Vassar College

SOWING IN THE APOCALYPSE

Reading Octavia Butler's Parable Series Through an Ethics of Mutual Aid

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

by

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"Everyone who's surviving out here knows things that I need to know [...] I'll watch them, I'll listen to them, I'll learn from them. If I don't, I'll be killed. And like I said, I intend to survive,"

– Lauren Olamina, Parable of the Sower

"Who carries the seeds in your community?"

– adrienne maree brown, Octavia's Parables

Introduction

"All utopias from Plato's Republic to George Orwell's brave new world of 1984 have had one element of construction in common: they are all societies from which change is absent," (Dahrendorf, 115). If political theorist Ralf Dahrendorf's assessment can be taken as an apt requisite of fictive utopias, then *Parable of the Sower* constructs an anti-utopia. Of course, the most consistent refrain of the book proclaims:

All that you touch,
You Change.

All that you Change,
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.

Change, with its capitalized C, serves as a substitute for God in protagonist Lauren Olamina's Earthseed verses. These verses and Lauren's understanding of Earthseed in the world will be unveiled throughout this essay, but fundamentally they attest that Change is the most consistent truth that is at the basis of all knowable, experienced life. As Dahrendorf notes, utopia is not a societal formation that is yet achieved – "[...] utopia means Nowhere, and the very construction of a utopian society implies that it has no equivalent in reality," (118). *Parable of the Sower*, and Octavia Butler as a speculative fiction author, reject the utopian desire of a perfect society, one that punctuates the end of historical development and comes to be stagnant in its idealism. As a way of thinking that centers and feels the weight of Change and all its qualities and forces, Lauren's Earthseed and Octavia Butler's novel might best be considered ultra-real –

the novel speculates a world born from and propelled by Changes, uncertainties, and improvisations.

The novel's place in the speculative fiction genre, situated in the distant future of the late 2020s from Butler's time of publishing in 1993, along with a quasi-prophet protagonist facing a ravaged world, cannot deter one from learning the lessons it has to offer. *Parable of the Sower* must be taken seriously, not just for the world it imagines but the systems of care, knowledge, and conviviality that its characters produce as responses to their apocalyptic conditions. These systems will be framed with a lens and ethics of mutual aid. Lauren Olamina, the young, Black, female protagonist of the novel and its sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, navigates this speculated world by compiling her resources – knowledge, skills and experience facilitated through observation, reading, listening, writing, and relationships – and sharing them. She practices and embodies mutual aid.

The novel introduces its readers to an America in the twenty-first century in political, economic and social collapse. It is particularly compelling to open the book in the year 2023 and see the year 2024 printed glaringly, almost as a threat. The novel follows Lauren Olamina, from her Robledo community outside Los Angeles, through its violent demise, as a migrant crossing much terrain as she moves North, and her search to create a community founded on ethics that can truly sustain its members. Lauren is an astute observer, an obsessive learner and survivalist, and a spiritual soul. The God that her Christian father preaches about in the community is not apt to address the exploitation and ravaging of the Earth and its resources – including human bodies – and so she discovers a God that works better: Change. Lauren names Earthseed as the religion that grants authority to Change and people's innate ability to become in relationship with it, and at the end of the first novel she names Acorn as the first settlement to enact Earthseed's values in

community. Lauren loses her entire family to the violence generated under a complete systems collapse, and she joins the nomad community on the highway North with the two survivors of Robledo: Harry and Zahra. This is a migrant story. A story of precarity and improvisation under the hefty task of survival.

Throughout the novel Lauren Olamina identifies Earthseed, a system of thought composed of various knowable truths that she observes and compiles into a guiding practice. It is a religion and an interpretable text; Earthseed verses begin each chapter of the book and are scattered throughout, for reader and character alike to encounter and absorb. The fundamentals of Earthseed rest on mutual aid ethics and produce mutual aid actions. As Lauren makes clear, it is a text for the living (Earthseed: The Books of the Living). She says, "After all, my heaven really exists, and you don't have to die to reach it," (Butler, 222). A grappling with other religions, specifically that within Christianity which her father preaches in her community of Robledo, Earthseed firmly stands with the authority of the self and those that make up the community. Its values, adopted and enacted by many of the characters, will be addressed in greater detail in following sections as forms of mutual aid.

Through this study of Octavia Butler's Parable series – inseparable from its genre of speculative fiction, and the concepts of utopia and apocalypse – forms of social organization based in mutual aid will emerge. Dean Spade's study of mutual aid and its frameworks will assist this project, as well as the concepts and anecdotal assemblages of the book, *Poverty Scholarship*[1]. Another vital resource is the podcast series, "Octavia's Parables," or what will be

[1] The book, *Poverty Scholarship*, written by Lisa Gray-Garcia and Dee Garcia in association with the POOR Press, asserts that in order to use and distribute the knowledge and work of poverty scholars to the communities that they come from and address, one must either be a poverty scholar themselves or work in conjunction with one. This footnote acts as a disclaimer to the fact that I have not worked closely with a poverty scholar in the making of this work, and in an effort to respect the work of the book and its

referred to simply as the Podcast, hosted by artists and activists Toshi Reagon and adrienne maree brown. This latter source provides necessary critical engagement with the text as it relates to present day liberation and radical transformation strategies. This study will roam and explore. Divided into five parts, it will weave together different framings and tangents of Butler's work to situate it across disciplines and genres. The novel, *Foodtopia*, by Margot Anne Kelley, will be used to branch into a historical and theoretical critique of the land-use and farming initiatives in her piece as they relate to mutual aid, and an anecdotal component will attract poetics and shift lines of perspective.

This work is the result of an Urban Studies degree that has continually disturbed lines of disciplines (it is, after all, a multidisciplinary study). Urban theory recognizes the "urban" as an agglomeration of processes, dynamic and generative. The concept of planetary urbanization, for one, as theorized by David Harvey, drains significance from the confines of the so-called "city," and redistributes it to varied geographies with processes of urbanization – geographies that may be considered rural, or even uninhabited, yet are sites that contain or intersect with economic, transportation, and energy systems that fulfill urban needs. In this way, such processes of capitalistic urbanization are unveiled in the text in city-centers, suburbs, through highway flows, farming communities, and corporate towns. The concept of planetary urbanization helps decenter the imaginary of the so-called "city" in Urban Studies, in order to recognize all that which has generated and maintained urban conglomerates – processes of investment and disinvestment, speculative real estate, the racialized laborer, the list goes on and on – are inspired by racial capitalism that is by no means limited to arbitrary urban confines. They are also the systems that

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authors, I will limit the amount of poverty scholarship I write about. This disclaimer also functions to explain that this thesis project, as a product by and for Vassar College, is not intended to be distributed widely among vulnerable communities at its time of publishing.

are recognized to be catastrophic in *Parable of the Sower*, and that have led to extremes of violence and extraction that have become more and more visible. The book foresees collapse as an unfolding process, and one that will worsen unless people understand their ability to accept, contend with, and influence Change.

New forms of organization are identified in the book, and they contend with those that are violent, extractive and profit-oriented. These new forms are identifiable as mutual aid. Butler's work of speculative fiction is presented here as an Urban Studies text in the ways it reckons with systemic collapse. This reckoning demands that what now constitutes legitimate ingredients for learning be disturbed. The work of *Poverty Scholarship* redistributes authority over knowledge, uplifting kinds of knowledge that are not considered academic or legitimate in hegemonic learning institutions. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren says, "Everyone who's surviving out here knows things that I need to know," and then, "I'll watch them, I'll listen to them, I'll learn from them. If I don't, I'll be killed. And like I said, I intend to survive," (Butler, 173). She positions knowledge as a tool for survival, and one that must be gathered from one's immediate environment, in whatever form it comes in. Knowledge is in the mundane, it comes from poverty, it comes from struggle, and it can be taught by and through most anything, if one is willing to listen. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, in her book *Undrowned*, part of adrienne marie brown's Emergent Strategy series, details what we can learn from marine mammals, and centers the act of listening in this process. They write, "I am amazed by how much listening can do. How quickly it becomes less important to be seen, to leap, to show. And those who study river dolphins know it too. Don't bother looking for these teachers who will rarely jump or splash. You have to listen for them, try to hear them breathe," (Gumbs). Were Lauren to have more time by the ocean along her journey, I am sure she would have listened to the dolphins for advice.

Gumbs' call for interspecies collaboration redistributes the power behind forms of knowledge, attacks capitalism's violent individualization, and offers strategies of survival through uncertain and catastrophic conditions.

This is where mutual aid ethics intersect, as they challenge hierarchies and institutionalized services. Spade's book will solidify this connection between Lauren's approach to survival and a study of grassroots social organizing work. It is also where the idea of form, in genre and as structure, comes into play; As Lauren reflects on in *Parable of the Talents*, "My father loved parables – stories that taught, stories that presented ideas and morals in ways that made pictures in people's minds." (*Parable of the Talents*, 14). Storytelling and imagery are sources of knowledge and forces of change. Through the characters and teachings of the Parable series, without a strict commitment to any one form or topic, guiding ethics of mutual aid in social organization will emerge as response to and creation out of struggle and apocalypse.

Utopia, Apocalypse and Speculative Fiction

Before embarking on a deep dive into *Parable of the Sower* and its implications for social organization, certain concepts should be explored. In considering Butler's place amidst the speculative fiction genre, the terms utopia, dystopia, and apocalypse must be examined. Children and adolescents growing up in the 2000s were fed a constant stream of dystopian young adult literature – it was a defining cultural genre. Books and movie series such as The Hunger Games and Divergent presented youths of this decade with worlds set after some clear, apocalyptic moment. This moment generated a hierarchical, oppressive regime in place at the time of the reader's introduction into the world. The most mainstream examples of dystopia were also White. They followed a White protagonist navigating a largely White world with heterosexual relationships and nuclear family structures. Butler's Parable series preceded the 2000s young adult dystopian frenzy, yet her books present a challenge to the typical assumptions of those later works. Race continues to organize society, and in fact apocalyptic conditions only serve to foment racial tensions and the creation of racialized bodies for the strategic survival of those in power.

I invoke the word apocalypse, as almost synonymous with disaster, because I wish to analyze the terms of science fiction (interchangeably speculative fiction or visionary fiction, for the purpose of this paper) alongside the more palatable vernacular of people's lived experiences. So it is the hurricane that displaces a neighborhood, alongside systemic homelessness and institutionalized racial capitalism, alongside a terrorizing population of drug-addled pyromaniacs that can all be analyzed under the language of apocalypse. The leveling effect of using the word apocalypse is important in this study. It generates the proper lens through which to assess insecurity and injustice in everyday existence. The Podcast directly names the "apocalypse of

white supremacy" and the "pandemic apocalypse" (brown, Chapter 10), similarly invoking the term to describe the dailiness and immediacy of such lived experience. Butler reflects on her own fictional writing, saying:

> What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking-whoever "everyone" happens to be this year, (135) (Miller, 357).

This imagination need not detract from the real and the legitimate, if those latter terms are even useful in a study contending with systems of power upheld by notions of legitimacy. The Podcast reflects on Butler as an author of speculative fiction, finding in it a power redistributed to people wrestling with survival. adrienne maree brown says, "Visionary fiction is a way of saying, I get to shape a future in which I get to be co-responsible for what happens rather than a constant victim of someone else's imagining," (brown, Chapter 12). What is more real than that? Visionary/speculative fiction offers a path through the very circumstances that can be described as apocalyptic, and that feel overwhelmingly unlivable.

Lacking in Butler's Parable books is any instance of apocalypse. As Dean Spade relates the idea of disaster to the emergence of mutual aid efforts, he makes an important and almost accusatory assessment: apocalypse – or disaster in his terms – will always be downplayed by the regimes in power that are, "hoping to get back to the status quo of extraction and profit-making

as soon as possible," (Spade, 31). This is to say that narratives of stability and order will reign over any lived experiences of perpetual loss and impending catastrophe. Apocalypse, within these narratives and according to mainstream dystopian literature, will never be recognized as reality by state institutions. This is already confirmed; as bodies – individuals, groups, human and non-human – experience disaster in the way of perpetual insecurity, extinction, various forms of oppression, climate change related natural disasters – the list goes on and on – apocalypse has already "arrived." I use this limiting term in order to make a point, but it is this exact expectation of visible and perceivable arrival that renders the term apocalypse inapplicable in the discourse of the current hegemonic political order. This is why Butler's fiction is so poignant. Lauren explains, "I used to wait for the explosion, the big crash, the sudden chaos that would destroy the neighborhood. Instead, things are unraveling, disintegrating bit by bit," (Butler, 123). The "big crash" could have been ascribed to the daily rapings and killings outside of Lauren's community's walls, or the six years of drought with no rainfall – or to any of the countless other states of insecurity that the characters deal with. Apocalypse is not acknowledged, even though it is felt.

In "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision," Jim Miller identifies a "literature of estrangement" in Butler's work, and fundamental to dystopian/utopian literature more broadly. This estrangement is necessary in works that force a reckoning with what is "real" through speculative envisioning. Estrangement is a tool of literature that forces a repositioning of oneself in relation to the world and processes around them. Speculative fiction, specifically that of the Parable series which is comparatively more realist than other such texts, offers a lens that, in its distance from the mundane and material world of our existence, makes visible processes and conditions that have become naturalized. From Dr. Hee-Jung Serenity Joo's

text, “Old and New Slavery, Old and New Racisms: Strategies of Science Fiction in Octavia Butler's Parables Series,” this estrangement is considered to be an undertaking of relationality, a conversation between text and reality. The piece cites author Samuel Delany, saying, “because ‘[i]n science fiction the world of the story is not a given, [...] [w]ith each sentence we have to ask what in the world of the tale would have to be different from our world for such a sentence to be uttered - and thus, as the sentences build up, we build up a world in specific dialogue, in a specific tension, with our present concept of the real (104),” (Joo). The piece concerns itself with reading texts *as* science fiction. This is a practice that enacts the reader as an agent, and opens up the possibilities that science fiction tropes and structures offer for the so-called “real world.” Reading across the bounds of language – inviting in a vocabulary of apocalypse, for instance – helps us move beyond the confines of systems that obstruct our ability to imagine new possibilities. Necessary to this reimagining is a reorientation towards alternative knowledge systems. Butler encourages the reader, as agent, to identify and absorb these knowledges as Lauren does along her journey.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs urges a cooperative meditation with marine mammal life, a source of knowledge she encourages more interaction with. She commits to a dynamic shift from “identification” as a classificatory and colonial tool to *identification* as a relationship of solidarity. Gumbs locates the ocean as a site of struggle, whose inhabitants display modes of diversity, collectivity, strategy, and radical living that are imminently important and necessary for mutual interspecies survival. This piece is a kind of text of estrangement, the ocean becoming that world through which we can see our own in distorted reflection. Gumbs writes, “we can move between worlds,” (Gumbs). Invoking the practice of reading through genre – thinking with the mundane through the speculative, and vice versa – this sentence encourages world-jumping,

from land to ocean, from Earth to beyond, maybe to the stars. Gumbs' work shares an aim of Butler's that can be stated as a question: What sources of knowledge can we obtain, with respect and reciprocity, from the diverse experiences and environments around us?

Lauren Olamina listens to these diverse sources of knowledge. It is how she discovers Earthseed and is able to foster people to be able to receive its teachings. It is worth detailing here how Lauren perceives and responds to her environment, it explains how she is able to locate her resources and decipher the lessons around her. The critique of change that the book undertakes, with the apocalypse as its backdrop, provides a very useful lens through which to analyze present processes of change that seem to be on course to create the conditions Lauren lives under (if many of those conditions aren't already being felt, or have come and gone for some). Regarding Change as a divine force of Earthseed, a verse from Lauren's book of Earthseed goes:

God is Power—
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
Indifferent.
And yet, God is Pliable—
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.
God exists to be shaped.
God is Change.

This is a dynamic offering. It recognizes the powerful force that unchecked change is, but reestablishes agency and encourages the remodeling (God is Clay) of ways of living. This is a religion – or way of thinking, or spiritual guide, or logic – that is most relevant to the present world of unrelenting and unforgiving change. Lauren lives by the guiding principle of what she names "positive obsession." This is the kind of innate force driving a person to act, and act in the way that is necessary to shape God. It is the application of adaptability and persistence.

Lauren Olamina takes a spiritual and logical approach to the hardships of political destruction, environmental deterioration, rampant violence, and the scarcity of basic resources that the United States in Butler's novel faces. She lives in a community that is striving to maintain a semblance of normalcy within its walls, walls that supposedly function to shield its citizens from the looting, killing and desperate populations outside. Technology is unreliable – the last television in the community breaks down for good – and welfare and security is achieved through gardening and firearms training. The death and destruction beyond the walls, and the imminence of that reality for more than just a few unlucky suspects, does not, in any real way, motivate Lauren's community to restructure their lives. Beyond simple techniques of adaptation, the rote rhythms of daily life are maintained: go to work, go to school, go to church.

The book follows her journey of discovering Earthseed – a way of thinking, of ascribing to a kind of God, of being propelled through life by a religion that is defined by individual agency, and is legitimated to be an observable set of truths. The writings and beliefs of Earthseed see God as Change – the only constant, knowable force in life. In this sense, "Olamina believes in a god that does not in the least love her. In fact, her god is a process or a combination of processes, not an entity. It is not consciously aware of her—or of anything. It is not conscious at all," (*Parable of the Talents*, 46). Lauren recognizes that Earthseed lacks a mysticism that might reel people into other religions. In granting Earthseed a religious status, she is able to promote Change as a force and a constant to the level of a God, demanding that it be reckoned with, esteemed, and lived with as an everlasting and embodied being. Earthseed does offer a destiny, however, and it fits nicely into a work of speculative fiction. To take root among the stars, to quite literally leave this world behind in a spaceship in search of new worlds to inhabit, becomes the hopeful – however dismal it may sound – refrain of Lauren's existence. Earthseed may not be

saturated with deep-rooted lore and iconography, but it surely offers purpose and demands worship in order to contend with the violent world and reach the stars. And besides, what offers better biblical imagery than a world in environmental and political collapse – scorching fires, widespread violence, crumbling walls and impoverished communities. *Parable of the Sower* turns what is everyday and normalized devastation into a horror of biblical proportions with the help of Earthseed.

A common trope of science fiction is the walled community. It is a response to insecurity, and an attempt to create a utopia in and amongst destitution and scarcity. Ursula K. LeGuin's, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," aptly illustrates the tension between utopia and dystopia, and their mutual reliance. LeGuin narrates most directly how utopia is impossible, and necessarily exists at the suffering of another – a defined other. Much of the world around Lauren is in a constant battle with change, in their physical and mental attempts to escape it. They construct walls and make icons of distant political figures. A crucial moment in the book comes in Chapter 5, following the death of three-year-old Amy Dunn who is accidentally shot through the porous walls of the community from the outside. This event unveils the fragility of the walls, both physical and mental, that the community has set up, but more so creates a moment for Lauren to vocalize her unrest in the face of her neighborhood's negligence and complacency. The social organization of her community at the beginning of the novel is best described as a "provatopia." As explained in "The Intuition of the Future: Utopia and Catastrophe in Octavia Butler's 'Parable of the Sower,'" "Privatopia, the walled or gated community, is, at bottom, a fantasy of escape, that one can be in the world without having to live through the sharp contradictions that the world presents. Lauren sees that a community based on such bad faith has little hope of averting eventual catastrophe," (Phillips, 302). This term is attributable to other

societies represented in science/speculative fiction, where walls distinguish between those who have and those who have-not. In this sense, and echoed by adrienne maree brown and Toshi Reagon in their podcast, utopia always creates dystopia. In chapter 14 of the Podcast, they speak of the violence generated by complicity, enacted by those living within the walls and under the belief in their right to have, and others to have-not (brown, Chapter 14).

The conversation that ensues after the death of Amy Dunn between Lauren and her friend Joanne is about survival. For Lauren, generating safety for oneself and for others is not a passive act, rather an intentional and progressive practice of learning and teaching. It is coming face to face with the things that do not work – the flimsy walls – and what lies beyond them. She knows more violence is coming, and in this sense she *can* predict the future. As her religion tells her: "A victim of God may, through learning adaptation, become a partner of God," God being Change, and "[a] victim of God may, through forethought and planning, become a shaper of God," (Butler, 31). Lauren knows more violence and destruction are inevitable following the course her community is on track for, but then contends with this, with this linear notion of progress and change, by offering Joanne a book. She intends to shape God. Through knowledge, with foresight, Lauren's intellect is based in an almost common-sense attentiveness to what works and what does not.

It is impossible to write of the character of Lauren Olamina without discussing her hyperempathy syndrome. Underlying her experiences and perspectives in her very violent and unstable world is the syndrome which causes her to feel the intense physical states of others, namely pain. She feels the pain of others as though it were her own – psychosomatic symptoms capable of completely immobilizing her. This syndrome would fall under what Joo calls the novum of science fiction, a feature or innovation that is granted scientific explanation and helps

define the boundaries of the imagined narrative world. Lauren must move with extreme caution, calculate her decisions with the health and safety of others as the same priority as that of herself. This mutual pain, and pleasure, does not isolate Lauren, although it surely could have. This syndrome grounds the book in its speculative fiction genre; it is a trace of the drug culture that rampantly afflicts desperate populations searching for relief of various ailments and insufficiencies. The drug that ultimately killed Lauren's mother, Paracetco, metamorphosed into the hyperempathy in the child, or (a theme that will be discussed in the following two sections), aid emerging from disaster.

This hyperempathy can be seen as a kind of mediation that reflects the experience of the reader, reading through and into the pains and pleasures of the characters in the books. As is the role of speculative fiction, a strong empathic response to conditions set in the book provides a mode of response for those recognizable conditions in the everyday. In a way, hyperempathy syndrome is able to reckon with forms of estrangement. Speculative fiction is able to reposition violent and unjust conditions that have been naturalized, so that the reader might re-experience environmental, political and economic catastrophe through a new lens. Hyperempathy syndrome is another type of mediated sensory experience, repositioning the pain of others, the struggle of others, as that of a collective. Sharers are unable to dissociate themselves from the daily disasters around them; There is so much to be learned from sharers.

There is so much to be learned from speculative fiction, and as Lauren Olamina insists, from those who are vulnerable, struggling, and surviving – this includes the nonhuman, or those who have been categorically erased from the social conditions of the "human". The following section will make the argument that this alternative approach to listening, to knowledge formation, that which uplifts the non-canon, non-professional, perhaps illegitimate (seeing as

such designations are embedded with hierarchies of power and systems of oppression), is foundational to mutual aid groups and ethics. Butler, not despite her speculative genre of writing, but rather advanced through it, offers an alternative model for social organizing in the midst of the apocalypse that does not rely on any utopian idealism, and thus feels remarkably attainable. On the other hand, her threats of a distinctly American catastrophe feel similarly imminent. As Butler posits to her reader, and she does not mince words: “Learn or die,” (Butler, 279).

Dean Spade's Mutual Aid

Dean Spade offers a framework for mutual aid in his book, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And the Next)*. The lessons from this book are helpful in conversation with Butler's work, and help to show how speculative fiction can relay significant messages for social organizing. The structures of mutual aid organizations as delineated in Spade's book, as well as the struggles they face, find common ground with the organizing approaches in Parable that Lauren strategically undertakes. There are striking traces of the kinds of aid projects that Spade discusses, namely those arising from Black Panther Party survival programs beginning in the 1960s, within the writing and imagined communities of Parable. The free community service programs offered through Black Panther Party organizing were responses to conditions of disaster. In the same visionary work that Butler undergoes in her works of speculative fiction, these programs imagined new worlds out of injustice. Butler's work is a call for mutual aid. Invoking Spade's frameworks and toolkits for achieving truly grassroots and equitable aid allows a stronger reading of the Parable series as an essential text for politics of place and social organization.

Dean Spade is an organizer and professor at the Seattle University School of Law. His work is driven towards queer and trans liberation, centering racial and economic justice in his thinking. The answer to the deep and aching injustices that create and target populations entrenched in struggle?—Mutual aid. According to Spade, "Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them," (Spade, 7). Such an ongoing practice is a dynamic answer to a problem of systems and institutionalized prejudice. Mutual aid must be embodied by those experiencing the violence of hegemonic systems of power in the United States (and abroad). It is a practice built

from shared identity, yet embraces diversity – an imperative for Earthseed. Spade writes, "At its best, mutual aid actually produces new ways of living where people get to create systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being," (Spade, 2). Systems of care – that is the imperative. This is a self-reflective process too. The Podcast ensures that self-reflective questions of care are directed toward the listener throughout each discussion. "What are the joys that keep you moving?" adrienne maree brown asks. She asks too, how we might care for the vulnerability of our leaders. These are the elements of care that distinguish mutual aid work from other claims for welfare.

Mutual aid, from an embodied experience to a global organizing effort, enlists a politics of care, demands diversity, radicalizes cooperation, and uplifts the teachings from spaces of vulnerability and struggle. The goal here is to identify where Earthseed does the same work in a naturalized, almost common sense manner in the face of desperation. Lauren does not sit down to discuss the place of mutual aid as a strategy. It is simply embodied in her survival – it is a vital organ.

How might this embodied politics of care-as-aid function? Lauren and her earliest Earthseed followers live it, and following their journey will embolden it. When an unknown source of gunfire shrouds the area around the migrants' camp, what prevails through desperation and fear is an abundance of care as strategy of survival. Natividad, wife of Travis and mother of Dominic, offers a service of protection by breastfeeding not only her young son, but also the recently orphaned toddler, Justin, who had been taken in by Lauren and her group. Natividad breastfeeds her child and another simultaneously to ensure their silence and maintain the group's invisibility. This act of nurturance, of sharing the marrow of what one has to offer for the betterment of a chosen group, is a politics of care at the root of a strategy of survival. Alexis

Pauline Gumbs describes the practice of adoption or "othermothering" that exists in dolphins, which have been known to lactate in order to feed calves that have been adopted by a certain female. Of this kind of external care she writes, "And if you shared something, taught someone, shared responsibility for someone's wellness for even a part of their journey, how would you measure what you gained from that potentially 'costly behavior?' We call it love," (Gumbs). Within systems intent on dividing labor, incentivizing competition, driving apart the extended family-as-support-system, and altogether individualizing people at every step of socioeconomic life, the sharing of one's most intimate offerings can be a jarring act, indeed, radical. Mutual aid unlocks that which is most human, that which is taught by various species and that which arises to match a desperate need, and amplifies it as venerated and necessary practice.

Spade emphasizes how mutual aid follows a model of solidarity, not charity. He notes considerable differences in the systems and functions of the two. He writes that "Mutual aid is inherently antiauthoritarian," (Spade, 16), and in-so-being involves a lot of people, and refuses the processes of professionalization and the power behind titles that designate some to be "experts" or "professionals," (59). A clear chart denotes attributable differences between charity and mutual aid models. To point out a few: where mutual aid projects "beg, borrow, and steal supplies," charity services rely on "grant money for supplies/philanthropic control of [the] program," (61); Mutual aid "support[s] people facing the most dire conditions, whereas charity "impose[s] eligibility criteria for services that divide people into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients." A major focus is also granted towards decision-making processes, where mutual aid centers consensus and care for participation, while charity turns to a singular person or board of people with a place of status. This chart is helpful because it is direct and recognizable. It both warns and encourages.

Many mutual aid projects and movements ground Spade's work. The Black Panther Party's organizing is a clear and foundational example of a mutual aid ethic building long-lasting systems of liberation and survival. The free community survival programs established in the late 1960s demanded and provided community health services. Free medical clinics and the free school lunch program exemplify the model of solidarity that Spade describes; these programs were run by Black Panther Party members, those scholars of their own conditions and wellbeing who rallied community resources to provide for gaping, and institutionally-constructed, needs. This fundamentally grassroots organizing implicitly challenged the violence of government and corporate racism, and threatened the authority of such powers. Police forces, as weapons of the state, were deployed to extinguish Black Panther Party survival programs – going so far as to urinate on the food for the Breakfast for Children Program in Chicago (Spade, 10) – so that their work might be co-opted by the United States government. Co-optation is granted an entire section of warning in Spade's book. As Earthseed expands and settles to form the community of Acorn, the power of its organization increases its susceptibility to militant-grade raids. Mutual aid is threatening. As we can recall, it is "inherently antiauthoritarian."

Butler illustrates the unreliability and violence of the state branches of policing and security, most notably through their absence in daily life. In the Robledo community, other strategies of safety replaced the assumption that police would arrive on time (or at all), let alone offer services of support. Community members act as their own providers, as guards, decision-makers, teachers, peace-keepers, and firefighters. In times of distress or disaster, for instance in the case of an invasion or house fire, while some individual tendrils of faith remain attached to policing systems, the quick response and action of the community is what wards off or extinguishes. Throughout the novel, police are known to steal, threaten, and enslave. To go for

help, for the murder of a loved one, the raid of a home, or any one of the daily disasters portrayed in a dystopic America, is to assume the risk of one's own imprisonment and to expect to pay a costly sum. Most do not pursue this path. Spade writes, "mutual aid projects emerge because public services are exclusive, insufficient, punitive, and criminalizing," (Spade, 53). To embolden the distinction between neoliberal projects and mutual aid, Spade invokes the work that the Oakland Power Projects (OPP) achieves in response to privatized fire services in the Bay Area. As neoliberal programming erodes the functioning of public firefighting services – a devastating accompaniment to the increase in wildfires due to climate change – the OPP aims to redirect community dependence unto itself. The growing private firefighting sector follows a for-profit model, exclusionary by nature. The work of the OPP, by contrast, is situated in communities predisposed to suffer from police violence, and their training offers skills and resources to bolster the crisis-response capacity of the communities themselves.

To put the stakes of larger-scale political and economic orders at play with Spade's insights, a longer Earthseed verse is helpful here:

When apparent stability disintegrates,
As it must—
God is Change—
People tend to give in
To fear and depression,
To need and greed.
When no influence is strong enough
To unify people
They divide.
They struggle,
One against one,
Group against group,
For survival, position, power.
They remember old hates and generate new ones,
They create chaos and nurture it.
They kill and kill and kill,

Until they are exhausted and destroyed,
Until they are conquered by outside forces,
Or until one of them becomes
A leader
Most will follow,
Or a tyrant,
Most fear.

Lauren appears to recognize the same possibilities and patterns of human behavior under Capitalism as Spade. Lacking in Parable's America is national political stability. Through the deterioration of all governmental welfare systems – and systems in general, whether or not they could be considered to provide welfare – political leadership evokes little to no pride, confidence, or even attention among its citizenry. Within the Robledo community, arguably a community privileged with enough stability to grant its citizens some time and energy to devote to "politics," there is a predominant and confused blasé regarding political elections. Most people do not vote and agree that if they did, it would not matter. The America in Parable divides. After Robledo falls apart, to the same "one against one" progression detailed above, Lauren's journey in becoming a leader, attracting a group, and living by Earthseed, is one that directly responds to the systems of harm, greed and exploitation that destroyed America's political institutions to begin with. adrienne maree brown says, "We know that there's not really a response to the growing rates of poverty, because the poverty is induced by policy decisions that have been made to construct this inside/outside, have/have-not extremism," (brown, ch. 8). Parable allows us to see what we already know, and teaches us how to act, and who to trust.

Mutual aid is situated in *Parable of the Sower* as education and tangible practices that combat insecurity. Travis, an early and devoted Earthseed member, says, "Your God doesn't care about you at all," to which Lauren responds, "All the more reason to care about myself and others," (Butler, 221). Lauren's powerful refrain throughout the book grants agency to those on

Earth, in the face of a God that can only be perceived through the forces it exerts. Lauren continues in her response to Travis, “All the more reason to create Earthseed communities and shape God together. ‘God is Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay.’ We decide which aspect we embrace—and how to deal with the others.” The way that hardship and uncertainty is faced in the novel embraces foundational practices of mutual aid. Lauren identifies those systems and beliefs upon which she cannot rely, and uses this knowledge to establish for herself and those around her systems – largely based in care and cooperation – that fundamentally center survival. Skill-sharing and self-actualization as well as care and attentiveness are key to these systems. These are acts of solidarity.

When Lauren gives Joanne a book about the use of native plants by California Indians, she offers her access to knowledge in order to balance out the insecurities of their community – knowledge as survival. In the sequel novel, *Parable of the Talents*, it is said of the already established Earthseed community, “One of the most valuable things they traded with one another was knowledge,” [...] “Anyone who had a trade was always in the process of teaching it to someone else,” (*Parable of the Talents*, 24). The knowledge and the iterative process of teaching it, passing it, and freeing it to be used more widely, are forms of aid in states of apocalypse. They are also the founding principles of Earthseed, and the first iteration of the kind of community it can foster, Acorn. When Lauren and the group she found and nurtured reached Bankole’s land, they created the community of Acorn. The social organizing that arises out of this group intending to survive can be placed in context with Spade’s models of mutual aid.

One of the first examples of mutual aid seen after the destruction of the Robledo community comes out of Zahra’s life before Robledo and on the “outside.” This life provided her with survival skills – such as scavenging, theft, and a certain attentiveness – that Lauren sees as

invaluable for her to learn. Zahra's experience reflects the kind of scholarship that *Poverty Scholarship uplifts*, and that Lauren instinctively trusts and turns to. "The schools of the people are many," (Poverty Scholarship, 162) and they include the embodied experience of individuals. Literacy is a rare and valuable skill. Lauren has it, Zahra does not, and so they share. Seen growing out of Earthseed is a politics and an economy of care. This care is interpersonal, and oriented toward both survival and joy. It is a staunch rebuttal to Capitalistic individualization, and the hegemonic model of scarcity which creates real scarcity in refusing the possibility of alternative structures of living, recognizing that care in community is reliable and necessary. Dean Spade's book writes it all out legibly. All that Earthseed and the community of Acorn embody, enforce, encourage and then face as severe consequence, are reflected in Spade's defined mutual aid framework.

In the Podcast, the question is asked: "what are the skillsets of the future that you already have but you take for granted right now?" (brown, Chapter 10). adrienne maree brown then answers with an anecdote of a friend whose sewing skills provided an invaluable gift to her community in the form of masks during the peak of the covid-19 pandemic. Lauren asked herself this same question in Robledo, before the walls collapsed and such skills were imminently necessary. She put this question into practice by learning about California wildlife, by learning how to skin and prepare a rabbit, and by packing her survival pack. She then prompted this question to her friend Joanne. She urged her father to prompt it to the community. On the topic of people developing skills in order to combat their own oppression, Spade says, "This departs from expertise-based social services that tell us we need to have a social worker, licensed therapist, lawyer, or some other person with an advanced degree to get things done," (Spade 16). Skill-sharing is a way to redirect dependency inwards, back towards the community. Building

sovereignty over community resources, co-creating and maintaining the systems of production – this is not just survival, but a radical reconfiguring of accountability and knowledge. The sewing machine in Lauren's house in Robledo was a valuable artifact, it contributed to the repair economy of the neighborhood. Its value was evident as the target in a robbery – access to this skill was access to power – and its loss from the Olamina household was grieved. Sewing… sowing… this is more than just a game of linguistics. Communities need both, even in an economy that seeks to co-opt those very fundamental capacities, creating a scarcity that misdirects dependence. It is worth asking again: "what are the skillsets of the future that you already have but you take for granted right now?"

Lauren's hyperempathy is colloquially referred to as "sharing." Might this syndrome represent the most embodied and intimate form of mutual aid? Hyperempathy syndrome is not in and of itself a structure of social formation, but it surely does impact how Lauren creates one. Her leadership is, perhaps more than impacted by, constructed out of her hyperempathy. She has an innate sense of solidarity towards those who share her syndrome – those most vulnerable in a world that targets and exploits one's most intimate offerings. "Sharing" speaks directly to the politics of deservingness hierarchies, or those conditions of acceptance that individuals must meet in order to receive aid from politicized aid organizations. Spade denounces the kind of conditional aid that charity models offer. Who deserves to be helped? Lauren's sharing helps her reach the same answer as that under a mutual aid ethic, which shatters such deservingness hierarchies in recognition that everyone is deserving. Sharing in the pain of others, she shares in the stakes of everyone's survival.

An excerpt from *Undrowned* goes: "In a striped dolphin school, only up to one-third of the school is visible at the surface. What scale and trust would it take to rotate our roles, to work

not to fulfill a gendered lifetime ideal (husbandwifemotherfatherdaughterson) but to show up and sink back, knowing there is enough of all the forms of nurturance to go around in cycles?" (Gumbs). Through the behaviors of a school of striped dolphins, as a collective body, a system of care unveils itself. This rotating and self-regulating organism ("organism" used here in the way a city might be called such, as an entity made up of systems that regulate and work together towards its functioning) is not a suggestion, but a demand. When one falls, another rises to the occasion. This kind of system builds in rest, accounts for exhaustion, and creates abundance. This is a radical, redirected alternative to systems that exhaust and disorient its people. This alternative demands the collective, because the collective is a swimming, jumping, splashing body of nurturance.

Mutual Aid out of Disaster: Riding the California Zephyr

There is an intimate relationship between mutual aid practices and conditions of disaster (apocalypse). The book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, by Rebecca Solnit, engages a dialogue of disaster that highlights communities' responses of care and altruism. Invoking the story of Cain and Abel, she asks: "are we beholden to each other, must we take care of each other, or is it every man for himself?" (Solnit, 3). Through case studies of disasters in recent human history – from hurricanes to instances of organized violence – Solnit finds people acting for the survival and empowerment of one another. It is in those institutions intent on upholding an individualized and competitive citizenry – state and corporate powers functioning within racial Capitalism – where the exciting and effectual sense of conviviality gets smothered, supplanted by a response system based in human values that determine the productivity and worthiness of an often racialized body. Solnit writes that these institutions, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, followed a plan of response steeped in social constructions of human value; bodies were left for dead – killed – because assumptions of their character and worth guided action[2].

Solnit contrasts this response with that of the community, characterized by expedient efforts to share and sacrifice resources, truly saving lives. Hierarchical institutions that uplift racial Capitalism coercively enforce an individualization of citizens. This kind of fragmented citizenry incites Solnit to declare, "Thus does everyday life become a social disaster," (Solnit, 3). She points here to the everyday disasters, the states of apocalypse, that force people to learn to survive. Disaster is then expanded to account for a mentality of competition among people that

[2] Solnit writes in this section about mass media hysteria that was produced in the aftermath of Katrina, characterizing New Orleans citizens as rapists, murderers and general chaos-creators during the natural disaster. She notes how this propaganda generated a hierarchy of deservingness, which excluded many suffering community members from government aid.

pits one against the other, and fundamentally excludes care from organized society. When considering Parable, this really is the crux of apocalypse, and the kind of disaster that Butler seeks to estrange in her speculative fiction in order to warn and produce change.

The "paradise" that arises from "hell" is mutual aid. And community-building that generates reliable systems of survival and care, composed of and for those members a community encompasses, is a joyful experience. Joy, care, happiness – these are all requisites for a just form of social organization, and they are co-constitutive with strategies of survival. Solnit recounts a story told by a friend once caught in a deep fog in California, and therefore forced to spend two nights in a diner amongst similarly stranded strangers. She makes note of how the story, to everyone's surprise, was told "with such ebullience," (Solnit, 4) despite the more obvious inconvenience and discomfort of the experience. Here it makes sense to detail a story with exciting similarity from my own experience. I intentionally describe the similarity as exciting, because my own experience of being stranded among strangers is one I cherish deeply and share with ebullience, and so, upon reading the story presented by Solnit I felt such embodied glee in the intimate understanding of that experience. Solnit situates this story of weather-based inconvenience within a discussion of disaster and the emergence of improvisational communities. I can attest to how such a dinner-party-anecdote powerfully contributes to a study of paradise out of natural and social disasters, and will attempt to corroborate this connection with my own.

Riding the California Zephyr

I was recently taking an Amtrak train across the country, from Oakland, California to New York City. This was meant to be an individual experience, a time to read my books, write

my thesis, and enjoy the shifting scenery across eleven states from coast to coast. I did all of this, and there were moments, hours on end, when I existed in a deep inner consciousness, my thoughts and music encompassing my sensory perception. But immediately upon boarding the train, as I sat in my coach seat and met my seatmate Sophie, there was a discernible sense of community. I do not want to downplay how important and profound this feeling was, and how it seeped into the lives of each passenger and the fabric of each train car.

Along the way, the California Zephyr accumulated upwards of twelve hours of delays. A boulder crashed into Engine #1. Engine #2 became flooded (somehow). The band aid solution – freight Engine #3 – chugged along at a much slower rate. I would wake up frequently that first night to an unmoving train, somewhere in the middle of Nevada. What started as a sort of funny refrain – chuckling strangers eyeing each other with joking exasperation as the train would slow to a stop, yet again – became the undercurrent of a trip in which time expanded and collapsed, hardly playing a role in daily life on the train.

In the lounge car, where seats and tables spread out to face wall-length windows, Coach-class passengers gathered to escape their chair-as-bed in the Coach cars. I couldn't help but think of the apocalypse movie *Snowpiercer*, as the train soon assumed the role for all my living needs in a class-designated layout from car to car – train cars being an effective symbolic interpretation of the "wall" in science fiction. I would catch only a fleeting glimpse of the dining car reserved for the Sleeper-class, as an Amtrak staff member would pass between cars and the closing door would reveal doily-lined tables adorned with blooming red roses and cutlery for waited meals. I elaborate this Coach-Sleeper distinction with the belief that the kind of community formed in the Coach lounge car was noticeably strengthened by a shared discomfort and need to improvise.

In the lounge car that first day, bodies floated and flitted around in a state of seeking, it seemed. The three days ahead loomed, as did the prospect of solitude. Along with my seatmate, Sophie, I met Emiliano, a poet attending graduate school at Notre Dame, and Iris, embarking on a long journey to her newly rented first apartment after under-grad. On the younger end of the spectrum of our train comrades, we found a comforting commonality, although we welcomed the company of anyone willing to offer it. Accumulating hours and hours of delays, our expected arrival time in Chicago surged right through the departure time of each and every transfer train.

We read Joan Didion, or rather, Emiliano provided dramatic readings from his Joan Didion novel, as the train lay idle for an engine change. We shared snacks, my three friends demonstrating their veteran meal-prepping, nutrient-efficient strategies for train satiation (beef jerky and cheese on a baguette laughed at my plain oatmeal packets constituting most meals of the day). Emiliano plugged in his heated fleece blanket, which I yearned for as I shivered in fetal position at night in my Coach chair. Jenny, the Amtrak Cafe Car worker, a woman in her mid-fifties, sympathized with our discomfort through the delays and offered us free coffee and thrilling, possibly confidential, California Zephyr stories. Together we were without sleep, without satisfying nourishment, and our only exercise consisted of five minute bouts of jumping jacks during infrequent smoke breaks in various midwestern towns.

We sought each other. Every morning, in ritualistic fashion, we moved to the lounge car with our books and distractions for the day, knowing full well that our conversation and company would carry us to the night. Iris kept her hands busy with rainbow yarn, knitting it with ferocious speed throughout conversation and mealtimes. Having watched the movie, *Triangle of Sadness*, on Emiliano's computer, the two of us engaged in a dynamic conversation about the absurdity of the Capitalistic aesthetic that the film hyperbolizes, to the point of "Lord of the Flies"-esque

island survival amongst various victims of racial Capitalism. We determined that greed, power, and beauty comprise the three points of the triangle[3]. I read *Mutual Aid* from start to finish. As we developed our care for one another, as our possessions slowly dispossessed into communal offerings, a faint whisper in my head grew to an excited yell: *It's all here!* Once I thought it, it was all around me. *This is mutual aid!*

On the last night of the train, one extra night tacked on to the original journey, the lounge car dwindled down to eight. The rest had gone to catch some sleep before being awoken by our Chicago arrival, at whatever outrageous hour of night or morning it might come. Sitting with a boy named Lazaro and a middle-aged man named Jack at the table behind me, I see Emiliano jump up and run back to the Coach car. He comes back with a record player in hand, complete with about five records. He returns to his seat, the rest of us five curiously eyeing the table now fiddling with the record player. I approach and stand in the aisle, watching the three at work. An elderly couple watches from the table on the other side of the aisle, and Sophie and Iris stand by to complete the improvisational circle that has just formed. The records are passed around, and as I hand them to my left I learn the names of the couple, Fernando and Catarina from Argentina. They pull from their bags some homemade cashew brittle and pork jerky, spreading it across napkins on the table for all to share. I write down the cashew brittle recipe. Sophie grabs the remainder of her block of cheese, so I add my box of triscuits. A sort of cornucopia has formed. Jack produces an unopened bottle of whiskey, a gift from his son he has just visited, and declares, "I would be honored to share this with you all." We rejoice and, like pesky teenagers smuggling alcohol into a movie theater, pour the whiskey covertly into lidded cups to avoid a

[3] Clearly, an understanding of the movie would be helpful here, but in the general sense it is a commentary on the absurdity of extreme wealth through Capitalism. It features caricaturistic characters who fight for survival and speculates about what skills are truly valuable in times of disaster.

reprimanding from Amtrak staff. Iris makes one last trip to the Coach car. She brings back a typewriter, to the excitement of everyone and the eagerness of Emiliano, the poet. We sip, we eat, we begin to tell stories, Emiliano types.

What are you most passionate about? We dive right in, we listen with intensity and yearning. After a complete first round answering the question, the typewriter ribbon zips with dramatic effect, indicating that Emiliano had finished writing. He reads back to us a poem about eight strangers' life passions.

How can I describe that it felt like we were on that island in *Triangle of Sadness*, surviving. How can I claim that, in fact we were, for Emiliano had written it into being? Well, actually, we all had, for after that first round of typing and questioning, we continued on to many more with the typewriter traveling among us. I began typing:

Jack poured the Omaha bourbon,
Fernando offered homemade pork jerky and cashew brittle,
Catarina showed us Camila Eliza, newborn granddaughter,
Sophie cut up cheese slices,
Iris asked icebreaking questions,
Lazaro explained Detroit-style pizza,
I drank a Blue Moon,
Emiliano wrote a stunning poem.

And then Emiliano put us on an island. We shared and we fought and we loved on that island. And the typewriter went to Jack who shared his whiskey and spent thirty intentional minutes adding to the story of us eight. Jack passed to Sophie. On and on we knit together a story as

magical as that lounge car somewhere in Iowa felt, as possible as sharing cashew brittle with Fernando and promising to see Lazaro in Detroit. There it is again. *It's all here!*

As Iris' stop approached we divvied up the typed story – everybody gets a page. I accompanied Iris down to the Cafe Car for a coffee, and she gifted Jenny a completed pair of rainbow mittens. I watched as the two embraced, as Jenny began to cry, as three days of exchanged kindness generated this final act of reciprocation.

A paradise out of hell? Surely that last night on the train was no "paradise" nor was a delayed Amtrak "hell," but as a microcosmic example of improvisational community being built out of solidarity and propelled through perpetual acts of care, a structure of social organizing emerges that dialogues with that from *Parable of the Sower*. Trumping any frustration was the sheer and palpable excitement of community, in many contexts a radical undertaking. Maybe this all sounds like common sense. People act with kindness, that kindness is exciting, it was a fun and fulfilling train ride. That's kind of the point isn't it? Lauren's survival approach is so logical. Mutual aid is so logical. The goal at hand is to estrange what is so illogical, and yet that has become so naturalized, so that a politics of care can restructure a fundamental orientation towards power, each other, and environment. That string of Coach cars on the California Zephyr was the site of a radical restructuring. Lost in time, racing across space (some kind of floating Utopia, a "Nowhere"), eight people found in common circumstance founded a place of community.

Food and Farming: Utopia, Mutual Aid, and Seeds

One of the final questions posed to the listener of the Podcast is: What seeds do we have? (brown, Chapter 25). This is understood to take both literal and metaphorical meaning; what seeds do we have to grow the crops we need to nourish ourselves and survive? What grains, trees, fruits, and vegetables lay in potentia, in our sheds, survival packs, hands, and soils? And then, what seeds do we have to foster lasting communities and systems to support them? Where are our skills and how can we nurture them to grow and strengthen? Who are our sowers? —another question with a similar range of meaning. In this chapter, the literal seed will be of focus, although the act of gardening and the practice of sowing are necessarily seeds of community and systems of safety and sovereignty. They are acts of mutual aid. The question of seeds rings clear throughout the book, with Lauren as the principal sower. It is, after all, *Parable of the Sower*: this is a novel about sowing, gardening, tending and stewarding land. Along with her gun, Lauren packs seeds. She envisions survival. She envisions a future. This book is about imagining. The seed has always been a part of that imagination, that which needs a fertile ground, proper nourishment, and tender hands to be realized.

Without analyzing in much detail the Parable of the Sower in its biblical context, it is worth mentioning the story, which provides a moralistic lesson of faith and devoutness through the metaphor of planting a seed. The parable forewarns the dangers of planting on infertile and unstable ground, stressing the importance of foundation and groundwork in order to achieve cooperation and trust. In the context of the novel, seed imagery is abundant. It helps Lauren, and then the reader, envision Earthseed and its members, meanings and motives. And what encapsulates the process of change better in an image than that of the seed? Lauren reflects, “And I think we’ll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place” (Butler, 78),

recognizing the infertility of the soil around her, poisoned and eroded by infrastructures under exploitative capitalism.

The book, *Foodtopia*, by Margot Anne Kelley, analyzes a history of so-called "back-to-the-land" movements as well as their ties to largely anti-Capitalist resistance. Kelley frames these movements, which often sought food-sovereignty through small-scale farming initiatives, through a lens of utopia – a framing that will be scrutinized here for its divergence from Butler's work. A point of consistency across Kelley's analyses is the assertion that motives for pursuing these farming endeavors – these "utopian experiments" – emerged from dissatisfaction and insecurity resulting from systemic and economic failures. When systems fail, people become sowers. Kelley characterizes these back-to-the-land movements as projects that aim to create new social orders. She describes this yearning as "social dreaming," which "involves asking and answering questions about what would constitute a better alternative to current living conditions, and then actually pursuing that way of life," (Kelley, xxi). Recognizing in this description the work of Butler as an author as well as Lauren as her protagonist, *Foodtopia* is an alluring, although sometimes misguided, contribution to speculative imagining.

Food and utopia. This connection is consistent. Recalling Ralf Dahrendorf's piece, and recognizing utopia's translation to "nowhere," it is curious that this most basic act of tending one's own seeds is thrust into the realm of abstract unattainability. Kelley roots her history of "back-to-the-land" movements in transcendentalist thought – a philosophical movement in the eighteen hundreds that ascribed to all beings, human and non-human, an inherent divinity. The recognized actors of this movement are Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose works on nature inspired a so-called "golden age of utopian experiments," (Kelley, 47). The innate divinity of all beings, once acknowledged and tapped into, allows one to pursue the good

life, and to achieve freedom. Thoreau preached this idea, and the beauty and lessons that could be found in Nature, as he lived on Walden Pond. He goes so far as to "[draw] a parallel between Walden Pond and the Garden of Eden," (58). These transcendentalist ideals apply a politics of purity, the belief in an original state of nature, distinct from culture, that can be returned to – a concept thoroughly critiqued by feminist scholar Donna Haraway, and others, who problematize purity politics for its assumptions of essential categories of the Human. Transcendentalists assume the category of the human to be true and discrete, as opposed to a socially privileged and exclusionary designation. Kelley acknowledges Thoreau's privilege, and briefly offers a nod to the free Black community that resided on the same land before him, and yet her analysis remains founded on his theorizing alone.

Situating back-to-the-land movements and food sovereignty initiatives within a rhetoric of utopia, especially through the majority white and Western gaze employed by Kelley, suffers some limitations. Farming and land-use is central in *Parable of the Sower*. Robledo, at the novel's introduction, is nearly self-sufficient in large part due to its gardens and food sovereignty. Acorn, at the novel's end, is born of the seeds from Lauren's survival pack which anticipated Robledo's demise. When Lauren speculated about her future and the skills and systems it would require, farming was crucial. There's a contradiction, however, between the utopian experiments of Kelley's focus and Earthseed's teachings. In acknowledging that back-to-the-land movements arise largely out of inequality, Kelley recalls specific moments in history when these movements came to fruition. In doing so, she positions inequality as something easily definable, that ebbs and flows with coherent visibility across populations, as opposed to something so deeply embedded in institutions as to continuously violate certain populations as an ever present state of apocalypse. What I am trying to say here is that as Kelley underscores five distinct moments of

back-to-the-land utopian projects – privileging Thoreau's individualistic endeavor, homesteading couple Scott and Helen Nearing whom she accredits with the success of the whole sustainable food movement, and Millenials almost indiscriminately as "utopians" – she casts aside scores of Black and indigenous stewards of the land. Her utopians also do not receive criticism for the way that many sustainable food efforts operate well-within and to the benefit of racial Capitalism, generating a brand and aesthetics of sustainability that is marketable and profitable.

A utopian experiment relies on the promise of a static, unchanging utopia, that described by Ralf Dahrendorf which introduces this essay. Earthseed relies only on Change. It cannot afford anything else, lest its members ignorantly accept catastrophe. Kelley does not seem to found her analysis in critical race theory (a conversation of the structuring capabilities of race in Capitalism will be continued in the final section of the essay) rather, her utopic contextualization of these agricultural projects takes on an optimism that is negligent of the apocalypse at hand. Some of the sites of focus in *Foodtopia* are strong centers of adaptation and resistance, but their placement alongside Thoreau's Walden and English reformers is something of an inaccuracy. This analysis would benefit from the critical teachings of Earthseed, which demand diversity, uplift skill sharing and alternative knowledge systems, and ultimately center mutual aid, as part of a process of survival. Acknowledging this, the connection drawn between utopia and farming contributes to the project at hand of promoting speculation through fictive writing as a crucial offering for addressing apocalypse.

In a very real sense, food and place are deeply intertwined. Food diversity is being lost due to the homogenization and industrialization of food production. That loss (a natural disaster in itself) has impacts on cultural identity. One such combative technique lies in local seed saving efforts, particularly as they are oriented towards cultural preservation in the face of its erasure.

Seeds are a source of identity, and a potential for community. “Acorns are home food, and home is gone,” (Butler, 180) Lauren remarks. Not only were those acorns physical sustenance and tools of survival, they were indicative of home. The identity stored in food is significant, and denotes the potential for food and place as sources of aid. A basis of food sovereignty and an understanding of food as survival and identity can generate profound communal and grassroots power.

Many of the cited projects in *Foodtopia* of recent decades, specifically those founded by and for BIPOC individuals, root their farms in imaginative freedom, racial justice, and food sovereignty. Soul Fire Farm, Black Dirt Farming Collective, and Humble Hands Harvest, to name a few, are generating new social orders. They are structurally challenging systems of ownership upheld by exclusion, creating their own sovereignty, namely through access to self-grown food. The connection between Butler’s Parables and this farming justice work is profoundly clear through the example of the Earthseed Land Collective. *Parable of the Sower* speculated this kind of community just as it speculated the systems collapse that preceded it. One might call this an Acorn community adapted to the particular social conditions of its context. Earthseed Land Collective is undergoing “survival work rooted in principles of anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, racial justice, gender justice, [and] disability justice,” or, a central characteristic of Spade’s model of mutual aid (Spade, 61). At risk of contributing to the kind of co-optive, fetishization discourse of land-stewardship in BIPOC communities used in White circles, I will direct my audience to the same article highlighted on Earthseed Land Collective’s website: “To Live and Thrive on New Earths,” written by Danielle M. Purifoy. To recognize the sovereignty of projects like these, I accept that my language holds power that can be better used to uplift the language of those I am writing about. To round out this section, Purifoy’s words are acutely

insightful: “If Butler’s fictive religion wants its adherents “to live and thrive on new earths,” Earthseed Land Collective is committed to developing the relationships and practices necessary for thriving lives here, on renewed earths,” (Purifoy). Again, the connection runs deep. This is speculative fiction, and through it we can embody mutual aid. People are locating their seeds, and that is fundamentally a call for survival, and that which literally and figuratively feeds community.

Cities, Urbanization and the Starry Destiny

Parable of the Sower makes a potent claim about cities and the processes that uphold them, offering a host of alternative structures of social organization that may form in the wake of urban catastrophe. This is not so simple as deeming some form of social organization good or bad. The city is a dynamic agglomeration born from intersecting and multiscalar processes, and in this sense it is not such a unitary form to be analyzed as a whole. The Los Angeles that Butler's fiction encounters has suffered the impacts of unregulated capitalism and exponential economic growth – creating disparate classes of poor and wealthy. Her analysis takes place within the violence and the fringe populations created by the city. In effect, Butler and her protagonist explore under which circumstances and infrastructures Earthseed and its ethics of mutual aid can prosper. This analysis has strong implications for world-building, and growing an awareness of what hegemonic systems thrive and reproduce under what kinds of conditions, whether they be urban, rural or something altogether different.

Early on in *Parable of the Sower*, a conversation ensues between Lauren and her stepmother Cory. On page 5, in the very first chapter, and therefore an important introduction to the tone of the book and its characters, Lauren asks,

> "Why couldn't you see the stars?"
>
> To which Cory responds, "City lights," and then, "Lights, progress, growth, all those things that we're too hot and too poor to bother with anymore," "When I was your age, my mother told me that the stars—the few stars we could see—were windows into heaven. Windows for God to look through to keep an eye on us." She goes on to say, "Kids today have no idea what a blaze of light cities used to be—and not that long ago."

Lauren declares, “I’d rather have the stars.”

“The stars are free,” Cory responds, and then, “I’d rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better. But we can afford the stars,” (Butler, 6)

The implication here becomes: we *cannot* afford the city lights. This interaction is one of the first that Butler intends for her readers to absorb. It is an indication of what went wrong, and out of what failures this new social order was born from. Rebecca Solnit picks apart the word “disaster” in her exploration of community-building out of catastrophe. The word disaster, she dissects, comes from the Latin compound “dis-” and “astro,” which translates most literally into “without a star.” She notes how in the midst of some of the disasters of the twentieth century, “the loss of electrical power meant that the light pollution blotting out the night sky vanished. In these disaster-struck cities, people suddenly found themselves under the canopy of stars still visible in small and remote places,” (Solnit, 10). The stars are presented as an anti-modernity, an anti-urbanization and all the socio-economic orders that uphold such processes. Solnit continues, “You can think of the current social order as something akin to this artificial light: another kind of power that fails in disaster,” (10). What gains importance in this discussion is the Destiny of Earthseed that Lauren lives by. “The Destiny of Earthseed//Is to take root among the stars,” (Butler, 84) goes her popular refrain.

What is Butler’s warning? What happened to this Los Angeles, described as an “oozing sore,” (Butler, 109) from which countless beaten-down bodies escape, joining the river of migrants in search of prosperity in some abstract “North”? Butler began to write *Parable of the Sower* in the aftermath of Reagan’s presidency. Joo’s analysis describes the gated communities that cropped up in the 1980s, as well as the 1992 LA uprisings (Joo). Joo situates this context, of

a potent neoliberal ideology and a reckoning with violent state institutions, within Butler's narrative, as the trends through which she speculated her futuristic America. The piece also acknowledges the purposeful centering of racial politics in Butler's work. This politics recognizes the way race has fundamentally structured late Capitalism, and diverges from uncritical assumptions that racial prejudice will simply disappear in time. Joo writes, "Butler does more than merely "create parallels" between African American chattel slavery and contemporary sweatshop labor (Wanzo 79); she shows how the latter is a direct, logical extension of the former," (Joo). Newcomers of Earthseed – migrants met along the journey North on the highway – tell stories of their enslavement, specifically through debt relations with their employers. This is the Los Angeles of Butler's imagination, upheld by processes that generate violent and inhabitable city-centers in perpetual collapse.

Countless structures of organization filter through the novel, all in an attempt to adapt to the shifting economic orders of the time. Lauren's original Robledo community, that in which she grew up and that from which she fled as it was burned and pillaged, exemplified the difficulty in adapting within the frameworks of faulty institutions and echoed those aforementioned Reagan-era gated communities. Its walls indicated a gaping insecurity, a constant fight against institutional disparity. As noted by Stillman, its membership was determined by homeownership and proximity, rather than other affinities or value systems (Stillman), and accordingly relied on traditions tied to an American suburban dream. This was a community lacking coherent intentionality, no matter how hard they tried to attain it. This was a community sown on infertile soil.

Another such example of social organization is Olivar, a planned community developed by a multinational corporation. This is a privatized, gated community that promises jobs and

safety. Membership is determined by application, and favors the white and the privileged in bodily condition to work. It is a mini-utopia, a project of world-building held separate from the rest of society, and necessitating its inverse, a dystopia. Butler envisions this corporate response to collapsing welfare systems. Communities like Olivar, resembling American company towns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are built on exploitative principles of labor, targeting vulnerable populations with the promise of safety, but the threat of conditions that could be described as debt slavery. Butler does not shy away from the very real possibilities of widespread slavery in America. The Podcast characterizes the desire to move to Olivar as a "suicidal ideation," propelled by the lamentation, "It's too hard living, but I'm afraid to die," (brown). The novel forewarns that this type of community is improperly sown.

The novel does not prescribe an ideal community, that would be utopic. Its only guarantee is Change. Lauren attempts to navigate destructive changes through Earthseed, but she knows much of Earth's soil is infertile. Her Destiny is vital. Treading some line between Afrofuturism and Afropessimism[4], Butler's Parable series employs elements of both, considering the severity of a racially-structured world while also writing into being alternative ways of living with and through such a world. Sown with the teachings of Earthseed, Lauren establishes Acorn at the end of *Parable of the Sower*. Built with a politics of care, reliant on systems of mutual aid, Acorn is emblematic of the kind of community that uplifts its members and fundamentally criticizes the American ethics of capitalism. And yet, Acorn does not survive. In *Parable of the Talents*, Christian America extremist groups target and destroy Acorn, using tactics of

[4] Afrofuturism and Afropessimism are two schools of thought that deserve critical engagement that will not be undertaken here. While this essay engages scholarship and thinking within both, I acknowledge here that it does so indirectly, and favors the work of Black Afrofuturist and Afropessimist authors to best begin that conversation. The brief nod to such works is also a recognition of the insufficiency in my studies to properly grapple with such themes completely, and of the literature I have yet to engage with.

enslavement, torture, and the rehoming of children. Earthseed accounts for this, of course, as a major and violent Change, the only truth. Fragmented, Earthseed's members journey to reseed themselves, some in search of their children, some simply for safety. The book ends with a rocket launch into space – a step towards the Destiny.

Butler's novel ends with uncertainty. Ultimately, this is remarkably consistent with the trajectory of her Parables. The violence and the walls that Lauren grew up with have shifted form rather than disappeared; Butler never promised us otherwise, all she promised was Change. Of her Destiny to reach the stars, Lauren says, "That's the ultimate Earthseed aim, and the ultimate human change short of death. It's a destiny we'd better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth-skinned dinosaurs—here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities, and so what?" (Butler, 222). She insists that we look to other worlds for our survival. Our cities will be bones and ashes, they are killing people, and the systems that uphold them are killing themselves. Alexis Pauline Gumbs found one such other world in the ocean—a living world that is yet unknown but has so much to teach. Perhaps the stars reflected on the ocean water at night are pointing us towards those depths. Gumbs writes, "We have wondered at the sharpness of teeth, glorified the extremes of alienation. We have fetishized exactly what we fear. And now we are here to notice the miracle that was there the entire time," (Gumbs). Our teachers exist everywhere, certainly in those that have been alienated, and whose worlds have been estranged. It's time to estrange a different world – the violent one we've normalized, and through which our own apocalypse has come to pass. It's time to start nurturing the worlds that might nurture us back.

"I reacted the way I had trained myself to react," Lauren says (Butler, 161). She accepted all of her teachers, and she knew where to find them. Her teachers, Earthseed being chief among

them, taught her how to prepare as she faced her apocalypse. These works by Butler are a project of teaching and receiving teachings. Earlier I wrote that a necessary part of reimagining the world is accepting marginalized forms of knowledge. We must undergo an epistemological undoing. We must learn instead to resist our training to legitimate and accept without question the institutionally sanctioned knowledge which aims to benefit an economy that must accumulate capital and perpetuate violence to survive. How exciting it is when we find teachers who liberate us from that economic regime? Dolphins who live in community, neighbors who fight fires, strangers who share our pain. In her book, *Pleasure Activism,* adrienne maree brown says, "I believe that all organizing is science fiction - that we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced," (brown, *Pleasure Activism*). In order to establish new systems we must first learn how to imagine. From this radical imagining, the act of shaping can occur. Our teachers are our shapers, are our sowers. When we learn from these fertile soils, when we accept that the soil itself has so much to teach, we begin to notice the worlds in thriving existence beneath our feet, above our atmosphere, in our deep oceans, and we can collectively sow something that is meant to survive.

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