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olamina jiménez sánchez March 28, 2023

Octavia Butler's Black Mysticism and the Poetics of Change

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Abstract

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Octavia Butler's *Parable* series is well known for its depiction of Earthseed, a fictional religion that forms after societal collapse. Earthseed has two paradoxical core tenets: one, that God is Change; and two, that God and the universe exist to shape and be shaped by each other. I propose that the paradoxical relationship between Earthseed's God and the universe offers an entryway into what may be described as the black mysticism at the heart of Earthseed. Drawn from contemporary movements in black studies, I use the term 'black mysticism' to denote an attunement within and to blackness. This orientation is not simply the condition of being a racially black person but, more fundamentally, black mysticism indexes an anarchic spiritual and material plane: a shared site of abjection, liminality, and impossibility irreducible to black people. By reading Earthseed's universe as blackness, we find that Butler provides a critical lens through which to examine the mystical poetics of change. In exploring the praxis and poetics of Butler's black mysticism, I share my experiences with the Earthseed Land Collective, a mutual-aid cooperative inspired by her *Parable* series. I use my ethnography to observe the mystical poetics of change at work in the relationships between individuals, collectives, and the spaces they inhabit. I argue that, by becoming attuned to the dynamic interplay between change and blackness that Earthseed is founded upon, we can inhabit a mode of becoming *as* undoing with radical potential for collective transformation.

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May we all move closer to experiencing and witnessing the unfurling of our own and each other's spirits.
—Zulayka Santiago, "Witnessing and Unfurling"

Introduction

"Change is stressful for plants and humans alike. We try to minimize the stressors so that the plants can thrive."

Cristina told me this as we sat in her kitchen, stripping the flowers off bundles of dried tulsi. We were packing them into a few dozen tea bags to distribute later that week. Tulsi is also known as holy basil, given its history and use as a sacred plant among Hindus in India. I immediately understood why. Tulsi is an adaptogenic herb, a type of medicinal plant known to calm the nerves and restore bodily equilibrium. As we filled large bowls with mounds of purple petals, the plant's sweet aroma began to drift through the room. It was soothing to the point of sublime bliss. I almost forgot the cold and exhaustion.

I had just gotten off the plane around an hour and a half earlier. It was the cheapest flight I could find last minute, and I had to wake up at 4 a.m. to catch it. Somehow, I managed to arrive just in time to be greeted by Tropical Storm Elsa. Cristina picked me up from the airport, and once we arrived at the farm, it was a mad dash to the hoop house to ensure the new tomato plants were safe from the storm. I had to hop onto her porch and slip into her husband Tahz's rain boots to avoid slipping in all the mud. Cristina very quickly and efficiently walked me through laying irrigation pipes and ground cover, after which we threw down some fertilizer and ran inside. As I came down from the adrenaline, still soaking wet, Cristina slowly and calmly explained how organic farming techniques minimize the stress placed on crops. After stripping a few bundles of tulsi, I could hardly even remember my own stress. I still have a few of those empty tea bags tucked away in one of the drawers of my writing desk.

I had made the trip out from Atlanta to spend the next week living and working with the Earthseed Land Collective, of which Cristina is a member.[1] The Earthseed Land Collective (ELC) is a predominantly black mutual aid cooperative based in Durham County, North Carolina, founded in 2016. It comprises seven core members: Tahz Walker, Cristina Rivera Chapman, Justin Robinson, Courtney Woods, Corre Robinson, Zulayka Santiago, and Santos Flores.[2] While each member is engaged in different kinds of mutual aid work (including community education, food sovereignty, and organizational consulting), they are all mutually committed to environmental justice as a movement, praxis, and way of life. The collective lives together on a 48-acre plot of land they steward just outside Durham.[3] They use this land as a community garden, gathering space, and forest preserve, making the entirety of it available to guests. In their own words, their mission as a collective is "To remember and reimagine our relationship to ourselves, each other and the land in pursuit and practice of collective liberation."[4] And if I had doubts about the truth of these words prior to my visit, they were quickly dispelled within the first few hours I spent in their company.

ELC's formation was inspired by Octavia Butler's *Parable* series of books, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. The books depict the creation and spread of Earthseed, a religion premised on the belief that God is Change—not a sentient entity, but a process; *every*

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[1] My visit took place between the 8th and 17th of July, 2021.

[2] Cristina is the only non-black member of the Earthseed Land Collective, not counting visitors or part-time employees.

[3] I refer to both the collective and the land they steward as "ELC" throughout the rest of this thesis. This is for clarity's sake, as ELC members typically refer to the land itself as "Earthseed," not to be confused with the religion of the same name, which I introduce further in this introduction.

[4] "Our Collective," Earthseed Land Collective, accessed February 23, 2023, https://earthseedlandcoop.org/about/.

process. They happen to be my favorite books. Naturally, I felt I understood the series well enough long before I ever heard of ELC. But as the group's mission statement would suggest, my time with them pushed me to reimagine my relationship with the text in ways I could not have foreseen.

I had originally come to ELC to perform an ethnography of the "real life" practice of Earthseed. When I arrived, I was slightly disappointed to find that not a single person I asked identified as a practitioner. Yet, over time I began to feel its influence in our day-to-day interactions. I could feel Butler's distinct presence in the ways members of ELC spoke about themselves and everything around them. I realized that their spiritual practice was in fact more faithful to the core tenets of Earthseed than the religion itself. Moreover, and as I explain further throughout this thesis, I found that their spiritual practice displayed a remarkable fidelity to blackness. By the time I returned home, I had become obsessed with answering two overarching questions: how do we embody the futures we dream of, and what is the relationship between blackness and change?

But perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. For the uninitiated reader, it would undoubtedly be helpful to establish a baseline familiarity with Butler's text.

A History of Earthseed

The *Parable* series takes place during a decades-long period of global collapse known as "the Pox" (short for "the apocalypse").[5] By 2024 when the narrative first begins, a series of

[5] Within the fictional world of *Parable of the Talents*, journalists describe the Pox as lasting roughly from 2015 to 2030. However, some characters claim the Pox began long before and lasted far longer, the culmination of decades of social and economic stratification, political upheaval, and environmental degradation beginning before the dawn of the new millennium. Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 17.

economic, political, and environmental crises have left the United States in ruin. Society is divided into what Gloria Steinem describes as "three overlapping worlds"[6] based on class strata: the elite who control access to water, electricity, and the production of food; the decaying middle-class, living in walled, semi-autonomous communities; and the unhoused, mostly non-literate population known as the "street poor."[7] Gasoline, electricity, and potable water are extremely scarce. Healthcare, emergency response services, and formal education are too expensive for most people to afford. And the unhoused are at constant risk of being trafficked and enslaved by gangs, police, religious extremists, and company towns, especially if they are black.[8]

The *Parables* series follows Lauren Oya Olamina, a young, disabled, middle-class black woman entering adulthood in the middle of an apocalypse. Lauren is raised in a scholarly and Christian household within a walled suburb of the fictional city of Robledo, somewhere outside of Los Angeles. Despite her upbringing, Lauren does not identify with Christianity or the middle-class values held dear by her family and neighbors. As those around her attempt to maintain faith in their God and the restoration of order, Lauren begins obsessively planning for further chaos. In the process, she develops a faith of her own.

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[6] Steinem, introduction to *Parable of the Sower*, by Butler, 5.

[7] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 20.

[8] One particularly illuminating example is that of David "Day" Turner from *Parable of the Talents*, a fairly transparent Nat Turner stand-in. A street poor black man, David and his friends are arrested for vagrancy and falsely accused of stealing from a church. The police give them to the Church of Christian America, forcing them to live with and perform "community service" for the denomination until they can either find another job, sell their organs, or prove they are Christian. David, who was already a Christian at the time of his capture, is lashed when he recites anti-slavery scripture to his captors. He eventually dies leading a revolt.

Faced with questions of agency, suffering, and deliverance, Lauren turns to history, literature, religious texts, and her own lived experience to create a belief system capable of saving humanity.[9] The truths she uncovers come to her in verse. These verses, which would later be compiled into a text known as The Books of the Living, form the basis of Earthseed, a religion of her own making. The three basic pillars of Earthseed can be summarized as follows: one, God is Change; two, God and the Universe exist to shape and be shaped by each other; and three, the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. Lauren believes Earthseed has the potential to help humanity not only survive the Pox, but also achieve a kind of species immortality through space colonization.

As part of the practice of her faith, Lauren does everything in her power to shape change with her own hands. She begins obsessively preparing for the eventual destruction of her home. Her attempts to convince her friends and family to do the same fail, as none are willing to accept even the possibility of an impending crisis. Lauren's years of survivalist training pay off when she is one of the few survivors of a devastating raid on Robledo.

For most of *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren and a small group of other Pox refugees are traveling up the west coast in search of safety. They are part of a mass exodus of street poor hoping to find sanctuary in Canada. Lauren begins recruiting adherents from those she meets along the way, and together they build Earthseed into a systematized religion.[10] Among the

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[9] While an in-depth discussion of Lauren's disability, hyperempathy syndrome, is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to recognize that her disability plays an important role in her development as a pedagogue and religious leader. As Sami Schalk notes in her analysis of the *Parable* series, "Lauren's disability and her context mutually inform her experience and understanding of the other." Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 101.

[10] According to Gregory Hampton, "Lauren's pilgrimage up the coast acts as a bodily ritual that assists her in outlining the praxis of her beliefs and the symbolic order of the Earthseed religion. The bodies of Lauren and her followers play an essential role in the formation of their religion." Hampton, "Religious Science Fiction: Butler's Changing God" in *God is Change*, ed. Nanda and Crosby, 20.

refugees she meets her future husband Bankole, and he agrees to take her and the new converts to a plot of land he owns in Northern California. When they finally arrive they find the land buried in ash, along with Bankole's last remaining family members. With nothing left and nowhere to go, the first-ever Earthseed community settles into their new home. They name it Acorn.

By the start of *Parable of the Talents* five years later, Acorn has blossomed into a somewhat idyllic agrarian village. While still small, the population has grown exponentially over the years as refugees, street poor, and runaway slaves flock in and convert to Earthseed.[11] And though not everyone in Acorn truly believes in Earthseed, group membership comes with its privileges. Earthseed values small, horizontally-structured and environmentally sustainable communities.[12] All resources are shared equally, and after an initiation period, new members are built a cabin and given an equal say in all matters of organization. Thanks to Earthseed's insistence on adaptability and communal learning, Acorn is also one of few places in the state where children and adults alike can receive a free education.[13] Lauren finally has the kind of community she longed for as a child, and after she gives birth to her and Bankole's daughter, Larkin, she once again has a family of her own.

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[11] While Lauren strives to make Acorn an inclusive and safe space for those most affected by the Pox (people of color, children, the disabled, etc.), we should also recognize that she is very calculating about who she allows to enter the community. Speaking to Bankole in *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren tells him, "if we can convince ex-slaves that they can have freedom with us, no one will fight harder to keep it." Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 298.

[12] Lauren outlines her ideal Earthseed community and praxis in a conversation with a potential convert in *Parable of the Talents*. She states, "Earthseed is about preparing to fulfill the Destiny. It's about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment. It's about treating education and adaptability as the absolute essentials that they are." Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 362.

[13] While a thorough analysis of Earthseed's pedagogy is outside the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that Lauren claims "education is the most direct pathway to God." Ibid., 86.

But as word of Acorn and Earthseed spreads through the countryside, rumors about the mysterious cult living in the mountains reach a group of armed Christo-fascist extremists known as Jarret's Crusaders. Mainly composed of clergymen and off-duty police, the Crusaders are an underground wing of the Church of Christian America, a fundamentalist Christian denomination that has quickly grown into one of the most popular and powerful religious movements in the country. Emboldened by the recent election of Christian American president Andrew Steele Jarret, who galvanizes his supporters with powerful rallying cries such as "make America great again,"[14] the Crusaders begin terrorizing rural areas around California, burning or enslaving those they label heretics. The Crusaders storm into Acorn in armored vehicles. Using gas canisters to knock everyone unconscious, the Crusaders kidnap the children and force the adults into closed quarters. The children, including Larkin, are taken to reeducation camps and given new names. The adults are fastened with electric slave collars capable of shocking them to death. Bankole dies when the Crusaders decide to test them out. With Acorn effectively destroyed, Jarret's Crusaders rename the site Camp Christian. Once again, Lauren has lost everything.

Eventually, the Crusaders enslave about 250 people at Camp Christian, including the remaining members of Earthseed and many other so-called sinners. They are forced to perform farmwork and domestic labor for sixteen hours a day. When they are not working or sleeping they are being tortured, supposedly to punish them for their heresy and discipline them into proper Christians. All their books, writings, and sheet music are burned, and they are forced to memorize Bible verses. They are starved, lashed, and beaten. Marriages are broken and men and women are separated, forced to sleep in one of two overcrowded and filthy cabins. The women are raped. And the survivors of Acorn are forced to log their orchards and groves, the very trees that symbolized their relationship to the land and stood as grave markers for their dead.

[14] Ibid., 29.

Ironically, it is this act of deforestation that creates the condition of possibility for their eventual escape.

After a year and a half, Lauren and the rest of Earthseed begin plotting a revolt. They conspire with the other slaves, relying on the women who are most often raped to gather intel and kitchen knives from their captors. They plan to have these women seduce the Crusaders and murder them once they are in their cabins, where they can find and disable the slave collars' master control unit. They are all willing to die in the attempt, preferring death to slavery. But on the eve of their planned uprising, a violent thunderstorm triggers a landslide that buries three of the Crusaders' cabins, including the one storing the control unit. Without the roots of the groves and orchards keeping the ground in place, the hillside was perilously unstable. A landslide was inevitable. Already organized and quick to arm themselves, the slaves kill their captors amidst the chaos and confusion of the disaster. Lauren personally cuts the slave collars off everyone's necks. As the rest of the freed slaves make their escapes, the few surviving Earthseed members gather together for one last look at their former home. Then they burn it to the ground.

After her escape from Camp Christian and many failed attempts to find her daughter Larkin, Lauren decides to focus all her attention on spreading Earthseed. She changes her approach to leadership and teaching, choosing to act as something of an Earthseed missionary. Lauren adopts a false identity and travels the countryside door-to-door, offering to work for strangers in exchange for food and shelter. Once inside a home, she begins to study her hosts, often by drawing them. She explains this in her journal, where she admits, "drawing a person helps me become that person and, to be honest, it helps me manipulate that person."[15] Once she has earned a degree of trust with them, Lauren begins sharing Earthseed verses she believes would resonate well with them. By specifically targeting wealthy and middle-class homeowners,

[15] Ibid., 370.

Lauren recruits a class of powerful and influential Earthseed devotees while also securing funding and housing for herself and others. In turn, this network of middle and upper-class believers become teachers, spreading knowledge of Earthseed and convincing others to host Lauren for themselves.

In time, the Pox ends and Earthseed becomes the movement Lauren always dreamed of. In fact, it becomes something of a religious megacorporation. When an adult Larkin, now named Asha, tries to reconnect with her long-lost biological mother, she finds Earthseed to be an extremely wealthy sect, owning land, schools (K-12 as well as universities), farms, factories, stores, and even whole towns.[16] Earthseed offers scholarships to gifted students willing to work in Earthseed communities after graduation, and it finances major projects in scientific and technological research. There are Earthseed members in every sphere of public life, including law and politics. Lauren herself becomes incredibly successful as an author and speaker, spending the rest of her life touring venues and Earthseed communities nationwide. By her death in 2090 at the age of 81, she is able to see the Destiny fulfilled as the first starship, the Christopher Columbus, sets off to create mankind's first extrasolar colony. Many members of Earthseed are on board, including descendants of the survivors of Acorn. As she looks upon the culmination of her life's work, she wonders to herself what manners of joy and suffering await the ship's passengers. In one of her final journal entries, she muses, "If you want a thing—truly want it, want it so badly that you need it as you need air to breathe, then unless you die, you will have it. Why not? It has you. There is no escape. What a cruel and terrible thing escape would be if escape were possible."[17] And in the end, she gets what she always wanted. After her death, her

[16] Ibid., 382-383.

[17] Ibid., 408.

ashes are mixed into the soil of a distant planet, where she lives on as fertilizer for the orchards and groves.

And with this introduction into the fictional universe that has inspired me and ELC alike, I present a preview of the journey to come.

Methodology and Chapter Overview

This thesis brings together two essays that, while in some ways very different from one another, are grounded in similar insights and reach similar conclusions. I would like to make clear that nowhere in this thesis do I pose a totalizing or conclusive interpretation of Butler's work. To do so would be to miss the point entirely. The two chapters contained herein may be considered two different approaches to examining the dynamics between hope, change, and blackness, as seen through Butler's work and ELC's praxis.

The first chapter, "Dream Lessons," theorizes speculation and dreamwork as modes of uncovering and navigating apocalyptic landscapes, both in the mind and in the material world. In this chapter I rely primarily on literary analysis, inflected by my mobilization of basic concepts from the fields of psychoanalysis and human geography. In the final section, I theorize what I refer to as *radical hope* as a reflexive response to systemic oppression.

The second chapter, "Gods and Squash Beetles," re-interprets Earthseed's core tenets through various traditions in the field of black critical thought; namely black feminism, Afro-pessimism, and black optimism. This chapter functions as something of a genealogy, highlighting the ways in which Butler's work foreshadows later developments in the theoretical and philosophical study of blackness. In the process I theorize linkages between blackness and

Earthseed's God, simultaneously outlining an alternative spiritual practice I refer to as *black mysticism*.

My ethnography of ELC, for which I recorded field notes and semi-structured interviews, is not *central* to my analysis or argument in either chapter. Rather, it would be far more accurate to say my argument and analysis are *grounded* in my ethnography of ELC. For the most part, I save my reflections on my time spent with ELC for the beginnings and ends of each chapter. These vignettes and reflections are used to frame and supplement my exegesis. It is my intention that they help demonstrate the lived experience from which I ultimately draw my conclusions. Naturally, different readers will also interpret these experiences differently than I do. I attempt to make room for the reader's own reflections and speculations at these points. To encourage this, I choose to speak in a more personal or affective register, rather than in a strictly analytical one.

I end with a brief reflection on the writing process and the personal change it engendered. Naturally, words alone cannot describe the process or its lasting effects.

Chapter One: Dream Lessons

Cristina and I were on an impromptu tour of Durham. She needed some help delivering produce to a youth group for victims of domestic violence, and I agreed to tag along for the ride. Along the way we took some detours—some intentional, some the result of our poor sense of direction. Every now and then Cristina would point outside to something new, or old, or soon to be demolished, and tell me some anecdote about the people who used to live there.

Gentrification is a slow, creeping horror. It is the un-settling promise of an agonizing dismemberment. Through the window, I saw cracked roads and wire fences give way to neighborhood watch signs and boxy, minimalist architecture. Plumes of smoke rose from construction sites on the edges of forests. Cristina's voice was quiet and steady as she described this or that street or building or vacant lot. I wondered what emotions might be behind her words. Grief? Nostalgia? Regret? And beneath them all was a cool, quiet rage.

We finally arrived at the group's headquarters: an old brick-and-mortar warehouse with brightly colored signs. Two people came out and motioned the car into place in front of the building's wide industrial doors. Cristina introduced me to her two friends, and the four of us started unloading crates full of fresh fruits and vegetables. After we finished, I idled by while the other three spoke. I was still rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, but the three of them, huddled together by the car, felt so vibrant and full of life. I decided to wander off and leave them to their laughter.

The warehouse doors were now fully open to the street, and absentmindedly I drifted inside. I was in a large room with walls covered in art. It was filled with a mismatched assortment of rugs and furniture. A tight circle of chairs sat in the center of the room. I could just make out the faint sound of music emanating from somewhere further inside, behind a closed

door in the back. I lingered in front of it for a moment, staring at the door until the laughter outside began to fade.

A few minutes later, Cristina and I were back in the car on our way to the farm. Out of curiosity, I asked her to tell me about other local mutual aid and food justice groups she had worked with. She didn't have a lot of positive things to say. As she explained, she has had ample experience in food justice circles, having worked with a number of collectives and NGOs in Durham County. This also means she's had plenty of experience with white radicals.

According to Cristina, most of the major food justice groups around Durham are predominantly white spaces, predominantly funded by wealthy white donors, and ultimately serving white property interests—although non-white spaces are also complicit in racial capitalism. She went into great detail about one local NGO that underwent a mass firing after many of its workers (most of whom were young people of color) began demanding better treatment. The way she made it sound, it seemed like most of the time Cristina had spent in radical spaces was spent arguing with other radicals. She sounded tired.

"You know, most people expect me to be a pretty hopeful person. They think that the work I do is inherently hopeful, so they think I must be pretty optimistic."

I turned to her.

"But I'm really not. I may practice hope through my work, but I don't have a lot of hope left in this world. I don't expect things to get any better."

Honestly, I was surprised.

"Yeah. Me neither."

It was a bittersweet, almost shameful thing to admit, even to myself. My eyes wandered back outside the car window, watching the city pass by. She continued.

"In the end, everything must burn. And sooner or later, it will."

That was comforting, somehow.

"Yeah."

* * *

One thing I have noticed, whether in churches or classrooms or movement spaces, is that crises in faith are understudied phenomena. In my personal experience, these crises are inseparable from the environments in which they occur. One silently assumes that everyone around them still believes in what they are doing, in what they are, in *where* they are. And how far that is from the truth. It is easy enough to climb onto the rooftops and proclaim your faith in those sacred moments of religious ecstasy, but very rarely is one prepared to describe what they see from the ledge. And beyond "faith" as we typically conceive of it—unwavering belief or eternal devotion—it seems that most people struggle just to maintain a semblance of hope. The deliverance we long for seems perpetually beyond our reach. And in all likelihood, it is.

Inspired by my car ride conversation with Cristina and the sight of Durham's changing landscape, I offer a meditation on the relationship between space and hope, as read through Butler's *Parable* series. As Butler demonstrates through her protagonist Lauren's experiences and interpretations of the Pox, an era of global collapse similar to our own, the apocalypse is both a social and a geographic crisis occurring on the periphery of public awareness. In light of this collective repression and the spatialized oppression it reproduces, I turn to Butler and Lauren's practices of speculation to explore the apocalypse as a site both in space and in the imagination. In doing so, I propose an alternative conceptualization of hope—a *radical hope*—to be understood not as a feeling or investment (as in a thing to hope *for*), but as an embodied, reflexive, and place-based social praxis. As I argue, radical hope in the face of unavoidable

disaster is the condition of possibility for alternative ways of being, both during and after the end of the world.

Speculation and the Collective Imagination

The *Parable* series is a masterwork of speculative fiction. Butler's vision of a post-apocalyptic United States remains relevant and timely to scholars and casual readers alike. Many first-time readers are surprised to find that the *Parable* series, originally published in the 1990s, contains somewhat accurate depictions of life in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.[18] Much like the Pox, our current moment in history is characterized by global conflict, environmental crises, and rampant inequality.[19] Given the many resonances between the Pox and the present, it should come as no surprise that the series has seen a surge in popularity in recent years.[20] The narrative's continued prescience has led many to call Butler something of a prophetess—something Butler herself refuted.

The apocalypse Butler depicts in the *Parable* series is already underway, as it has been for a very long time. Part of what makes the Pox so believable is that it cannot be reduced to a single event or chain of events, nor to a single location. It is a slow unfolding of familiar crises all around the globe. In her own words, "All I did was look around at the problems we're

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[18] Many are particularly struck by the depiction of President Andrew Jarret, who appears to foreshadow the election of President Donald Trump. We should note however that Jarret's slogan "make America great again" was used by presidents and politicians prior to Trump, including Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton.

[19] Though as I argue later in this paper, these things are not exclusive to contemporary history. Modernity itself could be defined by these very conditions.

[20] In 2020, twenty-seven years after its initial release in 1993, *Parable of the Sower* finally reached the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Sheehan, "Octavia Butler has finally made the *New York Times* Best Seller list."

neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters."[21] Instead of clairvoyance, we might say Butler displays a rare talent for *speculation*, the art of theorizing alternative worlds and ways of being. The future history she brings to life in the *Parable* series is one of many that may reasonably come about from human behavior in the present. By Butler's account, it seems as though such a future should be as predictable to us as the change in seasons. Perhaps then we should wonder why Butler's talent for speculation is so rare in the first place.

Speculation is as much an exercise in introspection as in imagination. Imagining alternative worlds and ways of being requires that one address the fears and desires they cannot otherwise express or fulfill within the world they know. In fact, the very need or desire to speculate implies an experience of repression or denial. This experience is necessarily shared, as one's fears and desires are overdetermined by their social environment.[22] Speculative fiction is thus rooted in the collective imagination of a given place or subject position.[23] For dystopian authors like Butler, speculation often means mining the depths of shared fears to create a vivid and believable apocalypse. A discussion of just *whose* fears she mines for must be saved for later. For now, it would serve us well to attempt to understand the relationship between apocalyptic fiction and collective fear.

Apocalyptic fiction resonates with an existential dread inextricable from the dystopian horror of everyday life. It evokes a fear of the inevitable collapse of the world we know, or, more

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[21] Butler, "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future," *Essence*, May 2000, 165.

[22] For instance, people are generally socialized into compulsory heterosexuality. This does not mean everyone is heterosexual, but it does affect the ways in which anyone can satisfy their sexual desires. Any imagined sexual utopia is created in response to this status quo.

[23] Gregory Hampton makes a similar claim in an essay on Butler's depiction of Earthseed. Hampton argues that religion and speculative fiction are both rooted in the collective imagination, and as such one's interactions with one will inevitably influence one's relationship with the other. See Hampton, "Religious Science Fiction: Butler's Changing God" in *God is Change*.

to the point, a fear of the eventual breakdown of our relationship *with* the world, however illusory said relationship may be.[24] The world, the conceptual whole of human relations, is the field in which desire is cultivated. To lose the world would likely mean losing everything one knows and loves about others and themselves. And everyone with something to love has something to fear losing.

Yet the fear of loss is often inseparable from a desire for destruction. After all, anyone with something to love has something to hate. It cannot be denied that one's object of desire holds immense power over them. The exercise of this power, whether in the form of denial or satisfaction, is cause enough for love to suddenly and subtly become hate.[25] One may hate the other they perceive as standing in the way of their satisfaction, or one may hate themselves for being unable to fully satisfy their desires. Who does not sometimes mourn the loss of control, especially when control was never theirs to begin with? Naturally, this dynamic can also describe one's relationship with the world itself. People are socialized to look to the overarching structures in their life—culture, politics, the economy, and so on—to define and delimit their horizon of possibility. And yet it is these same overarching structures that repeatedly fail to fulfill their promise of fulfillment, punishing those who aspire towards it. One can safely assume that

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[24] For example, many working-class people in the United States would rather remain poor than live in a socialist or communist country. Their identities, beliefs, and every other aspect of their lives are ultimately rooted in capitalist structures. To them, rejecting capitalism would mean rejecting the possibility of one day joining the master class, which they have been socialized to desire from childhood. The possibility of upward mobility gives them a sense of agency and personal responsibility that undergirds their entire value system. Losing capitalism would mean jeopardizing their sense of self-worth. Worse still, it may mean losing everything they know and love about the world they know. At the very least, it would mean losing those things as they once knew them to be.

[25] In psychoanalysis, the term *ambivalence* is often used to mark the oscillation between psychic opposites, such as between love and hate. It is an extremely common and well-documented psychic phenomenon. The term is often used to describe an infant's attitude towards their mother, who is perceived as both providing and denying the care the infant desires.

one reason apocalyptic fiction is so popular is that it satisfies at the level of the imagination a desire not merely to escape from or break with the world we know, but to watch it meet its violent and catastrophic end.[26]

Presumably, this destruction also entails the creation or revelation of something new, even if what is "created" or revealed is nothing more than the void left in destruction's wake.[27] Language used to describe apocalyptic or catastrophic events often carries an implicit recognition of freed potentiality.[28] The word "apocalypse" holds significance both as an act of divine punishment and as a moment of deliverance; anyone who says "apocalypse" says both "rapture" and "damnation."

This final judgment is both feared and desired as the ultimate act of rupture, the conceptual limit at which creation and destruction converge. It is the time and place of radical and irreversible transformation, an undoing of the world and its horizon of possibility. But equally important is its revelatory nature. The word apocalypse has its origins in the Greek word apokalyptein, meaning "uncover, disclose, reveal." To call a place, period, or mode of existence apocalyptic is to acknowledge it not only as being in a state of desolation or annihilation, but also as being the prophetic sign or embodiment of things that are, that have been, and that are yet to come. The very fact that the world can and shall end is proof that its apparent totality and

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[26] This is especially true for those whose lives are characterized by an antagonism between themselves and the world, such as the slave. This dynamic is explored in greater depth further in this chapter.

[27] I would like to make clear that destruction does not necessarily lead to creation. However, destruction does have the potential to "create" new conditions of possibility, or to bring previously unthought possibilities to light.

[28] One example of this is the word "aftermath" which means both "the period immediately following a usually ruinous event" and "a second-growth crop." *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "aftermath (n.)," accessed March 12, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aftermath?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld.

permanence are mere fabrications. The apocalypse is a place both beyond and beneath the world we know; the groundless foundation upon which the world rests, and to which the world must inevitably return. What the apocalypse reveals is potentiality itself. To survive the apocalypse—or alternatively, to will one's own destruction through it—could open one up to far more pleasurable and fulfilling modes of existence than those we know. Unfortunately, one must be willing to lose everything in the process. Those who cling to the dying world are doomed to be lost with it—"you can't take it with you."

Butler understood well that the apocalypse is first and foremost a time and place within the mind. She also understood the importance of uncovering this hidden place in the waking world. But as she demonstrates through various characters in the *Parable* series (examples of which will be given later on), reckoning with the apocalypse is no easy task, especially when directly confronted with its inevitability. The logic of the world always assumes its own permanence and primacy, and the mind can always find ways to rationalize denial. It should come as no surprise then that Butler, through Lauren, uses the language of dreams and poetry to communicate what is otherwise unthinkable and intangible.

Butler's poetics are perhaps best exemplified in Lauren's practice of *dreamwork*, the speculative art of reading one's unconscious through their dreams.[29] This dreamwork is essential to the formulation of Lauren's beliefs, as well as the expression of these beliefs in her poetry. Both her dreamwork and the poetry that arises from it communicate in an emotional and aesthetic register that immerses the reader in Lauren's experience of the apocalypse, an experience defined by radical transformations.

[29] Of course, Lauren's dreamwork is but an extension of Butler's speculation.

For the reader, the *Parable* series functions similarly to Lauren's dreams, imparting lessons through its depiction of the Pox and Lauren's journey through it.[30] In many ways, Lauren's dreamwork mirrors the reader's own engagement with the text. Put differently, the novels may themselves be read as dreams. The reader may then come to see themselves reflecting and reflected in Lauren's dreamwork as they engage their own repressed fears and desires through her.[31]

An examination of Lauren's dreamwork may be especially useful for those looking to take up Butler's art of speculation. Naturally, the context in which these dreams occur must also be considered. The insights such examination offers may help reveal the apocalyptic landscapes just outside our awareness. And once these scenes are laid bare perhaps we may open our eyes to some path *through*, regardless of whether or not there is truly a place awaiting us on the other side.

Where There's Smoke

Parable of the Sower opens with one of Lauren's recurring dreams. She finds herself in an oddly long, dark hallway of her house. A pale, cool light emanates from a doorway at the far end of the hall. She is slowly teaching herself how to fly, "dream lesson by dream lesson," as she

[30] This is of course evident in the title of the series, as it implies the books are intended to be received as parables. In an act of metacommentary in *Parable of the Talents*, Butler (through Lauren) speaks on the importance of parables as tools for learning and self-reflection. Reflecting on her recurring dream of her father, Lauren writes, "My father loved parables—stories that taught, stories that presented ideas and morals in ways that made pictures in people's minds. . . . Because he believed stories were so important as teaching tools, I learned to pay more attention to them than I might have otherwise." Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 23-24.

[31] In what basically amounts to breaking the fourth wall, Lauren even recommends using survivalist literature to prepare for catastrophic events. When trying to convince a neighbor to start prepping for potential raids, Lauren tells her, "use your imagination. Any kind of survival information from encyclopedias, biographies, anything that helps you learn to live off the land and defend ourselves. Even some fiction might be useful." Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 69.

puts it.[32] At first it is all she can do just to levitate in place, holding tightly to whatever she can grasp in the dark. When she finally learns to let go she begins floating forward with a mixture of terror and joy. But she can't control it. She drifts off course toward another, harsher light; a wall engulfed in flames. The fire, which seems to have come out of nowhere, is rapidly spreading all throughout the house. It is all around her. She burns. Everything fades to black.

The dream shifts. The darkness is broken by the pale, cool light of the stars. Lauren is looking up at the Milky Way, floating on a cloud of clean clothes. This half of the dream is an early memory of her stepmother, Corazón. They are in their yard, taking a break from pulling laundry off the clothesline. As they look up at the stars, Corazón tells Lauren about the city lights of her youth. The stars were never so visible back then. Now that the neighboring cities are out of electricity there is a lot less light pollution. Still, Corazón misses the city lights. Lauren, too young to remember such a time, responds, "I'd rather have the stars."[33] As they speak, the wall of their gated community looms over them, shrouding them in its shadow.

This recurring dream comes to Lauren at times when she is struggling to accept some inner truth. This time happens to be the morning of her and her father's birthday. Describing the dream in her journal, Lauren writes, "It comes to me when I struggle—when I twist on my own personal hook and try to pretend that nothing unusual is happening. It comes to me when I try to be my father's daughter. Today is our birthday—my fifteenth and my father's fifty-fifth. Tomorrow, I'll try to please him—him and the community and God. So last night, I dreamed a reminder that it's all a lie."[34] The neighborhood plans to celebrate the birthdays by risking the

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[32] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 13.

[33] Ibid., 15.

[34] Ibid., 13.

long and dangerous bicycle ride to the nearest church, where Lauren and a few other neighborhood children will be baptized by her father, Reverend Olamina. Lauren has not believed in the Christian God for three years at this point, but she knows the tradition is important to her community. She observes that, "To the adults, going outside to a real church was like stepping back into the good old days. . . . They never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back."[35] She cannot bear to admit to them that she no longer believes in their God or their traditions, let alone in the possibility of returning to the idealized past they yearn for.

Few things are more shameful to oneself or to their community than a lapse of faith. As much as Lauren's dream is a manifestation of her own repressed fears, it is also a reflection of the systemic denial of fear taking place in her environment. The perceived stability or longevity of a community is a fantasy that must be shared by its members; a fantasy that must be enforced and reinforced in every social interaction. For even one member of the community to doubt or refuse the symbolic order means jeopardizing the group's very foundation; in other words, it risks anarchy.[36] This is why most of Lauren's family and neighbors refuse to entertain the possibility that they are not truly safe in Robledo, despite Lauren's repeated attempts at warning them. Reverend Olamina, the de facto leader of the neighborhood, suggests as much to Lauren when he says, "It's better to teach people than to scare them, Lauren. If you scare them and nothing

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[35] Ibid., 18.

[36] I would like to clarify that anarchy does not necessarily imply disorder or chaos, although these terms are often conflated. Anarchy is simply the absence of law and authority—or alternatively, the equal distribution of noncoercive power. Naturally, it arises in infinitely diverse social and political contexts. For some, anarchy signifies the end of the world itself; for others, anarchy signifies freedom itself, as achievable as that may or may not be. I am inclined to believe both are correct. In either case, anarchy demands a great deal of sacrifice and uncertainty, and as such it evokes a great deal of fear in most people.

happens, *they lose their fear, and you lose some of your authority with them*. It's harder to scare them a second time, harder to teach them, harder to win back their trust."[37] Reverend Olamina assumes that fear, even when justifiable, undermines community leadership and therefore compromises collective reasoning. More importantly, his statement implies that a leader's authority—and by extension, a community's stability—comes from the careful manipulation of fear.[38] And he knows all too well that the people of Robledo have every reason to be afraid.

Reverend Olamina acknowledges that Robledo exists in a constant state of precarity. In the same conversation in which he chastises Lauren for spreading fear of a potential raid, Reverend Olamina tells her, "You've just noticed the abyss. . . . The adults in this community have been balancing at the edge of it for more years than you've been alive."[39] For him to acknowledge this means he is making the conscious decision to prioritize his authority over the public acknowledgment of impending danger. Presumably he does so because he genuinely, if foolishly, believes his authority is more reliable in the long term than any immediate measures for preparation. As such, he uses his authority to maintain a culture of repression and denial. Within this repressive culture, Lauren's speculative dreaming is always already an act of resistance, even if this resistance were to remain on the level of the unconscious. But if he admits the falsity of his own teachings, to where does Reverend Olamina lead his flock? Any form of pedagogy or leadership he could practice would only serve to sustain the illusion of permanence—the illusion of Robledo's permanence as well as the illusion of *permanence* itself.

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[37] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 75; emphasis mine.

[38] At the very least, Reverend Olamina's statement implies that there is a strong correlation between collective fear and a leader's authority. The recent resurgence of the fascism in American politics is proof enough of this phenomenon.

[39] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 76.

Permanence is undoubtedly one of the most powerful and insidious of all social constructs. It justifies and perpetuates its spectral existence through its symbiotic relationship with authority. The interlocking structures that govern our existence gain legitimacy through their claims to stability and futurity, which they frame as safeguards against the threats of uncertainty and existential dread. They offer stability and futurity to the masses in exchange for undying devotion. This devotion, in turn, ensures that the masses live their lives under the quiet assumption that the given order is fixed in place. No matter how grave, every crisis is taken as an opportunity to further perfect this governing matrix. Because of this, its authority persists even after its governing power is effectively destroyed, as in the case of the United States during the Pox.[40]

Reverend Olamina and the rest of Robledo *must* believe in the United States' permanence to continue living within the parameters it delimits. The nation's authority is inscribed on every fiber of their being, defining their individual and group identities. Reverend Olamina fears that without this authority—as represented by the church, the local university, and the walls surrounding Robledo—his community would lack the cohesion and direction needed to survive the Pox.[41] In fact, they would lose everything they could ever hope for. And yet in the next breath, he is able to admit that they have nothing to look forward to but the abyss at their feet. The fall is inevitable.

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[40] A similar argument is made by Giorgio Agamben in his treatise on the ontology of the command. Agamben argues that "Every time a power is in decay, so long as someone gives orders, there will always also be found someone, even if only one, who will obey it: *a power ceases to exist only when it leaves off giving orders*." Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 54-55; emphasis mine.

[41] This is despite the fact that they already lack both. Lauren documents multiple instances of bigotry and exploitation among her neighbors, including blatant racism and sexual coercion. Furthermore, each individual family depicted in the story responds to the Pox differently, and none of them have any solid idea of how to remedy their situation.

And in the end, all is lost. Lauren's dream of fire is realized three years after her baptism, when Robledo is burned to the ground. Lauren is one of the few who survived, thanks in large part to the years she spent preparing for her eventual escape. Left with little more than her pen and journal, she writes,

> In order to rise
> From its own ashes
> A phoenix
> First
> Must
> Burn.[42]

I remember the fear I felt when I first read this Earthseed verse. Lauren writes it directly above the journal entry in which she describes, in graphic detail, the rape, murder, and immolation of her family and neighbors. The verse is a promise of the catastrophe to come. But it is a promise. It implies there is *more*, somewhere or somehow or someday. *More*. Even if all that can be promised is more fire. And somehow the knowledge of that makes it easier to keep reading. In its destructive and all-consuming nature, fire is a truly cleansing force. It reduces everything in its path to its barest elements, a rich and fecund state from which something new may just grow. Lauren's ability to see a phoenix in the ashes of her home speaks not only to her resilience, but also to the wisdom and imagination she cultivated in her dreams.

Lauren, who is only fifteen years old at the beginning of the series, is in an important and vulnerable stage of personal growth during a period of global collapse. In her recurring dream, she teaches herself how to navigate the darkness between herself and the stars. Her Icarian flight is symbolic of her passage into adulthood, a true trial by fire. The joy she feels while flying is inextricable from her fear of crashing and burning, and it is only after passing through a wall of fire that she is finally able to gaze upon the stars. Lauren's dream depicts fear and desire, agency

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[42] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 159.

and impotence, life and death, and collapses them all into one continuous process of change through which she might reach physical and spiritual maturity. It is only by willfully shaping this change and facing its inevitable challenges that one may be able to survive complete annihilation.

Lauren's dream and the developmental stage it represents prove incredibly important to her later thinking. It is only after this dream that Lauren begins refining and explicating the set of beliefs that would eventually become Earthseed. The dream eve,n takes on added significance as an allegory for the fulfillment of the Destiny, as when she later claims Earthseed is "the dawning adulthood of the human species," enabling mankind to fly towards its destiny in the stars.[43] And just like in Lauren's dream, this flight is not without its share of terror.

Lauren intends the Destiny to be an iterative process, an interminable cycle one cannot escape. Believers must accept the fact that their paradise in the stars is no less likely to fall into ruin than their homes on Earth. The only thing promised to them is the possibility of their continued existence, itself a never-ending process of change. Lauren believes that only this undying devotion to change itself can save humanity from self-destruction.[44] It is this revelation, taught to her in the language of dreams, that prepares Lauren to shape and be shaped by the events of the first novel. Lauren's actions throughout the story can thus be understood as the embodiment of these dream lessons; lessons she shares and refines in verse and in praxis.

However, Lauren is not immune to the temptations of stability. On the dawn of the fifth anniversary of Acorn's founding, Lauren has another one of her recurring dreams. She is back in

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[43] Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 331.

[44] There is no guarantee that humans who "achieve" the Destiny will remain human for long. They may continue to exist indefinitely as something or some things other than themselves. The fact that Lauren places the biofuturity of the human race above all else is inconsistent with a basic tenet of Earthseed: the only lasting truth is change.

her Robledo home, surrounded by loved ones who have long been dead or missing. All but her younger brothers are still and perfectly silent. She realizes that she cannot speak or move either. Lauren's father is preaching, reading from the biblical parable of the talents. As much as Lauren tries to listen to his sermon, she can only make out the words of the parable, which she knows by heart. It was one of her father's favorites. It tells the story of a wealthy man who entrusts each of his three servants with varying sums of money before going on a journey. While the first two servants invest his money and earn him double what they were entrusted with, the third servant, who was given the least, buries the money for safekeeping. Upon his return, the wealthy man rewards his first two servants and punishes the third, saying, "For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have in abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."[45] After Reverend Olamina speaks these words, the entire congregation begins to disappear, one by one. Eventually, the house itself is gone, and Lauren is left alone in the rubble and ash of her old neighborhood. The wall stands taller than it ever did before, trapping her in the vestiges of her childhood home as her body slowly vanishes, piece by piece.

While Lauren's first recurring dream is one of flight, her second is one of immobility. By the start of *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren is living a fairly comfortable life as Acorn's spiritual leader, a role that parallels that of her father in Robledo. Acorn is the only site of the religion's existence at the time. In her preoccupation with creating and maintaining the community she always longed for, Lauren is unable to facilitate the spread of Earthseed. Much like the third servant in the biblical parable of the talents, Lauren has been entrusted with a small but valuable treasure that she fears losing more than anything. Lauren quietly wonders if she will be similarly punished for burying Earthseed in the relative safety of the mountains, instead of actively

[45] Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 24. The quoted scripture is from Matthew 25:29-30, KJV.

growing the religion into a far-reaching social movement—something her counterpart Andrew Jarret has been doing for years as a leader in the Church of Christian America. Who better than her father to act as the psychic representative of this fear. Lauren, for all her good intentions, craves authority just like her father.[46] Her deification of change is often eclipsed by her overwhelming need to control its course, a fantasy she indulges within the relative safety of Acorn.[47]

Readers who identify with Lauren may feel similarly attached to Acorn. For them, Acorn represents something of a post-apocalyptic utopia. However, as ostensibly utopian as Acorn may have been, it can only appear so by distancing itself from the conditions that exist outside its boundaries. And no amount of distance can prevent Acorn's eventual encounter with the sprawling apocalypse that surrounds it. In fact, Parable of the Talents only unfolds as it does because Lauren cannot accept the fact that Acorn and everything it represents cannot possibly remain safe for long. Its destruction is essential to the world around it.

While the Pox may be a global phenomenon, its effects are unequally distributed across regions and populations. Often, the sites in which its effects are most concentrated are also those farthest from visibility, the same sites in which power and capital are violently extracted from captive flesh. These are apocalyptic landscapes in which the mechanisms of oppression are laid bare, made visible in the physicality of their demands and consequences. They are both contained and containing. No single location in the *Parable* series fits this description better than Camp Christian.

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[46] Ironically, Lauren's power-seeking is later criticized by Asha, her own daughter.

[47] This tension displayed by Lauren is at the heart of Earthseed itself: the struggle between shaping change and allowing one to be shaped by it.

Apocalyptic Landscapes

Camp Christian is a truly hellish place, and in many ways it is a perfect microcosm of both the Pox and the United States. The time Lauren spends there is easily the worst and most painful period of her life. Unsurprisingly, it is also one of the least documented periods in the *Parable* series's narrative, as Lauren's journal entries from the year 2034 (accounting for twelve of the seventeen months of her enslavement) are lost. Even the journal entries that remain often feel bare and emotionally detached, as if there are simply no words to express her suffering.[48]

Characters like Marc, Lauren's long-lost brother and Christian American pastor, have difficulty even believing a place like Camp Christian could exist. Marc even hits Lauren when she tells him about Camp Christian, as he refuses to believe that people associated with Christian America would ever harm *innocent* people.[49] Many people, especially religious members of the working class, actively support Jarret and his Crusaders even when they are aware of internment

[48] In my personal experience reading the book, one of Lauren's most devastating journal entries is also one of her shortest. The entry for December 18, 2033, merely reads: "Now I have been raped. It happened twice. Once on Monday, and again yesterday. It is my Christmas gift from Christian America." While she recounts the experience in some detail in the following entry, one still gets the impression that the experience and its effects cannot be adequately described. Butler, *Talents*, 240.

[49] Marc is a particularly interesting example of the repression and denial of slavery common to the Pox. Marc himself is a child sex slave for years after the destruction of his and Lauren's childhood home. One might think he would be willing to believe and empathize with Lauren after her escape from Camp Christian. However, Marc not only accuses Lauren of lying about being enslaved, but he also goes as far as victim-blaming her and others targeted by Jarret's Crusaders. It is clear that Marc's treatment of Lauren reflects his own coping mechanisms. He struggles to process and communicate the extent and symptoms of his trauma, as demonstrated in his decision to keep Asha from Lauren out of loneliness. He turns to religiosity and nationalism for some semblance of order and self-worth, clinging desperately to an idealized image of the church and state despite all evidence of their corruption. Marc demonstrates the extent to which slaves and noncitizens are converted into loyal servants of their oppressors, driven by desperation and internalized self-hatred.

camps like Camp Christian.[50] Others like Asha, Lauren's long-lost daughter, denounce the actions of Jarret's Crusaders while continuing to support Christian America and its ideological war against so-called "cults" like Earthseed.

It is as if the horror of Camp Christian escapes any attempt at comprehension or representation, even when everyone *knows* that it exists, and even as they live their lives in its wake. But therein lies the problem; everyone lives their everyday lives in the wake of slavery and dispossession. In the grand scheme of things, Camp Christian is almost unremarkable. Its existence is inevitable, essential to the world they know and remember. And there will have to be many more Camp Christians if they are to make anything in their world great again.

Those who support or ignore the existence of Camp Christian are able to do so because they do not consciously identify with those enslaved therein. To do so would mean disrupting their self-perception and their worldview. Instead, they distance themselves from slaves through notions of innocence and criminality, allegiance and treason, righteousness and sinfulness. All these supposed differences are naturalized and attached to visible characteristics like race, gender, and class. One can then see Camp Christian and its slaves and be comforted by the fact that all is right with the world; America might just become great again. One is a citizen because others are slaves. And just as the citizen has the freedom to gaze upon the spectacle of slavery, they also have the freedom to divert their gaze entirely. Surely they have better things to do.

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[50] Lauren gives a fairly nuanced take on religious conservatism among members of the working class. She acknowledges that their bigotry and fascist sympathies are byproducts of their own oppression. She writes, "The working poor who love Jarret want to be fooled, need to be fooled. They scratch a living, working long, hard hours at dangerous, dirty jobs, and they need a savior. Poor women, in particular, tend to be deeply religious and more than willing to see Jarret as the Second Coming. Religion is all they have. Their employers and their men abuse them. They bear more children than they can feed. They bear everyone's contempt." Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 287.

The sight or mere mention of slavery evokes overwhelming emotions in the citizenry, even if only on an unconscious level. David Turner, a man enslaved at Camp Christian, observes that the hatred directed towards slaves and the street poor is often rooted in a fear of taking their place. Describing his experiences as a street poor black man, David says, "We walk the highways and scrounge and scavenge and ask for work, and all of that reminds people that what's happened to us can happen to them. They don't like to think about stuff like that, so they get mad at us. They make the cops arrest us or run us out of town."[51] If what David says is true, then the justification used to support slavery during the Pox is based on a collective fear of the Pox; in other words, slavery is necessary because citizens fear becoming slaves. This fear necessitates the physical relocation of undesirables out of sight of the citizenry. The places slaves are confined to, themselves deemed undesirable for the general populace, then take on all the signs of slavery itself. Naturally, these places are thus quite frightening—even apocalyptic.

Such apocalyptic landscapes elicit a kind of fear that crosses spatial or temporal boundaries. Looking at them, one realizes the fragility of their body and the world around them. They realize, if only for a moment, that these things have always been fragile, and that their eventual end may be just as catastrophic as the scene before them. In fact, the end could come at any time or place. The apocalypse is a place that moves.[52] It travels, stalks, pursues. And there is nothing more terrifying than an inescapable problem. One thing Butler and the *Parables* series

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[51] Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 239.

[52] Here I draw some insight from the "spatial turn" taking place in the field of eschatology. Scholars and theologians in this movement understand the biblical apocalypse as existing in a spatial dimension as well as a temporal one. The apocalypse, salvation, and damnation are then reconceptualized as spaces one moves through; places that are already inhabited. The apocalypse in particular is understood as a kind of liminal space between the world we know and the Kingdom of God, wherever that may be. See Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present*.

illustrates well is that the apocalypse has been here all along, even when and where we cannot see it. In fact, our whole lives are spent in the shadow of its promise. For some, this tragic fact can be ignored or forgotten. Others understand all too well what it means to live an apocalyptic existence.

While it would be an oversimplification to say the *Parable* series is (exclusively) about blackness or some archetypal "black experience," it cannot be denied that Butler uses the series to draw key connections between racial slavery and the apocalyptic imaginary. As Jayna Brown argues, the structure of the *Parable* series "speaks to an African American topos of the apocalyptic nature of everyday life: desperate and fragile forms of survival, constant crisis, alienation, upheaval, and the trope of exodus."[53] In other words, the *Parable* series's continued timeliness speaks not only to Butler's skill as a writer, but also to the *untimeliness* of blackness itself, existing as it does in an eternal state of crises. Black existence is apocalyptic by nature. To fear the apocalypse is, in a sense, to fear blackness—to fear the complete unraveling of your world and your place in it.[54]

Lauren frequently states her belief that slavery never ended, even implying that slavery cannot end as long as the nation exists. After reading news about modern slavery in the year 2032, Lauren makes the comment, "What I'd like to see is a state of the union where slavery isn't being practiced."[55] Despite her insistence on human progress towards the Destiny, Lauren understands well that the category of human has always been denied to her. This is especially evident after she is enslaved at Camp Christian. Reflecting on her time there, she writes, "My

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[53] Brown, *Black Utopias*, 100.

[54] The following chapter contains a more in-depth explication of blackness as a concept and racial category.

[55] Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 92.

ancestors in this hemisphere were, by law, chattel slaves. . . . How did they survive it all and keep their humanity? Certainly, they were never intended to keep it, just as we weren't."[56] As Lauren and other black characters' experience of the Pox reveals, the apocalypse is mapped onto black skin. There is no escape, even in the event of physical relocation or the collapse of state and economic power.

The apocalypse is a social and geographic crisis that will exist as long as people—*any* people—are black; as long as any form of hierarchy or rigid categorization exists in human relations. Such hierarchies and categorizations are of course essential to the world we know. All aspects of modern life can be traced back to the advent of racial slavery.[57] Put differently, *modernity is defined by racial slavery*. The modern world, in all its permanence and supreme authority, is the very apocalypse it claims to prevent. Its true nature escapes legibility through its perpetual movement. It projects and concentrates itself in the various places and groups of people it takes as sacrifices and scapegoats. Racial antagonism is a global paradigm capable of shaping change far better than any individual or movement could ever hope to. But this too shall pass. If, as Lauren claims, change is "the only lasting truth,"[58] it can only be resisted for so long.

The Poetics of Change

Part of why Lauren is able to accomplish the things she does throughout the *Parable* series is that she, more than those around her, is willing to accept the fact that things do not

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[56] Ibid., 277.

[57] While an in-depth explication of this claim is beyond the scope of this paper, it should suffice to note that racial slavery produced the economic and political conditions for the industrial revolution, Western imperialism, and the formulation of capitalist economic structures.

[58] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 13.

necessarily get better; they merely change.[59] Yet this also implies that one day, at an unknowable time and place, the perfect conditions for collective transformation may suddenly appear. The question is: will we be ready?

Systems of oppression inevitably create the condition of possibility for their own destruction. This is a truth as old as civilization. Nations are born, they die, and eventually they are succeeded. Butler demonstrates this truth well enough in her depiction of the Pox, but it is illustrated all the more vividly in her depiction of Camp Christian's destruction. The success of the slaves' revolt should in large part be attributed to the short-sightedness of their enslavers. It is only because Jarret's Crusaders forced their slaves to clear the orchards and groves around Camp Christian that the soil was loose enough for a landslide to occur. Of course, none of it would have mattered if the slaves had not had the skill and resolve to take advantage of the crisis. They had already been preparing for a revolt for some time, willing and ready to die for their chance at freedom. And it all culminated in that final, all-consuming fire. If only the fire had spread beyond the ruins of Camp Christian.[60]

Even after the moment of collapse or revolution, it remains to be seen just what, if anything, will fill the power vacuum that remains. It is far too easy for former revolutionaries to recreate the same systems of oppression they dedicated their lives to fighting against. Lauren is no exception. It cannot be denied that Lauren actively cooperates with both capitalism and state governance after the destruction of Camp Christian, despite being ideologically opposed to both.

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[59] As she writes in her journal while still living in Robledo, "The adults say things will get better, but they never have." Ibid., 25.

[60] Here I echo Anthony Farley's sentiments on the Haitian Revolution. Describing the Haitians setting fire to the plantations of their former masters, Farley muses, "The slaves burned everything, yes, but, unfortunately, they only burned everything in Haiti. Theirs was the greatest and most successful revolution in the history of the world but the failure of their fire to cross the waters was the great tragedy of the nineteenth century." Farley, "Perfecting Slavery," 236.

We can assume she does not do so enthusiastically, given her frequent critiques of ownership and governance. Still, the fact remains that she actively seeks power within what she recognizes as an inherently violent and oppressive system. The maroon quality of Acorn is slowly replaced by the totalizing economic, religious, and political institution that is Earthseed circa 2090. There is a very real possibility that any number of the many Earthseed-owned schools, farms, factories, stores, or towns are running on or complicit with slave labor similar to what Lauren herself once experienced. One gets the impression that Lauren trades the speculation and dreamwork of her childhood in favor of a more "pragmatic" approach.

Between the pragmatic and the speculative there is only uncharted territory. For the dreamers who envision their own Acorns, their own embodiment of Earthseed's teachings, it may feel as though there really is nothing left to hope for in the waking world. But if that is the case, it is only because they misunderstand the kind of hope Butler envisions.

Butler claims speculation itself is an act of hope, even when one has nothing left to hope *for*. She explains that, "the one thing that I and my main characters never do when contemplating the future is give up hope. In fact, the very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope."[61] Two things are especially important about this statement: one is the implication that hope can exist independently of something to hope *for*; the other is the recognition that hope can exist as an action or practice, and is therefore not synonymous with optimism. Both of these things are also reflected in Butler's concept of *positive obsession*, first mentioned in Lauren's Earthseed verses.

> God is Change,
> And in the end,
> God prevails.
> But meanwhile…
> Kindness eases Change.

[61] Butler, "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future," *Essence*, May 2000, 165.

> Love quiets fear.
> And a sweet and powerful
> Positive obsession
> Blunts pain,
> Diverts rage,
> And engages each of us
> In the greatest,
> The most intense
> Of our chosen struggles.[62]

Positive obsession, as mobilized in the above verse, is not about reaching a particular goal—even Lauren can acknowledge that ideals have a way of perpetually escaping our grasp. The concept names the devotion that shapes one's strivings. In Butler's words, "Positive obsession is about not being able to stop just because you're afraid and full of doubts. . . . It's about not being able to stop at all."[63] Positive obsession, then, foregrounds and celebrates the ongoing process of change enabled by our unfulfillable desire for *more*.

If we understand hope as a practice—or better yet, *discipline*, to borrow from Mariame Kaba[64]—we might say that hope is the embodiment of positive obsession. If hope is a discipline it must be practiced obsessively; and if one truly desires change, it must also be practiced *collectively*, in cooperation with others and one's environment. To illustrate the praxis of such a hope, I return once again to my car ride conversation with Cristina.

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[62] Technically this is the second mention of positive obsession in Lauren's Earthseed verses, but I find it to be the most illustrative use of it. Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 55.

[63] Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 133.

[64] Butler's understanding of hope closely aligns with that of scholar-activist Mariame Kaba, who describes hope not as an emotion, but as a discipline independent of any specific emotion. As such, my reading of Butler is closely informed by my reading of Kaba. It is also worth noting that Kaba was taught about hope (as a discipline) by a nun. Both Butler and Kaba associate hope with a certain religiosity. As physical a thing as hope may be, it is also inherently spiritual. See Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, 26.

The kind of hope Cristina practices is not exactly "hopeful" in a traditional sense. Cristina herself admitted that she is a rather pessimistic person. It is often difficult to find optimists in radical circles, and the bitter cynicism so common to such spaces is often frowned upon. As Calvin Warren argues, hope is typically conceived as a form of "spiritual currency" to be invested in various political systems and agendas.[65] The realm of politics presents itself as the natural home or outlet for hope, and as such people often assume that to have hope one must have faith in a specific political program. This is the usual approach of those considered activists, who devote their lives to fighting for incremental changes in the political systems that oppress them. While the value of such work should not be understated, it should never be considered the only or the "natural" alternative to complacency under systemic oppression.

Ultimately, engaging the state on its own terms only reinforces it as the *only* field of possibility for collectivity and organization, just like any engagement with capitalism, no matter how necessary for one's immediate survival, perpetuates exploitation and inequality.[66] Of equal importance is the fact that a life of campaigning, voting, fundraising, protesting, and so on is deeply, painfully exhausting. Having to campaign for your rights is constant proof of the fact that you will never receive them. No one can *give* someone their rights.[67] They can only be taken or recognized, and if they ever were universally recognized, the state would suddenly become

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[65] Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," 219.

[66] The latter point is the reason philanthropy in general is so looked down upon in radical spaces, even in the absence of an alternative source of funding. As Justin told me in his interview, "We have the same [economic] model just masquerading as different ones. The nonprofit model, the philanthropy model, the whatever, all those things . . . they're all the corporate model. . . . But it doesn't have to look like what we currently experience, and it won't. Things don't last long." Justin Robinson, interview with the author, July 14, 2021.

[67] In the words of Anthony Farley, "the fact of need itself means that the request will fail. The request for equality and freedom, for rights, will fail whether the request is granted or denied. The request is produced through an injury." Farley, "Perfecting Slavery," 223.

obsolete. A life of activism, as materially beneficial as it may sometimes be for certain vulnerable populations, is destined to be a life of disappointment after disappointment. The same could be said for any form of resistance.[68] For black people in particular, the rage and passion of the discontented are quickly converted into an affective and cultural currency to pass between the hands of their masters.

In light of this, Cristina's apparent hopelessness should be reexamined as a worthwhile alternative to conventional activism. There can be a singular kind of peace and collectivity to be found in shared dissent without any pretense of resolution, liberated from the cycle of failure and disappointment so common to activism.[69] As important as it is to tear down and burn oppressive structures, whether structures in the mind or in our social and physical environments, it is equally important to speculate, to experiment, to embody the infinite number of alternatives we see in our dreams. This belief is at the core of ELC's praxis. As stated on the group's website:

> We believe that lasting systems change and birthing just communities requires us as POC to trust and depend on each other in the face of oppression, fear and risk. *We believe that trust is built when we are able to integrate the whole of who we are and to connect to others in their wholeness*. Earthseed is a place and a practice to reclaim our cultural and community ways, further bolstering our movements and strategies for justice and equity.[70]

Far too few would-be revolutionaries recognize that trust is a structure that must be continuously built and maintained. In many ways, it operates like a body.

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[68] This is not to say that resistance is not necessary, worthwhile, or even enjoyable. It is often all these things. Still, it cannot be the only outlet for one's apocalyptic or utopian desires.

[69] Here I am thinking alongside Lisa Duggan, who writes, "Negative sentiments like cynicism, opportunism, depression, bitchiness are often seen as solipsistic, individualistic and anti-communal affective stances associated with an emotional tonality of hopelessness. Yet these bad sentiments can signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness. These sentiments associated with despondence contain the potentiality for new modes of collectivity, *belonging in difference and dissent*." Duggan and Munoz, "Hope and Hopelessness," 277; emphasis mine.

[70] "Our Collective," Earthseed Land Collective, accessed February 23, 2023, https://earthseedlandcoop.org/about/; emphasis mine.

That day, as we rode back to the farm after finishing our delivery, Cristina told me that she thought of her mutual-aid work as training the muscle memory of cooperation. If cooperation really is a muscle that must be activated and worked, surely most people living under racial capitalism are experiencing its atrophy and its symptoms. How then could they ever hope to pull themselves together, "in their wholeness," when the time comes for mobilization? What good is dismantling the systems of our oppression when we have no strength left to build our alternatives? But of course, simply building alternatives could never be enough. The beauty of muscle memory, of *any* memory, is that it is reflexive. It is spontaneous, it is relational, always turning back on itself, always working to maintain equilibrium—to preserve the wholeness of the whole.

Instead of maintaining or investing hope for the sake of a fixed and definite "solution" to social ills, it can be far more rewarding, and certainly more *radical*, to practice hope for anything but fixity or definition. This radical hope is hope for change itself, practiced freely and collectively, without hierarchy or rigid categorizations. While such radical hope is necessarily political, it is irreducible to the realm of politics. It is a poetics of change, a flow of becoming in which one and their environment are gently, and possibly even irreversibly, transformed. By the time the fire comes, perhaps we will have already taught each other to fly. And even if we have not, we can still revel in the ashes.

* * *

Before ELC, before Durham, before even the United States, there was the plantation.

The Cameron and Bennehan family plantations used slave labor from 1771 to 1865. By 1776, the two families held a combined 30,000 acres of land across North Carolina, and after an 1804 marriage merged their estates, this vast plantation complex was given the name Stagville.

By the 1860s, over 1,000 Africans were enslaved at Stagville, making it one of the largest sites of mass slavery in the state. Today, Stagville has mostly faded into the recesses of public memory. Relatively little remains of that grand old estate—165 acres and a handful of buildings, including four slave houses, the Bennehan family house, and the Great Barn.[71]

The Great Barn was completed in 1860, mere months before the start of the Civil War. It is still a sight to behold a century and a half later. It was the largest barn in the state at the time of its completion, a massive structure 135 feet long and 33 feet wide, all atop a stone foundation; yet the impressive size of the Great Barn belies its most remarkable quality.[72]

The enslaved craftspeople at Stagville were experts in the art of timber framing; a method of building in which especially large timbers are carved to fit perfectly together, without the use of nails or screws. The resulting frame, visible from within and outside the structure, serves an aesthetic as well as functional purpose. In fact, the technique is renowned for its beauty and durability, often associated with castles and cathedrals. A timber-framed building will likely last for generations, and the simple elegance of the frame lends it a seemingly timeless presence and warmth. Naturally, the construction process is incredibly labor intensive, requiring dangerously heavy timbers and extremely precise calculations. It was work fit for a slave.

Wealth begets wealth. A perfect structure was torn out of captive flesh; one final, extravagant display of domination before the looming threat of abolition. It's as if the masters really saw no end in sight. And there wasn't. There still isn't. Thus the slaves built a monument to their suffering, a testament to slavery then and slavery now and slavery still to come. And it

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[71] "History," NC Historic Sites, accessed February 12, 2023, https://historicsites.nc.gov/all-sites/historic-stagville/history.

[72] Simmons, "Stagville State Historic Site," 129; "Horton Grove," Open Durham, accessed February 12, 2023, https://www.opendurham.org/buildings/horton-grove.

hurts all the more for its elegant, timeless beauty. Surely, they must have felt some pride in their work.

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My biggest regret about my time with ELC is that I never took a photograph of the pavilion. Every now and then I reminisce, recalling how it looked then, in the middle of that summer, its wooden pillars glowing gold in the warm light of the setting sun. They hadn't installed flooring by the time of my visit, so the whole structure rested on a soft bed of grass and dirt. I was soothed by the chorus of grasshoppers and cicadas, captivated by the flittering dance of bees and moths. The pavilion looked and felt like part of the natural scenery, like it belonged right there, right where it was.

I first learned of Stagville beneath the tall ceiling of the pavilion, Cristina and I seated across from each other in metal folding chairs. She swept over the countryside with a wave of her hand, gesturing to what was once Stagville. I could almost see her wipe away the thin veneer between us and the plantations. I listened silently as she described the Great Barn, watching its shadow fall across the landscape.

Many people throughout Durham County and much of the rural South are descendants of the Africans enslaved at Stagville. Some of them still practice the art of timber framing. When ELC wanted a pavilion built on land that was formerly part of Stagville, they decided to do so in a way that honored their legacy. They reached out to Earth-Bound Building, a collective of black builders and craftspeople run by a descendant of Stagville's enslaved population. According to Cristina, the construction process was profound and healing for everyone involved. I think Zulayka, another member of ELC tells the story best:

> Together they defied the forces that have threatened to disconnect them from their inherent divinity. Reconnecting them with their ability to create and to see *the beauty of*

> *potential* to its natural end point. . . . These men understood viscerally that what they were doing had implications far beyond them, and they brought the rigor to match. Equally important was that amidst all of the hard work there was laughter, appreciation and celebration. We know that this too is how we honor the legacy of our ancestors. That we come to this work by our own choosing, under our own terms, and with a lightness of heart that would make them proud. Yes, we are the realization of so many compounded dreams.[73]

But I wonder, is potential only beautiful in light of its eventual "end," its realization into this or that "finished" state? Is there not divinity to be found in the unfinished, undone, incomplete? The ground beneath us felt so warm that summer. I can only imagine the dark chill of the Great Barn, sitting high atop its stone foundation.

[73] Santiago, "Wood As Art Medium;" emphasis mine.

Chapter Two: Gods and Squash Beetles

We stood among rows and rows of squash. The sun was directly overhead, without a cloud in sight. Sweat dripped under my borrowed wide-brimmed hat. Before I got a chance to wipe it out of my eyes, I felt the soothing chill of a passing breeze. The feeling practically knocked me off my feet. I sat and rested while I listened to the soil.

We had spent the last half-hour or so killing squash beetles. I want to say we were dealing with an infestation—there were so many, they were eating everything, the squash leaves were turning black with disease—but I can't. It would feel unfair. It *did* feel unfair. At first, I thought it was just some environmentalist guilt. Who was I to decide which beings had the right to exist, to eat, to destroy? I tried to justify their deaths with the knowledge that the crops I protected from them would go on to feed a family in need, that the roots and leaves and corpses left behind would return to the soil and become something new. But this didn't comfort me. It was so hard not to notice the way their eggs caught the light. These tiny, reddish-brown ovals I looked for under every leaf. And when I did find them, for just a moment, they were rubies. I felt how firm they were under my thumb as I flattened them. I poured soap water on them, and I watched as hundreds of beetles scattered, panicked. I knew the soap would slowly suffocate them to death. Then I listened as the bubbles soaked into the soil.

Earlier, Emili had shown me the song "Fuck These Fuckin' Fascists" by local punk band The Muslims. We'd been humming it together for the past few minutes; an icebreaker of sorts. We still hadn't had a full one-on-one conversation yet. She was a part-time worker on the farm close to my age, and she was kind enough to let me borrow her hat. That was pretty much the only interaction we'd had up to that point. She could probably sense my nervousness. Seeing me on the ground, she decided to walk over.

"Time for a break?"

She was still standing. Somehow, her being so at ease made standing seem like the more comfortable position. I rose to join her.

"Yeah, my back is killing me."

I wasn't being completely honest. Physically, I felt great. I was actually surprised by how little I noticed my chronic pain since coming to the farm, despite the heavy labor. *There was something here*, but at the time I just couldn't explain it—I couldn't begin to describe what it was doing to me. But I knew how it felt. It felt like sweat in a cool breeze. It felt like killing an insect and mourning its death.

"I hope this isn't weird to ask, but what do you believe in? Like, spiritually, or religiously, or whatever."

She smiled a bit.

"I believe in paradoxes."

She told me of a universe that was infinite and infinitesimal. Of a god that was singular and innumerable, everywhere and nowhere, nothing and everything. Of the lessons taught to her by her ancestors, speaking to her through the land she stewarded. More than anything, she believed in what was all around her, and what that revealed about herself. As we spoke, I hoped the squash beetles found a way out from beneath our feet.

* * *

Emili invited me into an alternative mode of perception. Despite my own lack of traditionally "spiritual" or "religious" beliefs, I found that I agreed, in some way or another, with everything Emili told me about God(s) and the universe. But when I heard her speak, I did not interpret her words as describing some higher power. To me, Emili was describing blackness.

This was jarring for a few reasons, not the least of which was the fact that Emili is an almost white-passing mestiza woman. Yet at the same time, her words were remarkably similar to some of Butler's own.

> Your teachers
> Are all around you.
> All that you perceive,
> All that you experience.[74]

I thought about what it meant for something to be nothing and nowhere, yet at the same time everywhere and everything; about how it felt to see your ancestors in the world around you, long after their passing, whether or not they were ever *there* to begin with. Suddenly, I realized I was describing my own experiences as a black person in the United States. At that moment I allowed myself to feel, more than I ever had before, how it felt to be black, *anywhere* and *everywhere*. And as I felt it, I knew it was no one sensation, but an endless flow of becoming and unbecoming; a subtle but ceaseless process of change shared by insects and humans alike.

Drawing on Butler's poetry, ELC's praxis, and black critical thought, I argue that both the religion of Earthseed and ELC's land stewardship are undergirded by a desire to become one with blackness *as* change. Inspired and informed by ethnographic accounts of my time with ELC, this chapter reads Butler's *Parable* series in conversation with radical black feminism, Afro-pessimism, and black optimism. I focus on Earthseed's wisdom literature, The Books of the Living, to elaborate what I argue is Butler's distinct sense of black mysticism, as immanently theorized in her fiction. Accordingly, this essay is organized as follows: first, I introduce the structural position of blackness in the anti-black world, as theorized in contemporary black feminist and Afro-pessimist thought; second, drawing on black optimism, I introduce *black mysticism* as a mode of inhabiting what Alexis Pauline Gumbs calls "the black simultaneity of

[74] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 285.

the universe;"[75] and finally, I draw on these contemporary theorizations of black mysticism in order to cite one of its precedents in Butler's speculative fiction.[76] In doing so, I hope to provide alternative ways in which to interpret and relate to blackness, both as a subject position and as a theoretical concept.

Distorted Flesh

I think, although I cannot be certain, that most black people living in the United States do not consciously experience blackness until the very moment they experience anti-blackness. Typically this starts with a look, with an acknowledgment of what is perceived as some *essential* difference. It is through this subjectivizing look that blackness *as subject position* is assigned to black people.[77] Therefore, in order to understand the structural position of blackness in the anti-black world, it is imperative that we understand the relationship between blackness and the white gaze.

The white gaze is best understood through its preeminent site of ontological violence, the hyper(in)visibility of black women and femmes. Audre Lorde writes, "Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one

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[75] Gumbs, *M Archive*, 7.

[76] Some Butler scholars choose to categorize Butler's work as *visionary fiction* to emphasize its relevance to "building new, freer worlds." I maintain use of the term *speculative fiction*, as my engagement with the *Parables* series is not based in futurity or worldbuilding, but in the speculation and embodiment of alternative forms of being within and without the world as we know it. Imarisha and brown, *Octavia's Brood*, 4.

[77] As Frantz Fanon argues, "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man." Another way to think of it: if someone were to call a black person a nigger, what could that black person possibly do to prove them wrong? For the black person to say "I am not" would not be entirely true. As much as they may deny it, they know how it feels to be black in an antiblack world; in fact, they just felt it once again. Even if they were to say, "Yes, I am a proud nigger. So what?" it would ultimately make no difference. Try as one might, no one can choose how they are perceived. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110.

hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism."[78] Here Lorde gestures to the fact that racial categories distort the perception of difference to such an extent that black women are not only hypervisible (as Other), but also, paradoxically, invisible—warped beyond recognition as *people* altogether. Lorde notes that the distorted gaze finds the locus of difference not in black women themselves, but in "that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness."[79] Blackness, then, is the hyper(in)visibility around which vision distorts.[80]

Hortense Spillers elaborates on the forms of being engendered by depersonalization. Marking the distinction between body and flesh as the difference between liberated and captive subject positions, Spillers describes flesh as the "zero degree of social conceptualization."[81] Flesh collapses the distinction between content and form; black people are subsumed into their blackness, made invisible within public discourse and the social imaginary. This invisibility is precisely what makes blackness so scandalous, so hypervisible; by all accounts, *blackness should not exist*, and yet it must, as the zero degree of social conceptualization, the embodiment of potentialities foreclosed by normativity. It is through the figure of the black feminine, "the female flesh 'ungendered,'" that the mutability of black personhood and the violability of black flesh are their most apparent.[82] Black women and femmes routinely subjected to every form of

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[78] Lorde, *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, 11.

[79] Ibid.

[80] As I argue further in this chapter, racial categories distort everyone's vision, including the vision of the black people it renders unrecognizable. Whether or not one even believes in race as a category, racial images and stereotypes pervade every aspect of the modern world.

[81] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67; emphasis in original.

[82] Ibid., 68. While Spillers speaks of "the female flesh 'ungendered'" specifically in reference to cisgendered black women, trans studies scholars following Spillers have made a point of including black trans femininity in mobilizations of the concept. While a more in-depth discussion of black trans femininity is outside the scope of this thesis, it should suffice to say that

gendered violence, including forms of torture and exploitation typically reserved for men, Moreover, they are denied their right to gender altogether, masculinized beyond femininity without being granted access to the privileges and protections of masculinity.[83] Still, no black person escapes the terror of anti-blackness. As Spillers argues, under the conditions of anti-blackness, "we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*."[84] While certain identities make black people more vulnerable to violence (gendered, ableist, classist, and so forth), blackness unravels identity itself, leaving one completely exposed, without a self to call their own.

It is for fear of this depersonalization, the forced embodiment of mere flesh, that black people come to fear their own blackness. This fear, triggered at the recognition of being perceived, is often accompanied by a crippling sense of vertigo and shame. Frantz Fanon describes the sensation as follows: "I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an *objective* examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships."[85] This experience of existing "triply," as Fanon describes it,[86] reveals the irreconcilability between a black subject's notion of individual personhood and the *objective* reality of racial inferiority; a reality perceived through white eyes. These eyes pose

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there is an inherent praxis of ungendering in trans/non-binary embodiment, particularly as it relates to black femininity.

[83] In contrast, black men, by virtue of their (aberrant) masculinity, are afforded *contingent* access to the privileges and protections of patriarchy. Their participation in patriarchal power structures is both easily revoked and always already weaponized against them. This is why Spillers claims "the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself." Ibid., 80.

[84] Ibid., 67; emphasis in original.

[85] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109; emphasis mine.

[86] Ibid., 112.

a constant existential threat. These are eyes that are always already watching, eyes through which one sees themself being seen.[87] Denied his capacity, personhood, and orientation in space and time, Fanon finds himself lost in a sea of black faces—faces real and imagined, ancient and yet-to-be-born, all superimposed over his black skin. The scene, in all its impossible grandeur, is profoundly tragic. The mass of undifferentiated flesh is the purest form of deficiency and excess, collapsed into one. It is everything wrong, and nothing worth mentioning.

Blackness, as we are conditioned to perceive it, is nothing more than the space left in the absence of humans, signifying mankind's every abject quality. It is against the background of this absence that mankind is able to foreground itself. David Marriot, expounding on Fanon's analysis of the white gaze, argues that, "the pleasure in looking, at least inside the colony, has its source in a kind of masochistic subjection."[88] This is a kind of subjection that black and non-black subjects alike participate in, as each seeks to fulfill their desires through the assertion of their own individual personhood, the embodiment of their mastery over blackness. In truth, this is nothing short of a sadomasochistic self-abasement, a denial of one's own improper or uncivilized affects and desires projected onto a collective black Other.[89] It is through this act of

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[87] These "white eyes" can only be considered "always already watching" from an initial internalization of anti-blackness. As David Marriot argues, "Perception, in the colony, is always in fact a racial projection (or, rather, retro-jection) on the basis of a situation in which the real is indistinguishable from fantasy . . . the white self-image that one desires to be seen and loved by never really came first, but can only be said to come first from a situation that precedes that interiorizing idealization." Marriott, "Waiting to Fall," 166.

[88] Marriott, "Waiting to Fall," 168.

[89] According to Nathan Gorelick, "racism is motivated by a kind of fantasmatically driven jealousy which posits the racialized other as somehow less susceptible to socially-prescribed repressions, less constrained in the pursuit of his desire; in other words, racism names the externalization of one's own jouissance, of one's ownmost mode of enjoying . . . via its projection onto an imaginary Other, who thereby becomes an object of resentment and fear." Gorelick, "Extimate Revolt," 132.

denial and projection that subjects are socialized. As such, blackness acts as an interstitial "zone of nonbeing" that, outside of both individuality and society, demarcates the boundaries and dimensions of both.[90] Blackness seems to warp everything and everyone in its proximity, morphing the object of perception into something utterly unrecognizable; it draws in observer and observed, threatens to absorb them both, and yet one cannot help but look. The fear of blackness animates vision.

These are the ontological conditions that re/produce the gratuitous violence of anti-blackness. We are horror, comedy, pornography, tragedy. We are senseless entertainment. Senseless, because there need be no reason.[91] Senseless, because it is often unconscious. Senseless, because we grow numb. Everyone watches, enthralled; "the *spectacle* of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world . . . our deaths must be repeated, *visually*."[92] There is something absolutely nonsensical about the whole affair. It is of the utmost importance to the structure and maintenance of the world we know that we suffer, *visually*, and yet it is absolutely

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[90] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 10. Here I am also guided by Patricia Williams, who writes, "The blackness of black people in this society has always represented the blemish, the uncleanliness, the barrier separating individual and society." Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 198.

[91] This is the difference between the contingent violence experienced by the worker, the criminal, the native, etc., and the gratuitous violence experienced by the slave. The former is used either for material gain (such as the acquisition of labor and land) or to enforce the rule of law. The latter needs no discernible motivation. As Wilderson argues, "When violence *is* the law, and not the effect of its enforcement, it presents the rules of narrative with a crisis; because what we have is a situation that resists retelling, for the simple reason that narrative's causal principle, the ghost in the machine we call the causal logic (or 'because principle') of the story, is missing. This is how a Black story is jinxed." Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 89-90.

[92] Ibid., 225; emphasis in original.

imperative that our collective suffering is impossible, *invisible*.[93] It is a kind of irrationality that breeds paradoxes. We affirm that our lives matter because of their very immateriality.

And yet, there is a certain kind of clarity to be found in paradoxes. They are the sites at which reason is left shattered. The paradoxical nature of blackness reveals the aporias underlying all modern conceptual formations.[94] If Black life and death are both hypervisible and invisible *and* material and immaterial, then one might very well claim that they are also both nowhere and everywhere. In the realm of discourse and imagination, blackness is synonymous with *nothingness*, the absence of existence that is nevertheless tangible, observable in every place and in every thing that it is not.[95] It is the infinite abyss upon which the world is built. And if blackness is the nothingness against which the world is constructed and its people are defined, then the world and everyone in it ultimately depend on blackness. But the reverse cannot be true. *Absence exists prior to presence*, even if it can only be called "absence" from the perspective of everything that exists. More importantly, absence can never be destroyed. Within this bittersweet

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[93] As I write this I think of the many sensationalized incidents of black death that have occurred in recent years, particularly that of George Floyd. How irrational must someone be to watch an unarmed person be slowly murdered over the course of nine and a half minutes and still find a way to blame the deceased? How irrational must someone be to watch this death publicly rehearsed time and time again, always against the same group of people, and yet still claim that this people's collective torment is either nonexistent or unintentional?

[94] Here I take insight from Andrew Kaplan, who contends that "*all modern conceptual formations are allegories of anti-/Blackness*. . . . the theological, ontological, libidinal, political, and literary are but different perspectival lenses upon the same immanent register that is anti-Black modernity." Kaplan, "Richard Wright's Anagrammatical Allegory of Liturgical Reading," 280; emphasis in original.

[95] Speaking on the relationship between the absolute and absolute nothingness, Fred Moten poses the rhetorical queestion, "What if the nothing that is in question here moves through to the other side of negation, in 'the real presence' of blackness, in and as another idea of nothingness altogether that is given in and as and to things?" It is in this vein that I refer to nothingness; as a form, characteristic, or condition of matter that renders said matter almost non-existent. Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 751.

realization of the blackness's nothingness is the implicit acknowledgment of alternative modes of knowing and being, in excess of the world we know.

In its nothingness blackness is the bearer of infinite potentialities. This is the negative capability of what Christina Sharpe calls "anagrammatical blackness," "an index of violability and also potentiality. . . . blackness anew, blackness as a/temporal, in and out of place and time putting pressure on meaning and that against which meaning [through grammar] is made."[96] As Sharpe argues, it is because of its very violability, its constitutive exclusion from ontology, that blackness bears the potential to *undo* ontology, to unravel meaning and the desire for it. This is not merely an act of defiance, but also an affirmation of the nothingness we everyone and everything share in common, even if few are able to recognize its presence.

Therein lies the question, the matter at hand: What if we were to stare, unflinching, into the depths of blackness; let it fill our field of vision, let it subsume us entirely? What if we were to drop all pretenses of the body and delight in the flesh? What if we let ourselves be elaborated through the eyes of squash beetles?

Black Mysticism

The day after my talk with Emili I interviewed Tahz, another member of ELC. I asked him why he thought it was important for black people in particular to connect with nature. He answered with a soft chuckle.

> It's like [asking], why is it important for [black people] to connect with sleep? 'Cause there's more stress upon them, in this country especially. It's important to cleanse and wash yourself, be connected to life in some different ways. . . . [ELC's] a place to get more grounded and kind of *wash the distortion off of you*—distorted culture, distorted pessimism . . . whatever it is you do when you're out there.[97]

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[96] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 75-76.

[97] Tahz Walker, interview with the author, July 12, 2021.

He made it sound so obvious. I guess it must have been. Over the course of my visit, I came to understand that I knew nothing. In fact, I knew it intimately. It was a kind of intimacy that required humility. The intimacy of objects in the midst of other objects.[98] The intimacy of hands in soil. Once again I hear Butler's echo:

> Earthseed
> Cast on new ground
> Must first perceive
> That it knows nothing.[99]

I knew nothing because I knew where I came from. I knew nothing because I had everything to unlearn.

If we are to embrace the negative capability of anagrammatical blackness, we must first understand the grammar it renders inoperative. Denise Fereira da Silva identifies three ontological pillars that sustain modern thought: separability, determinacy, and sequentiality.[100] These pillars support the world as we know it, "an ordered whole composed of separate parts relating through the mediation of constant units of measurement and/or a limiting violent force."[101] This mode of understanding the world creates a grammar in which difference itself is enough to justify violence and exclusion. In light of this, da Silva proposes we perceive the entirety of existence not as an ordered whole, but as a plenum, "a complex whole without order. . . .an infinite composition in which each existant's singularity is contingent upon its becoming one possible expression of all the other existants, with which it is entangled beyond space and

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[98] "I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects." Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

[99] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 185.

[100] Da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," 61.

[101] Ibid., 57-58.

time."[102] This requires us to think of difference without separability—difference undistorted by notions of race, ownership, and self-possession. What remains is a form of relationality disentangled from sociality, unbound by the matrix of space and time; one that bridges the distance between what exists and what could be. It is a kind of relationship black people often feel for their many unknown or forgotten ancestors; that collective whole of the visions and vestiges of people who may never have existed, yet whose kinship continues to warm our hearts.

Implicit in da Silva's theorization of the plenum is the presence of anagrammatical blackness. Not only does blackness undo the ontological pillars of modernity, but it also serves to create the condition of possibility for a form of collectivity in excess of sociality, temporality, and determinability. Da Silva gestures towards this in her mobilization of Spillers's concept of flesh: "flesh is no more and no less than what has been (which nourishes us as animal, vegetable, or mineral) and of what has yet to become, that which returns to the soil to be broken down into the nano elements, the particles that emerged at the beginning and remain in the composition of everything that happens and exists in the universe."[103] At least two things about this statement are worthy of special attention. First is the acknowledgment of the *physical* inseparability between the material and the immaterial; more specifically, it highlights the inseparability between blackness and the natural world, which we will return to later. Second is the spiritual register of her words, the *mystical* quality of flesh that collapses the distinctions between immanence and transcendence, nothingness and everything. This is blackness as the flesh of the universe; differentiable, but inseparable from everything that is—the pure potentiality of

[102] Ibid., 59.

[103] Da Silva, "Reading the Dead," 43.

non/existence.[104] How then might we come to inhabit blackness as singular existants within a black collectivity, finite expressions of an unknowable infinity?

Fred Moten explicates the relationship between blackness, ontology, and mysticism by elaborating what he calls a "mysticism in the flesh," a spiritual and embodied attempt at inhabiting blackness in all its potentiality.[105] Moten argues that blackness, being prior to and antagonistic towards ontology itself, cannot be considered the property of black people or the regulatory powers that created blackness as a racial category.[106] In fact, blackness is antagonistic towards subjectivity and sovereignty in all their forms. Blackness is constantly applying pressure to the material and metaphysical matrix that attempts to capture it. To attempt union with blackness is to refuse one's very social existence.[107]

A mysticism of the flesh, a *black mysticism*, can thus be considered "the refusal of standpoint,"[108] a disavowal of everything one uses to define or identify themselves, whether

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[104] Differentiable as opposed to undifferentiated, as black people (collectively) are under the white gaze. Without separability, difference is disentangled from both individuality and society.

[105] As a general term, mysticism refers to any set of beliefs or practices through which one attempts union with the Divine. As used here, black mysticism (or a mysticism in the flesh, again in the vein of Spillers) is a form of mysticism through which one attempts to achieve union with blackness. Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 753.

[106] Ibid., 739.

[107] I would like to clarify that there is a difference between "society" and "collectivity." The former is an ordered whole unified through its various internal identities and defined against the Other. The latter is a disordered whole united in difference. Black people exist in a collectivity united by a shared *lack* of identity. To put it differently: all black people are black. To be pro-black does not mean you have to like all black people; in fact, it would be rather fetishistic to do so. To be pro-black simply means you want whatever is best for black people, knowing full well that no two black people will be in perfect agreement on whatever the "best" thing for black people is. What matters is not that you attempt to be social with every black person you know, but that you attempt to think and act on behalf of collective needs and interests.

[108] Ibid., 752.

class, gender, race, or anything else. This is not to be confused with neoliberal colorblindness. Rather, it is the recognition that, while these identities have very real implications, they are ultimately nothing but hot air, idealized versions of ourselves that remain permanently beyond the reach of our "true," contextual selves. It is for this insistent refusal of grounding that Moten believes blackness bears the potential to end the world as we know it—yet it is for these same reasons that blackness will always remain beyond grasp. There is no way to completely empty oneself *of* themself, for even the dead maintain some form of identifiable presence.[109] As such, black mysticism indexes a life without telos; an open set of practices through which one attempts an impossible union with the anoriginal black whole, the spiritual domain of freedom and equality.[110] And yet it would all be worth the effort, merely to touch and be touched by the black flesh of the universe.

Coincidentally enough, Moten's black mysticism has had some influence on ELC via Alexis Pauline Gumbs—who was not only a student of Moten's, but also one of the collective's founding members. Gumbs ascribes a feminine, maternal nature to this mystical, universal conception of blackness, tracing its presence as the thread connecting all of existence. This is particularly evident in her book *M Archive*, a speculative documentary of blackness and black existence after the end of the world. Blackness is given various names within the text—"the dark feminine," "the black simultaneity of the universe," "the black feminist pragmatic

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[109] I am thinking here not only with da Silva, but with Moten's bold assertion, "what remains to be inhabited is nothing itself." Ibid., 752.

[110] J. Kameron Carter describes black religion as "an open set of processes and practices that point to modes of existence that are irreducible to or devoid of archē, foundation, beginning, commandment, a principle of genesis; that is, devoid of teloses, fixed categories, oppositions, or singular narratives." In many ways, Moten's theorization of black mysticism (or "mysticism in the flesh") parallels Carter's theorization of black religion, and as such my reading of each is influenced by my reading of the other. Carter, "Anarchē; or, The Matter of Charles Long and Black Feminism," 107.

intergenerational sphere"—there can be no singular word for *everything*.[111] It is a femininity that refuses intelligibility, evades capture, and provides sanctuary. It is the outer reaches of space, the black depths of the ocean, a single grain of sand. It is a touch in the dark, the sharing of breath, "the radical black porousness of love."[112] Each manifestation of (or potentiality within) the dark feminine is inseparable from every other, existing simultaneously alongside one another outside the bounds of space and time.

Through her written praxis of black mysticism—what she calls "black feminist metaphysics"—Gumbs presents the reader with "a possibility of being beyond the human and an invitation into the blackness of what we cannot know from here."[113] Ironically, this is a blackness that is already around and within us, distorted beyond recognition by our material, psychic, and metaphysical investments in antiblackness. Therefore, black mysticism must be embodied, intellectual, spiritual. It is to embrace the porousness of sensation, to touch and be touched by what we cannot know. It is the never-ending praxis of change; the praxis of our blackness, an endless journey of return to the source. Perhaps this was the paradise Butler had in mind when she wrote the following verse.

> The child in each of us
> Knows paradise.
> Paradise is home.
> Home as it was
> Or home as it should have been. . . .
>
> Yet every child
> Is cast from paradise—
> Into growth and destruction,
> Into solitude and new community,
> Into vast, ongoing

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[111] Gumbs, *M Archive*, 6; Ibid., 7; Ibid.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid., xi; Ibid.

> Change.[114]

And if blackness truly is a universal paradise, albeit a challenging and shifting one, surely we can find traces of it here on Earth.

The Blackness of Change

The ELC members I spoke with often described themselves as being "in relationship" with the land and its non-human inhabitants. At first I thought this was a perfectly material thing—and it is—but one does not "feel" the material world exclusively through sensory registers. The intimacy they described required a different kind of feeling in and through the world, facilitated by but not defined through the senses we are taught to use.

I thought about this as I interviewed Zulayka and Justin, two other members of ELC. Describing the act of listening, Zulayka told me, "these trees and this land and these beings who consider [ELC] a sanctuary . . . they have a lot to teach me. . . . being quiet and just opening up to listening is as worthy an endeavor as anything else that I do."[115] I could feel the deep reverence in her words—she was describing a communion. I asked about her spiritual beliefs.

> When I was in my late 20s I really became interested in the goddess, and the divine feminine, and [I] still am a believer, a devotee I would say. . . . I meditate daily. My meditations happen in nature, and I feel lost without them. . . . I think it's a devotion and a remembering of the sacredness of this natural world, and that I am a part of it, and that the divine lives within me . . . *the divine is accessible to us all*. There is no intermediary required. *That's what I do. That's who I am*.[116]

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[114] Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 117.

[115] Zulayka Santiago, interview with the author, July 12, 2021.

[116] Ibid.; emphasis mine.

Justin had said similar things during his interview. After he described his own reverence for the natural world as a devotee of Ifa, I asked him what it meant for him to be a black land steward on Indigenous land.[117]

> *Being human is different in different places*. . . . It is the indigenous people of whichever place who are gonna be best suited to guide newcomers to do that, because of their own relationship and all the trial and error that their people have done, and all the ways they have gotten the place ready to receive people. . . . This is not my ancestral home, and so it has felt important [to ask], "What do I need to do to be in relationship with y'all so that I'm honoring y'all and your ancestors, *whose bones make up this dust*?"[118]

I had not been exposed to this kind of devotion before my visit. It was the most committed form of devotion I had ever seen, and by far the most peaceful, the most intimate—a devotion in the form of listening. This was the first time I ever thought of land stewardship as a way of speculating and embodying alternative forms of being; forms of being unbound by the ontological pillars of modernity, inseparable from the natural world and its in/animate inhabitants. It was an altogether different understanding of selfhood; one that was porous, fluid, changing with the seasons.[119]

It became clear to me that the modes of relationality ELC members engaged in were rooted in a deep love and longing for blackness itself. In their refusal of fixity and their embrace of modes of collectivity beyond identity, species, and spatiotemporality, the members of ELC are actively practicing black mysticism. At the same time, beneath their words and praxis I could

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[117] While a discussion of the relationship between Earthseed and Ifa (and other diasporic religious traditions) is outside the scope of this work, I do believe Justin's shared interest in both highlights the transformative potential of African cosmologies, both in their capacity to transform adherents and in their capacity to be transformed. Justin Robinson, interview with the author, July 14, 2021.

[118] Ibid.; emphasis mine.

[119] In my interviews I was told that ELC always celebrates solstices and equinoxes to honor the change in seasons. Cycles themselves are sacred, another aspect of divinity. Tahz Walker, interview with the author, July 12, 2021; Zulayka Santiago, interview with the author, July 12, 2021.

feel the distinct presence of Octavia Butler.[120] Zulayka even recognized Butler's influence on ELC's land stewardship in her interview:

> I feel like when you read something like [the *Parable* series], it shifts the lens in your life, of everything that you do, once you've been exposed to that kind of —I don't know if I would use the word prophetic—work, and it did have that kind of impact on my life. . . . that I think was one of the magnets to this group, to this configuration of groups.[121]

Every member I asked had read the *Parable* series and been transformed by it—in fact, they continued to be transformed by it, long after reading. The text itself changed with time, taking on new life in different social contexts and stages of their lives—"it felt essential to revisit that book in community, and to have that space to process some of the emotions that it provoked. . . . it just became . . . more real, and more relevant, and more timely."[122] I realized then that my own reading of Earthseed and the *Parable* series had been too fixed, too detached. I had been so preoccupied with the ways *I* had been changed through the text, that I failed to realize how my reading of the text too was undergoing its own process of change.

Reading The Books of the Living through a black mystical hermeneutic, one bears witness to the mystical poetics at play in Butler's work—poetics that not only precede the theorization of black mysticism, but that also elaborate its praxis and implications. In my reading of the Books of the Living, I introduce what I refer to as the three pillars of Earthseed; three central tenets from which every other lesson and ritual of the tradition branches, and through which we are able to identify the black mysticism embedded within (but in excess of) the

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[120] While I use the term "black mysticism" to better reflect the spiritual dimension of Butler and ELC's work, one could also say ELC practiced what da Silva would identify as "a Black Feminist Poethics—inspired by Octavia Butler's female characters—[which] reads Blackness to expose the ruse of Reflection and Recognition, the yielding of the self-contained and coherent image of the Subject." Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 94.

[121] Zulayka Santiago, interview with the author, July 12, 2021.

[122] Ibid.

religion.[123] To introduce each pillar I will share an associated verse from The Books of the Living.

The first pillar is the core belief of Earthseed—God is change. "Consider: Whether you're a human being, an insect, a microbe, or a stone, this verse is true."[124]

> All that you touch,
> You Change.
> All that you Change,
> Changes you.
> The only lasting truth
> Is Change.
> God
> Is Change.[125]

This verse depicts a kind of relationality that goes beyond humanity and sociality; everything shapes and is shaped by its environment, whether or not the act of shaping is intentional, and regardless of whether or not its effects are determinable. This depiction elucidates a certain interdependence that is revealed through contact, as all things are defined by and dependent on interchange and interaction.[126] Intimacy *as* change is thus essential to the self. It is not enough to recognize that the self changes through contact; the self *is* through contact.

Moreover, this verse makes a striking epistemological claim: the only lasting truth is change, and therefore every other truth or system of knowledge is necessarily fleeting, incomplete, and potentially dangerous. Change itself, while constant, is

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[123] Here I am thinking alongside Jayna Brown. In a chapter on black women mystics, Brown writes: "I try to get at something embedded within, but in excess of, their religiosity. Religion was the condition of communication, the language of change and mode of possibility for many activists and spiritual innovators. In a black episteme, radical spiritual practices gave release to alternate forms of being and selfhood" Brown, *Black Utopias*, 25.

[124] Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 89.

[125] Ibid.

[126] This is true even when intimacy is given in the form of denial or exclusion.

inconsistent—manifesting in infinite forms to infinite effects, always beyond predictability or understanding.[127] As such, the God of Earthseed can be understood as that which blackens reason, destabilizing the onto-epistemological foundations of the world.

The second pillar is the paradox of Earthseed, the relationship between God and the universe.

> Why is the universe?
> To shape God.
> Why is God?
> To shape the universe.[128]

This pillar, in claiming that God and the universe are mutually constitutive, collapses the distinction between the two. If all things in existence are actively shaping God even as they are being shaped by God, this implies that all things in existence *are* God—as a collectivity of changing entities inseparable but differentiable from the whole. Not only does this strip the word "God" of authority, it denaturalizes order and hierarchy altogether; in other words, all things are equally one with an ever-changing universe, existing for no other reason than change. In other words, they exist for existence itself.

The third and final pillar is the Destiny of Earthseed.

> The Destiny of Earthseed
> Is to take root among the stars.
> It is to live and to thrive
> On new earths.
> It is to become new beings
> And to consider new questions.
> It is to leap into the heavens
> Again and again.
> It is to explore the vastness

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[127] This is even reflected in the naming conventions within the Books of the Living. Besides Change, God is given many other names—including Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, and Clay. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 34.

[128] Ibid., 88.

> Of heaven.
> It is to explore the vastness
> Of ourselves.[129]

While characters within the narrative of the *Parable* series—including Lauren herself—interpret this verse literally, doing so is a betrayal of the second pillar of Earthseed. If all things are equally one with the universe and/as change, there can be no hierarchy between animate and inanimate objects, or between forms of existence capable of leaving Earth and those that are not; if change is the sole reason for existence, there can be no telos for the adherents of Earthseed. There is only the faithful praxis of shaping and being shaped.

Read metaphorically, this pillar solidifies the symbolic link between Earthseed's ever-changing universe and the black mystic's understanding of blackness. This exodus into space is then (re)interpreted not as some singular event for the future of mankind, nor as inherently positive. It is an iterative process of transformation and self-discovery that necessarily involves stripping ourselves of everything that makes us who we are; everything that makes us human. In ridding ourselves of our *selves*, we open onto the endless void and its infinite potentiality. Put differently, the destiny of Earthseed—of humanity, of the world—is a descent into blackness; the rejection of stability, a fall from grace and a leap into the welcoming embrace of nothingness. And how beautiful must the view be on the way down.

* * *

A little ways off the farm, past the houses, the fire pit, and the pavilion, is a 33-acre forest. It takes up the majority of the land ELC stewards. They see caring for it as their responsibility, even as they recognize the land could never be theirs, the city's, or anyone else's.

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[129] Ibid., 283.

For days I had been staring at it through the mesh fence around the farm, imagining winding dirt paths disappearing into the forest floor. It was drawing me in, and I wanted to lose myself in it.

I finally got my chance about halfway into my visit. Cristina pulled me aside the morning after my conversation with Emili, taking me to a quiet spot in the shade where we could sit and talk. She apologized (even though she really didn't have to), explaining that ELC members normally like to introduce first-time visitors to the land as soon as they arrive, and that she regretted not doing so sooner. We went back and forth expressing our mutual gratitude, and then she started speaking about the forest and surrounding area. She told me about the creek, the soil, the abundance of life beneath the canopy. Then she told me some of its history. For all the life it nurtured, the forest was also a living monument to hundreds of years of genocide, dispossession, and slavery.[130] For both reasons it was sacred. She asked me to open my hand.

"This forest is especially sacred to the Occaneechi. Local elders told us this was a good way for guests to honor their ancestors."

She placed a folded scrap of paper onto my palm. A few pieces of tobacco spilled out of one end. It was so delicate, so light, and yet it carried so much weight. I was almost too scared to hold it. I put it in my pocket, checking every now and then to make sure I hadn't somehow torn or crushed it.

"I'll walk you to the entrance, but from there you should go in alone."

Tunnel vision is a bad habit of mine. My eyes were probably fixed on the dirt path most of the walk. I didn't even notice we got to the gravesite until Cristina stopped me. We were almost at the entrance to the forest when suddenly the path split into two, forming a wide circle

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[130] During our interview, Justin gestured to the forest and the surrounding land, saying, "these are the shreds of colonization. . . . Look at the woods, even just a patch of trees. What you are looking at [are] the effects of colonization." Robinson, interview with the author, July 14, 2021.

around a field of grass and a patch of trees. They called it the mother's grove. There wasn't any one spot, any particular marking. Just space. There was no telling how many were buried there—but that wasn't the point. It was sacred as a symbolic representation of the dead, but it could never contain them. The dead permeate the landscape. We were already encircled.

Cristina left shortly after. I took the tobacco out of my pocket and started wandering. From inside, I got the distinct impression that there was no outside. I was happy to feel immersed, and wanted so desperately to take it all in; the falling leaves, the dragonflies, the scent of red cedar. After a while I found a wooden bridge, and I decided it was where I would pay my respects. I sat down and let my feet dangle above the creek.

Cristina had told me the creek was once an important route for travel and trade between bands. When I arrived it was almost entirely dried up, even more than you would expect in the summer heat. The lake that feeds into it was dammed a long time ago, most of the water being redirected to processing plants for the citizens of Raleigh. Now it was just a slow trickle of water, but with such tall banks, so wide apart. You could feel something was missing. Sometimes absence is its own form of presence.

I don't exactly believe in an afterlife. I don't believe in an everlasting soul. But I believe in nothingness. I believe in a nothingness that can be felt, can be seen. A nothingness we all return to. And it was all around me, the entire time. I believe in paradoxes too. I poured the tobacco into my hand, spoke a wordless prayer, and released it onto the bank.

Before I left I took one last chance to look up at the forest canopy. I was surrounded by red cedar. They're sacred trees, and not just for their soothing fragrance and healing properties. They're incredibly strong, tall, and long-lived. But they're still just trees, no matter how resilient.

I found myself wondering how long they would stand, and what might grow from their decaying trunks.

Conclusion

I have spent the last two years researching and writing for this project. Now that my work is finished, I find it incredibly painful to tear myself away from it. At the same time, I remember just how painful it felt every second I had to write about hope and change and blackness and pretend I wasn't just talking about myself. I felt as if every word I wrote was violently torn out of my body.

For the nine days that I was in Durham, I carried a pen and a small black notebook in my back pocket. I wrote in it every single day. After I got back home, it sat undisturbed for almost a full year. I was content to look back at my time there from a safe distance. I think I was afraid that if I opened that notebook and read what was inside, it would somehow lose some of its magic. The illusion would be shattered. The illusion that it was a perfectly happy and transformative experience. The illusion that my time there revived my faith in change. The illusion that that place and those people would always be there waiting for me, between the pages of my notebook, whenever I needed them most.

After a year of pretending it wasn't right in front of me, tucked away in one of the drawers of my writing desk, I finally decided to open that little black notebook. I needed them. By now, its pages were stiff, creased, yellow with age. I cracked it open and turned to the final entry, written the second morning after my return to Atlanta.

> 7/19
> I had a breakdown last night.
> I realized that the farm is the only place I've ever felt like I mattered.
> I'm not supposed to be here.

I'm always surprised by the things I write in the middle of a mental health crisis. A bit dramatic at times, but always completely honest. Reflecting on it now, I'd have to say I still agree with

what I wrote. But just because I felt more seen and heard and cared for than I ever had before, doesn't mean I wasn't still in the thick of one of the worst periods of time in my life.

In the months immediately before my visit, I suddenly became aware of my own personal apocalypse. I came out as trans.

Perhaps I did so too quietly. So few people seem to recognize that I am. I changed my name—legally and everything!—and I started using they/them pronouns, just waiting for that sweet rush of gender euphoria. It never came. Those were the first in a long line of failures. I shaved my head. I grew my hair. I put on makeup. I wiped it off between classes. I started voice therapy. I refused to talk—no matter how I inflect or what words I say, the words I speak don't feel like mine. I started taking estrogen and t-blockers. I've noticed few changes. Too few. No matter how hard I look in the mirror, I can't seem to see myself. I'm not sure I ever have. All I see is everything that's missing. Everything that shouldn't be there.

I was just beginning my transition at the time of my visit. I didn't know then exactly what I was doing, or where I was going, or even what was happening to me. But I knew how it felt. That was the first time I had used my new name in public. The first time I used they/them pronouns in public. The first time I wore my hoops in public. And nobody I met at ELC questioned me or looked down on me. For a time I felt, I don't know, "normal," I guess.

But that feeling of normalcy was shattered on one of my first excursions off the farm. The first time I went to a nail salon was with another part-time worker on the farm, a young North African woman named Tamara. We wanted to celebrate a hard day's work. We walked in together, spoke to the hostess together, and for a brief moment, waited together. Tamara was called to the back within a few minutes. I waited there for half an hour while she got her mani-pedi. Four or five other women walked in and got their nails done in-between. By the time

one of the technicians realized I was a customer, I was almost too afraid to admit it. I saw how they looked at me when I walked in. Not just them, but everybody else in the store. I was the only man, and I wasn't even a man. And I was covered in dirt and sweat. And I was one of the only black people there. The least I could do was look effeminate. Why was I even there?

I don't even want to recount how it felt to sit across from that nail technician in the middle of the store. Anyway, it was a cute little lilac gel. I have an absolutely awful memory, but I still remember the color. Sometimes when I look at my nails, I can almost make it out. I left without paying that day, as if stiffing a working-class nail tech would really make me feel better. It didn't. I thought about it for the rest of the time I was in Durham. I still do sometimes.

And then I came home to Atlanta, the black queer mecca, and suddenly I was met with near-constant deadnaming, misgendering, and microaggressions.

Like with any significant life changes, you lose people during transition. Sometimes people's perception of you can't keep up with their knowledge of you. Sometimes they don't even try. Sometimes even you don't have it in you to see yourself the way you want to. *I was losing myself.* And in the midst of all that chaos and confusion, I knew I needed that place and those people. So I opened my notebook.

I threw myself into my work, thinking maybe I could recover that version of myself that felt normal, that felt real, that felt like I mattered. And in some ways, I did. I remembered that being trans didn't always feel like being wrong. But for every little thing I rediscovered about myself, I suddenly became aware of how much more, infinitely more, would always escape my self-awareness. That was hard to accept. I mourned the loss of the control I never had. But after I finished mourning, I felt something like relief. I remembered something Zulayka had said in her interview.

> Many of us come from that world of resist, resist, protest, tear down, challenge the oppressor, and that work is needed, it is obviously still very necessary, [but] it can't be all of it. . . . [ELC] is about what it looks like to build the alternative, what it looks like to use some of our energy to invest in what we do want to see in the world, and how we think we can live with each other, and how we think we can be in relationship with the natural world. I think that that's what [ELC] represents to a lot of people. That's what it is for me. That's why I give so many of my waking hours for free, y'know? [Laughter] . . . . *How do we hold each other close when the world is falling apart*?[131]

I've thought about that last sentence a lot since our conversation. As I told Zulayka then, my time at ELC was incredibly healing. All my life I had been acculturated into thinking that the world we knew could and would be saved, that the possibility of its salvation was worth devoting one's whole life to. I imagine many black children grow up thinking they can be the change they want to see in the world. What a terrible burden that is to carry, along with the weight of the world. What an amazing relief it can be to let oneself down.

I was tired of resisting the loss of my identity. I was tired of resisting, period—not that I could ever truly stop. And I was tired of missing ELC. But Zulayka was right, of course. ELC represented an alternative to me. An alternative space and an alternative self. But I can now recognize the fact that there was never just *one* alternative, not there and not anywhere. There is no singular trans identity I can or should strive towards, nor any singular ideal future I can or should shape into existence. There is only context and its latent potential, both in a constant state of transition.

I am excited to leave this project behind even as I mourn its loss. I leave it imperfect and unfinished, as all things should be. Perhaps in time this work will find its way back to me, changed beyond recognition. Perhaps I'll do the same. I look forward to finding out for myself.

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[131] Zulayka Santiago, interview with the author, July 12, 2021; emphasis mine.

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