeding with an alien species, Oankali. The Oankali have rescued human beings from post-apocalyptic destruction but they now want to procreate with them to form a hybrid species. According to Butler, former President Ronald Regan inspired this series during his presidency due to a discussion of how nuclear weapons would make America a safer

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12 Francis, *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 21.
place to live. The *Xenogenesis* series was Butler’s attempt to demonstrate how humanity’s self destruction could possibly lead them to extinction.

The *Parable* series, which is the focus of this thesis, consists of *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). The protagonist is Lauren, a young African-American teenager who is living in a future world full of chaos. She sets out on her own and develops her own religious system (Earthseed) that will assist in her survival. However, Lauren is also an empath, a person who feels the pain (and pleasure) of others, which heightens her vulnerability. After many struggles on the road, heading north towards Canada, she finally establishes a group of followers. She goes on to found a utopian community, Acorn, where everyone is governed by the tenets of Earthseed. In *Parable of the Talents* Butler details the development of the Earthseed religion and the challenges the Acorn community must endure in trying to maintain a utopian society.

Later, seized and forced into slavery by a fanatical Christian group, Lauren must escape and figure out how to continue to spread the word of Earthseed. Butler had planned to continue the *Parable* series with *Parable of the Trickster, Parable of the Teacher, Parable of Chaos* and *Parable of Clay*. However, after attempting to write the introduction to the third book “at least 150 times,” Butler decided that she would cancel the idea when she could not figure out how to continue the plot. She says, “it was too hard to write the first sequel; and now I’m focused on and having fun with a completely

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13 Ibid., 23.
different text and narrator."\textsuperscript{14} Instead she decided to compose a completely different narrative.

Butler’s last novel, \textit{Fledgling} (2005), is about a special breed of vampires. Shori, a vampire who has been genetically altered, is a hybrid, half human and half vampire. Due to her genetic make-up, she is considered an abomination to pure vampires and becomes a target. However, because of her dark skin, she is able to come out during the day, and although she is fifty-two years old, she physically looks like an adolescent. Unlike pure vampires, Shori is not immortal and she needs human blood to survive. She also has to fight for her survival and acceptance amongst another vampire clan who initially wants to destroy her.

According to a friend of Butler’s, Vonda N. McIntyre, Butler had been greatly influenced by Charlaine Harris’ Sookie Stackhouse mysteries when she decided to write \textit{Fledgling}. The Sookie Stackhouse mysteries are a series about a southern belle who possesses the gift of telepathy, and engages in all sorts of mischief with various supernatural beings (i.e. vampires, werewolves and shape shifters). Butler was greatly influenced by the vampirism in Harris’ writing, and felt compelled to write her own narrative with an African-American heroin. Butler had planned to write a sequel, but, shortly after the publication of \textit{Fledgling}, she died from an accidental fall at her home in Seattle, Washington (2006).

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 122.
Throughout her career Butler has received many accolades and awards of recognition for her writing achievements. During Butler’s career, she has received the Hugo award\textsuperscript{15} for “Speech Sounds” and both the Hugo and Nebula awards\textsuperscript{16} for “Bloodchild.” *Parable of the Sower* and “The Evening the Morning and the Night” were nominated for a Nebula, but *Parable of the Talents* actually won a Nebula award. In 1995 Butler won one of the most prestigious awards, the MacArthur Foundation “genius” award, which included a grant for $295,000. Lastly, she received the lifetime achievement award in writing from PEN in 2000.

**Butler’s Motivation for the Parables**

Butler’s works have had a remarkable influence on other black science fiction writers as well as fiction writers as a whole. Her dedication to the genre and to expanding it beyond its earlier confines is admirable. She clearly had an interest in the future of humanity, science, race relations, gender issues, and human behavior. Interestingly, while she was clearly aware of the fact that being an African-American and a woman affects the perspective of her writing, she did not like to focus her attention on categories. Even being classified as a science fiction novelist sometimes bothered her. Being placed into a science fiction box, so to speak, she felt was limiting and evoked certain stipulations that were not necessarily true. Although she loved science fiction, the freedom of the genre,

\textsuperscript{15} The Hugo is an award given for the best science fiction, fantasy or horror and is decided by the World Science Fiction Society (WSFS).

\textsuperscript{16} The Nebula is an award for the best science fiction or fantasy decided by the members of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA).
she often felt that a lot of people would not bother to read her works because of the science fiction label attached to it. After all, it is often assumed that most science fiction only explores topics such as alien species or space explorations.

While Butler has written some traditional science fiction and even fantasy, when writing the *Parable* series she wanted it to remain as realistic as possible. She states:

I didn’t want any powers, any kind of magic or fanatical elements. Even the empathy is not real—it’s delusional. I wanted to have human beings in that one book find their own way clear. And I used religion because it seems to me it’s something we can never get away from. I’ve met science fiction people who say, ‘Oh, well, we’re going to out grow it,’ and I don’t believe that for one moment. It seems that religion has kept us focused and helped us to do any number of very difficult things, from building pyramids and cathedrals to holding together countries, in some instances. I’m not saying it’s a force for good—it’s just a force. So why not use it to get you to the stars?\(^{17}\)

Interestingly, the *Parables* are considered to be science fiction, and yet it is absolutely realistic. The issues in the narrative are reminiscent of occurrences that are actually happening today. Butler’s ability to articulate current issues and actually offer a possible solution is commendable. Moreover, her obsession with African-American protagonists is empowering.

**The Parables and the Science Fiction Genre**

Before doing an analysis of Butler’s work, it is necessary to define the framework within which it has been written. Many scholars offer definitions of science fiction by way of categorizing the genre into subgenres. Science fiction subgenres usually include,

\(^{17}\) Francis, *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 182-183.
but are not limited to, time travel and alien invasion narratives, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives, dystopian and utopian fiction, feminism and gender fiction as well as multicultural fiction. Despite the genre breakdowns, however, various people and institutions have different opinions about what constitutes science fiction. Some would say that science fiction portrays worlds beyond Earth with aliens or other sorts of species. Others might say that science fiction involves space travel and future technologies. However, Robert Heinlein offers a definition that describes Butler’s *Parables* perfectly. He describes science fiction as “a realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method.”

In Butler’s examination of the plights of minorities in America, she uses occurrences from the past such as slavery, politics, biblical references, African folklore and religious traditions in order to make a point about the present and the plausibility of the future. In Butler’s works she is able to use the freedom of the genre to rewrite the past, present and the future. As an African-American woman, she has the ability to write African-Americans into a genre that was previously occupied only by Caucasian males. The *Parable* novels resonate with people because they represent advancement beyond the current social limitations of our society. They offer positive African-American role models, which demonstrates that despite current dystopias, there is hope. The freedom of

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science fiction allows Butler the flexibility she needs to rework and retell narratives that may otherwise be untold.

The subgenre Butler is usually associated with is that of dystopian fiction with utopian elements. According to *The Science Fiction Handbook*, “if utopian societies are typically designed to enable the maximum fulfillment of individual human potential, then dystopian societies impose oppressive conditions that interfere with that fulfillment.”19 Based on issues she noticed back in the late 1980s and early 1990s Butler projects what is likely to happen as a result of those issues in the *Parable* series. For example, due to global warming, water is scarce. Police and fire departments refuse to regulate or investigate crime. Unemployment rates are ridiculously high, and decent paying jobs are scarce. Even middle class families are finding it difficult to survive. Space exploration has come to a halt due to the lack of funding. Education and security is only accessible to the rich. People are discriminated against due to their religious beliefs or sexual orientation. Entire communities are enslaved both voluntarily and involuntarily. Both men and women are being raped. Cannibalism has even become a viable option for some people who do not have any possibility of gaining access to actual food. There is a constant civil war going on in the streets of Los Angeles amongst the middle and lower classes. And yet, *Parable of the Talents* ends with positivity and optimism for what the

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future holds. It ends with a world that is better than the former due to the efforts of a few.

The community Lauren develops is one that should serve as inspiration to us all.
CHAPTER 2

OCTAVIA BUTLER’S CRITIQUE OF RELIGION IN AMERICA

This chapter will discuss the role of religion in America reflected in the spiritual journey of protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. In the *Parable* novels, Butler discusses problems that could potentially arise in the future if America continues on its current path, which she believes is destructive. Part of her solution to potential problems in the future is the development of a forward thinking religion: Earthseed. Butler is addressing religion in the *Parable* novels because she realizes how important religion is to human life. Religion is also a huge part of American culture as well as American history.

In the 1980s *Equal Opportunity Forum Magazine* interviewed Butler, and during the interview she discusses a science fiction panel she previously participated in. The topic of discussion on the panel was the relevance of religion in science fiction. According to Butler, many of her companions expressed that religion usually did not have any place in the science fiction genre. Despite Butler’s personal feelings regarding religion she does not agree that religion should not be included in the genre. In her *Parable* novels religion plays a significant role throughout the narrative, and both positive and negative religious influences are represented in the text.

Although Butler personally feels that religion should be outgrown, she recognizes the value that religion has maintained throughout African-American history.
She states:

Religion kept some of my relatives alive, because it was all they had. If they hadn’t had some hope of heaven, some companionship in Jesus, they probably would have committed suicide, their lives were so hellish. But they could go to church and have that exuberance together, and that was good, the community of it. When they were in pain they had God to fall back on. I think that’s what religion does for the majority of people. 1

While Butler does not agree with the logic of her ancestors, she does understand the thought process behind it, and she creates characters like Lauren’s father and brother to demonstrate this ideology (they will be discussed later in the chapter). Butler also takes their ideology a step further by birthing an ideology that is much more radical and logical. Butler seems to think that a religion like Earthseed, something that is much more progressive and relevant to modern day struggles would be beneficial to the human race.

In the beginning of Parable of the Sower the storyline focuses on Lauren’s struggle to separate her beliefs from that of her father’s, Reverend Olamina. Lauren’s father is the patriarch of the Robledo community, and maintains great control within his neighborhood. However, once he goes missing and their community is destroyed, Lauren is forced to survive on her own. Although Lauren is heavily influenced by her father’s Baptist religion, she feels compelled to establish her own belief system, one that will assist in her survival. As she travels north towards Canada, she is able to confirm that Earthseed will be her new God-Is-Change belief system.

Christian Influences and Contradictions in the *Parables*

It is evident that *Earthseed* is designed to be different from Christianity, but there are many similarities, which seem to derive from Butler's familiarity with the Baptist tradition. Initially, it seems as if Butler is simply offering a very harsh critique of Christianity. Although she thinks that there are some contradictions and inconsistencies within the religion, she is well aware of the inherent value of the Judeo-Christian tradition in America. Butler uses Christianity as her foundation for the *Parables* because she knows that most readers will be more willing to accept a religion based on premises with which they are already familiar. I have to agree with Donna Spalding Andreolle who argues, "Butler is not calling the Christian world view into question but rather is using the very power of Biblical discourse to change it from within."\(^\text{2}\) According to Andreolle, what Butler is doing in the *Parables* is confirming that a foundation of Christian values is needed to maintain the social order in America. In her essay she argues that *Earthseed* is the new Christianity, which seems to be over simplifying *Parables* a bit. However, Gregory Hampton, a professor at Howard University and a Butler enthusiast, takes this notion a step further when he states:

> Butler’s use of science fiction in conjunction with religious references allows her to rewrite history and the future with plausible fantasy and faith based mythology. By mixing science fiction with religious themes, Butler’s fiction encourages

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readers to question social values that mark marginalized bodies.\textsuperscript{3}

While Hampton agrees with Andreolle in regards to Butler using the biblical discourse in the establishment of Earthseed, he doesn’t seem to think that she is creating a new Christianity. Instead, what Butler is doing here is using themes with which she assumes her audience is already familiar to encourage them to question the social constructs by which they live.

Even the titles of the \emph{Parable} novels are chosen to immediately grab the reader and call attention to scriptures in the New Testament. The title, \emph{Parable of the Sower} is a biblical reference to St. Luke 8:5-8, which Butler includes at the end of the novel:

\begin{quote}
A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundred fold.\textsuperscript{4}
\end{quote}

In \emph{Parable of the Talents}, Lauren states that she can recall several biblical parables, as her father was a minister who loved to use parables as tools for teaching. Lauren too begins to teach her own religion, and she uses the parable tactic when discussing Earthseed with non-believers. While Butler does not include the second part of the passage when Jesus explains the meaning of this parable, I’d like to include it here;

\textsuperscript{3} Hampton, \textit{Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler}, 85.

Luke 8:11-15 states:

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they only believe for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance. No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light.\(^5\)

The “good soil” represents the people who actually follow Lauren north and settle at Acorn. Lauren plants seeds in each of them as she is traveling up the California coast, and while some choose not to believe in Earthseed, others are receptive to it. Lauren is the sower who sows the word of God. Instead of calling her the sower, however, Butler labels Lauren as the Shaper of the Acorn community. Lauren endures resistance and criticism in regards to her beliefs throughout *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, but Butler seems to be suggesting that not everyone is ready to hear the truth that is Earthseed.

The title *Parable of the Talents* refers to another biblical parable in the book of St. Matthew. This parable discusses three men (servants) who were entrusted with their master’s talents. The master gives five talents to the first servant, two to the next one, and one talent to the last. The servants with the most talents were able to double their talents

\(^5\) Ibid.
(silver). However, instead of sharing his one talent, the last servant hid his, and his master was very angry with him.

Matthew 25:26-30 states:

His master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own interest. So take the talent from him and, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’

Like the parable of the sower, the parable of the talents is referring to the use of one’s talent. Lauren’s talents are writing and teaching. The talent of writing helps her to convey her thoughts on Earthseed and to compile her verses into a spiritual text, the Books of the Living. Her talent of teaching helps her with converting people to the Earthseed belief system. She also goes on to develop other talents such as drawing, which aids her in making a living and furthering Earthseed even after their enslavement. Further, both of these titles are references to the teachings of Jesus Christ, which suggests that Butler wants to establish some parallels between Lauren and Jesus Christ.

Lauren Oya Olamina: The New Christ

Early in the *Parable* novels, we learn that Lauren has a special condition called hyperempathy. Hyperempathy is a disease that Lauren inherited as a result of her mother’s drug abuse. It is a condition that causes Lauren to feel the pain or pleasure that she perceives someone else is feeling. She states:

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6 Ibid.
Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an ‘organic delusional syndrome.’ Big shit. It hurts, that’s all I know. Thanks to Paracetco, the small pill, the Einstein powder, the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her, I’m crazy...I’m supposed to share pleasure and pain, but there isn’t much pleasure around these days.  

Not only is Lauren living in a chaotic world, but she is also getting a double dosage of her fair share of pain. While she can perceive both pleasure and pain, there is not much pleasure for her to experience. It is especially dangerous for Lauren to be travelling on the road in her condition. The world in which she lives is desolate, and she has to face a lot of adverse conditions on the road. These circumstances make Lauren vulnerable, an easy target, regardless of whether or not she can defend herself. If she hurts someone, she will likely hurt herself as well. For example, while Lauren is travelling on the road with her companions, she explains:

If you got hurt, I might not be able to help you. I might be as crippled by your injury—by your pain, I mean—as you are...If you broke your leg badly, if you were shot, if anything serious and disabling happened to you, I might be disabled too.  

While her disability is a huge disadvantage to her, it makes her more sensitive and sympathetic to human suffering. Her hyperempathy binds her to the rest of humanity. That sensitivity, the weight of taking on the world’s suffering, makes her comparable to Jesus Christ. In Sandra Govan’s essay on the positive aspects of Christian fundamentalisms, she argues, “Lauren is a contemporary, black female Jesus with a

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8 Ibid., 278.
message, perhaps more powerful than that of the original Jesus, which needs to be heard.\(^9\)

Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and was sent to earth to die for humankind. The particulars of Jesus' life are detailed in the New Testament. Before Jesus was crucified at the age of thirty-three, he walked amongst the people, teaching and associating with all people despite their nationality or occupation. There are many instances in the Bible that reference Jesus' interaction with non-Jewish people or people who were well known sinners. For example, Jesus would often meet people during his travels and pray for them, casting out demons. It is not ironic at all that Butler would make Lauren comparable to Jesus Christ, as she establishes her as a suffering religious leader. Furthermore, Earthseed is a belief system that is welcoming to all despite their religious background, race, gender, or sexual preference. As Lauren travels north, she recruits heterosexual couples, homosexuals, prostitutes, polygamists, other hyperempaths and ex-slaves. In Peter Stillman's analysis of \textit{Parable of the Sower} he states:

\begin{quote}
Like Jesus fishing for men, Olamina [Lauren] as she walks gathers about her a small group of twelve other homeless wanderers—men, women, and children—who appreciate the solidarity, protection, and friendship the group offers and the message of Earthseed that guides Olamina's life.\(^10\)
\end{quote}


Like Jesus, Lauren is welcoming to everyone. Although Lauren does not make any direct references in the text to Jesus Christ, she does discuss Job. However, Job's plight is not one that Lauren would like to align herself with. She states, "I'm not some kind of potential Job, long-suffering, stiff-necked, then at last, either humble before an all-knowing Almighty, or destroyed."\(^\text{11}\) Although she admits that Job is her favorite book of the Bible, she refuses to believe that she and Job are one and the same. She says:

> In the book of Job, God says he made everything and he knows everything so no one has any right to question what he does with any of it. Okay. That works. That Old Testament God doesn't violate the way things are now. But that God sounds a lot like Zeus—a super-powerful man, playing with his toys the way my youngest brothers play with toy soldiers. Bang, bang! Seven toys fall dead. If they're yours, you make the rules. Who cares what the toys think. Toy children, like Job's children, are interchangeable. Maybe God is a kind of big kid, playing with his toys. If he is, what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane—or if seven kids go to church and get dipped in a big tank of expensive water? But what if all that is wrong? What if God is something else altogether?\(^\text{12}\)

This is where Butler begins to gradually move Earthseed away from the Baptist tradition. Lauren does not believe in a "big-daddy god" that plucks people off as he sees fit. In a chapter entitled "Religious Science Fiction: Butler's Changing God," Gregory Hampton states, "Lauren's shift away from her father's church is a critique of the system of faith practiced by his church. Reverend Olamina's faith is dependent on an Old Testament God that is inflexible and utterly mysterious. For Lauren the God of the Old Testament is juvenile and mythical."\(^\text{13}\) Once Lauren is able to establish exactly how she feels about

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^\text{13}\) Hampton, *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler*, 90-91.
God, she is able to further develop her thoughts about Earthseed. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren defines God in terms that she can comprehend:

> My God doesn’t love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love or loyalty to my God. My God just is. Maybe I’ll be like Alicia Leal, the astronaut. Like her, I believe in something that I think my dying, denying, backward-looking people need. I don’t have all of it yet. I don’t even know how to pass on what I have. I’ve got to learn to do that. It scares me how many things I’ve got to learn.\(^{14}\)

Here Lauren comes to the realization that she has some knowledge that must be passed on to others. Further, by aligning herself with an astronaut, Lauren is making reference to science. Science is detrimental to the destiny of Earthseed later in the text. Lauren also compares herself to the astronaut in terms of the fact that she is looking to secure her future; she is looking forward as opposed to praying for the old days to return like many of her family members and neighbors. Instead of longing for the ‘good old days,’ Lauren prepares herself for the day she will end up outside the walls of her community.

**God is Change**

In Lauren’s examination of God, she discovers that it is not all about God at all, but change. God is change. She writes:

> We do not worship God.  
> We perceive and attend God.  
> We learn from God.  
> With forethought and work,  
> We shape God.  
> In the end, we yield to God.  
> We adapt and endure,  
> For we are Earthseed

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And God is Change.\textsuperscript{15}

Lauren really begins to deviate from the Baptist religion once she discovers that change is really what affects everything. It is uncomfortable for her to think this way at first because of her Baptist roots, but anytime someone mentions the topic of god, religion, or faith she reverts back to change. She believes the literal truth about God is that he can and will be shaped, and that simply praying to God is not enough. She says,

God is not to be prayed to. Prayers only help the person doing the praying, and then, only if they strengthen and focus that person’s resolve. If they’re used that way, they can help us in our only real relationship with God. They help us to shape God and accept and work with the shapes that God imposes on us.\textsuperscript{16}

Lauren does not accept the notion that if one prays to God and has faith, then God will magically make a way. She has already seen that this approach did not work for her father or for any of his followers in the community. She is a firm believer in being preparatory and proactive. In her analysis, change happens because people make it happen, and not as a result of one waiting on a change to come. Stillman argues, “Her [Lauren] father’s Christian God does not speak to her in this changing world, where people’s prayers go unanswered, God’s mercy seems absent from a heartless world, and God’s power is mocked by private power and ecological decay.”\textsuperscript{17} Lauren cannot relate to a mysterious “big daddy God” in the sky. All she sees is the chaos around her, and she

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 25

\textsuperscript{17} Stillman, “Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler’s Parables,” 25.
knows that prayer is not enough to change the world’s circumstances. Action is what is required.

Lauren Oya Olamina: The Leader of the Modern Generation

When apparent stability disintegrates,
As it must—
God is change—
People tend to give in
To fear and depression,
To need and greed.
When no influence is strong enough
To unify people
They divide.
They struggle,
One against one,
Group against group,
For survival, position, power.
They remember old hates and generate new ones,
They create chaos and nurture it.
They kill and kill and kill,
Until they are exhausted and destroyed,
Until they are conquered by outside forces,
Or until one of them becomes
A leader
Most will follow,
Or tyrant
Most fear.\(^{18}\)

Butler is setting Lauren up to become a modern day leader of future generations.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of *Parable of the Sower* no one is stepping forward to fight against injustice. Lauren becomes frustrated with older generations because, since they lived during a time when America was flourishing, they are convinced that time will eventually return. Therefore, they are not compelled to do anything extraordinary to

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change their circumstances. When Lauren tries to discuss survival tactics with her friend Joanne, assuming that someone her own age would be more apt to rally together and take action, she immediately resists. Joanne states that they are too young to change their circumstances. She practically pleads for Lauren to stop talking about it. In response Lauren states:

We can get ready. That’s what we’ve got to do now. Get ready for what’s going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterward. Get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more than just get batted around by crazy people, desperate people, thugs, and leaders who don’t know what they’re doing!19

While Joanne agrees with Lauren, she is not ready to face reality yet. Lauren suggests that they should prepare for the day when their walled community is attacked. This is a sensible suggestion considering that the street poor have a special vendetta against anyone who even appears to be middle class. Here Butler is suggesting that the people in her neighborhood need someone to lead them beyond their Robledo community and into another place where they can survive. However, Lauren’s mission is immediately shut down when Joanne tells her parents about the discussion she had with Lauren. Lauren’s father tells her not discuss such things because it only frightens people.

Lauren’s father, for example, is relying on his faith alone. While he is a good man, he does not take any action towards fighting for any sort of change. Outside of protecting his neighborhood and preaching to his congregation, he does not participate in politics at all. He may be afraid, which is understandable considering the circumstances,

19 Ibid., 55.
but there is no representation of any community leaders in the *Parables* until Lauren is established as the leader of Earthseed.

Back in the 1960s there were several African-American religious leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X who fought for change. King was a Christian and Malcolm X was a Muslim. While these religious leaders sometimes used varying methods, they both led many marches and demonstrations in an effort to fight for change and equality. There were also a number of black revolutions as well in the 1960s and 1970s. People of all religious backgrounds were active both within and outside their communities, working diligently towards making changes. While the issues in the *Parables* are not simply political, there is a need for leadership. There is a need for protest. Within the context of the *Parables* Lauren seems to be the only person who is willing to come forward as a leader. Other people in the neighborhood either avoid thinking about what is to come or move away to a company town in an attempt to avoid dealing with the real issues that are going on in the world. No one in the community is of one accord. Therefore, Lauren does not find any sort of camaraderie until she begins her travel on the road towards Canada.

**Earthseed Beliefs and Practices**

Earthseed was created as a means to establish a spiritual guide that dealt with the harsh conditions in Lauren’s life. The immediate goal of Earthseed is survival, and the ultimate goal of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. The second part of *Parable of the Sower* details Lauren’s physical and intellectual journey towards establishing a new
community of Earthseed believers. During her travels north, she gains followers along the way, as she is genuine and helpful to others during a time when people are completely selfish. Initially, no one necessarily becomes allies with Lauren because they want to be members of Earthseed. They simply want to be a part of a community that is safe and trustworthy. According to Lauren, her community began to develop on highway 101 while she and her companions were all fighting for their lives. After a long journey, Lauren is finally able to build an actual Earthseed community—Acorn. Everyone that had travelled with Lauren (thirteen people in all) decided to stay at Acorn because there seemed to be some hope and eventual gratification in her belief system. When Parable of the Talents begins, the community has expanded to about sixty members.

Lauren was often told that Earthseed was too logical, too simple, that change was not a god that could be worshipped. People also wanted to know how she could shape a god that she did not believe cared about her at all. In one instance, while discussing the purpose of worship, she responds, “Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action. With action, it is only useful if it steadies you, focuses your efforts, eases your mind.”

While some of the practices of the Acorn community resemble Lauren’s earlier Robledo neighborhood, she creates a new type of community, guided by the tenets of Earthseed but not necessarily controlled by them. Butler’s development of this new community represents her hope for the future of America. Acorn is a fresh start, a new frontier.

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In *Parable of the Talents* Butler refers to Lauren as the "Shaper" of the community, the leader, the matriarch. As she is to shape God, she is also responsible for shaping her community. It is required that each member be educated and trained to learn a specific skill. Each member is taught at least two languages (English and Spanish), and is encouraged to learn more if possible. The community is mixed in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and religious background. According to Hampton, there are no tenets that Earthseed members are forced to follow. He states:

> Besides the attendance and understanding the nature of a god that is change, i.e. shaping god; preparing for God; learning from God; all synonymous with understanding one's self, there isn't a great deal of material sacrifice involved in being a member of the Earthseed religion. There are no monetary taxes; no commandments etched in stone to follow or enforce; no rejection of individuals. Earthseed sounds like a utopian religion except for the very important fact that it exists because it acknowledges the impossibility of perfection and permanence.\(^{21}\)

Members grow their own crops and barter with neighboring communities for things that they need. The Earthseed community establishes their own customs, which include weekly gatherings as well as welcoming ceremonies and weddings. During these gatherings, Earthseed members come together and are encouraged to have open discussions that include anything regarding their community. At such gatherings, members are allowed to cite "Earthseed verses, the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, the Bhagavad-Gita, and John Donne."\(^{22}\) Here Butler is confirming that not only does Earthseed derive from Christianity, but it is also a mixture of varying religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Process Theology and Catholicism. Earthseed is a compilation of

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\(^{22}\) Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 58.
universal truths, and perhaps possesses the most beneficial aspects of various religions. Further, *The Books of the Living* seem to be a reference to the Egyptian funeral texts, also referred to as the Book of the Dead. However, because Earthseed’s focus is survival, the emphasis on “living” makes complete sense.

Although Lauren is the religious founder and leader of the Acorn community, she is not the focus of Earthseed’s attention. Change is the entity on which everyone should focus his or her energies. “Change is the one unavoidable, irresistible, ongoing reality of the universe . . . that makes it the most powerful reality.”23 They do not believe in miracles, and faith in god is irrelevant. It is an uncomfortable and unpleasant ideology at first, as the God of change is faceless and insensitive. And although members do not have a God that is looking after them, they are a part of a community that looks after one another. At the end of *Parable of the Talents* Earthseed is able to travel to other worlds. They do not need to wait for the afterlife to reach heaven. Their destiny is to take root amongst the stars.

**Earthseed versus Christian America**

The most significant critique of Christianity and capitalism in *Parable of the Talents* is demonstrated through Butler’s establishment of Christian America. The fictional Texas Senator, Andrew Steele Jarret, a southern born minster, is elected as President to repair the damage America has done to itself. He believes that America

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23 Ibid., 75.
needs to revert back to an all-Christian nation. Because the Acorn community is seen as
the antithesis of Jarret’s mission, it is decided that they must be reeducated or destroyed.
This notion of enslaving a group of people in the name of Christianity goes back to the
days of slavery in America. According to *From Slavery to Freedom*, a book on African
American history, one of the four tenets of the proslavery argument was that “through the
ages the church had sanctioned slavery as a means of converting the heathen to Christian
civilization.”24 Here Butler is making a reference to the problems African-Americans
have faced in the past in terms of slavery, and she is inferring that if one is not careful,
history can and will repeat itself. Additionally, Christian America does not believe that
women should maintain positions of power. Lauren states:

Some Christian America types would be happy to silence all women. Jarret
preached that woman was to be treasured, honored, and protected but that for her
sake, she must be silent and obey the will of her husband, father, brother, or adult
son since they understood the world as she did not.25

Here, Butler is again referencing the inevitability of history repeating itself. Even
Lauren’s brother, Marcus is threatened by the success of Lauren’s community. Although
Lauren rescues him from enslavement, Marcus does not offer any sort of loyalty or
support towards her cause, further perpetuating misogyny. Marcus’ refusal to respect the
principles of Earthseed and the Acorn community foreshadow his eventual alliance with
Christian America later on in *Parable of the Talents*.

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24 John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African

Interestingly, Butler aligns Lauren’s only surviving relative with the very entity that aims to destroy her. While her brother is not directly involved in the enslavement of the Earthseed community, he is a minister and great supporter of Christian America. If Lauren is the antithesis of Christian America, her brother Marcus seems to be the antithesis of Earthseed. Where Lauren welcomes questions from her members, the same questions easily frustrate Marcus. He is a Baptist minister like her father, and in his opinion the church (CA) is valuable because it possesses great power. There is a journal entry written by him in *Parable of the Talents* where he discusses his father’s obsession with having faith in God. While Marcus does not side with Lauren in any way, they both believe that faith in God is not enough. Action is required, and he believes that President Jarret could change America’s direction for the better. He states:

When the city authorities decided that we were no more than trash to be swept out of our homes, my prayers had no power to stop them...but in post-Pox America, successful churches were only sources of influence. They offered people safe emotional catharsis, a sense of community, and ways to organize their desires, hope and fears into systems of ethics. Those things were important and necessary, but they weren’t power. If this country was ever to be restored with greatness, it wasn’t the little dollar-a-dozen preachers who would do it. Andrew Steele Jarret understood this. When he created Christian America and then moved from the pulpit into politics, when he pulled religion and government together and cemented the link with money from rich businessmen, he created what should have been unstoppable drive to restore the country. And he became my teacher.26

Marcus is drawn to Christian America because of the sense of power and order it is able to provide him. Considering that he witnessed the murder of his family, was raped repeatedly and sold into slavery, it is understandable that he would like to be a part of a powerful entity. Here, Butler is reaffirming that people need something to believe in. As

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26 Ibid., 308-309.
a minister of Christian America, he is respected and treated like a human being, or so he thinks.

Peter Stillman offers a great description of Christian America (CA), which he describes as:

an active religious movement with many local branches. These branches include churches with out-reach organizations like orphanages and homeless shelters. Ominously, some CA men have organized themselves into militant gangs—Crusaders—who seek to blot out those who are not like them. Unlike usual thieves or slavers who plunder and kidnap, they demolish and kill.27

Similar to such vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan, there is a group of Christian Americans (Crusaders) who decide that it is their Christian responsibility to enslave Acorn community members. They take over their land and send their children off to be raised by Christian foster parents. At “Camp Christian” each slave is required to report each other’s sins as well as confess their own sins in front of the entire group. They have to recite specific Bible verses, and if they choose a verse that is contrary to what the Crusaders want to hear, they are lashed. Further, late at night, many of the “teachers” retrieve women from the community and rape them. Lauren states:

They rape but pretend they don’t. They say they’re religious, but power has corrupted even the best of them. I don’t like to admit it, but some of them are, in a strange way, decent, ordinary men. I mean that, they believe in what they are doing. They’re not all sadists and psychopaths. Some of them seem truly to feel that collecting minor criminals in places like Camp Christian is right and necessary for the good of the country. They disapprove of the rape and the

unnecessary lashings, but they do believe that we inmates are, somehow, enemies of the country.\textsuperscript{28}

There is no doubt that there were some individuals who truly believed that they were reeducating in the name of Christ. However, it does not excuse the rest of the Crusaders who raped, tortured and murdered many of the slaves when their efforts should have been focused on reeducation. Again, such instances in the text are reminiscent of men and women being raped, beaten and killed by their masters during slavery. Throughout this portion of the \textit{Parable of the Talents}, Lauren’s journal entries resemble slave narratives.

The Destiny of Earthseed Revisited

The final focus of Earthseed really comes to fruition when Lauren is able to escape from Camp Christian and begins travelling with another empath, Belen Ross.

While Lauren is distraught by the disappearance of her daughter, she is also contemplating how she will fulfill the destiny of Earthseed. Belen Ross seems to represent a typical skeptic of Earthseed. She agrees that the principles of Earthseed sound appealing, but in the midst of a chaotic world, no one can fathom the idea of trying to reach the moon and stars when they are poor and desolate. She suggests:

\begin{quote}
You need to do what Jarret does…Focus on what people want and tell them how your system will help them to get it. Tell folksy stories that illustrate your points and promise the moon and stars—literally in your case. Why should people want to go to the stars anyway? It will cost a lot of money and time. It will force us to create whole new technologies. And I doubt that anyone who’s alive when the effort starts will live to see the end of it. Some scientists might like it. It will give
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} Butler, \textit{Parable of the Talents}, 223.
them the chance to work on their pet projects. And some people might think it’s a
great adventure, but no one’s going to want to pay for it.”  
Belen makes some very valid points that Lauren must concede even though her first
instinct is to resist being associated in any way with Jarret’s methods. Here Butler is
suggesting that one doesn’t necessarily need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. In
revisiting history, one can be both enlightened and inspired. If Lauren wants to go against
the patriarchal society in which she lives, she will need to adopt some of its methods to
do so. Like believers of other religions, Earthseed members have been subjected to
opposition and enslavement, and once Lauren begins to share their history, she begins to
gain national recognition. As a result of the electronic publication of Earthseed: Books of
the Living, Lauren begins to receive invitations to various schools and organizations to
discuss the principles of Earthseed. While it was not well received by everyone, many
take a liking to Earthseed and volunteer to help with her cause. As a result, Earthseed
begins to flourish again.

Ultimately, despite the many obstacles Lauren had to face, she was able to go on
to found several Earthseed communities, schools, farms, and factories. They even owned
banks, stores and several towns. By 2090 Earthseed sent its first space ship into outer
space to explore the other worlds of the universe. Lauren says, “I have not given them
heaven, but I’ve helped them to give themselves the heavens. I can’t give them individual

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29 Ibid., 359.
immortality, but I’ve helped them to give our species its only chance at immortality. I’ve helped them to the next stage of growth.”

Final Thoughts on Earthseed as a Religion of the Future

Initially, I assumed that Butler was simply criticizing the Christian tradition in the Parables. However, upon further investigation, it seems that the Parable novels represent her hope for the future. What is so interesting about the Parable novels is that Butler is using the genre of science fiction to discuss some very significant issues in America today, especially in terms of religion, and how it should be used to motivate and advance humanity. Although a lot of the unfortunate circumstances in the Parables are based on American history (i.e. slavery, racism, sexism, etc.) as well current events, the ideologies detailed in these particular novels are a bit easier to accept because it is considered to be science fiction. By placing such topics into the science fiction genre, she is able to use the openness of it to introduce new ideas and at the same time revisit/rewrite history. Further, the genre allows Butler the freedom to explore such complexities that are normally taboo topics for discussion.

In terms of religion, one is traditionally taught that one must have faith and refrain from questioning religious beliefs, but Butler is suggesting the opposite. It is in the questioning and the building of one’s own destiny that one should find comfort. Earthseed is just one of Butler’s suggestions as to what America needs to do to improve

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30 Ibid., 405.

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itself. What Earthseed does for its members is quite similar to what religion/Christianity used to do for African-Americans during slavery. It helps them to cope and deal with their circumstances. No, Earthseed is not a perfect religion; in fact, to some, it may not be considered a religion at all. Moreover, Butler is not attempting to create a utopian society. Instead, she is offering a blueprint of what societies could or should look like in the future.

Community is also a very integral part of the *Parables*. From the very beginning stages of Earthseed, Butler made it clear that a sense of community was very important. When Lauren’s Robledo community is destroyed, she finds companionship on the road, and when Acorn is seized she is refocused once again by her interaction with others.

Butler says:

I had in mind how certain historical populations have used religion to focus a group toward long-term goals—such as cathedrals or the pyramids. I wanted Lauren to envision, but then also to focus the Earthseed group toward, the goal of changing human attitudes about the treatment of the Earth and each other. And a big part of that vision was to formulate not a national government but, instead, multiple communities. Self-governing and—supporting, but also interactive with each other.”

Butler’s intent was to model Earthseed to be similar to historical religious societies. She wanted the organization to have several locations so that they could reach out to people all over the world, and develop “self-governing” but “interactive” communities. Earthseed encourages people to take action and play an active role in their future, but

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31 Francis, *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 121.
they must realize that their future also depends on their community. While Lauren is an extraordinary young woman, Butler is indicating that any number of people with positive intentions, regardless of their religious beliefs, could come together and to achieve what Lauren has in the *Parables*. She is one human being who took notice of the problems in her world and took action towards solving them.
CHAPTER 3

OCTAVIA BUTLER’S CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN DYSTOPIAS

This chapter will discuss Octavia Butler’s examination of the dystopian realities demonstrated in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. While Butler is greatly concerned with what religion can do in the future, it is equally as important to her to examine how current dystopias can possibly develop into future catastrophes. She is heavily influenced by the news as well as American history. The histories that are represented in the *Parables* are ones where many people were marginalized, perpetuating the notion that one must be Caucasian, male, and Christian in order to survive/succeed in America. Instead Butler offers a world where the protagonist is an African-American female who creates her own religion and implements a social movement.

Typical of post-apocalyptic fiction, the world in the *Parables* has changed drastically from our modern world today. However, the change is not caused by an actual apocalyptic event. Instead, Butler’s future world is a result of the carelessness of previous generations. To Butler her protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina is a perfect candidate to execute change in the narrative. Lauren is young and her vision of the world is new, innovative, and different from that of her parents’ generation. Her father and stepmother are constantly looking to the past and waiting for its return, but Lauren only looks to the past for the knowledge it possesses. Lauren feels compelled, or perhaps responsible for making some sort of change in her world.
In an effort to further one’s understanding of the state of the world in which Butler is writing, the following is a passage from the beginning of *Parable of the Talents*.

It is a journal entry written by Taylor Franklin Bankole, Lauren’s husband:

I have read that the period of upheaval that journalists have begun to refer to as “the Apocalypse” or more commonly, more bitterly, “the Pox” lasted from 2015 through 2030—a decade and a half of chaos. This is untrue. The Pox has been a much longer torment. It began well before 2015, perhaps even before the turn of the millennium. It has not ended.

I have also read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climactic, economic and sociological crises. It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises. I have heard people deny this but I was born in 1970. I have seen enough to know that it is true. I have watched education become more a privilege of the rich than the basic necessity that it must be if civilized society is to survive. I have watched as convenience, profit, and inertia excused greater and more dangerous environmental degradation. I have watched poverty, hunger, and disease become inevitable for more and more people.\(^1\)

When the *Parable of the Sower* begins, there is a lot of description of the chaos, but there is no explanation of how the world became this way. It is not until the second book of the series that the reader receives some sort of explanation as to how the United States became so barren and desolate. Apparently, it was the fault of the American people. As it will soon become clear, Bankole’s journal entry above practically mirrors Butler’s thoughts on how America would look in the future.

While the *Parables* are sometimes considered to be prophecy, Butler indicates that they are simply works that identify solvable problems. This means that Americans still have the opportunity to correct these issues before things worsen. But even

\(^1\) Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 8.
correcting the issues will not make America a utopian society according to Butler.

Communal, environmental and political involvement is what Butler proposes will need to be examined in order for America to last. During an interview with the San Francisco Bay Guardian, Daniel Burton-Rose mentions to Butler that when reading the Parables he assumed that they were based on “modern-day slavery in the Sudan” or some other third world country. However, Butler confirms that the Parables are based on what she saw going on in America back in the 1980s. She states:

What I did was I looked at our country. I also looked at Nazi-Germany. I was interested to see how a country goes fascist. Because it concerned me that in some ways we could head down that pathway. And I was also interested in all the things we weren’t paying attention to in any useful way. These things are used to play politics but they’re not really used in any useful way most of the time. I was thinking of education and the economy and the ecology, and the various things that, if we don’t pay attention to, are going to lead us to living in a world that we don’t want to live in. This is not about the past. This is about the present and the future.²

While Butler claims that the Parables are not about the past, she must reference the past in order to explore what could potentially happen in the future. One of her goals, as well as the goals of the fictional religion, Earthseed, is to accept adaptability and change.

However, before people are able to accept change, they must identify what needs to be adjusted. One of Butler’s greatest concerns in the Parable novels is that “we [Americans] seem to be setting things up so that the poor will get a lot poorer and the middle-class will

² Francis, Conversations with Octavia Butler, 198.
get a lot poorer too, and I don’t think a lot of members of the middle-class have figured that out yet.\textsuperscript{3}

Lower and Middle Class Struggles: Debt Slavery and the Turn towards Violence

In the fictional 2020s employment is practically nonexistent and private corporations now have the power to create their own rules, as Labor laws no longer restrict them. Therefore, they are able to pay employees the least amount of money possible. According to Peter Stillman this "new American dystopia stems from extremes of economic wealth and consequent inequality of political power, so that the private power of the rich corporations dominates."\textsuperscript{4} Only the rich are flourishing while the middle and lower classes battle one another, which make it quite difficult for anyone in either class to advance beyond their current plight. As a result, most people are either forced to turn to a life of crime and drug abuse, or to join a company town.

In the Parable of the Sower we learn that Lauren’s stepbrother, Keith, chooses a life of crime in lieu of remaining in his walled community. While Lauren seeks to advance humanity, Keith sought only to rob and cheat people in order to get what he desired. The first time he ventures outside of their walled community though, he is robbed completely of his shoes and clothing. However, Keith does not concede. He believes that he can only become a man and earn the respect of his family if he can

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 61.

\textsuperscript{4} Stillman, “Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler’s Parables,” 17.
survive outside. He runs away several times and begins to learn the art of killing and stealing. While shunned at first, Keith learns how to gain the respect (or fear) from the people on the street, and even uses his literacy to earn a living. Ultimately, Keith does not survive and is murdered after less than a year outside.

Keith's experiences outside offer the reader a closer look at what is going on socially and economically in Butler's fictional world. It is apparent that Keith's choices are ones that have been affected by the society around him. His actions are not a reflection of his upbringing, but his response to the hopelessness that surrounds his community. In a conversation with Lauren, Keith tells her about "the paints." He says, "They shave their hair—even their eyebrows—and they paint their skin green or blue or red or yellow. They eat fire and kill rich people."5 The paints are people who are addicted to a drug called "Pyro," which was accidentally mutated from a prescription drug (Paracetco) designed for people with Alzheimer's disease. It seems to only be used by the middle and lower classes, and often when people abuse the drug it results in the burning or torching of things as well as people. They sometimes aim specifically at people in walled communities, as they appear to be in a much better position than the street poor.

The plight of the street poor in Butler's narrative is quite disturbing. At the beginning of Parable of the Sower Lauren states that "they often have something wrong with them," which suggest that despite Keith's fascination with his success outside, the majority of the street poor are enduring very unfortunate circumstances. She states, "They

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5 Butler, Parable of the Sower, 110.
have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don't get enough to eat so they're malnourished—or they eat bad food and poison themselves." However, there are some people on the street who are thriving. Keith was doing great outside for a short time. When Lauren hears of Keith’s death, the police determine that Pyros probably killed him. Lauren states, “Someone had cut and burned away most of my brother’s skin. Everywhere except his face. They burned out his eyes, but left the rest of his face intact—like they wanted him to be recognized.” When the Olaminas speak with the police, they state that a murder like Keith’s usually occurs when someone has stolen from others or when someone has competed with others.

This sort of competition amongst people in the lower and middle classes are examined in Jim Miller’s essay, “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler’s Dystopian/Utopian Vision.” In Miller’s essay he engages in a discussion of Octavia Butler’s Parable novels as they relate to Mike Davis’ City of Quartz. Miller recognizes some similarities between Davis’ analysis and history of Los Angeles and Butler’s fiction. Two of the topics discussed in the City of Quartz as well as Miller’s essay are the “downtown war on the poor” and “middle class gated communities.” In regards to the war on the poor, Miller argues that the police officers in Butler’s narrative are simply extensions of “present day LAPD officers” who have been known to harass the homeless. In Butler’s narrative, she describes the police officers as tyrants who take advantage of

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6 Ibid., 10-11.

7 City of Quartz is a non-fiction book on the utopian and dystopias elements of the city of Los Angeles. Davis discusses the social history of the city, and how L.A. is likely to be in the future.
the street poor by stealing their possessions and forcing them to move on from wherever they may be resting although they have nowhere else to go.

Further, he goes on to discuss how the Pyros’ “burn-the-rich movement” is nonsensical because they rarely actually gain access to the rich. He compares the destruction of Lauren’s Robledo neighborhood in the Parables to the L.A. riots where people in the city destroyed their own communities in response to the Rodney King verdict. Miller states:

Considering that Parable of the Sower was written during the wake of the L.A. riots, it seems clear that Butler is commenting on the futility of the destruction that befell poor communities in Los Angeles in the wake of the Rodney King verdict, as local grocery stores, gas stations, and apartment buildings went up in flames while the rich watched it all safely on TV and the underlying problems went unaddressed. It was not the police or the corporate executives who pulled businesses out of inner city L.A. who paid the costs of the riots, but Korean immigrants, black and Latino small-business owners, and the people who had to live through the aftermath. . . Hence the mostly black and Latino residents of Lauren’s neighborhood are left homeless or dead while the root causes of homelessness are left unaddressed.8

When Lauren’s community is destroyed, the Pyros have not done what they have set out to do. They have not “burned the rich,” so to speak. All they have done is destroy another struggling neighborhood and place more people on the street. Therefore, people who are located in these gated communities are not as protected as they might assume.

While Butler does not compare her narrative to the L.A. Riots in any of her interviews, she does comment on the symbolism of walled communities. She says,

“people are walled in but they are clearly going nowhere in spite of the fact that they are surviving as long as they do.”

Miller goes on to state, “the walls shielding what’s left of the middle class have become as much a prison as protection. These walls guard the fragile and downwardly mobile middle class from the army of violent, drug-addicted underclasses outside.”

Whenever Lauren’s family travels on the street they must carry guns. Miller suggests that this represents the “constant low-level class warfare going on between the have-littles and the have-nots.”

The walls of the community are only a short-term fix, and do not offer any real long-term security. Butler is suggesting that one must deal with the “social problems” or such occurrences could happen again and again in the future. Not every gated community can withstand the violence of the outside world once it gets in. These sorts of circumstances are what lands many people in Butler’s narrative in slavery, modern or otherwise.

Slavery Revisited in the Parables

Unlike slavery in the past, the slavery that Butler presents in the Parables is no longer limited to Southern plantations and African-American slaves. In the future Butler projects there will be debt slavery, in which people of various economic statuses will volunteer to participate in order to survive. In 2024 people are sacrificing their freedom for room and board in privately owned neighborhoods. Any hope of advancing, however,

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9 Francis, Conversations with Octavia Butler, 46.


11 Ibid.
is unlikely considering these people are usually victimized by such systems. For example, in *Parable of the Sower* there is a lot of discussion about a place called Olivar. Olivar is a fictional town that was once a wealthy independent community located on the coast of Los Angeles. However, it is now on the decline and is soliciting help from a corporation called Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton and Company (KSF). The KSF is a Japanese, German, and Canadian multinational company, which represents the decline of American prosperity, so much so that a foreign entity is needed to assist American communities.

Some of Olivar’s issues include earthquakes, high taxes, a rising sea level and a lot of unstable land. Therefore, the Olivar residents vote for the KSF to come in and revive what is left of their community. Not everyone in Olivar agrees that this is the best way to proceed, but the majority of the inhabitants are desperate for some sort of help. In this portion of the text, Lauren references the “early American company towns” that were common back in the nineteenth century. In *Parable of the Sower* Lauren describes the KSF plan of action:

KSF will expand the desalination plant to vast size. That plant will be the first of many. The company intends to dominate farming and the selling of water and solar and wind energy over much of the southwest—where for pennies it’s already bought vast tracts of fertile, waterless land. So far, Olivar is one of its smaller coastal holdings, but with Olivar, it gets an eager, educated work force, people a few years younger than I am whose options are very limited. And there’s all that formerly public land that they now control. They mean to own great water, power, and agricultural industries in an area that most people have given up on. They have long term plans, and the people of Olivar have decided to become a part of them—to accept smaller salaries than their socio-economic group is used
to in exchange for security, a guaranteed food supply, jobs, and help in their battle with the Pacific.\textsuperscript{12}

In Marlene Allen’s essay, “Octavia Butler’s Parable Novels and the ‘Boomerang’ of African American History,” she states that the system of the KSF is quite similar to sharecropping, which was common in the South after the Civil War. Unlike many sharecroppers however, the Olivar community consists of educated people, and yet, they are willing to offer their freedom to the KSF to avoid the chaos that is already creeping into their community. Allen goes on to discuss how Butler is also using these instances to examine the principles of big business owners who seek to gain cheap labor, which is never beneficial to the workers. Allen states, “This [KSF] situation is common in science fiction literature, wherein authors articulate contemporary fears of capitalistic enterprises such as KSF overstepping their boundaries to replace the state as ruling authorities.”\textsuperscript{13}

Capitalism is the new form of slavery, and these corporate businesses are taking full advantage of people with desperate circumstances. Even Lauren’s stepmother, Cory, would like to move to Olivar, but her father refuses. Olivar is what Claire Curtis\textsuperscript{14} calls a “delusional escape.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Butler, Parable of the Sower, 119.


\textsuperscript{14} Claire Curtis is the author of Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: We’ll Not Go Home Again. This text dedicates two chapters to the discussion of Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents in terms of the social contract.

\textsuperscript{15} Claire Curtis, Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: We’ll Not Go Home Again (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), 157.
Later in *Parable of the Sower* the reader gets a first-hand account of modern day slavery from Emery Solis, a young woman of African-American and Japanese descent, who used to be a part of a privatized community like Olivar. Solis was forced to marry an older man once she lost her father to violence and her mother to an illness, to ensure her survival. She and her husband worked together on a farm for shelter, food, and clothing. However, once her husband died, Emery and her children were held responsible for his debt. Once the farm was sold to a “big agribusiness conglomerate” the stipulations of her living situation changed drastically. Lauren describes the conditions at Solis’ farm:

Wages were paid, but in company scrip, not in cash. Rent was charged for the workers’ shacks. Workers had to pay for food, for clothing—new and used—for everything they needed, and of course they could only spend their company notes at the company store. Wages—surprise!—were never quite enough to pay the bills. According to new laws that might or might not exist, people were not permitted to leave an employer to whom they owed money. They were obligated to work off the debt either as quasi-indentured people or as convicts. That is, if they refused to work, they could be arrested, jailed and in the end, handed over to their employers.

Either way, such debt slaves could be forced to work longer hours for less pay, could be “disciplined” if they failed to meet their quotas, could be traded and sold with or without their consent, with or without their families, to distant employers who had temporary or permanent need for them. Worse, children could be forced to work off the debt of their parents if the parents died, became disabled, or escaped.¹⁶

Because of the enormous debt the husband left behind, Emery and her family could never earn enough money to repay it. Therefore, her sons were sold without her permission.

Even after she was able to run away, she and her daughter faced homelessness and starvation until they joined the Earthseed community.

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The slavery that the Earthseed members endured at hands of Christian America is just as horrifying as debt slavery. When Acorn is turned into a Camp Christian Reeducation facility, the enslavement is not limited to Earthseed members alone. There are a number of homeless people as well as criminals who are held captive. Lauren describes the conditions in which they are forced to live:

We’re to sit still, not speak, not repair our clothing or our shoes—we’re all in rags since all but two sets per person of our clothing have been confiscated. We’re allowed to read the Bible, pray, and sleep. If we’re caught doing anything more than that we’re lashed . . . We’re permitted no electric light and no oil lamps, so we have only the window for light. During the week, it’s dark when we get up and dark when we’re shut in to sleep. During the week, we are machines—or domestic animals.

The only conveniences we’re permitted are a galvanized bucket which we must all use as a toilet and a 20-liter plastic bottle of water fitted with a cheap plastic siphon pump. We each have one plastic bowl from which we both eat and drink.\textsuperscript{17}

The most unfortunate aspect of the enslavement of Earthseed is that the majority of people outside the facility have no idea of its existence. A fellow slave, Day Turner, informs Lauren that most Americans assume that the people arrested and reeducated by Camp Christian actually deserve to be there. It is assumed that everyone is a criminal, and no one investigates the validity of these charges because they are issued by a church. Because Day knew that no one from outside would come in to rescue them, he led his own revolt against Camp Christian. Like Nat Turner, a slave who led revolt in 1831, he gathered some people together to fight against the guards. Unfortunately, the revolt only led to a number of people being killed.

\textsuperscript{17} Butler, \textit{Parable of the Talents}, 224-225.
Indentured servitude was also a topic of discussion in *Parable of the Talents*.

After finding some children in an abandoned truck, Lauren speculates on what could have happened to them if they had sought help from the police or some other form of authority. Apparently, many children are kidnapped and subjected to indentured servitude. In the text homeless children could legally become indentured servants due to the weakening of Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments by various legislatures. While the amendments are still in existence there is no one enforcing them in the *Parables*.

According to *From Slavery to Freedom*, indentured servitude was in existence back in the seventeenth century when Europeans decided that black people would be more efficient and easier to control than whites. Indentured servitude was the precursor of African-American slavery.

These sorts of farms or company towns are quite common in Butler’s narrative. The notion of slavery in the *Parables* is one that does not exclude people in terms of race or gender. Therefore, no one is safe guarded from it with the exception of very wealthy Americans who can afford to avoid privatization. Butler is suggesting that both traditional and debt slavery could be a possibility in the future. She believed that debt slavery was already in existence years ago. In an interview with Crisis magazine in 1994, Butler speaks very candidly on modern slavery in both the United States as well as Mexico:

> Every now and then it will come out that people have been held against their will and forced to work after having been seduced by lies about good salaries and that sort of thing. In this part of the country [California] they’re usually Hispanic. I’ve heard of the same sort of thing happening to black people in the South. It’s
already happening. I'm talking about people who can’t even leave. If they try, they're beaten or killed.

The opposite of slavery is also in evidence now: throw-away labor. I think the [American factories] in Mexico were the best examples of it. American companies going down there to take advantage of cheap labor and unenforced environmental regulations. It's what was going on before NAFTA. One of the things they do down there, they employ people and make no provision for safety. They may be poisoned with chemicals, hurt in equipment foul-ups, that kind of thing. Or they may just have to live in horrible shacks because there's nothing nearby. There’s no plumbing, open sewers, drinking polluted water, not really enough money to sustain life, so they have to put the whole family to work. These are American companies down there taking as much advantage as they can get.¹⁸

Miller too discusses Butler's narrative in terms of the resemblance to “sweatshops in Los Angeles and New York City where large numbers of immigrants from Asia and Latin America were found to be living in similar circumstances.”¹⁹ He goes on to say that many of the instances that Butler describes in her narrative are currently happening “either in the United States or in some Third World factory.” Butler’s discussion of immigrants also demonstrates that she is not just concerned about the well being of African-Americans, which reiterates that this sort of slavery could happen to anyone.

Any notion of slavery in modern America really bothered Butler. She figured that if Americans had the audacity to do this sort of thing to people in another country, then she could explore the possibility of this sort of slavery becoming commonplace in America. Butler estimates that people will be placed in similar situations if Americans do not realize that such atrocities already exist and must cease to exist. However, instead of using an American company or business, Butler uses a foreign country to demonstrate

¹⁸ Francis, Conversations with Octavia Butler, 44.
that America can eventually become a third world country if there is not enough attention paid to these sorts of issues. We too can be dominated by another powerful entity as we have dominated others in the past.

Butler also discusses another form of slavery where both men and women are bartered and sold for sexual favors making them susceptible to mistreatment. The first reference to this sort of slavery in the text begins with Lauren's discussion of the Mosses, a polygamist family in her Robledo neighborhood. Richard Moss, who is the patriarch of his family, believes that men should breed as many children as they possibly can, which justifies his need for several wives. One of his youngest wives, Zahra Moss, becomes one of Lauren's companions on the road once their community is destroyed and their families are killed. During their journey together, the reader learns that Zahra's mother sold her to Richard Moss at the age of fifteen. In Lauren's opinion, there are a number of middle class men with this mentality in 2024/2025. She states:

I hear there's a lot of that kind of thing going on in other neighborhoods. Some middle class men prove they're men by having a lot of wives in temporary or permanent relationships. Some upper class men prove they're men by having one wife and a lot of beautiful, disposable young servant girls. Nasty. When the girls get pregnant, if their rich employers won't protect them, the employers' wives throw them out to starve.²⁰

Zahra's role in the Moss family is no different than the plight of people trapped in debt slavery. She was not allowed to learn to read or write. As she was sold to Richard, she was not considered to be an actual person, but a mere possession. Such conditions

²⁰Butler, Parable of the Sower, 37.
motivate both Lauren and her companions to establish their own self-governing community, Acorn.

The Migration of the Body and the African-American Past

Another important aspect of Butler’s narrative is what Gregory Hampton calls the “migration of diverse bodies.” Butler sets Lauren and her companions on a journey going north in an effort to align them with the migration of African-American slaves in the past. The destruction of the Robledo community represents the death of an “old world-view,” which allows Lauren to move forward with creating a new one. According to Hampton, “Migration happens because a group of people want, and sometimes need to make an economic adjustment in order to survive within particular boundaries.”

Lauren’s journey north is significant because it not only marks the possibility of hope, but it also represents her awareness of the African-American past.

Many scholars compare Lauren’s journey to that of Harriet Tubman and other significant slaves in American history. Harriet Tubman, one of the most significant African-American women in black history, freed over three hundred slaves by way of the Underground Railroad. Described as “frail of body and suffering from recurrent spells of dizziness” in *From Slavery to Freedom*, Tubman represents a woman who is able to deliver others despite her own weaknesses. This is quite an appropriate comparison to Lauren since she is easily weakened by her hyperempathy condition. However, she still


22 Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 209.
manages to lead her people to their settlement in Northern California. The establishment of Acorn at the end of Parable of the Sower represents the possibility of change as well as the movement towards a better life. However, Allen argues that in order for the Acorn community to have its own worldview “they must face the past to learn the lessons the past has to provide.” These lessons are learned through their enslavement and reeducation by the Christian Crusaders.

Here Butler explores the inevitability of fascism in America. With evidence that slavery is still in existence in America today, Butler is concerned that people in America will soon be forced to believe one way. The enslavement of the mind inevitably follows the enslavement of the body. Butler portrays this through her creation of the Christian Crusaders, the militant gang that enslaved the Acorn community. While her fictional president, Andrew Steele Jarret, does not admit to, or directly participate in the torture of the Acorn community members, it is his speeches and his influence that motivate the Crusaders. According to Allen, this sort of behavior represents a “boomeranging of history, and this moment in the story shows another time where the past and the future intersect.” She goes on to compare the enslavement of Acorn to the Spanish Inquisition. Whether in terms of the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, or any other movement that sought to blot out any differences amongst humanity, Butler uses such

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24 Ibid., 1361.
events to demonstrate that if it has happened several times in history then it can happen again in the future if people remain unaffected.

Destruction of the Black Family

The destruction of the black family was common during African-American slavery. Many slave owners would breed slaves like animals, forcing women to birth as many as five children by the age of twenty. In order for slave owners to justify such acts, they “argued that family ties among slaves were either extremely loose or nonexistent and that slaves were, therefore, indifferent to separation.”25 In the text the Christian Crusaders seek to divide the families in the Acorn community by kidnapping and reeducating their children. They believe that they are doing god’s work by delivering the Acorn members from their sinful ways. Instead of selling the children, which was actually legal in the text, they send them to Christian foster parents to be reeducated. Lauren’s daughter, Larkin is included in this kidnapping, and although this was a result of the invasion of the Christian Crusaders, Larkin blames Lauren for choosing Earthseed over her family.

The loss of family is significant in both the Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents. However, what is unique about Parable of the Talents is that it includes journal entries written by Larkin as well as Lauren. Larkin’s perspective adds an interesting element to the narrative as Lauren’s voice and opinions no longer dominate

25 Franklin and Moss, From Slavery to Freedom, 133.
the text as in Sower. Larkin's opinionated remarks and criticisms of her mother, as well as Earthseed, offer the reader a glimpse not only at the opinions of future generations, but also at a perspective other than that of Lauren's. Larkin was somewhat trapped in a slavery of her own, being molested by her foster father like many other slave girls who were sexually exploited in the past. It is likely that this is why she maintains so much resentment towards Lauren. She does not seem to hold a grudge against the Acorn community, as she thought that it was a positive establishment. However, she is not pleased with Earthseed at all. She states, "if my mother had created only Acorn, the refuge for the homeless and the orphaned . . .if she had created Acorn but not Earthseed, then I think she would have been a wholly admirable person."26 She believes that Lauren is a zealot, a seductress obsessed with the pursuit of the Earthseed religion.

At the end of Parable of the Talents there is a Reading Group Guide where Butler discusses her thoughts on the novel. In one particular section Butler is asked where she thinks the line should be drawn in terms of self versus community. She states that Lauren does not choose herself when she is faced with making decisions about Earthseed. This is perhaps why Larkin harbors such resentment towards her. However, Butler goes on to tell a story about a woman whose plight was quite similar to that of Lauren's. Butler states:

When I was a girl and the civil rights movement was in full stride, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, a homemaker, a white woman of Detroit, Michigan, went to Alabama to help in the peaceful struggle for human rights for African Americans. For her trouble, she was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. Memory of this incident has stayed with me because later in a women's magazine, I read a number of letters to

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26 Butler, Parable of the Talents, 63-64.
the editor in which letter writers insisted that that it was Mrs. Liuzzo’s duty to stay at home and look after her family. She had no right, the letter writers said, to involve herself in a struggle not her own. She had no right to deprive her husband of a wife, her children of a mother. And, of course, she had no intention of doing any of that. She was murdered, after all. Interesting that not one of those letter writers condemned the murderers.\(^{27}\)

Like the letter writers here, Butler is suggesting that instead of condemning the oppressors, people tend to condemn the oppressed. Liuzzo and Lauren’s intentions seem to be identical here. Lauren’s intent is to help humanity. Perhaps if Lauren was able to raise Larkin during the time when the Acorn community was flourishing, or if she was able to pass some information on to her in regards to their culture, she would likely have had a completely different perspective. However, “Lauren and Larkin are not able to reconcile into a healthy mother-daughter relationship because their familial bonds are irrevocably broken.”\(^{28}\) Here Butler demonstrates that current dystopias will result in the destruction of families, black or otherwise.

Environmental Implications in the *Parables*

Although environmental concerns are not explicitly addressed in the *Parables*, they are definitely in the background of the narrative. Early in *Parable of the Sower* we learn that water is scarce and is considered to be a luxury. Lauren discusses a particular day in which people leave her father’s church service prematurely so that they are able to obtain free water from the rain. She states, “they went home to put out all the barrels,

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 414.

buckets, tubs, and pots they could find to catch the free water." In the text water costs more than gasoline. Gasoline is no longer a useful commodity because most middle and lower class families can barely afford their mortgage and taxes, let alone the costs of a gas-powered vehicle. Most cars in the Parables are rusting in someone’s driveway or are being recycled for the use of its metal.

While the scarcity of water isn’t one of the major concerns in the text, Butler is suggesting that it is something that will need to be addressed at some point in the future. Lauren comments on how the U.S. government would prefer to spend a significant amount of money on space exploration instead of ensuring that Americans have clean and reasonably priced drinking water. The scarcity of water also incites violence. Early in the narrative we learn that there are “water peddlers” that sell water on the street, and are sometimes brutally murdered for their water as well as their money.

In a number of interviews, Butler expresses her concern for the environmental future of America. Butler states:

There are a lot of things that I care about, and I mention some of them with relation to the two Parable books. I belong to a lot of environmentalist organizations. I really feel that it’s important we stop playing games, and the idea that we’re somehow going to improve the forests by having people go in and chop down the most valuable trees is just obscene, and the idea that we’re going to lose environmental legislation for clean air and clean water that earlier groups worked really hard for is obscene. I mean we’re doing such unutterably stupid things that I can’t not pay attention to it.  

29 Butler, Parable of the Sower, 48.

30 Francis, Conversations with Octavia Butler, 200.
Like many other aspects of American life, Butler is pessimistic about the environment. She thinks that no one is paying enough attention to pollution, nuclear waste, rising sea levels and solar power. She maintains that people are not going to make environmental changes until they are forced to do so.

Pros and Cons of Technological Advancement

In most science fiction novels technological advancement is a central theme. However, in Parable of the Sower there is not a great deal of discussion about technological advances with the exception of the space exploration discussed in the beginning. In Parable of the Talents technology is much more advanced, distracting and, in some cases, deadly. Two of the most dangerous technological advancements are the development of slave Collins and maggots. The notion of slave collars derived from the existence of the electronic belt, which is a device that is used in correctional facilities to control prisoners. While Butler’s slave collars derive from the electronic belts, the slave collars in Parable of the Talents are much more advanced. They can issue pain as well as pleasure, and are meant to toy with one’s emotions.

According to Lauren’s brother Marcus, slave owners no longer have to beat their slaves into submission. The collars can control the slaves even if the owner is not present. More importantly, the collars can make a person do things that they would not ordinarily do just to avoid the pain the slave owner is capable of inflicting. He states:

These are the rules: Once you’ve got a collar on you, you can’t run. Get a certain distance from the control unit and the collar chokes you. I mean it gives you so much pain that you can’t keep going. You pass out if you try. We called that
getting choked. Touch the control unit and the collar chokes you. It won’t work for you anyway. It’s got a fingerprint lock. And if the fingers trying to use it are wrong or dead, it chokes you and stays on choke until someone with the right living fingers turns it off. Or until you die.31

Marcus goes on to discuss how he was once forced to assist in burning a woman alive because, if he refused, he would have been subjected to the choking sensation he mentions above. Maggots too are used for the purpose of attacking people. The Christian Crusaders use maggots to gain access to the Acorn community. Lauren states, “a maggot, nicknamed in its ugly shape, is something less than a tank, and something more than a truck. It’s a big, armed and armored, all-terrain, all wheel drive vehicle.”32 The Crusaders use their maggots to fire gas canisters at the Acorn community members. Further, there are some towns that are rich enough to own one or two maggots for protection, but considering the cost of gasoline there were not very many.

Another form of technology that develops in Parable of the Talents is Dreamasks. The reader learns about these masks from one of Larkin’s entries. Larkin’s name was changed to Asha Vere once she is sent to the Christian reeducation facility. Asha Vere was a character that was developed by Christian America in order to ensure that dreamasks did not corrupt the people using them. Asha Vere was part of a religious, virtual reality game where Vere rescued people from various “heathen cults” and “squatter camps.” Larkin goes on to describe the actual masks when she states:

Dreamasks—also known as head cages, dream books, or simply, Masks—were new then [when she was an infant], and were beginning to edge out some of the

31 Butler, Parable of the Talents, 130-131.

32 Butler, Parable of the Sower, 186.
virtual-reality stuff. Even the early ones were cheap—big ski-mask-like devices with goggles over the eyes. Wearing them made people look not-quite-human. But the masks made computer-stimulated and guided dreams available to the public, and people loved them. Dreamasks were related to old-fashioned lie detectors, to slave collars, and to a frighteningly efficient form of audiovisual subliminal suggestion. In spite of the way they looked, Dreamasks were lightweight, clothlike and comfortable. Each one offered wearers a whole series of adventures in which they could identify with any of several characters. They could live their character’s fictional life complete with realistic sensation.\(^{33}\)

The dreamasks were quite entertaining for most, but could easily become addictive to others. With the illusion of becoming someone else and enjoying a life that one could never realistically have access to, it was quite a popular invention. Even Larkin has her first sexual experience within the confines of a dreamask, and she later becomes a manufacturer of them. Dreamasks offer an escape from the real world and are too just another “delusional distraction.”

Lauren’s goal of reaching the stars is perhaps the best technological advancement in the text. At the end of *Parable of the Talents* Lauren sends the first Earthseed shuttles into outer space. She states:

> Today’s shuttles have been loaded with cargoes of people, already deeply asleep in DiaPause—the suspended-animation process that seems to be the best of the bunch. Traveling with the people are frozen human and animal embryos, plant seeds, tools, equipment, memories, dreams, and hopes. As big and as space worthy as they are, the shuttle should sag to the Earth under such a load.\(^{34}\)

After all that Lauren endured, she is able to see her dream come to fruition with the launch of Earthseed’s first starship. While she is not able to get on the first shuttle, she arranges to have her ashes aboard the next shuttle once she passes away. She plans to

\(^{33}\) Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 218.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 406.
have her ashes spread in outer space where she can be immortal. The ambiguous but hopeful ending that Butler leaves with the reader does not indicate that Lauren or her members have reached utopia. All is not perfect in the world, and even after the *Christopher Columbus* starship descends into the heavens the world will remain the same. However, the hopefulness is more so about the possibilities associated with such an accomplishment. Butler states, “she [Lauren] recognizes that probably a lot of them are going to die, and they’re taking their problems with them, but she hopes the distraction of surviving on another world will enable them, slowly, to grow into something better.”

**Concluding Thoughts on the Future of America and All the Utopian Possibilities**

The *Parables* resonate with readers because the context in which it is written is so familiar. Butler’s narrative demonstrates how circumstances can go from bad to hellish in a matter of years. The realization that slavery still exists, and could one day become legal again, is frightening. With all of the distractions and “delusional escapes” in America today, Butler is suggesting that it is easy to overlook and ignore resemblances to the past. Throughout the narrative readers are reminded to remember their history, but not to be distracted by it. Know your history but do not become stagnant; continue to move forward. “What her novel does by estranging these already-existing problems is to starkly illustrate the consequences of our present denial and/or indifference. We see in fiction

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35 Francis, *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, 85.
what we refuse to see in the real world." Butler is not disillusioned in any way, and she does not seek to sugarcoat the harsh realities that Americans may need to face in the near future.

While many scholars agree that the Parables have utopian elements, it is evident that Butler is not suggesting that a utopian world is attainable or a better alternative. According to Hampton, "if Parable of the Sower is a warning for tomorrow, Talents represents a likely outcome which appears very distant from any notion of utopia."

While Earthseed fulfills the destiny of reaching the stars, there are still a lot of unanswered questions. The lives of Earthseed members do not suddenly become blissful. They still have a lot of challenges ahead. Butler states:

Personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We're not going to have a perfect human society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems highly unlikely. Besides, any true utopia would almost certainly be incredibly boring, and it would be so overspecialized that any change we might introduce would probably destroy the whole system. As bad as we humans are sometimes, I have a feeling that we'll never have that problem with the current system.

Unlike many other science fiction writers, Butler seeks to use the genre to teach a lesson in addition to telling a good story. Instead of attempting to create a perfect, unrealistic futuristic society, Butler's narrative demonstrates how one can work through dystopias in order to advance the society that already exists. And it is during this work that one is

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38 Francis, Conversations with Octavia Butler, 26.
compelled to change and evolve. She is not seeking to discourage her readers, but to motivate them. "Sameness" will not make the world a better place. Tolerance and acceptance of one another's differences is what ultimately matters.

Lauren's hyperempathy make her more conscious of others, therefore, she is forced to contemplate how her actions will affect both herself and her community. To hurt someone else is as detrimental as hurting oneself. That is a powerful message, and one that readers should adopt when making decisions in their own lives. One must focus on the community instead of the individual self, which would alleviate the need or desire for a utopian society. Butler is suggesting that the salvation of humanity lies in the hands of human beings, in community. While it is unclear whether or not Butler believed in God, it is evident that she believed in the power of humanity.

The following poem from the Books of the Living is a great way to end this chapter with an emphasis on community and interdependence:

Partnership is giving, taking
learning, teaching, offering the
greatest possible benefit while doing
the least possible harm. Partnership
is mutualistic symbiosis. Partnership
is life.

Any entity, any process that
Cannot or should not be resisted or
avoided must somehow be
partnered. Partner one another.
Partner diverse communities. Partner
life. Partner any world that is your
home. Partner God. Only in
partnership can we thrive, grow,
change. Only in partnership can we live.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{39} Butler, \textit{Parable of the Talents}, 137.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Octavia Butler is suggesting that both religious organizations as well as individual communities must play an active role in changing the state of affairs in America. While Butler was not a religious person, she acknowledges that she acquired a conscience very early in her childhood due to her Baptist upbringing. While she later decided that the Baptist tradition was not to her liking, she recognizes the value religion has maintained throughout history. She states:

Religion is everywhere. There are no human societies without it, whether they acknowledge it as a religion or not. So I thought religion might be an answer, as well as, in some cases, a problem. And in, for instance Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents, it’s both. So I have people who are bringing America to a kind of fascism, because their religion is the only one they’re willing to tolerate. On the other hand, I have people who are saying, well, here is another religion, and here are some verses that can help us think in a different way.¹

Initially, I assumed that Butler was simply offering a harsh critique of the Baptist/Christian tradition. However, upon further investigation, Butler is stating that all religions can have a positive influence or a negative influence depending on the mindset of the persons involved. Further, by referencing various examples of the genocide and the enslavement of various races and ethnicities in the text, Butler is indicating that such horrors are not just limited to African Americans. History demonstrates that people have been marginalized not only because of their race, but their religion, culture, occupation, sexual orientation and any other factors that others may not agree with or understand.

The Christian America movement was supposed to represent a new phase in America, and it may have begun with good intentions. They did in fact have various

¹ Francis, Conversations with Octavia Butler, 224.
orphanages and homeless shelters to help individuals to advance. Some parts of the organization even employed people who may not have found a job, otherwise. However, it somehow evolved into an organization that terrorized, enslaved, and killed innocent people. The Christian Crusaders sought to destroy the families of the Acorn community and tried to beat them into submission, tried to force them to convert to Christianity. However, in order for people to live peacefully amongst each other in America, everyone must learn to respect diversity and difference.

The Earthseed belief system works within the contexts of the Parables because no other religious groups appear to be making an effort to change the circumstances in America in a positive way. The main objective of Earthseed is survival. They focus on "ongoing reality," which assists them in coping with the dystopian aspects of their day-to-day life. The members of the Acorn community protect one another; they are constantly searching for ways to improve their circumstances in such a way that will benefit everyone involved. There is a great emphasis on community and the need for individuals to come together in an effort to protect their families and alter their circumstances. The success of Earthseed largely depends on the interaction between Lauren and other members of the community. Lauren is extraordinarily in tuned with her environment and her positive obsession with surviving in America is contagious.

Once Earthseed survives the enslavement of Christian America, Earthseed becomes a religion with a past, a religion that has endured and overcome injustices. Earthseed's resilient testimony is what makes the religion popular amongst people in the community. The final destiny of Earthseed is fulfilled at the end of Parable of the
*Talents*, when Earthseed members are preparing to launch their mission into outer space. It is such a hopeful moment in the text, and yet, there are still negative implications in Lauren’s final assessment. Lauren makes it evident that the Earthseed members could possibly die on this first mission. Also, Lauren has lost the support of her only two surviving relatives. And yet, the narrative ends with a sense of hopefulness that was not evident at the beginning of the narrative.

While it is apparent that Butler did not believe that Earthseed was comforting enough to be a real religion, she used it to demonstrate what religions should be doing in the future to help people to cope with the inevitable harsh realities to come. When discussing the *Parables* in an interview back in 2006, Butler states:

> You can call it save the world fiction, but it clearly doesn’t save anything. It just calls people’s attention to the fact that so much needs to be done and obviously there are people who are running this country who don’t care. I mean look at what Congress is doing in terms of taking money away from every cause that is helping people who aren’t very rich. Especially making it harder for people to get an education. Who would want to live in a world where there were fewer educated people?²

While the depiction of America in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* is not real, it could be. As everything that happened in the *Parables* is based on real events, this could very well become reality in America one day. Therefore, one must take these cautionary tales seriously. While the slavery of the Earthseed community as well as the slavery involved in privatization in the text is exaggerated, it is based on actual occurrences. There was in fact a time in history when people were bartered and sold like animals, and many modern day employers have taken advantage of foreign and/or

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² Ibid., 227-228.
undocumented workers. According to Butler, this sort of behavior was still happening at the time the *Parables* were written in the 1990s. Further, Butler's comment regarding Congress in the above passage indicates that she was also very aware that politics plays a major role in the future of America as well.

Butler is admonishing all of her readers to know their history. If one is not aware of what has happened in the past, then it is likely that future generations will continue to make the same mistakes again and again. Moreover, one must also be aware of current events. Watch and read the news. Like the people in the *Parables* who have trapped themselves into the virtual worlds within their dreamasks, many Americans today are so preoccupied with other frivolous activities that they are not paying close attention to what is happening in the world around them.

If nothing else *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are both works that should spark a dialogue amongst all Americans. African-Americans as well as other minority groups especially should take the time to explore the various themes and subjects covered in the *Parables*. Despite the fictional accounts in the text, topics such as global warming and throw away labor are ones that Americans should consider working toward changing.

Finally, my goal in writing this thesis was to expand the scholarly literature surrounding Butler's work. It amazes me that a writer with such an imaginative and insightful perspective could go unnoticed for so long. She has certainly paved the way for other African-American, female science fiction writers. As the pioneer of a genre that most African-Americans normally do not acknowledge, Butler has not received nearly as
much recognition as she deserves. With over twenty years dedicated to writing African-Americans into the science fiction genre, Butler has certainly left her mark on the world. I too have been guilty of assuming that I know what science fiction is all about, and ignoring the genre altogether. As a result of my studies, however, I have become more and more intrigued by genre.
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