

"GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION":
RECLAIMING SLAVE RELIGION IN THE FUTURE

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GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION:
RECLAIMING SLAVE RELIGION IN THE FUTURE

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my son, Cameron, because even when I wanted to quit, thoughts of him inspired me to continue.

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Introduction

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* takes place in the year 2024 in a post apocalyptic Los Angeles that has been ravaged by disease, poverty, and war. The story follows the life of Lauren Olamina, a fifteen-year-old African American girl who lives with her family in Rodeblo, a suburb of Los Angeles. Lauren is the daughter of a Baptist minister and so at a young age develops her own distinct ideas about religion. As a result of her mother using drugs while pregnant with her, Lauren is also hyperempathic, a condition that causes her to imagine she feels the pain of others. Pyromaniacs, drug users addicted to the sight of fire, destroyed her gated community and killed everyone in sight, but only Lauren and two other members of her community, Harry Balter and Zahra Moss, escape. While headed north, they picked up other individuals or families who could be trusted and who added something to the group. For instance, men helped protect the group and Bankole, an older African American man who Lauren would eventually marry, was a retired physician so he ensured the health and well being of the group. Throughout their travels Lauren taught members of the group about Earthseed, a religious philosophy that she claims is a system of truths that she discovered as a young girl. It privileges rational thought and science versus emotion and faith. Thus, Earthseed does not have a God but instead it holds that "God is Change." Eventually the group reaches Bankole's land just south of Canada, where they settle and form Acorn, the first Earthseed community. Here

they begin teaching and practicing the Earthseed philosophy and trying to fulfill the Earthseed destiny of taking root among the stars.

Butler's *Parable of the Talents* does not exactly pick up where *Parable of the Sower* leaves off. Instead Asha Vere, Lauren Olamina's estranged daughter, tells her mother's story in flashback. Since *Parable of the Sower*, Acorn, the first Earthseed community, has grown in number and flourished. Lauren also finds her younger brother Marc who did not die along with the rest of her family, but was rescued by a poor family, the Durans, after he was left for dead. Because they were squatters, they eventually ended up living in the streets where Marc was found and sold into slavery. However, during his time with the Durans, Marc developed a passion for preaching and wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father and become a Baptist minister. Lauren's teachings contradicted the only belief system he could ever embrace and eventually their conflicting ideals caused him to leave the group. Shortly after, just as the community begins to thrive, they are attacked and enslaved by the Crusaders, a Christian fundamentalist group. They are accused of being heathens so their children are taken from them to be placed in Christian homes. While these Christians are raping the women, beating and overworking both men and women, they are preaching fundamentalist Christian sermons. After a storm deactivates the slave collars that Lauren's community is forced to wear they are then able to kill their captors and escape.

Lauren eventually finds her brother, who has become a prominent figure in the Christian America movement and recounts her story, which he refuses to believe, and after accusing her of being in a cult he encourages her to join Christian America for the possibility of finding her daughter. She rejects this

offer, but asks him to help her daughter if he ever finds her. She then sets out to find the other members of her community who split up after their escape. Along the way she meets people and reads Earthseed verses to them so that she has gained many converts by the time she reaches Oregon. By the end of the novel when Lauren meets her daughter, Earthseed has become a thriving religion and has many followers. Because her daughter has known her uncle Marc for over ten years she feels her allegiance is to him and is resentful of her mother's commitment to Earthseed. Before Lauren dies she is able to see the Earthseed destiny of taking root among the stars fulfilled as the first group of people leave to colonize the moon.

Octavia Butler's *Parables*, like the biblical passages they derive their name from, are designed to be instructional. The question then remains what is the intended message and whom is it intended for? The *Parable of the Sower* is an allegory for the spreading of God's word but both it and *Parable of the Talents* have layers of meaning beyond the religious allegory found in them. The protagonist, Lauren Olamina, explains to her community like Jesus explains to his disciples that "the parable refers to the preaching of the word, where only a few will hear and understand, but the 'harvest' from their conversion will be all-important" (Doerksen 22). While this may refer to the seeds she sows with Earthseed, it may also refer to the work that Butler does in the *Parables* and previous texts, which ask readers "to work to understand contemporary social policies." From this view "it is primarily a cautionary work, warning through illustration of the potential outcome of certain contemporary social policies" (Doerksen 23). These ideas however, are not the only ones Butler promotes in her

texts. An investigation of Octavia Butler's *Parables* bring a number of ideas to fruition, most notably that although religion may look different in the future its purpose is invariably the same-to provide believers with a way of understanding the world and equipping them with the tools to deal with their reality. With this in mind Octavia Butler goes about the tasks of creating a belief system that noticeably lacks dogmatic texts and dictatorial deities but essentially meets the needs of the black or multiethnic community she creates. In so doing, she connects to earlier African religious traditions and slave religion while simultaneously rejecting mainstream black Baptist religion.

This thesis will argue that Earthseed is a deliberate rejection of contemporary black religion that has been influenced by the Baptist tradition by comparing characteristics of Earthseed with elements of slave religion and modern Baptist black religion. Furthermore, I argue that Butler offers Earthseed as an alternative to her father's religion to suggest that religion be more practical and grounded in the everyday lived experiences of people of color in the 21st century. Chapter One will identify some of the major tenets of slave religion that are relevant to Earthseed. Chapter Two will identify some of the major characteristics of mainstream black religion. Chapter Three will compare elements of both traditions to Earthseed.

The parable of the sower in the book of Luke and the parable of the talents from the book of Matthew provide continuity for Butler's ideas in addition to bringing the texts full circle. At the end of *Parable of the Sower* the seed that Lauren plants, Acorn, has taken root. For much of *Parable of the Talents* we see this seed flourish and more people brought into the fold of Lauren's religious

beliefs. Even after the destruction of this original Earthseed community and the death of some of its members, Lauren's talents multiply. She takes something small and turns it into something momentous. She transforms Earthseed from a collection of verses into a social and religious movement. Against overwhelming odds, Lauren lives to see the Earthseed destiny of "taking root among the stars," occur. It is in this way that she multiplies her talents. This would not have been possible had Earthseed not been the progressive philosophy it is. Only a belief system designed to meet the needs of people in their particular social situation would have influenced masses to follow it. Earthseed felt like and appeared to be something new, a fresh alternative to the Christian America churches that were overrunning society during Lauren's childhood. Earthseed was also different from African American Baptist churches like her father's, which often had fundamentalist teachings similar to that of Christian America churches. Yet, it was not so progressive that people felt like they were departing religion altogether.

For Butler, religious services do not, or should not, center the locus of power with one individual who speaks for God. In the future she prefers a decentered service that disperses power and the right to interpret God equally among the practitioners of that religion. Her services serve the same function as a church service and sermon do but without the preacher because as she claims, they are "times of planning, healing, learning, creating, time of focusing, and reshaping ourselves" (Talents 72-73). The Shaper of Butler's universe is more akin to an African spiritual leader because Lauren is more of a spiritual guide than preacher.

Chapter One

Slave Religion

Earthseed's message arises from the context of black life in Rodeblo, California (Hubbard 18). In light of this, African American spirituality is relevant because both it and *Earthseed* have retained aspects of African cosmology because some of these elements are conducive to the black experience in America. Unfortunately, discussions of African American spirituality are often resigned to a discussion of black church life and that is clearly not the case with *Earthseed*. For the purpose of this thesis it is most useful to focus on those aspects of African worship that influenced the religion of slaves because they have a direct bearing on *Earthseed*. This chapter will give an overview of religion during slavery and it will examine some of the major tenets of slave religion: communal worship, adherence to the Old Testament & liberation theology, and slave preachers.

Slave religion was an outgrowth of the "religious foundation and heritage of Africa which, when transplanted to these shores, adjusted and accommodated itself to a new situational experience" (Hicks 28). While it would be fallacious to claim that all aspects of African American religions are holdovers from Africa or that there is no connection to Africa in African American religion, it is probably true that this situational experience to which Hicks' speaks makes both true to some extent. For instance, the importation of massive numbers of slaves to the Caribbean made retaining cultural elements from Africa a possibility that was not as easy to do in the United States where at most, a large planter would have had hundreds of slaves as opposed to thousands. More than likely though, many

households could only afford a handful of slaves or less.

The combination of small plantations, hostile white power, and the premature end to the slave trade made an African religious memory almost impossible. It did, however, leave vestiges of "superstition" in the black community even among the new converts to Christianity. African Christianity was subsumed under European Christianity but was also outside of it because Christianity could not completely quell the African impulse (Genovese 211). Large groups of slaves who could remember aspects of their religion were necessary before syncretism could occur and this was not possible in the United States. The West African belief in a pantheon of gods lent itself to Protestantism as well as Catholicism because "it carried with it the perfectly sensible principle that no one could afford total reliance on a single god who allows his people to get beaten, whereas everyone could use identification with a god who leads his people to victory" (Genovese 210- 211).

Several salient features have characterized African American religion since slavery, some of which are still recognizable in various denominations of black religion today. Familiar to most African religions were dancing, singing, ring shouts, and folk belief all of which were heavily apparent in slave religion. One pillar of African religion that was lost was a belief in spirit possession, at least in the way that Africans perceived it (Raboteau 92). Most of these elements, however, were retained and became mainstays of slave religion. Ring shouts, especially, with the addition of hush harbors, praise houses, and music were central components of the communal worship that was essential to the religion of slaves.

Religious expression for slaves would often occur spontaneously and in informal settings, but when the slaves needed a space for services and they were not authorized to have them they would often steal away to their hush-harbors, bush-arbors, or brush arbors (Levine 41-42). These locations were appropriately named because the slaves found inventive ways to muffle the sounds while there and frequently these clearings had to be accessed by going through bushes or wooded areas to arrive at them (Raboteau 219, Levine 41-42). Hush-harbors, often located in the woods, gullies, ravines, and thickets, were the site of communal worship including prayer meetings, singing, and the ring-shout among others (Raboteau 215). Both Levine and Raboteau reaffirm the importance of these sites by describing the lengths slaves went to in order to conceal these sites including turning pots upside down to absorb sound, filling vessels with water to absorb sound, and even soaking quilts and rags in water and hanging them around the perimeter of these sites to absorb the sound. They were an essential component of slave religion and without them many slave meetings would not have been possible. It was in the "seclusion of the brush arbor that "slaves made Christianity truly their own" (Raboteau 212). Hush harbors also ensured that the slaves continued to have a place where spiritual and emotional catharsis could be achieved, and they were invaluable for this reason.

The secret prayer meetings that occurred in these hush-harbors are an equally important facet of the communal life of the slave. An ex-slave commented of these 'secret and risky religious gatherings' that "meetings back then meant more than they do now . . . It was more than just Sunday meeting and then no godliness for a week." When they crept away to the "fields and in the thickets they

called on God out of heavy hearts" (qtd. in Raboteau 217). During these meetings slaves sang but they also expressed their religion through tales and prayers. The "communal ethos" of these religious gatherings was so strong that people watching the slaves were often drawn in and became participants (Levine 27). One traveler noted, "the pious negroes delight in prayer . . . Their prayers are full of fire, and often exceedingly vivid and impressive" (qtd. in *Slave Religion* 265). As rousing as these prayers may have been they were not the most striking feature of praise meetings.

A large part of these secret prayer meetings was devoted to music. In fact, Raboteau claims that the "spirituals were the soul of communal worship" (*Slave* 265). Many African societies believed in communication with the divine through music. The European influence on slave spirituals should not be understated; however, it is the context both "social and religious, in which the spirituals were performed, as well as an insight into the extraordinary power of these songs to shape the experience and conscious identity of a people" (243). Even though spirituals could be performed elsewhere they could only be fully appreciated in their "communal and liturgical" setting of the praise meeting (243).

Another outlet for the slaves' spiritual, emotional, and perhaps even physical needs at these meetings was the ring-shout. In *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* Levine notes that a major characteristic of slave religion is the expressiveness and emotionalism of worship. Some attribute this excess in worship to the influence of evangelical churches like the Baptists who made great strides in converting the slaves. Others credit African spirit possession with this zealous form of worship. In African tradition, the spirit mounts the individuals

and the spirit's personality dominates but in the black shouting tradition of the United States the converse is true. The Holy Spirit who prompts the individual to sing, shout and dance fills the individual, but the individual's personality still dominates (Raboteau 64). This exuberance in worship eventually gave way to the ring shout. The ring-shout was a "counterclockwise, shuffling dance" where participants formed a ring and chanted, sang or often reenacted historical or biblical events (Levine 38). Because dancing was off-limits for religious reasons, the ring-shout provided slaves with a physical outlet since secular dancing was no longer available to them (Raboteau 222). New converts often felt the need to justify their dancing in the ring-shout. One slave said, "hit ain't railly dancin' 'less de feets is crossed." "Dancin' ain't sinful iffen de foots ain't crossed," claimed others (qtd. in Levine 38). Ring-shouts were dynamic emotional expressions and yet another vital aspect of the communal worship of slaves.

Perhaps because of the conditions of slavery, slaves had their own interpretation of the Bible that placed an emphasis on the Old Testament and liberation. Even though slaves were not the only oppressed groups to use liberation as a theme in their songs, prayers, and sermons, it did not resonate with them as it did the slaves because "oppression was not slavery" (Raboteau 251). For this reason, Biblical tales where the weak overcame the strong or God delivers the oppressed appealed to slaves because they could identify with the people in them. These stories abound in the Old Testament but are less prevalent in the New Testament. When Jesus is depicted in slave spirituals he has been changed into a figure like those in the Old Testament who go to battle or fight bravely during war (Levine 43). According to a Colonel Higginson, one would

have thought that the Bible of his black soldiers only had two books: Moses in the Old Testament and Revelations in the New Testament. "All that lay between, even the life of Jesus, they hardly cared to read or hear," so even though there may have been other aspects of the Bible that were relevant to their lives they were fixated on these Old Testament themes (Levine 50).

Slave spirituals were often the site where the slaves' bias for certain Old Testament figures was revealed. The fact that characters like Moses, David, and Samson, were delivered in this world is an important part of what made them the subject of numerous songs:

[They were] delivered in ways in which struck the imagination of the slaves. Over and over their songs dwelt upon the spectacle of the Red Sea opening to allow the Hebrew slaves past before inundating the mighty armies of the Pharaoh. They lingered delightedly upon the image of little David humbling the great Goliath with a stone . . . They retold in endless variation the stories of the blind and humbled Samson bringing down the mansions of his conquerors. (Levine 50)

These figures, along with others like Jonah, Joshua, and Daniel provided prime material for slave spirituals because they depicted the weak overcoming the strong. Through song and by living vicariously through these Biblical figures, the slave was able to escape the confines of a universe that he or she could not physically escape. Another group that slaves often identified with through song were the children of Israel; unlike white Americans who identified with the Israelites after their exodus to the promised land, the slaves viewed themselves as the Israelites under the oppression of Pharaoh (Raboteau 251). It is not surprising that in spite of the many characters in the Bible worth writing about,

slaves were always writing and singing songs about the people whose plight was so much like their own.

Another vital feature of slave religion is the slave preacher. The slave preacher, obeah man, or root doctor was a highly respected member of the slave community. They looked to this individual for guidance and healing of both spiritual and physical ills:

The political power of the Obeah men, the Myal men, and the Vodun priests of the West Indies and their occasional emergence as revolutionary leaders could not be reproduced in the United States, except on a trivial scale, because the necessary revolutionary conjuncture did not exist. Hence the conjurers of the Old South were accommodationists in the same sense as were the black preachers. Indeed, the two may sometimes have been the same men (Genovese 222).

Because little is known about the connection between the plantation exhorter, plantation conjurer, and the black preacher it is possible that some individual might have been all three at the same time (Genovese 255). Indeed, the "slave preacher was one of the most influential members of the plantation community and of slave society in general" (Montgomery 33).

The plantation preacher occupied a very precarious position in that he had to give a message that fulfilled the needs of the community and that did not arouse the anger or suspicion of the master. Sermons designed to appease plantation owners took topics such as "Servants Obey Your Master," and although slaves inwardly rejected the teachings of their owners this rejection of the master's religion usually didn't manifest itself in outward action (Raboteau 295). So even though slave preachers often used defiant language in their sermons, this was not necessarily intended to incite riots or encourage slaves to

fight battles they could not win but rather to arouse righteous indignation at their situation and to encourage subversive behavior in response to slavery (Genovese 266).

Finally, the lack of distinction between the sacred and the secular plays a large part in shaping the religion of slaves. Though not a characteristic in and of itself, this belief permeated every aspect of the slaves' life, especially religion. An African belief in a unified worldview holds that "the spiritual and physical universe exist together in such a way that it is often not feasible to distinguish between them" (Mbiti 476). For slaves there was not a tension between a belief in spirits, superstition, or folk belief and their newfound religion because as Raboteau observes, in African communities there was a connection between the secular and sacred world, the natural and supernatural (*Slave* 15)

Chapter Two

Slave Religion and Black Baptist Religion

Around the turn of the twentieth century Dubois claims that the preacher, music, and frenzy were the most salient features of African American church life. Today, African American religious life is most commonly identified by the following elements working in cooperation: preaching, singing, praying, testifying, and offering (Weaver 60). The additions do not mean that the purpose of the service has changed. In fact, it has probably changed little in the past hundred years. During slavery, religious services provided a space for emotional catharsis and an outlet against the frustrations of daily life. However, during the twentieth century the black church along with its figurehead, the black preacher, also began to occupy a central space in the political life of blacks. This chapter will examine the gradual shift in the religious life of blacks after slavery and will compare the tenets of slave religion examined in chapter one with elements of twentieth century African American religion, particularly black Baptist religion, because Lauren Olamina's *Earthseed* is an immediate departure from this tradition.

Slaves weren't drawn into Christian churches in mass until the first Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s. Puritanism failed to convert many slaves because of the intellectualism that characterized the church's theology. Although the Quakers were one of the first religious groups to take an Anti-slavery stance, (Raboteau *Slave* 110) Presbyterians, Methodists, and eventually Baptists would

draw large numbers of blacks because their message was geared more towards the common people, white and black (Montgomery 7). Even though the Quakers religious beliefs probably would have drawn slaves, their anti-slavery stance denied them access to slaves; they generally preferred not to preach but rather let slaves come to God in their own time (*Slave* 111). Raboteau argues that the similarity between African and Evangelical styles of worship “enabled the slaves to reinterpret the new religion by reference to the old, and so made this brand of Christianity seem less foreign than that of the more liturgically sedate Church of England” (Raboteau *Fire* 22). Similarly, E. Franklin Frazier suggests the slaves responded to the “uninhibited emotionalism of the frontier Baptists and Methodists preachers” (qtd. in Genovese 233). The Baptists and Methodists also gained more recruits than other denominations because they worked hard at converting slaves and they employed blacks to assist them as they proselytized among the slaves (Genovese 235).

The most important reasons slaves were drawn to Baptists, Methodists, and evangelical religious denominations was because of the importance of oral tradition in African cultures where most of the slaves originated from and their lack of literacy. Where other denominations focused on religious instruction, evangelicals did not (Raboteau 132). For them, the conversion experience was the defining aspect of Christian experience. “While the Anglican clergyman tended to be didactic and moralistic, the Methodist or Baptist exhorter visualized and personalized the drama of sin and salvation, of damnation and election” (133). This personalization made scripture and by extension, religion more accessible for the slave. Also, Baptists were among the first denominations to ordain and

encourage black preachers (136). This was because education was not a prerequisite for their preachers. In fact, "a converted heart and a gifted tongue were more important than the amount of theological training received" (133). This historical connection to Baptists and Methodists often led black religious leaders to identify with these denominations.

In *Black Culture Black Consciousness* Lawrence Levine observes that after the Civil War through the first half of the twentieth century black religion and the spirituals that accompanied it changed little. One of the things that had the greatest impact on the eventual change was literacy:

Since it is not coincidental that preliterate societies tend to develop sacred notions of time and space, the introduction of literacy inevitably dilutes the predominance of the oral tradition and just as inevitably produces important shifts in the *Weltanschauung* of the group. Thus although it happened neither suddenly nor completely, the sacred world view so central to black slaves was to be shattered in the twentieth century. (158)

Literacy would usher in the first wave of change for blacks in their religious life that would begin with spirituals and carry over into other aspects of their religion as well.

Levine documents the decline of the slaves' form of worship by way of the spirituals. Even these sacred songs begin to attest to the fact that the spirituals no longer held the position they had previously occupied. One song lamented "I wonder what de matter wid Zion, O my Lord . . . My preacher don' preach a like a used to, O my Lord/My sister don' shout like she used to, O my Lord . . . That's what's the matter with the church today" (161). Similarly, after hearing the spirituals, a student at Hampton remarked that "[he] had come to school to learn to do things differently; to sing, to speak, and to use the language . . . not of

coloured people but of white people" (Moton qtd. in Levine 162). This indicates that part of the reason for the decline of spirituals was out of a conscious desire to learn the ways of the dominant culture, possibly in an attempt to assimilate. Another part of the reason that the spirituals fell into decline and were no longer sang with the same fervor was because freedom carried with it a self-consciousness about what the white man would think about these excessive displays of emotion. So the spirituals, once an essential component of slave religion fell out of prominence, however, "it was not merely the spirituals but the entire network of slave religious practices that was undergoing the erosions of change" (Levine 164).

Around the mid 1900s gospel songs began to replace the spirituals as the dominant form of religious music and they documented the changes in blacks religious beliefs. They both were "songs of hope and affirmation" and in both "God was an immediate, intimate, living presence" (Levine 174). That is about where the similarities ended. A subdued and altruistic Jesus replaced the Old Testament figures that had previously dominated the spirituals. Their focus also shifted to a heaven that could be reached at some point in the future and "where the spirituals proved their point by analogy, precedent, and concrete example, the gospel ethos was largely one of pure faith" (Levine 175-176). Gospel songs increased the gulf between blacks everyday life and heaven because victory was never attained in this world; "this world had to be suffered [and] one had to take comfort from the blessings one had" (Levine 177). Gospel distinguished itself further from spirituals because it was composed and published rather than passed on orally and through tradition (Levine 186). Finally, one of the most

important differences between gospel music and the spirituals was the way that gospel music imposed a distance between the performer and audience. When slaves performed spirituals there was no audience persay; everyone was a participant. This is not to say that gospel singers did not employ the call and response method or reach out to their audiences because they did; however, this communal process of making music was inherent to the spirituals whereas it was imposed with gospel.

Another component of the communal worship that had been a pillar of slave religion that underwent a change was the ring shout. Although it continued to be practiced long into the twentieth century people started to feel they had to defend it. In fact, many were "reluctant to perform the shout because of the disapproval of their white teachers and their fear that they would be laughed at" (Levine 165). Educated and prominent black ministers such as Daniel Payne, an A.M.E. bishop, went so far as to place a ban on the ring shout citing it as "a heathenish way to worship and disgraceful to themselves, the race, and the Christian name" (qtd. in Levine 165). He further asserts that the "A.M.E. church must drive out this heathenish mode or worship or drive out all the intelligence, refinement, and practical Christians who may be in her bosom" (qtd. in Levine 166). The implication is that intelligence and physical manifestations of religion did not go hand in hand. For slaves their religion could be oral, corporeal, and sacred since sacred and secular were inextricably linked. In the twentieth century, however, African American denominations like the Methodists began to ascribe to a more European aesthetic of religion that privileged the written word over the spoken and the mind over the body. African American Baptists, however,

along with a few other denominations that would be prominent in the South, became heir to what was formerly the ring shout.

Although many groups made overtures towards the slaves in an attempt at conversion, this was not an attempt at inclusion, and conversion to this new faith was not the equivalent of freedom. Slaves and black preachers were continually discriminated against in white and biracial churches so they began to segregate themselves. Thus the formulation of these black churches was both “a positive desire for independent cultural expression and a defense against racism” (Genovese 235). It is this cultural, religious, and social milieu of the black church from which the dynamic figure of the black preacher arises. One of the most striking characteristics of the modern black Baptist tradition is the dynamic figure of the black preacher. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois claims the “preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil” and that he is a “leader, a politician, an orator, a “boss,” an intriguer, [and] an idealist” (211).

At the turn of the century the role of the black preacher began to change to one more geared toward social and civic activism but the following definition provides a model for understanding the black preacher of today:

A black person who is engaged in a biblically and culturally oriented instructive, directive, and supportive relationship with black persons; an interpreter of life's meaning and an advocate of life's potential in light of commitment to Jesus Christ. His main function, therefore, are the proclamation of the gospel, the parenting of the extended family through the black church, and the empowerment of persons in the context of congregation and community (Hicks 19).

This understanding of the black preacher, in many ways is idealistic, but one of its most important implication is that the black preacher must be understood

within the context of Christianity, hence the preeminence of Jesus Christ in this definition. Clearly the black preacher who embodies this definition is a twentieth century creation because Jesus occupies a central role in his description and for slaves a preacher's devotion to or lack of devotion to Jesus would have held little or no import.

Chapter Three

Slave Religion, Black Baptist Religion, and Earthseed

Instead of writing a story and casting it in a foreign or alien locale, Octavia Butler uses her native Los Angeles to tell the story of a young black female who must come of age in a fragmented society and deal with both her 'special' abilities while trying to ensure that her religious vision comes to fruition during her lifetime. With both *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Octavia Butler offers an insightful critique of what African American religion might look like and how it can function in the future. Surprisingly, it does not resemble the stereotype of black religion that we have come to know in the twenty-first century; rather, her religion has more in common with the religion of early blacks in the United States. *Earthseed* is a more intellectual endeavor than slave religion so it does not possess all the same characteristics, however they do have some important factors in common. Among these are an emphasis on the here and now and communal worship. It will compare major aspects of slave religion with *Earthseed*. Finally, it will juxtapose contemporary black Baptist religion and *Earthseed* through textual analysis of their respective religious leaders. Overall it suggests that Lauren's "God is Change" philosophy has much in common with the worldview of the slaves.

One important characteristic connecting *Earthseed* to both slave religion and modern black Baptist religion is communal worship. *Earthseed* Gatherings, though, were more like prayer meetings in hush harbors than they were formal church services. During these meetings "prayer, preaching, song, communal

support, and especially 'feeling the spirit' refreshed the slaves and consoled them in their times of distress" (Raboteau 218). This indicates that above all, prayer meetings had multiple purposes but primarily they were a time of healing.

Likewise, Lauren says of Earthseed:

Our Gatherings, aside from weddings, funerals, welcomings, or holiday celebrations, are discussions. They're problem-solving sessions, they're times of planning, healing, learning, creating times of focusing, and reshaping ourselves. (Butler *Talents 73*)

Ostensibly, they lack some of the main characteristics of prayer meetings like preaching and singing, but in fact they serve the same vital function of providing an emotional and spiritual catharsis for the community. The residents of Acorn also read Earthseed verses, which is the equivalent of reading Biblical passages.

Another point of comparison between Earthseed, slave religion, and black Baptist religion is the religious leader. By juxtaposing Lauren Olamina with her father in Book One and with her brother Marc in Book Two the connection to the spiritual leader is made explicit. Lauren clearly rejects the values of contemporary Baptist religion that her father and brother represent.

Commentary on contemporary African American religion reveals the difference between it and a religious orientation like Earthseed. The modern perception of the black church and black preacher are that of professional healers who are little more than thieves who are out to take advantage of their congregations. Of course, such a notion presupposes that the institutions and the belief system are synonymous when they are not. It becomes extremely difficult to construct an identity for the black preacher without being reminded of his/her literary progenitors. Oftentimes, their somewhat undeserved literary reputation as a philanderer or womanizer obscures the historical figure and the positive

characteristics associated with this figure. Like her father and brother, Lauren is engaged in a “culturally oriented instructive, directive and supportive relationship” primarily with people of color, she analyzes the importance of life, and her main functions are overseeing family networks by way of the church and “the empowerment of persons in the context of congregation and community” (Hicks 19).

Ironically, though a part of the same upbringing, Lauren and her brother Marc respond in two very different ways to crisis. Lauren’s daughter, Asha, ruminates on this phenomenon as she reflects on her grandfather who from what she heard was a committed minister who took care of his family and community. Although he insisted that both be equipped with the knowledge to protect themselves in the event of danger he had no major ambitions beyond that. “It never seemed to occur to him that he could or should fix the world. Yet he was the father of two would be world-fixers. How did that happen” (*Talents* 120)? Asha is correct in her assumption that he was a good man because from all accounts given in *Parable of the Sower* he not only provides for his family but also sees to the spiritual well being of his community. In fact, the whole community comes to him for spiritual guidance, even those who are not Baptists (*Sower* 6). It is not surprising then that he reared two very spiritual children. Again, Asha’s reflections embody the schism between sister and brother:

My father called my mother a zealot. I think that name applies even more to my Uncle Marc. And yet, I think Uncle Marc was more a realist. Uncle Marc wanted to make the world a better place. Uncle Marc knew that the stars could take care of themselves. (*Talents* 121)

Their two religious philosophies are almost polar opposites, one being firmly rooted in Christianity and concerned with how to make Earth a better place to live. The other philosophy is progressive, rooted in space, and concerned with how humanity is to survive once Earth has exhausted its potential, a philosophy ideal for the future.

Like the stereotypical black Baptist preacher, Lauren's brother Marc gravitates towards the ministry because he recognizes that it is a position of power and because of the exploitative potential of religion. Born Marcus Olamina, he takes on the family name Duran. Because so few people could read and even fewer had familiarity with the Bible, he began to hold makeshift church ceremonies in the squatter camp where he lived. Marcus recalled that "[he] loved being Marcos Duran-the little preacher. People trusted me, respected me . . . It was a good life" (*Talents* 134). Implicit in his remarks are the ideas that the preacher is one who is deserving of not only trust and respect, but also love. This perception of the preacher is one of the reasons Marcus is anxious to get back to the ministry once he is at Acorn.

Marc is also drawn to the ministry because it provides a sense of order, a way for him to understand his world, and it gives him access to power. After seeing his community, his family assassinated in front of him, being raped and subsequently enslaved there is little left for Marc to believe in on Earth. At this point the only thing left to console him is religion for as Lauren says sometimes people need religion, when they don't need anything else. Unfortunately, Marc translates belief and faith into religious fervor and zealotry and believes there is only one way to salvation.

Like the administration of the country at this time, Marc views anything that deviates from Christianity as inherently sinful. He later accuses his sister of leading a cult and advises her to renounce her evil ways, although she and her community fed and sheltered him for months. He clings to his father's religion because it is all he has ever known, and it does not allow for polytheism or a belief system without a supernatural God like Earthseed. The religious lessons he learns while growing up give him security because he feels he understands the religion. His refusal to comprehend or even entertain the idea of other belief systems breeds both hatred and fear. This fear is revealed when he wants to preach at Acorn. Although he knew the rules regarding speaking at Earthseed Gatherings he tells his sister that "[he] doesn't want to talk about Earthseed. I want to preach," Marc exclaims (*Talents* 161). Lauren agrees, adding the caveat that he must respond to questions at the end to which Marc replies that he does not want to teach a course, he wants to give a sermon. For Marc, preaching and teaching are not synonymous so he can give a sermon that admonishes his listeners about the propriety of their actions or the salvation of their souls without being questioned. Because this has been his experience with the church he is afraid to agree to preach on those terms. His resistance made sense under the circumstances, because he did not respond well to the line of questioning from the residents of Acorn. In his mind, preaching and teaching are not at all the same thing.

One of the reasons Lauren did not remain a part of the Baptist tradition is because she did not have the commanding presence often associated with a Baptist preacher, like her brother and father before her. From the outset of

Parable of the Sower, Lauren is troubled by trying to be her father's daughter, and even though she felt she was living a lie she still tried to live up to his expectations, whatever this entailed (3). President Jarrett reminds her of her father in that he was once a Baptist minister and his voice "is a whole body experience, the way [her] father's was" (*Talents* 21). At the sermon after her father's death, she tells the parable of the unfortunate widow as an analogy for their community. The message is essentially that the weak can overcome the strong if they are persistent and fight, and she tries to encourage the community to be strong in the absence of the leadership her father provided and the imminent dangers they faced (119-120). Later on Lauren reflects on how preaching is not one of her strengths. She would never win people over with her voice or sermons, but rather teaching is her preferred method because she feels her belief system can withstand people questioning it in an attempt to understand it; this an implicit criticism of Baptist sermons, which she feels cannot sustain questioning.

Like Marc and her father, Lauren's community look to her for leadership and she offers them a philosophy she thinks will help them deal with their reality and thus she establishes the notion that 'God is Change' as the cornerstone of Earthseed belief. Since such a philosophy suggests the inevitability of change, adherence to this belief system will ensure that believers are prepared for this change and overcome it. In Lauren's mind, this view is not ideal but necessary for the continuity of humanity in the dystopian and post-apocalyptic world in which they reside.

Lauren and Marc's reasons for choosing their respective religious

traditions probably do more to illuminate the difference between their two philosophies. Marc chooses his religion because it gives him a sense of power and offers a means of making Earth a better place to live. Even though Marc prefers the religion of his father as a way of understanding the world during a time of crisis, he takes a very different approach to religion than his father did. He recognizes the limitations of faith in their society: essentially faith has no benefit for the powerless. His view becomes evident when he acknowledges that though he always believed in God he believed in the ability of religion to influence masses even more. He states, "I think my father honestly believed that faith in God was enough. He lived as though he believed it. But it didn't save him" (*Talents* 338). These comments reveal Marc's simultaneous affirmation and rejection of his father's belief system. Though he genuinely believed that the church had the potential to change society, it would not be by way of ministries and the "emotional catharsis" it provided people, but only by the church's transition into politics. He notes that while these things are important and necessary, they are not power (*Talents* 339). It is at this juncture when Marc truly embodies characteristics of both his historical and literary progenitors. He recognizes the personal benefit of going into the ministry while simultaneously seeing a need for the church to move from the spiritual realm to the physical by way of political activism, in essence to have some tangible application to people's lives. Like some of his literary predecessors, Marc's reasons for entering the ministry are not just his religious belief and desire to spread the Word. In fact, these reasons are tangential to Marc's desire for power and access that the pulpit supplies him. In this way, his actions are very hypocritical.

Conversely, Lauren chooses Earthseed because Christianity invoked a sense of powerlessness in her, and she felt Earth had exhausted its potential. Lauren reveals her sense of inadequacy when she questions God's motive early on in *Parable of the Sower*. She compares her father's God to Zeus, both with the power to intervene in human's lives while they are powerless to stop them. She thinks, "maybe God is a kind of big kid, playing with his toys [and] if he is what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane" (*Sower* 14). This not only reveals her skepticism and belief in an omniscient and all-powerful God but also her concern for humanity if this God exists. Underlying all her concerns about a God with human characteristics is the fear of total annihilation. After all, what's to stop such an entity from destroying humanity if it is angry, disappointed, or unconcerned with them. Both her vision for God and Earthseed provide an escape from the limitations that traditional religion and Earth impose.

Through Lauren, Butler offers a direct censure of the contemporary black preacher and the black Baptist minister by extension. She accomplishes this by recasting the charismatic preacher of the black preaching tradition as a woman and makes a written text, rather than the spoken sermon, her primary method of initiating change. She not only attacks the patriarchy that dominates the tradition, but also highlights the impracticality of this tradition. Ultimately, Butler recommends that blacks have a religion that they can take with them through their daily trials and that they have one that is not bound to a church or preacher and thus, the creation of Earthseed's simple articulations and profound philosophy.

Earthseed seems like such a progressive philosophy because it is very different from the mainstream African American religion of the twentieth century. However, it functions a lot like the other religions that were influenced by the harsh strictures of slavery. More important than Butler's suggestion that religion will have a similar function for blacks in the future as it had during slavery, is the surprisingly accurate prediction that religion would provide an alternative to the disparaging reality of Black people's lives in the United States. In that sense its function is no different from that of other religions for communities in need. It creates a sense of safety and order in an otherwise chaotic world.

In many ways the resiliency of Earthseed is a stronger indication of its connection to the religion of slaves than other more superficial factors. Albert Raboteau claims that one of the most durable legacies of slave culture is that of religion. However, one must be sure to note the following:

In the Americas the religions of African have not been preserved as static "Africanisms" or as archaic 'retentions.' The fact is that they have continued to develop as living traditions putting down new roots in new soil, bearing new fruit as unique hybrids of American origin. African styles of worship, forms of ritual, systems of belief, and fundamental perspectives have remained vital on this side of the Atlantic, not because they were preserved in a 'pure' orthodoxy but because they were transformed. Adaptability, based upon respect for spiritual power wherever it originated, accounted for the openness of African religions to syncretism with other religious traditions and for the continuity of a distinctively African religious consciousness. (4-5)

This transformative quality that was the legacy of African, particularly slave, religion, is noticeably present in *Parable of the Talents*. Its cultural resiliency was a dream or a goal in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, but in *Talents* that dream

comes to fruition. Like slave religion, the religion that Lauren reveals, adapts, as she shapes it, in order to survive and in so doing reflects some of the conventions and beliefs of other religious traditions around it.

Although the exact starting point of African-American religion is probably impossible to establish, "it can be assumed as with African religion, that it exhibited an instrumental orientation that attempted to empower its adherents with techniques for dealings with situations in the here and now" (Baer and Singer 1). This notion of equipping believers with tools to deal with the "here and now" places Earthseed within the tradition of slave religion and that is what Lauren's religion seeks to do from its inception. Around the time Lauren begins writing Earthseed verses in her journal, she starts preparing for the inevitable destruction of her community. She acknowledges that her exploration of Earthseed as a philosophical concept must "proceed on the terms of open-ended practical activity as opposed to pure contemplation. She has no choice but to test out the pragmatic proposition that 'belief initiates and guides actions-or it does nothing'" (Butler qtd. in Phillips 303). She then tries to ensure that some of her friends and family are equally prepared by letting them in on her plans. She tells her friend Joanne, "I'm trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there. I think we should all study books like these. I think we should make emergency packs-grab and run packs-in case we have to get out of here in a hurry." She goes on to claim that though she tries to imagine what it would be like to survive outside or without walls, she realizes she doesn't know anything. At this point, Joanne asks, "Then why---" to which Lauren replies, "I intend to survive" (Butler *Sower* 51). The thoughts that Lauren voices are in many ways

identical to the verses she writes. The notion that “God is change” holds that in the tumultuous world they occupy, permanence and everything that comes with it including safety and security are a fantasy that can never be realized. Hence the creation of a religious vision that will culminate with mankind taking “root among the stars,” or colonizing planets other than Earth.

Similarly, Lauren’s daughter observes that Earthseed was probably a more viable option for people than other religions. Asha interprets Jonathan Edwards’s sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” as ultimately saying to mankind “You’re worthless. God hates you. All you deserve is pain and death.” She goes on to suggest that this is why her mother’s God is comforting for some. “If it didn’t love them, at least it offered them some chance to live” (Butler *Talents 70*). This interpretation holds that a priority of religion should be equipping believers with the means to survive, something that Lauren did in fact privilege when she created Earthseed. So both her religious teachings and survival plan intended to prepare followers to survive in a harsh world. This radical survival plan develops parallel to her extremist religious philosophy, and both are met with skepticism.

Another way Earthseed reflects a desire to help believers cope with their reality is through the language she employs. Like the liberation theology so often employed by the black church, Earthseed verses provide a rationale for the way things are but also suggests that such conditions are only temporary. The inevitability of change as Lauren articulates it suggests that if they suffer now then that situation will be different in the future. Not necessarily that they will enjoy prosperity, but they will exist in the state that they do now because change is constant. These ideas also reflect a belief in the fluidity of the universe. Like

slave religion, Earthseed recognizes the connection between all aspects of life and instead of religious and secular life being opposed to each other they exist in cooperation. This is not often the view held by contemporary African American churches.

As the creator of Earthseed, Lauren's somewhat androgynous appearance and function as a Harriet Tubman figure is a superficial implication that Earthseed is a slave religion. Like Tubman, Lauren is often described as a masculine woman. She even says herself that she often travels as a man because she's "big enough and androgynous looking to get away with it" (*Talents* 370). When Acorn's population is first enslaved and the women are trying to avoid being raped Lauren's comfort is her appearance. She says, "I've done all that seemed reasonable to make myself appear both poor and male. I'm big and plain. That's good camouflage, at least" (Butler *Talents* 326-327). Lauren thinks that her lack of feminine characteristics will protect her from certain punishments such as rape, and to some extent she is correct. She is not subjected to that particular practice as often but her appearance marks her more often for tasks like manual labor, but her appearance is not the only factor connecting her to Tubman.

Like slaves, Lauren's band of followers view migration as a solution to the problems that plague their existence. When Lauren asks her father "would you he think about leaving here, heading north to where water isn't such a problem and food is cheaper" the implication is that the area north of Los Angeles holds promise that the city does not (Butler *Sower* 72). He responds, "No. . . There are no jobs up there. Newcomers work for food if they work at all. Experience doesn't

matter. Education doesn't matter. There are just too many desperate people [who] work their lives away for a sack of beans and they live on the streets" (72). The spatial metaphor of the North, though inaccurate, figures prominently in the *Parables*. Lauren is leading her ragtag group of followers to the North but not to anywhere in particular. Hopefully, relocation will alleviate some of the problems of their existence. In that sense, its function is comparable to "the North" for slaves in that the perception is that life has to be better there, or certainly that it could not be any worse. For blacks the idea of migration north can literally mean movement to an area north of your current position but symbolically it almost always associated with improved socio-economic conditions as well as improved race relations. But Lauren's father maintains the skeptical view of the North that many blacks had during Reconstruction.

Another superficial, yet obvious connection between Earthseed and the religion of slaves is that at some point in their history, the practitioners of Earthseed were slaves. Because the new President of the United States in *Parable of the Talents* is a religious zealot, many fundamentalist Christian groups sprang up and began terrorizing the country. Alternative religions and anything that deviated from Christianity were condemned and followers were even referred to as witches and heathens. The behavior of the groups like the Church of Christian America that destroyed Lauren's community and enslaved her people was largely condoned by the country's administration. When referring to the takeover Lauren writes, "they didn't shoot their way in. It seems that they don't intend to kill us. Yet. Since Dovetree, they have changed. Their leader has come to power. They have acquired . . . if not legitimacy, at least a shadow of sophistication" (*Talents*

202). This observation supports the notion that President Jarrett endorsed certain behavior but also the idea that they used insidious methods to penetrate and overcome unsuspecting groups. The Crusaders, as they were often called, overwhelmed the group, and since they were greatly outnumbered made any thought of escape impossible. Additionally, the debilitating gas they used and later the slave collars they placed on Acorn residents prevented them from fighting back. Lauren goes on to say she has to make a record of the event though she does not want to "so that, someday, Earthseed will know what Earthseed has survived. We will do that. We will survive. I don't yet know how. How is always a problem. But, in fact, we will survive" (*Talents* 203). It seems that she is attempting to speak into existence permanence for Earthseed that may not come to fruition, but she also reinforces the notion that Earthseed functions as a survival mechanism, if nothing else.

After the inhabitants of Acorn are taken captive, the subsequent events closely mirror slavery in the United States as does the religion, and as Eugene Genovese notes:

The religion of the slaves manifested many African "traits" and exhibited greater continuity with African ideas than has generally been appreciated. But it reflected a different reality in a vastly different land and in the end emerged as something new. If black religion in America still echoes Africa and expresses something of the common fate of black people on four continents, it has remained nonetheless a distinct product of the American slave experience. It could not have been other. But the religion of the slaves became Christian and unfolded as a special chapter in the general history of slaves. (162)

In much the same way, Earthseed emerges as the Christianity practiced by some during slavery. Earthseed acts as a variation of the type of pro-slavery

Christianity taught to slaves. It was adapted to meet the needs of blacks within the context of slavery, and for blacks in the future. Not all slaves adhered to this 'servants obey your masters' rhetoric, and even still some were not taught this version of Christianity but for the purpose of discussion, we will assume that this is the stance that Earthseed takes. So when we see Lauren's advises her people to prey, kneel, sing and follow any other commands as instructed, the assumption is that they will give the appearance of acquiescence while continuing to ascribe to their own belief system. The members of Acorn did exactly that, they continued to believe and adhere to Earthseed without giving any outward indication of this.

While it would be fallacious to claim that Christianity is merely a conservative and pacifying force, Earthseed as a slave religion functions as Nietzsche suggests by "drawing the hatred from their souls, and without hatred there could be no revolt" (qtd. in Genovese 163). While not all slaves ascribed to such beliefs this philosophy held its' appeal to many slaves for different reasons. For instance, Lauren rejects involvement with Day Turner's revolt on the grounds that it is impractical. "However much Christianity taught submission to slavery, it also carried a message of foreboding to the master class and of resistance to the enslaved" and this subtext of resistance resonates with slaves like David Turner but does not mean anything to Lauren whose religious beliefs aren't grounded in Biblical tales and similar Christian rhetoric (Genovese 165). Instead of encouraging members of the Earthseed community to fight with Turner and help kill the guards, Lauren instructs her people to "lie face down on the ground with their hands behind their necks" even though some members of the community wanted to retaliate (*Talents* 261). What Butler implies is that although

impractical, Day Turner's revolution is in direct contradiction with Earthseed's teachings. If "God is Change" then human intervention and actions that precipitate unwarranted change do not allow God's will to be carried out as it normally would. In retrospect, it seems the Earthseed stance on their enslavement was that it was a necessary for Earthseed to develop and emerge in the way that it did after they were out of bondage. In that sense, it was akin to the altruistic philosophy and "turn the other cheek" teachings that characterized twentieth century African-American Christianity; gone was the emphasis on the Old Testament-it was now all about Jesus and his teachings. This philosophy was convenient in that it privileged adhering to religious teachings over the hate of their captors.

It is not clear if any of the slaves in *Parable of the Talents* ever became preachers and it is hard to imagine given their situation, but it is not impossible. Perhaps to gain the support that he did, David Turner employed some of the rhetoric used by these Christian ministers. Although white slave owners always feared slaves with religion to a certain extent, after Nat Turner's revolt they feared slaves without religion even more, so the sermons and proselytizing to slaves drastically increased after David Turner's rebellion (Genovese 186). In much the same way, punishments and chastisements to the residents of Acorn increased after Day Turner's revolt. Although conditions at Acorn were horrible before Turner's revolt after they hung David Turner and killed the other slaves who revolted their anger turned toward the living. The ones who could walk had to go out the next day to work sixteen-hour days. "The guards said if they couldn't beat the devil out us, they'd work him out of us... They lashed you even if you

stopped to pee. You had to just do it on yourself and keep working" (Butler *Talents* 263). What is true for the slaves at Acorn, like early African American slaves, is despite their situation they were extremely resourceful, finding ways to communicate with each other, gaining access to weapons for a rebellion, and finally escaping. Without ingenuity, some of which, is motivated by their existence as slaves, none of these things would have occurred.

Although Earthseed had existed for years prior to Acorn's destruction and subsequent enslavement, it was not adopted and practiced by mass numbers of people until after there was a need for it. In that sense, it is very much like the Christianity that slaves adopted upon arriving in the new world. At one point Lauren expresses her concerns to her husband by claiming, "people seem to be willing to believe all kinds of stupid things-magic, the supernatural, witchcraft . . . But I couldn't get them to believe in something real, something that they could make with their own hands" (Butler *Talents* 195). The something real that she refers to was Earthseed's Destiny to take root among the stars. After Acorn is completely demolished and Earthseed communities have to rebuild, the vision is solidified and achieving the Destiny becomes a reality for most Earthseed practitioners. In this sense it exhibits some of the cultural resiliency that Raboteau identifies as characteristic of slave religion.

Ironically, the Earthseed destiny of taking root among the stars is the characteristic that connects it most to mainstream African American religion during the decades preceding the *Parables*, not in practice, but in the theology behind it. Lauren claims, "we need the stars, we need purpose," and "when we have no difficult, long term purpose to strive toward we destroy each other. We

need the stars" (Butler *Talents* 196). Her response is no different from one her brother or her father would have given in response to a criticism of their religion. After the Civil War, black denominations began ascribing to Christianity's emphasis on heaven as the ultimate end for those who have lived a Godly life on Earth. However, life on Earth is only a means to an end, with heaven being the culmination of that life in much the same way that life on Earth is only a temporary condition for Earthseed practitioners. A destiny not bound to Earth is the vision of both teachings, as is working toward reaching this celestial province while on Earth. Like slaves, the practitioners of Earthseed have little distinction between the sacred and secular mostly because Earthseed itself is an amalgamation of both religion and science. Both orientations stress having a purpose while on Earth which is inextricably bound to reaching another world

Chapter Four

Science Fiction and the *Parables*

It has been virtually impossible for people of the Diaspora to keep their religious identity intact after being transplanted to the “new world.” Imagine how that difficulty would be compounded in a time and place more removed than the present, that is, in the future. That is exactly what authors like Octavia Butler attempt to do. If she doesn’t precisely identify what traditional folk and African based religions will look like in the future, she certainly reveals that these religions don’t meet the needs of an even further displaced population in an ever changing and pluralistic society. They accomplish this critique by the tools of their trade-science fiction. The genre is known for its criticism of social systems and Butler attacks gender politics and social institutions such as politics, family, and church, among other things in their texts. Significantly, she critiques her religious tradition through her representations of spiritual figures and practices. For instance, Butler proffers Olamina and Marc as representative of the Black Baptist tradition while Lauren and Earthseed are their antithesis.

In order to fully understand how science fiction facilitates Butler’s account, understanding of the genre is prerequisite. Part of the challenge in talking about science fiction is in defining it. Two observations that constantly surface are that hard science fiction is “a new literary form, born of our modern sense of change and the future and capable of giving narrative form to the increasingly complex speculativeness of science” and that science fiction is “merely an old form masquerading as something new, a literature quite derivable

from the humanist tradition, hence reducible to its past" (Slusser and Rabkin viii). Because of the inclination to define science fiction in either one of these ways, there is often the tendency to date science fiction too far back, tracing it to illustrious progenitors like the Bible or to be too inclusive and claiming that cultural writings that include magic realism and the like are science fiction when they are not. In fact, writings such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, Beowulf, the Odyssey, and "practically everything down to Mickey Mouse Weekly-has been claimed at one time or another by science fiction fans with colonial ambitions" (Aldiss 10). While such writings may possess elements of science fiction they do not adhere to a more modern, working definition of science fiction and technically they pre-date the origin of the genre. "Science fiction and its relatives (fantasy, horror, speculative fiction, etc.) have been main arteries for recasting our imagination. There are a few concepts of invention of the twentieth century-from submarine to newspeak-that were not first fictional flights of fancy" (Mosley 1). In light of this view of science fiction, it becomes apparent where these all-inclusive notions of science fiction arise. In *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, Brian Aldiss contends that previous definitions have fallen short because they regard content exclusively without regard to form. He posits a somewhat more exclusive, but appropriate definition of science fiction that holds that the genre encompasses man's search for definition and status within the cosmos "which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mould" (Aldiss 8). The definition presupposes that the most common way of revealing man's status is to portray him in a time of crisis of his own making as with

overpopulation, of nature such as a second Ice Age, or that of science as in genetic mutants taking over the world.

Separating hard science fiction from soft, in addition to distinguishing between science fiction and its relatives further complicates its' definition especially because there has been a move away from the term science fiction to that of speculative fiction. One characteristic that is peculiar to hard science fiction are protagonists with extraordinary powers and the more of these they possess, the closer the text is to hard core (Aldiss 8). Another distinction that is important to note is that between science fiction and fantasy. Whereas "science fiction deals with improbable possibilities, fantasy [deals] with plausible impossibilities (Allen de Ford qt. in Aldiss). This is to say that one of the major premises of science fiction, at least hard science fiction, is that a scenario is scientifically possible even if it is highly unlikely. On the other hand, fantastical writing occasionally presents scenarios that seem extremely likely but are scientific impossibilities so whereas fantasy can encompass science fiction, the converse cannot be true. This is where speculative fiction or futurist fiction and fantasy (FFF) can enter the conversation. They each have served as an umbrella term with FFF being the broadest encompassing cyberpunk, hard science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction (Rutledge "Futurist" 236). Throughout the piece the terms FFF and science fiction will be used interchangeably to denote the body of popular fiction also known as speculative fiction.

While scholars within the field of science fiction tend to think the field is bordering on exhaustion, there's a certain lure to futuristic fiction for black authors, possibly because it vociferously speaks to those who lack power.

Additionally, “black people have been cut off from their African ancestry by the scythe of slavery and from an American heritage by being excluded from history. For us science fiction offers an alternative where that which deviates from the norm is the norm” (Mosley 1). Here, Mosley makes an interesting observation about blacks’ relationship with science fiction. Apparently, blacks would not only rejuvenate the field but also enjoy some type of cathartic experience in writing. Unlike the African American literary “canon,” science fiction offers unlimited possibilities for the black writer:

Science fiction allows history to be rewritten or ignored. Science fiction promises a future full of possibility, although alternative lives and even revenge. A black child picks up a copy of Spiderman and imagines himself swinging into a world beyond the limitations imposed by Harlem or Congress Through science fiction you can have a black president, a black world or simply a say in the way things are. This power to imagine is the first step taken every day by young, and not so young, black readers who crave a vision that will shout down the realism imprisoning us behind a wall of alienating culture (Mosley 1).

As the quote illustrates, science fiction can serve as a paradigm for black writers to articulate problems of the black experience and to write themselves into being and create their presence in a way that they have been unable to do thus far.

To say science fiction has always been a realm where disenfranchised groups and ostracized individuals could imagine a more equitable system than they’ve experienced in America or similar societies is ironic since blacks and ethnic minorities are not actively represented within the genre. In fact, there are very few science fiction texts where black characters are part of the plot and when they are portrayed it is in inconsequential or stereotypic ways, “the underlying assumption being essentially, though perhaps unconsciously, racist. Black people

are not a significant part of any parallel world or possible future that extrapolative literature projects" (Govan 44). Even the most zealous student of science fiction has to concede that blacks and other minorities are written out of existence. From its beginning through its maturation "the fact is that, in most of the vast expanse of science fiction's recorded universe, black folk are not present. They are gone. Absent. Removed from the infinite variety of alternate and possible worlds" (Govan 43).

Scholars in science fiction are not the only ones to notice black peoples' absence in the future. Richard Pryor facetiously claimed he didn't like movies without blacks in them. After seeing the film *Logan's Run*, Pryor said, "They had a movie of the future called "Logan's Run." Ain't no niggers in it. I said, well white folks ain't planning for us to be here. That's why we gotta make movies. Then we'll be in the pictures" (qtd. in Rutledge, "Futurist" 236). Although Pryor's comment refers to blacks in film, the problem with other futuristic texts is also revealed. Black characters aren't the only ones missing from the genre; black writers are as well. This absence allows a European aesthetic and cultural hegemony to flourish. If whiteness and blackness are mutually constructed then whiteness, by defining itself against blackness, asserts its' authority by overpowering the encroaching dark force within the universe which, if undefined, is probably black.¹ The fact that publishers during the 60's were hesitant to publish books with black protagonists further supports this claim. As a result of "systemic racism that ignored, appropriated, or erased Black global history, the

¹ Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 1992. In the text Morrison details how white authors have historically defined themselves against a black presence if not black character.

shape of the future being anchored in this same historical process, FFF themes, images, and production mechanisms are dominated by European Americans” (qtd. in Rutledge, “Science” 129). Since the genre holds such an appeal for blacks, it is surprising that blacks have not sought a more visible presence.

In a *New York Times* piece titled “Black to the Future,” Walter Mosley identifies reasons why he thinks few blacks write science fiction, one being the lack of positive black images around them. He notes that children make believe based on images they see so they often emulate behavior of adults around them or imagine they are like their favorite television character and until recently there haven’t been black images for children to imagine. Historically, whiteness has been viewed as a land of possibility and one might equate blackness with “powerlessness, ignorance, servitude- children who have forgotten how to play.” Also, he observes that the nature of the genre requires that you be able to imagine a reality beyond the here and now which is extremely hard considering one must first escape their mental prison (2). Another set of reasons for the notable lack of African Americans in science fiction could be that one of the underlying premises of FFF was of a raceless future and although racism did not disappear it was probably “recast as human xenophobia directed towards aliens” (qtd. in Rutledge, “Science” 129). Societies, especially blacks, need “future images and myths to prevent individuals from being and becoming drones” (Rutledge, “Science” 128). With this in mind Samuel Delaney created a Black futurist movement. Authors such as Octavia Butler have likewise created a vision for blacks through their dystopias. By presenting such unpleasant synopses they suggest a dismal future for blacks if things continue along their present course.

Their texts indicate that blacks must be actively engaged in creating their future if they are to enjoy a more fruitful existence.

Yet another concern of Black writers of science fiction is that they often have to vacillate between what are ostensibly two extremes. Science fiction is known for critiquing social systems, while Diasporic fiction is known for exploring issues that arise when black characters encounter the Western world. Octavia Butler's *Parables* are idyllic to begin exploring these issues because implicit in both cases is the notion that in order for blacks to be taken seriously they need to be writing "literature." Mosley asserts that black writers have primarily felt the need to document racial injustices. Particularly, pressure from the white literary establishment was for blacks to write about being black in a white world, "a limitation upon a limitation" as he calls it (2). His assertion seems to enforce the notion that blacks should be producing "high" art as opposed to "low." In fact, critics and traditional scholars have claimed that the nature of "futurist fiction renders it unworthy of consideration on such issues as ethnic relations, gender equality, and socio-political self-determination" (Rutledge, "Science" 128). Similarly, in an analysis of novels by Samuel Delaney, Sandra Govan observes that "typically, science fiction is not the genre scholars and critics of Afro-American literature turn toward to see the way that black fictionalists shape a vision of black experience and character" and in her subsequent discussion she notes that this has led to a "critical astigmatism" that causes authors like Delaney to be overlooked because they utilize a popular form (43). While this may have been the case, there seems to have been and may still be a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of speculative fiction by blacks and

possibly others as well. Although plots are often casts in alternate universes or distant lands, they are never about these places. Science fiction is always about this world and this society and quite frequently the problems of the here and now and authors like Octavia Butler recognizes this and addresses these concerns in her work.

Presumably, works of science fiction are believed to have less verisimilitude than other fiction when in fact they can offer a more accurate representation of the world. Because science fiction inverts, disrupts, and imagines universes opposite of the "real" world, folk elements can be embraced as viable, justifiable, and in fact preferable recourses to problems, whereas in literature these elements are often classified as fantastic, magic realism, and other misnomers. Others writing about blacks relationship with science fiction have attempted to answer the question as to why blacks don't read science fiction but what seems to be missing is the suggestion that blacks should utilize the genre because "in science fiction [blacks] have a literary genre made to rail against the status quo. All we need now are the black science fiction writers to realize these ends. But where are they?" (Mosley 2). Mosley replies with his own prophetic response by predicting that blacks will enter the field en masse which to date has not occurred. However, there remain a few black voices of dissent within the genre with the addition of a few new ones such as Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney, Charles Saunders, and more recently Nalo Hopkinson.

Although Octavia Butler's *Parables* are steeped in biblical images and references, concepts such as faith and miracles have disappeared in this world. What remains are new characteristics for blacks to embrace such as

industriousness and self-reliance. Nalo Hopkinson's novels are a space where folk tradition and issues of concerns for blacks not only co-exist, but also mutually inform each other. Imbedded in her text, and most works of fiction by black authors are folk tales because they are part of the authors' and characters' history and are therefore inextricable from the stories themselves. Nalo Hopkinson contends that she doesn't want to write mimetic fiction because she likes the "way that fantastical fiction allows [her] to use myth, archetype, speculation, and storytelling." This claim may be singular to Hopkinson only because she acknowledges the way myth and storytelling inform her work; these influences permeate the works of many black authors although they may not acknowledge it. It has been acknowledged that black science fiction writers use their novels as ways of grappling with numerous issues and negotiating the racial establishment, but no one has undertaken the task of analyzing the folk elements that inform many of these texts. Though not "hard core" science fiction in any sense of the word, Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* fall into one of the categories of fantastical writing if for no other reason than that they are set in a not so distant future. These texts are extremely important to folklore because of the valuable insight they offer about African American religion, but they are also important to science fiction because of what they suggest about the role of science and religion.

As the titles suggest, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are about religion and how they will look and function in the future, particularly for blacks. More importantly, however, is that Butler begins to reconstruct a cultural history for Blacks by depicting Earthseed as a slave religion

in *Parable of the Talents*. In doing so, Butler goes beyond the mere critique of the African American Baptist tradition that she proffers in the first *Parable*. Although she still exposes problems with this religious tradition, she extends her argument to suggest problems that are inherent to all religions. In response to inquiries about the benefit of science fiction to blacks, Octavia Butler claims ignorance:

What good is any form of literature to Black people? What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the 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. And what good is all this to Black people. (qtd. in Rutledge, "Science 128)

Butler's continued presence in science fiction despite claims of being oblivious to its value for blacks makes its own statement. For her, the benefit is the search for answers more so than the answers themselves. Science fiction allows them to constantly search for answers and imagine solutions. Authors like Butler create the future by questioning the present and their protagonists construct their fate by addressing problems of the here and now. Science fiction provides an ideal space for the critique of African American religious beliefs as is evident with Butler's *Parables*. Butler posits her alternate belief system to emphasize the limitations of mainstream black Baptist religion in modern, increasingly pluralistic societies and to recommend a more tangible application of religion to the lived experience of African Americans just as religion had a direct and profound impact on the life of slaves.

Religion and science have never coexisted easily but with 2025 not far

away one wonders about the alternative that Lauren proffers. Careless environmental laws and political leaders who seem surprisingly like the religious fanatic, President Jarret, in *Parable of the Talents* makes Butler's dystopian scenario seem all too likely. That coupled with the California setting reaffirm this idea that Butler's *Parables* are much more than religious allegory, but in fact are probably practical recommendations for the not so distant future. Butler's use of *Earthseed* may primarily be a way to advocate space exploration and colonization. After all, as Len asks why not just "tell people to go to the stars because that's what God wants them to do" (*Talents* 394)? Although Lauren doesn't ascribe to a reading of God that maintains that God is a tangible entity who can give orders, she does recognize that incorporating her views about space exploration into a religious philosophy make them more palatable. Beyond advocating space travel, *Earthseed* offers another more profound idea-in the 21st Century neither science nor religion holds the possibility of salvation, but only an amalgamation of both. If people embrace this idea instead of clinging irrationally to either belief system, usually religion, then the future may indeed hold more potential than the past.

Conclusion

More than anything, Butler's assertion that we need the stars is a validation of science fiction as a genre. If Earth and its' realities places limitations on people, Butler seems to be saying we should move beyond those boundaries. People's willingness to believe in an airy nothing but not something real speaks to the skepticism people have about both science fiction and space exploration, both of which lie within the realm of human possibility. Science fiction, often confused for fantasy is thought to be make-believe. Although the chaotic world of *Parable of the Sower* and *Talents* is a disparaging reality, it is a conceivable reality nonetheless. 'We need the stars' ultimately suggests that if humanity's fate is bound to Earth it is doomed. However, opponents of Earthseed, like her brother Marc, sound very much like opponents of space exploration. He claims that the Earthseed Destiny is an "airy nothing" the same thing Lauren says of God and other celestial beings. He goes on to argue that while the "country is bleeding to death in poverty, slavery, chaos, and sin," this is the time for us to work for our salvation, not to divert our attention to fantasy exploration of extrasolar worlds" (*Talents* 170). Most critics of the space exploration oppose it on the same grounds because they feel it is a waste of money and resources needed for more important things. In some ways Lauren's claim to "need the stars" is as much about science fiction as it is about her religion. In fact, it may be about the possibilities and potential of embracing both science and religion.

In many ways, the slavery that's presented in *Parable of the Talents* help

further some of Butler's feminist and racial agendas, but I believe it makes a more profound critique of religion than anything else. Even though Butler offers Earthseed as an alternative religion, she reveals its' commonality with all religions. Earthseed then has a dialectical function in that it suggests there is something inherently "wrong" with all religion but at the same time there is something very "right" or necessary about them because even an anti-religion like Earthseed is fundamentally like any other religion. When Lauren states "she [Zahra] and Harry may be the most loyal, least religious people in the community, but there are times when people need religion more than they need anything else" she speaks to the power and importance of religion in people's lives. Because Lauren does not claim that people need Earthseed more than anything else, but religion, she emphasizes Earthseed's commonality and connection to any other religion while reinforcing the notion that religion is a vital part of people's existence. Earthseed forces us to ask can a religion ever not be a religion? That is to say, can it ever not serve the vital social function of assuaging people and providing meaning for the lives and ascribing order to their universe? Even belief systems like Earthseed have faith, a basic tenet of most major world religions, although in Earthseed it's not articulated as such. Finally, Earthseed asks readers to question the purpose of religion and what should it be.

Butler's recasting of Earthseed's enslavement as that of the chattel slavery practiced in the United States from the early seventeenth century until the Civil War serves two functions. On one hand it invokes an important cultural memory for African Americans and emphasizes the role religion played for blacks during slavery. Moreover, it suggests that if blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities

are not vigilant, the past may repeat itself. Butler is not suggesting that slavery will exist as it did in the past, but rather that the end result will be the same. Once your rights and freedoms have been taken there is virtually nothing you can do about it except wait and look to religion as Acorn did. In Butler's future, slavery looks like it did earlier in this country's history but in the future beyond Butler's 2024, slavery may take the form of oppressive legislation or the revocation of civil liberties. However, for Butler the implication is that like religion, although slavery may look different in the future, it is essentially the same.

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