

CONFRONTING ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL CRISES:  
OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S CRITIQUE OF THE SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF  
ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN HER *PARABLE* NOVELS

by

Melissa Vargas

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Melissa Ann Vargas

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The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Melissa Ann Vargas, and they also evaluated her presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination, and that the thesis was satisfactory for a master's degree and ready for any final modifications that they explicitly required.

Thomas Hillard, Ph.D. Chair, Supervisory Committee

Dora Ramirez-Dhoore, Ph.D. Member, Supervisory Committee

Cheryl Hindrichs, Ph.D. Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Thomas Hillard, Ph.D., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved for the Graduate College by John R. Pelton, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College.

## DEDICATION

For my husband, Tony, and my daughters, Sarah and Katlyn. You inspire me to strive for a better world for us all, and you make my world beautiful every day.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE THEMES IN THE PARABLE NOVELS .....	4
LAUREN'S CRITIQUE OF FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANITY .....	25
A CRITIQUE OF EARTHSEED .....	45
CONCLUSION .....	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	72

## INTRODUCTION

We are living in the midst of environmental and social crises. This fact was not lost on late African-American science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, whose 1993 *Parable of the Sower* and 1998 Nebula Award-winning *Parable of the Talents* depict and critique the current environmental and social crises in the United States. Speaking of *Sower* in an interview with *Essence* magazine, Butler says that all she “did was look around at the problems we’re neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters” (“Brave New Worlds” 164). In another interview with Randall Kenan, Butler describes environmental degradation, specifically global warming, as a primary concern within the *Parable* novels but also as an extension of real-world environmental degradation. She says, “The greenhouse effect has intensified and there has been a certain amount of starvation and agricultural displacement. There are real problems. Some of our prime agricultural land won’t be able to produce the crops that it’s been producing [...] These are big problems” (qtd. in Kenan 502). However, in the *Parable* novels, she does not separate her concern for the environment from her concerns about other social issues, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and the specific problems that social injustice creates. Indeed, the novels show that the groups already oppressed in American society—namely racial minorities, women, the poor, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals—are most victimized by ecological disaster. These groups experience the worst conditions society has to offer, and racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic ideology

is perpetuated throughout the crises. Moreover, these ideologies gain prominence as people search for scapegoats and excuses for their behavior in a time of intense competition for even basic necessities. The connection Butler makes between environmental disaster and social injustice is apt in light of environmental justice criticism that shows that American society already disproportionately victimizes minority groups with environmental degradation. Furthermore, her discussions of empathy, hierarchy, and spirituality in the novels expose some of the root causes of environmental disaster and social injustice.

While scholarly attention has been paid to Butler's work and her social and environmental justice themes, there has not yet been an in-depth discussion of the *Parable* novels' implications for environmental literary criticism. The purpose of my thesis is to both expand Butler studies and contribute to environmental criticism generally and environmental justice criticism specifically by providing a focused look at Butler's depiction of environmental and social disasters in the *Parable* novels. In my analysis, I will utilize environmental, environmental justice, and ecofeminist criticism, as well as Chela Sandoval's discussion of the hermeneutics of love. A careful look at Butler's work shows how literature can contribute to our understanding of environmental and social justice issues. Specifically, my analysis of Butler's *Parable* novels will examine the connection between spirituality and current environmental and social crises.

In my first chapter, I will discuss how Butler depicts environmental and social crises in the *Parable* novels, focusing primarily on *Parable of the Sower* as a novel that exemplifies environmental justice criticism within a literary text. In my second chapter, I will show how Butler connects environmental justice issues in the *Parable* novels to

issues of spirituality, namely criticisms of the lack of empathy and perpetuation of hierarchy that is found in the American Christian tradition. My third chapter will expand beyond the context of the novels and critique the spiritual solution outlined in the *Parable* novels—Lauren Olamina’s *Earthseed*—and will show that while it has many attributes that could help American society find solutions to our current environmental and social crises, *Earthseed* is a flawed system because it does not fully extend the goal of empathy to the Earth, and it does not recognize the Earth as our home. Finally, my conclusion will argue that despite *Earthseed*’s flaws, it serves as an important and meaningful contribution to our understanding of the connection between spirituality and environmental and social crises.

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE THEMES IN THE PARABLE NOVELS

Written in the form of journal entries by the novel's protagonist, the fifteen-year-old Lauren Olamina, *Parable of the Sower* opens in the Los Angeles, California, suburb of Robledo on Saturday, July 20, 2024. Lauren inhabits a world thrown into chaos by environmental and social disasters, a world that has forced people to dramatically change the way they live. She describes her neighborhood as a walled community that protects its members from the "outside where things are so dangerous and crazy" (*Sower* 7). People are so fearful that they rarely go out for work and no longer send their children outside the community for school. When they do go outside, they travel armed and in groups. Lauren describes what might happen if they weren't so vigilant: "I think if there were only one of us, or if they couldn't see our guns, they might try to pull us down and steal our bikes, our clothes, our shoes, whatever. Then what? Rape? Murder?" (*Sower* 10). Lauren's sense of fear is not unfounded paranoia; it's built on experience and observation. She writes, "My stepmother says she and my father stopped to help an injured woman once, and the guys who had injured her jumped out from a wall and almost killed them" (*Sower* 10). Moreover, she has seen evidence of violence in the faces of beaten, desperate people and, worse, in the empty eyes of corpses left to rot.

Butler's choice of protagonist for *Parable of the Sower* is particularly appropriate. Lauren's youth gives her a different perspective than that of her father and step-mother, who remember the United States' prosperity in the 1990s and do not question the wish to return to "the good old days" (*Sower* 8). Lauren is therefore able to look at the world

around her with a fresh vision, a vision that questions everything and takes nothing for granted. Furthermore, as an African-American girl, her race and gender force her to experience greater hardship than a Caucasian male would experience, so she is better able to relate to others who suffer. And her middle-class status is extremely important. If she were rich, she would be sheltered from the worst atrocities of her time, and the story would be entirely different. If she were poor, on the other hand, she would certainly be more familiar with the suffering of those who experience the worst her society has to offer. But within the context of the novel, poverty is generally synonymous with illiteracy. An illiterate Lauren would no longer be able to tell her story in the form of a journal, and her voice would be subdued if not lost entirely. Moreover, she would not have the knowledge of history that she has gained from books, a knowledge that helps her better understand the roots of current problems and the historical precedence of newfound injustices. Lauren's insight depends greatly on her education, an education that would not be possible if she were illiterate. Instead, the middle-class, literate Lauren's voice is the driving force of the novel, and the novel's power stems from her rhetorical analysis of the dominant ideologies and their resulting realities in the world around her.

Lauren's age, race, gender, and class are certainly essential to her rhetorical analysis. Yet Butler gives Lauren's analysis a sharper edge by bestowing yet another characteristic on her, a characteristic that makes her even more perceptive in her world. Lauren suffers from "hyperempathy syndrome," a psychological disorder caused by her mother's drug use. Describing the disorder, she writes, "I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an 'organic delusional syndrome' [...] Thanks to Paracetco [...] the particular drug my mother chose to abuse

before my birth killed her, I'm crazy. I get a lot of grief that doesn't belong to me, and that isn't real. But it hurts" (*Sower* 12). Lauren notes that she is "supposed to share pleasure *and* pain," but she adds that "there isn't much pleasure around these days" (*Sower* 12). Because of her hyperempathy syndrome, Lauren cannot avoid noticing the suffering of those around her. She cannot hide behind her class privilege and her community walls and ignore the realities of a world in the midst of environmental and social crises. Furthermore, she cannot help but have a great deal of sympathy for those less fortunate than her, and her journals frequently describe their plight.

As it allows her to better understand and sympathize with the experiences of others, Lauren is a more compassionate person because of her hyperempathy syndrome. However, she experiences the disorder primarily as a disadvantage. In a violent world in which any sign of weakness can lead to rape, assault, or death, Lauren is more vulnerable than those who don't suffer from the disorder; in fact, she calls herself "the most vulnerable person I know" (*Sower* 12). At the first indication that she is experiencing the pain of another, an attacker could take advantage of her weakness and overpower her. Also, if she were threatened and needed to defend herself, the sign of another's pain could physically disable her and render her unable to fight back. This weakness frustrates Lauren, who is otherwise an extraordinarily strong and independent young woman. She fears for her own safety, and she realizes that she may someday be unable to protect someone she cares about because if that person or his or her attacker is in pain, she will be, too.

In *Parable of the Sower*, hyperempathy literally is a weakness because of the pain and vulnerability it inflicts on its sufferers, including Lauren. Furthermore, because it is

a medical condition caused by drug abuse, it is only logical that hyperempathy is deemed a pathological defect. Yet Jerry Phillips sees more significant reasons why “the doctors of the corporate order [in *Parable of the Sower*] view hyperempathy as a psycho-physical malady” (306). He writes, “in a hyperempathic world, the other would cease to exist as the ontological antithesis of the self, but would instead become a real aspect of oneself, insofar as one accepts oneself as a social being” (Phillips 306). The perpetuation of the status quo—a world of inequality and struggle for resources in which few are privileged—relies on the distinction between the self and the other and on an inability of its sufferers to empathize with one another. Instead of feeling others’ pain, they need to be focused on their own suffering so that they will continue to compete with one another for resources and status. This ensures that the privilege of the few is safe from any united uprising of the unprivileged many. This is why even in a society as unjust and unequal as that depicted in *Sower*, people continue to fight amongst themselves instead of uniting to change the status quo, and empathy is seen only as a weakness that will impair a person’s ability to survive. Indeed, empathy has become so entirely devalued in *Sower* that even Lauren’s father, a Baptist preacher who would seemingly be compelled by his faith to appreciate empathy, has no patience for her disorder. Lauren writes, “He tells me, ‘You can beat this thing. You don’t have to give in to it.’ He has always pretended, or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about” (*Sower* 11). While some of his concern likely stems from fears for Lauren’s safety and the need to prepare her to survive in such a harsh world, his lack of compassion also suggests that he, too, sees empathy itself as a deviant and defective trait.

Despite the problems caused by Lauren's hyperempathy, it is precisely her ability to feel the pain of others, combined with her intelligence and education, that makes her the ideal protagonist for a novel that depicts a convergence of social and environmental crises. This ability, combined with her social status as a young African-American woman, allows Lauren to see the causes of her society's downfall and provide critique and, sometimes, solutions. She is, in other words, able to achieve what Chela Sandoval describes as "differential consciousness," a

subjectivity [...] prodded into existence through an outsider's sensibilities: a lack of loyalty to dominant ideological signification, combined with the intellectual curiosity that demands an explosion of meaning [...] or to meaning's convergence and solidification [...] for the sake either of survival or of political change toward equality. (180).

Because of her hyperempathy, Lauren is forced to cross into the subjective positions of others and experience their realities as they experience them. And because of her intelligence, she transforms her subjective experiences into a basis for her rhetorical analysis. She feels no obligation for the status quo or the ideologies that perpetuate it, and she is therefore able to critique existing conditions and power structures as she sees fit. The result is a powerful rhetorical analysis that takes nothing for granted and is open to new possibilities.

While Lauren's rhetorical analysis of increased social inequality in a time of environmental and social disasters may seem limited to the context of the novel, it can also be understood as an extension of the current struggles of environmental justice activists, the social activists who expose and challenge the connections between

environmental degradation and social inequality. Indeed, Sylvia Mayer argues that *Parable of the Sower* “belongs to the tradition of apocalyptic ecogism that was started in the United States by Rachel Carson’s publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962,” one of the primary differences being Butler’s emphasis on “issues of environmental justice” (175). Mayer believes, in other words, that *Sower* cannot be safely filed away as fiction. Instead, it needs to be understood as an author’s attempt to expose and critique environmental and environmental justice issues. Mayer argues that Butler achieves this critique “by choosing a temporal setting that is very close to her contemporary reader’s world. She uses realist conventions of representation to delineate the features of her social and ecological dystopian future and by means of that facilitates reader identification” (177). The setting and events of the novel are fictional, but they are so close to reality that they force readers to reflect on real-world instances of environmental degradation and social inequality.

Butler uses artistic expression to expose and critique environmental justice issues; environmental justice activists, on the other hand, primarily expose and critique real-world environmental injustice. Describing the environmental justice movement, Robert D. Bullard writes, “The environmental justice framework [...] seeks to prevent environmental threats before they occur. The framework incorporates other social movements and principles [...] that seek to prevent and eliminate harmful practices in land use, industrial planning, health care, waste disposal, and sanitation services” (5). Explaining the environmental justice movement in the introduction to their collection of essays on environmental justice, *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy*, Adamson, Evans, and Stein expand Bullard’s description, writing,

We define environmental justice as the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment. We define the environment, in turn, as the places in which we live, work, play, and worship. Environmental justice initiatives specifically attempt to redress the disproportionate incidence of environmental contamination in communities of the poor and/or communities of color, to secure for those affected the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture. (4)

Bullards' and Adamson, Evans, and Stein's definitions of environmental justice are particularly important for understanding the connections between environmental justice activism and *Parable of the Sower*. Although the novel is set in a time of total environmental degradation, it is clear that the idea of "environment" in the novel is not limited to untouched nature. Instead, Lauren's primary environment is the community in which she lives. And although the environment is unhealthy for everyone, it becomes clear that it is unhealthier for some than it is for others. The poor experience the very worst conditions while the rich are able to survive because of their access to the remaining natural resources. Read as Butler's critique of the real-world status quo, *Parable of the Sower* can help readers understand how environmental injustice occurs.

Adamson, Evans, and Stein go on to describe how environmental justice emerged as a movement and argue for the importance of environmental justice work in politics, poetics, and pedagogy. Like Butler, environmental justice critics understand that because racial minorities, women, the poor, and LGBT individuals do not have the political and

economic power to make or influence the decisions of those in power, they are more likely to experience the brunt of environmental disaster: exposure to toxins in the workplace and in communities, cancer clusters, and the loss of communal outdoor spaces, not to mention possible starvation, homelessness, and even death as environmental conditions worsen. Indeed, environmental justice activist Giovanna Di Chiro shows that the urban areas that are most plagued by “the excesses of industrial society—too much pollution, too much poverty, too much unemployment, [and] too much disheartenment” are those lived in by poor minorities and working-class whites (286). These people do not have political clout and are therefore neglected or even victimized by governments, corporations, and greedy individuals. Robert Figueroa explains why:

Placing environmental burdens in the social spaces of the poor and people of color communities is an expression of the ways in which the inhabitants are valued by the more powerful decision-makers in our society. When the decision-makers are set in participatory power, they value their social location enough to consciously avoid locating harms upon themselves and their environments. The regularity with which environmental burdens are concentrated in the spaces of poverty and color announces who is the most institutionally powerful and who is represented in environmental decision-making. (316-317)

While Figueroa is discussing real-world problems, his analysis shows the relevance of the social injustices running rampant in a time of environmental crises within *Parable of the Sower*. Those who are in power really just don't care about the suffering of those who are not in power, and they hoard resources in a way that ensures their own survival.

Furthermore, *Parable of the Sower* can be read as an attempt to expose and analyze these real-world problems; the novel makes its readers aware of the connections between the injustice of the novel and the injustice in the real world.

Environmental justice activists are conscious of the importance of culture, including literary texts, to their work. Adamson, Evans, and Stein encourage the recognition of writers and artists whose works deal with environmental justice issues and can force readers to confront the realities of these issues. In fact, Octavia Butler is one of the writers they name as particularly relevant. Julie Sze also argues for the importance of literary texts that deal with social and environmental problems. While the roots of environmental justice lie in sociology, writes Sze, “Literature offers a new way of looking at environmental justice, through visual images and metaphors, not solely through the prism of statistics” (163). She argues that literature can be more effective than statistics because literary texts “offer complex, multilayered analysis that can interweave a dizzying array of images and issues. They reference ‘real’ problems, but are not limited to a realist mode of representation” (Sze 170). Such is the case with *Parable of the Sower*, which allows Butler to extrapolate from her social context and imagine what the world will become if drastic changes aren’t made in the ways humans interact socially and with their environments. Although Butler does not name the environmental justice movement in interviews, her decision to base the *Parable* novels on real-world problems, her inclusion of environmental justice issues in the novels, and her hope that the novels might help prevent a deepening environmental disaster before it occurs make them particularly relevant to environmental justice critics. And while Lauren does not discuss environmental justice per se, she is very aware of the environmental degradation

and social inequality in which she lives, and she frequently makes connections between the two.

Like environmental justice critics, Lauren sees the connections between environmental disasters and social crises, and her own text, her journal, allows her to represent her world in a way that interprets reality and bestows meaning upon the events she witnesses. As Lauren begins to describe the world around her in her journal, it quickly becomes clear that global warming and severe climate change have led to American society's deterioration. The severity of the environmental disaster is evident in Lauren's journal entry about a rainstorm, the first in six years. She writes that water has become precious and expensive because of the drought and describes her family's efforts to catch and store as much of the rainwater as possible. She writes, "the barrels and things we put out are full or filling. Good, clean, free water from the sky. If only it came more often" (*Sower* 48). Indeed, water has become so scarce that the majority of the community's money is used to buy food and water, and they can no longer afford to spend money on luxuries like gasoline, which Lauren's family never uses, and electricity, which Lauren's family uses sparingly. At one point Lauren writes, "Dad says water now costs several times as much as gasoline" (*Sower* 18). The focus on water scarcity in *Parable of the Sower* is not without cause. Concerns about water, one of the absolute necessities for human survival, are frequently raised in environmental justice criticism. For example, environmental justice activist Devon Peña discusses the importance of water, calling it "one of the most pivotal ecological struggles of contemporary times [because] [u]nder the capitalist system we have a very complex set of struggles that are emerging around the commodification and privatization of water" (22). The very idea

that those in power can control and profit from water is troubling because it means that they could potentially withhold water from those who can't afford it, and it becomes far more troubling in *Parable of the Sower* when the commercialization of the water supply determines who will live and who will die.

Although Lauren describes the difficulties faced by her community, she is well-aware of her class privilege. Lauren and her family are relatively well-off because they are middle class and are able to hide behind their community walls. Most people are not as fortunate and live in “neighborhoods so poor that their walls were made up of unmortared rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash;” in “pitiful, unwalled residential areas [...in which] A lot of the houses were trashed—burned, vandalized, infested with drunks or druggies or squatted in by homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half-naked children;” or even on the streets (*Sower* 9-10). In one entry, Lauren writes, “they often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other’s ears, arms, legs....They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don’t get enough to eat so they’re malnourished—or they eat bad food and poison themselves” (*Sower* 10-11). These people are a danger to Lauren and her family, both directly in terms of violence and indirectly in terms of lost resources by theft. Her father says that he would shoot these people to protect his family, arguing that “if these people steal enough, they’ll force us to spend more than we can afford on food—or go hungry. We live on the edge as it is” (*Sower* 71). Lauren, however, understands their behavior, writing that “They’re desperate or crazy or both. That’s enough to make anyone dangerous” (*Sower* 10). Although she knows she may have to kill to protect herself, she is far more hesitant than

her father to do so because she knows she would feel her victim's pain; this knowledge gives her all the more reason to sympathize with those who are less fortunate than her.

While Lauren spends a great deal of time reflecting on the plight of the poor, she also notes that there are those who are far more fortunate than she is: the rich who hide in their mansions behind even higher walls than those of her Robledo community. Even though these people are not as rich as they once were, they maintain their grasp on power and privilege, and they are able to take advantage of the desperation of those less fortunate, paying them little or nothing for labor, providing only “shacky little dependencies” for shelter, and denying them even basic human rights (*Sower* 9). Even the government allows the rich to exploit the poor, implementing laws that “suspend [the] ‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board” (*Sower* 27). Lauren is not fooled by the political rhetoric and knows that these changes will allow employers to abuse the poor even more than they already do. She asks, “Will it be legal to poison, mutilate, or infect people—as long as you provide them with food, water, and space to die?” (*Sower* 27). Lauren cannot ignore the way power and privilege are used to widen the divide between the rich and the poor, a divide that has already grown wider in the face of environmental disaster. She is also aware that the poor are fighting for their very survival, and she cannot accept this as inevitable or fair.

Lauren is aware that her community is somewhat privileged because of its middle-class status; however, because it is a mixed-race community, she also knows that its members experience the environmental and social crises unequally. At first this

inequality is not apparent to readers because the community works together in order to survive. Lauren writes, “The Garfields and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days. On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind [...] Our neighborhood is too small for us to play those kinds of games” (*Sower* 36). Nevertheless, the community is at risk of being pulled apart by racial divides. This becomes evident when Olivar, a corporate community offering jobs and security, invites people to apply for residency. Olivar does not announce any intentions to make its selections based on race, but as a young, African-American girl, Lauren knows that she and her mixed-race family (she and her father are African-American, her step-mother is Hispanic, and her brothers are mixed-raced) are not welcome in Olivar because of the newfound community’s racism. This is true despite her father and stepmother’s value as educators. On the other hand, white community members do have a chance to join Olivar. Even though Lauren has no desire to move to Olivar because she is aware of the history of company towns in the United States and knows that Olivar’s residents will be victims of wage slavery, it is clear that racism plays a major role in whether or not a person will survive her chaotic world. For, as Lauren knows, she is at greater immediate, physical risk in her walled community than she would be in Olivar.

Lauren is also aware of the gender inequality that surrounds her in both American society and within her community’s walls despite the fact that she is treated relatively well within her community regardless of her gender. Her principal experience of gender inequality is the assumption that she’ll get married, have babies, and not do much else with her life, but she ties this belief to the lack of hope the community has for any of its

youth and not gender inequality. Furthermore, she complains that she is not listened to by her father and other adults in her community, but, again, she perceives that this is primarily because of her young age rather than her gender. She realizes that she is lucky, though, and sees the oppression of other women. She writes, “Some middle class men prove they’re men by having a lot of wives [...] Some upper class men prove they’re men by having one wife and a lot of beautiful, disposable young servant girls. Nasty. When the girls get pregnant, if their rich employers won’t protect them, the employers’ wives throw them out to starve” (*Sower* 37). She refers to this trend as a form of sexual slavery, and she sees this slavery firsthand within her community. One woman in the community, Zahra Moss, was just fifteen when she was sold to Richard, her future husband, by her mother. She had lived on the streets with her mother and was thus more materially comfortable with Richard than she had ever been before, and she reflects on this improvement with gratitude. Yet Lauren sees the cruelty of Zahra’s situation. As a young girl forced to choose between homelessness and starvation or a bed to sleep in and food to eat, she had no real choice but to obey her new husband’s will, which included her having sex with him and giving birth to his child. She accepted her situation out of material need, not with free agency. And Zahra’s decision was not without immediate consequences. She had to tolerate the abuse of her husband’s other wives, who hated her. Moreover, she was victim to her husband’s archaic views about women. When Lauren expresses shock that Zahra doesn’t know how to read or write, she answers, “Richard wouldn’t let me. He said I already knew enough to suit him” (*Sower* 186). Zahra is clearly a victim of the resurgence of open gender oppression that occurs in the midst of dire social and environmental crises.

Even though most of Lauren's knowledge stems from her experiences within her community, she is also aware of the dangers for women outside her community's walls, so she understands why Zahra feels the way she does about her own situation. She writes, "A girl alone only faced one kind of future outside" (138). That one future is bleak: rape, forced prostitution, murder, or maybe all three. And this is on top of the dangers faced by men and women alike: the daily struggle to survive a violent and unjust society. Lauren knows that the community walls are her protection from this reality. However, she knows that this protection is fleeting. After her father disappears and is presumed dead, she feels compelled to leave her Robledo community because she knows that eventually the walls will be overcome by those who want her community's resources. But she also knows that "I could get killed as soon as I leave here. I could starve. The cops could pick me up. Dogs could get me. I could catch a disease. Anything could happen to me; I've thought about it. I haven't named half the bad possibilities" (*Sower* 141). And she knows that the worst possibilities—rape, sexual slavery, and then murder—are more likely to happen to her because of her gender.

Clearly Lauren is a bright young woman who is quite aware of the reality in which she lives. However, her life is relatively sheltered and easy within the walls of her community. She doesn't truly experience the worst her society has to offer until her community is all but wiped out and burnt to the ground by a group of drug-fueled pyromaniacs, leaving the now eighteen-year-old Lauren a homeless orphan who must attempt to find a place to belong and survive. Lauren fully understands the dramatic shift in her situation. She writes, "*I am one of the street poor, now. Not as poor as some, but homeless, alone*" (*Sower* 156). She has lost her protective bubble and must struggle to

survive. Worse, she writes, “Out here a mistake—one mistake—and you may be dead” (*Sower* 181). She is particularly aware of how vulnerable she is because of her race and gender. When she sets out to find a better place to work and live with two other Robledo survivors, Zahra Moss, an African-American woman, and Harry Balter, a Caucasian man, she tells them that she plans to travel “as a man” (*Sower* 171). The other two agree that this will be safer, for women are seen as vulnerable and are more likely to be raped and/or murdered. Aware of how dangerous racism is outside the community walls, Zahra points out a problem with this tactic, arguing that “Mixed couples catch hell whether people think they’re gay or straight. Harry’ll piss off all the blacks and you’ll piss off all the whites. Good luck” (*Sower* 171-172). Lauren agrees and tells Zahra, “We can be a black couple and their white friend. If Harry can get a reasonable tan, maybe we can claim him as a cousin” (*Sower* 172). As is typical of Lauren, she presents a practical solution to the problem. Yet she is still aware of the risks she faces because of racism, especially as an African-American, and she is wary of those who might want to kill her because of her race.

Lauren’s awareness of social injustice expands further when she takes to the freeway—walking, of course, because of the high cost of gasoline—and encounters a wider variety of people than she is accustomed to knowing. The first new people she meets and gets to know are a mixed-race family: Travis, an African-American man, Natividad, a Hispanic woman, and Domingo, their six-month-old son. It is through Travis and Natividad that Lauren learns about the resurgence of slavery and the evils it entails. Although the two have not been slaves in name, their experiences remind Lauren of the accounts of slavery she has read. Travis’s mother had worked “as a live-in cook”

(*Sower* 218). When her employer forbade Travis from reading his many books, his mother sneaked them to him so that she could teach him how to read. Reflecting on Travis's story in her journal, Lauren writes, "Of course. Slaves did that two hundred years ago. They sneaked around and educated themselves as best they could, sometimes suffering whipping, sale, or mutilation for their efforts" (*Sower* 218). Because of her critical mind, Lauren is quick to make the connection between servitude in a time of environmental and social crises and the slavery of the past, especially when Travis continues telling his story and says that Natividad had been a maid for the same employer. She writes, "The son of the cook marrying one of the maids. That was like something out of another era, too" (*Sower* 219). But her suspicions are confirmed when Travis explains why the couple finally left their place of employment with their baby. He says, "the old bastard we worked for decided he wanted Natividad [...] Couldn't let her alone. That's why we left. That's why his wife helped us leave" (*Sower* 219). Lauren knows how common sexual abuse and rape were for slaves, yet she realizes that Travis and Natividad are relatively lucky, that "In slavery when that happened, there was nothing the slaves could do about it—or nothing that wouldn't get them killed, sold, or beaten" (*Sower* 219). But Lauren is also quick to realize that Travis and Natividad are probably not the only ones who have experienced malicious employers, as well as the fact that their story probably doesn't even represent the worst to be found in her society. She writes, "How many other people were less lucky—unable to escape the master's attentions or gain the mistress's sympathies. How far did masters and mistresses go these days toward putting less than submissive servants in their places?" (*Sower* 219).

Lauren’s rhetorical question is answered when she meets Emery Solis and her nine-year-old daughter, Tori, and then Grayson and his daughter, Doe. All are ex-slaves on the run from their masters. Emery tells the group her story, and Lauren retells it in her journal. Emery, her husband, and her three children had lived and worked on a farm in which

[w]ages were paid, but in company scrip, not in cash. Rent was charged for the workers’ shacks. Workers had to pay for food, for clothing [...] for everything they needed, and, of course they could only spend their company notes at the company store. Wages—surprise!—were never quite enough to pay the bills. According to new laws that might or might not exist, people were not permitted to leave an employer to whom they owed money. They were obligated to work of the debt either as quasi-indentured people or as convicts. (*Sower* 288)

Emery and her husband were already in debt, but, worse, when Emery’s husband died, she “and her children became responsible for the Solis debt. Accepting this, Emery worked and endured until one day, without warning, her sons were taken away” and never returned (*Sower* 288). When the masters threatened to take Emery’s daughter away, as well, she decided they should run away, and she was forced to leave her sons behind.

As Lauren’s tone, particularly her sarcastic use of the word “surprise,” indicates, Lauren is well aware of the implications of Emery’s story. She sees that the end result of social injustice based on class, race, and gender is a return to the days of slavery, the primary difference being that slavery won’t be limited to those with black skin—it will be

deemed acceptable for anyone who lacks the power to be a slaver—and that the justification for slavery will no longer be racial superiority. Instead, it will be the much more acceptable idea that debt slaves have brought their condition on themselves by incurring debt. This is clearly the worst result of the social injustice Lauren experiences and observes. For even death is preferable to a lifetime of slavery, a reality made clear by Emery's decision "to run away, to take her daughter and brave the roads with their thieves, rapists, and cannibals. They had nothing for anyone to steal, and rape wasn't something they could escape by remaining slaves. As for the cannibals [...] well, perhaps they were only fantasies—lies intended to frighten slaves into accepting their lot" (*Sower* 289). Unfortunately, the stories of cannibals are indeed true. But even if they weren't, Emery, her daughter, and other slaves would still be taking a risk whether they remain as slaves or brave the roads. Their choice to flee shows how important freedom is to them, and Lauren's assertion that "we become the crew of a modern underground railroad" serves as a reminder that freedom is worth risking one's life (*Sower* 292).

The analyses of environmental justice activists are similar to Lauren's rhetorical analysis of her society. However, *Parable of the Sower* does not explicitly analyze one important way in which people are oppressed in environmental crises: heterosexism. In her introduction to *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism*, Rachel Stein argues for the importance of critiquing the roles of gender and sexuality in environmental justice issues. Greta Gaard seconds this assertion, writing "that a democratic, ecological society [...] will, of necessity, be a society that values sexual diversity and the erotic" (22). Yet even though Butler does not include a critique of heterosexism in *Parable of the Sower*, she does realize the importance of critiquing all

forms of oppression, including heterosexism, and corrects this oversight in *Parable of the Talents*. In *Talents* Lauren describes the treatment of two lesbian women, Allie and Mary, when their relationship is revealed. The women are called “sinners,” and they are punished. She writes, “They [electronically] lashed both women until neither could scream anymore. They made us watch” (*Talents* 251). Mary dies from the lashing, and Allie is never again the same. Lauren’s anger over this event is beyond words, but she is able to express her disdain for all forms of oppression, including homophobia.

Just as Lauren’s rhetorical analysis critiques and attempts to change a status quo in which any form of difference is seen as an excuse for oppression, environmental justice activists work to expose and stop the victimization of racial minorities, women, the poor, and LGBT individuals. Furthermore, they are aware that if there aren’t drastic changes in both the way we treat the Earth and the way we treat oppressed social groups, their plight will only worsen as the environment continues to deteriorate. This worst-case scenario has already occurred in *Parable of the Sower*, and Lauren’s rhetorical analysis exposes the connections between the environmental justice issues of our own world and the more desperate environmental justice issues of her own. Indeed, Madhu Dubey writes that “The dystopia presented in *Parable of the Sower* [sic] is so closely extrapolated from current trends, as Stephen Potts observes, [...] that it produces a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement” (106). This shock is particularly effective because Lauren’s experience is shared through her journal. As we read her journal, we become intimately acquainted with Lauren and grow to care about what happens to her. We are, in other words, made to empathize with her, to imaginatively feel her experiences as she feels them. Moreover, we do not just empathize with her; through her,

we also empathize with those she experiences hyperempathy for. In this way, *Parable of the Sower* is a powerful work of environmental justice literature. It forces readers to see, experience, and understand the plight of those who suffer the double burden of social injustice and environmental degradation.

## LAUREN'S CRITIQUE OF FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANITY

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler creates a world in which the environmental and social crises of our time have rapidly evolved into full-fledged environmental and social disasters, disasters that threaten the very survival of humans as a species and the United States as a society, as well as the Earth and all its inhabitants, both living and nonliving. Much of Lauren's rhetorical analysis centers on exposing the injustices perpetuated and heightened by these disasters, injustices primarily experienced by racial minorities, women, the poor, and LGBT individuals, bisexual, or transgendered individuals. In this way, Butler exposes the realities of environmental injustice. Through her ability to move between subjective positions through her combined empathy and intelligence—what Chela Sandoval calls “differential consciousness” (180)—Lauren also begins to uncover the causes of these injustices. She critiques the status quo and refuses to accept the dominant ideologies that perpetuate it: the ideologies that allow the few to rule over the many.

Like Lauren, environmental justice activists have worked to analyze the root causes of environmental injustice. Ecofeminists, in particular, have explored the connections between patriarchal ideology and environmental degradation: the same ideology that claims the value of the white, the male, the rich, and the heterosexual over the black, the woman, the poor, and LGBT individuals is used to justify the destruction of the environment in the name of progress. Greta Gaard explains how ecofeminists view these oppressive dualisms, writing that

At the root of ecofeminism is the understanding that the many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing. Building on the socialist feminist insight that racism, classism, and sexism [and Gaard later adds heterosexism] are interconnected, ecofeminists recognized additional similarities between those forms of human oppression and the oppressive structures of speciesism and naturism. An early impetus for the ecofeminist movement was the realization that the liberation of women [...] cannot be fully effected without the liberation of nature. (21)

Based on their understanding of the interconnection between various forms of oppression, ecofeminists have critiqued various ideological systems—science, religion, Renaissance humanism, and so on—to determine how they function to perpetuate the status quo.

While all of these critiques are valid and work together to expose the ideological roots of social inequality and environmental degradation, ecofeminist Carol P. Christ argues that the current social and environmental crises are “at root spiritual” (58). Similarly, Butler’s critique of religion in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* emphasizes spirituality (which I define in Chapter 3) as a root cause of the social and environmental crises depicted in the novels.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren is highly critical of the American Christian tradition. The daughter of a Baptist preacher, Lauren has lost her faith in her father’s God, the God of Christianity, even before *Sower*’s first journal entry, and her feelings are clear early in *Sower* when she writes, “At least three years ago, my father’s God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church” (*Sower* 7). The Christian God is nonsensical to Lauren in the face of environmental and social crises. She cannot

reconcile what she has been taught—biblical scripture as truth—with what she sees and experiences: suffering, hatred, violence, and murder. Her feelings become clear when she reflects on a storm that is raging in the Gulf of Mexico, killing hundreds. She asks, “Is it God? Most of the dead are the street poor who have nowhere to go and who don’t hear the warnings until it’s too late for their feet to take them to safety. Where’s the safety for them anyway? Is it a sin against God to be poor? We’re almost poor ourselves....How will God—my father’s God—behave toward us when we’re poor?” (*Sower* 15). Lauren’s questions about the connections between poverty and suffering reflect her knowledge that it is the poor who suffer most in her society. But she doesn’t really think there is a God up in the heavens who is punishing the poor. Her point is that the Christian God has been used as an excuse to justify the poverty of some while others prosper. The responsibility for poverty and suffering is delegated to God so that those who are in power do not have to take responsibility.

Lauren’s criticism of Christianity continues when she writes that the Book of Job “says more about my father’s God in particular and gods in general than anything else I’ve ever read” (*Sower* 16). Lauren’s summary of Job is as follows:

In the book of Job, God says he made everything and he knows everything so no one has any right to question what he does with any of it. Okay. That works. That Old Testament God doesn’t violate the way things are now. But that God sounds a lot like Zeus—a super-powerful man, playing with his toys the way my youngest brothers play with toy soldiers. Bang, bang! Seven toys fall dead. If they’re yours, you make the rules. Who cares what the toys think. Wipe out a toy’s family, then

give it a brand new family. Toy children, like Job's children, are interchangeable.

Maybe God is a kind of big kid, playing with his toys. If he is, what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane [...]?

(*Sower* 16)

Lauren's questions about the connection between God and the Gulf storm are not simply the ranting of a confused teenage girl. They reflect a logical mind at work, a mind trying to make sense of the world. And Lauren finds that the teachings of her father's Christianity and the realities of the world around her just don't mesh: if those teaching were true, how could God allow bad things to happen to innocent people? And if God does allow bad things to happen to innocent people, why should anyone believe in and worship that God?

Lauren's disbelief in the Christian God stems from her inability to believe that, if real, that God could allow so many horrible things to happen to so many innocent people, yet she is also frustrated by the passivity of the Christian community around her. Instead of taking action to better their lives, they hide behind their walls, waiting for inevitable destruction. Lauren is different. She tries to urge the community to take action. She starts with her best friend, Joanne, telling her "We can get ready [...] for what's going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterward. Get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more than just get batted around by crazy people, desperate people, thugs, and leaders who don't know what they're doing!" (*Sower* 55). But her attempt backfires. Joanne gets upset and tells her mother that Lauren scared her, and the tale gets back to Lauren's father, who is frustrated by her talk. He tells her,

“These things frighten people. It’s best not to talk about them” (*Sower* 63). Although he knows Lauren is right, he chooses peace and comfort within the community over the preparation that Lauren wants. This is extremely frustrating for Lauren. She doesn’t give up, though; even though the community won’t listen to her, she prepares herself for the worst, packing an emergency pack with money, seeds, water, and other necessities (*Sower* 80).

One reason Lauren’s religious point-of-view is so different from the adults in her Robledo community is that she has no memory of what American society once was. While those in the community who can remember the wealth and ease of the 1990s remember the past as “the good old days,” Lauren is not convinced (*Sower* 8). Instead, she writes of those times with sarcasm, describing the “good old days” as a time “when there were churches all over the place and too many lights and gasoline was for fueling cars and trucks instead of for torching things” (*Sower* 8). Lauren’s sarcasm makes it clear that she blames previous generations for the environmental degradation that plagues her society. She knows that if those generations hadn’t lived so extravagantly and wastefully, conditions would be better for her own generation. Furthermore, because she has lived with so few material comforts, she knows that they aren’t necessary. Indeed, when her stepmother reminisces about the city lights of Los Angeles and tells her that she misses them even though they couldn’t see the stars, Lauren disagrees, looking at the night sky and saying “I’d rather have the stars” (*Sower* 6). Lauren doesn’t miss what she’s never had, and she has learned to appreciate what she does have. And for Lauren, some of society’s losses have been positive. She sees potential in society’s changes.

A potential benefit of American society's deterioration is the possibility of humanity developing a new sense of spirituality, a spirituality which, unlike Christianity, will inspire action instead of condoning acceptance of the status quo. Lauren takes the initiative and forms this new spirituality herself. Driven by her need to take action and accept change, she "discovers" a religion she calls Earthseed. Earthseed is a religion of action, and it negates the existence of a literal God who creates, shapes, and controls reality. Instead, writes Lauren, "All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God / Is Change" (*Sower* 3). Later she explains this verse, writing,

God is Change, and in the end, God prevails. But God exists to be shaped. It isn't enough for us to just survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. If that's the shape we give to God, then someday we must become too weak—too poor, too hungry, too sick—to defend ourselves. Then we'll be wiped out. (*Sower* 76)

She adds, "There has to be more that we can do, a better destiny that we can shape. Another place. Another way. Something!" (*Sower* 76). Writing of her Earthseed verses, she explains, "I'll use these verses to pry them [people who will listen] loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense" (*Sower* 79). Earthseed emphasizes the importance of action, of interdependence, and of consequences. It is not a religion of passivity; it is a religion that puts responsibility for action on everyone. It is, in other words, a religion that is more likely to change the status quo than the Christianity which accepts the deterioration and destruction of the earth and the human race as inevitable.

Once again, Lauren's perspective, this time her spiritual perspective, is shaped by her hyperempathy and intelligence, by her ability, in other words, to shift between subjective positions and achieve "differential consciousness." Sandoval writes,

the differential mode of oppositional consciousness movement is conditional: subject to the terms of the dominant power, yet capable of challenging and changing those very same terms. It is a mode of consciousness that is not necessarily true or false—only possible, active, and present. It promotes social movement with purpose, both subject to the terms of power and capable of transforming them. This social movement generates a different kind of negotiation as it barter meaning systems, using skills accomplished by a new kind of collectivity that attaches strings, makes demands, imposes conditions, negotiates terms.

(180-181)

Like Sandoval's "differential consciousness," Earthseed requires flexibility, the ability to act according to the situation at hand. It requires the ability to do what is necessary within the status quo even as it challenges the status quo. For instance, following the principles of Earthseed, Lauren protects herself by following the rules society has put forth. She uses money to buy the resources she needs, and she knows better than to try to steal from those who are profiting from those needs, such as the water vendors who have establishments along the freeway, because she could be killed or enslaved. Yet she is also able to critique the status quo and breaks the rules when necessary or relatively safe, stealing from those who attack her and her group, for example. This adaptability is

justified by Earthseed's aphorism that "We adapt and endure, / For we are Earthseed / And God is Change" (*Sower* 17).

Although Lauren is highly critical of Christianity and forms the basic tenets of Earthseed in *Sower*, her criticism of Christianity is more vehement in *Parable of the Talents*, which shifts its focus from the Christianity of Lauren's father to the fundamentalist Christianity of a group called "Jarret's Crusaders," a radical branch of the popular Christian America Church led by Andrew Steele Jarret. This shift is important. It moves from Lauren's frustrations with a God who could let His people suffer and a faith that leaves its follower inactive—both highly debatable criticisms of Christianity in general, criticisms that admittedly don't apply equally to all expressions of the Christian faith—to a very specific criticism of the actions of one Christian fundamentalist group and the doctrine that it uses to justify its actions. This shift in focus allows Lauren to expose some major flaws in Christianity as a spiritual system, not just in its fundamentalist form but in any form. Because of this shift, she is able to discover the root of the spiritual crisis in the *Parable* novels.

At the end of *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren settles on a piece of land she calls Acorn in Humboldt County in Northern California. She is joined by Harry and Zahra and eleven other people who become a part of their group during the journey north. Most importantly, Lauren is joined by Bankole, a fifty-seven-year-old African-American man who owns the land that becomes Acorn and with whom she has fallen in love and plans to marry. The novel's last entry is dated Sunday, October 10, 2027, more than three years after the novel's opening entry. Lauren's first journal entry in *Parable of the Talents* is dated Sunday, September 26, 2032, nearly five years after the end of *Sower*.

While life has been relatively peaceful during those five years and the community has grown to the number of “59 people—64 with the Dovetree women and children, if they stay,” Lauren’s first journal entry describes a recent nightmare and expresses her anxiety over a recent attack on a neighboring community, Dovetree (*Talents* 21). She writes,

That attack shouldn’t have happened. Things have been quieting down over the past few years. There’s still crime, of course—robberies, break-ins, abductions for ransom or for slave trade. Worse, the poor still get arrested and indentured for indebtedness, vagrancy, loitering, and other “crimes.” But this thing of raging into a community and killing and burning all that you don’t steal seems to have gone out of fashion.

(*Talents* 17)

As Lauren indicates, conditions have become somewhat better since the events of *Sower*. But she is quick to realize that the recent attack indicates some kind of change, and she is clearly worried. She writes, “Whoever hit Dovetree, we could be next on their list” (*Talents* 17). Her fears are intensified by one of the Dovetree survivors’ descriptions of the attackers, who “[...] didn’t steal or burn anything until they had beaten us, shot us [...] They all wore big white crosses on their chests—crosses like in church. But they killed us. They even shot the kids. Everybody they found, they killed them” (*Talents* 18). Lauren doesn’t know what to think of this account, but she does know that “This was something new” (*Talents* 18).

Lauren has her suspicions about what exactly is going on. She has been following the news and knows that Andrew Steele Jarret, head of the “Christian America” churches, Texas senator, and a presidential candidate who is running on a platform of a return to the

religious foundations of America, has followers throughout the country. She suspects that his followers might be involved and describes it as “a revival of something nasty out of the past”: the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazis, the Inquisition, and the Crusades (*Talents* 19). Lauren’s assessment is not overblown. She writes,

Jarret supporters have been known, now and then, to form mobs and burn people at the stake for being witches. Witches! In 2032! A witch, in their view, tends to be a Moslem, a Jew, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or [...] a Mormon, a Jehovah’s Witness, or even a Catholic. A witch may also be an atheist, a ‘cultist,’ or a well-to-do eccentric. (*Talents* 19)

She adds that Jarret purports to condemn the acts of such extremists, but that his rhetoric is unconvincing. She sums up his message as the following: “*Join us and thrive, or whatever happens to you as a result of your own sinful stubbornness is your problem*” (*Talents* 20). Jarret’s message is particularly troubling for Acorn, a community seen as a cult by surrounding townspeople. Lauren realizes just how troubling Jarret’s rhetoric is when, after he does win the election and becomes President, she listens to some of his sermons as a Christian America pastor. In one sermon, he asks his congregation, “Why have we allowed ourselves to be seduced and betrayed by these allies of Satan, these heathen purveyors of false and unchristian doctrines? These people [...] these pagans are not only wrong. They’re dangerous [...] They rouse the righteous anger of God against us for our misguided generosity to them” (*Talents* 88). Lauren is quick to see that this sermon targets communities like Acorn, communities that will only be viewed as Satanic and/or heathen cults by people who will make no effort to understand them. Furthermore, Jarret’s sermon contains an implicit call for attacks like the one on the

Dovetree community, and she knows there is reason to worry that Acorn will be attacked next because of this call.

Lauren's worst fears are confirmed on Friday, September 23, 2033, when Acorn is attacked by a group of Jarret's Crusaders, who kill Lauren's husband, Bankole, and several other Acorn members; take away Acorn's children, including Lauren's newborn daughter, Larkin (renamed Asha Vere); and enslave Acorn's teenagers and adults at Acorn, which they rename Camp Christian. The prisoners are controlled with slave collars that deliver electric shocks with the push of a button on the Crusaders' remote controls or an automatic signal that senses escape attempts. The Crusaders make it clear that there is no escape. Lauren sums up their intentions in her journal, which she continues to write in secret. She writes, "They will break us down, reshape us, teach us what it means to love their country and fear their God" (*Talents* 184).

Lauren and the surviving Acorn members are held captive and put through over a year of abuse—meager food rations, forced labor in harsh weather, and, for many of the women, including Lauren, rape—meant to indoctrinate them into Christian America's brand of Christianity. Lauren's journal continues to provide a rhetorical analysis of the atrocities of Camp Christian. She exposes the hypocrisy of those who claim to be doing God's work while enslaving and murdering innocent people, raping women, and ravaging the land the Acorn community worked so hard to cultivate. Noting the importance of this critique, Donna Andréolle connects Lauren's critique of religious fundamentalism with present and historical instances of religious fundamentalism. She describes this fundamentalism as the result of "the American cultural myth of progress and the powerful eschatological vision of the Puritan American self" (115). This description

certainly rings true for the depiction of Jarret and his Crusaders, whose beliefs and behaviors are reminiscent of the Puritans, particularly in their narrow-minded sense of propriety and willingness to do anything to maintain the dominance of their own ideology.

More specifically, Butler's depiction of the Crusaders and Lauren's criticisms in *Parable of the Talents* serve as a critique of fundamentalist Christianity as a perpetuator of hierarchical ideology, ideology that justifies and naturalizes the domination of the few over the many, of "Christians" over "heathens," of men over women, and of man over nature. Lauren's journal depicts the Christian America organization as an organization that uses its sense of God-given superiority over others to oppress anyone they don't approve of. This oppressive ideology is acted on in what Lauren sees as predictable ways. First, although Christian America has African-American members, it is a racist organization. African-Americans are more likely to be accused of theft and vagrancy and are therefore more likely to be captured, imprisoned, and even killed (*Talents* 229-230). Moreover, poor vagrants of any ethnicity are likely to be accused of being "un-Christian" and sent to reeducation camps. Day Turner, a newcomer to Camp Christian who has more recent information about the outside world, tells Lauren that most people in the outside world are ignorant of Christian America's actions. However, he says that they probably wouldn't mind the treatment of poor vagrants because they "would be glad to see a church taking charge of the thieving, drug-taking, drug-selling, disease-spreading, homeless free poor" (*Talents* 231). He adds the poor remind "people that what's happened to us can happen to them. They don't like to think about stuff like that, so they get mad at us" (*Talents* 231). Society's views of the poor—a combination of blame and

fear—serves to maintain the social hierarchy; therefore, they are comfortable with the Christian Americans acting on this hierarchy.

Lauren also sees evidence of the hierarchy embraced by the Crusaders in the way they treat those they have power over every day of her captivity, especially in terms of gender. Her first experience of oppressive gender ideology occurs when she tries to comfort another woman with a hug. Her captor lashes her and says, “You do what you’re told and only what you’re told [...] You don’t touch one another. Whatever filth you’re used to, it’s over. It’s time for you to learn to behave like decent Christian women—if you’ve got the brains to learn” (*Talents* 203). He and the other men of Camp Christian believe it is their duty as Christian men to dominate the women into submission. Their methods are violence and scripture. If the women aren’t being lashed, they are forced to quote scripture that will indoctrinate them into the Christian America faith, such as the Bible verse that says “Unto woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (*Talents* 208). There can be no mistaking the hierarchical implications of an ideology in which men should “rule” over women, and Lauren repeatedly points out how the scripture is used to justify the way women are treated in Camp Christian. The explanation for this gender hierarchy is that women are inherently bad and need to be trained to submit to men. Lauren shows the logic of this ideology, writing, “if a collared man and woman are talking together, it’s the woman who tends to be lashed. Women are temptresses, you see. We drag innocent men into trouble. From the time of Adam and Eve women have dragged innocent men into trouble” (*Talents* 227). Lauren’s daughter, Asha Vere, explains that this isn’t just the case in

Camp Christian, for “President Jarret and his followers in Christian America believed that one of the things that had gone wrong with the country was the intrusion of women into ‘men’s business’” (*Talents* 221). In other words, women are blamed for the environmental and social crises of the novel even though it was primarily the men in power who allowed conditions to deteriorate so far.

Worse than the lashings and the endless scripture is the rape the women of Camp Christian endure. On Sunday, December 18, 2033, Lauren admits that she has been raped. She writes, “It happened twice. Once on Monday, and again yesterday. It is my Christmas gift from Christian America” (*Talents* 232). Once again, Lauren uses sarcasm to emphasize the cruelty of what has happened to her. Christmas is supposedly a holiday of love, joy, hope, and salvation. That Lauren’s Christmas “gift” is rape goes against everything the Christian faith claims to stand for. Yet she is not alone, nor is she the first woman to be raped at Camp Christian. Furthermore, rape is not her captors’ only source of sexual pleasure. Lauren describes one of her worst lashings, writing that “The son of a bitch smiled and pressed his button over and over as though he were fucking me, and he grinned while he watched me groaning and thrashing” (*Talents* 228). Worse, because of her hyperempathy syndrome, Lauren is all too aware that some of her captors do in fact get intense sexual satisfaction from the pain they inflict on women. They enjoy the power they have over women, and they don’t have to feel guilty because their beliefs support their actions. They openly admit this sense of justification. One of the women, Diamond Scott, tells Lauren that her rapist “told her it was all right. He was a man of God, and she should be honored” (*Talents* 209).

Surely it could be argued that the Crusaders are the worst examples of Christian American men and that they are twisting the faith to justify their domination of women. But Lauren does not believe the faults of Christianity can be isolated to Camp Christian and the Crusaders, nor does her experience with another Christian American man, her brother, Marc, support this argument. Later in the novel—after Lauren and the others have escaped from Camp Christian—Marc invites her to repent for her heathen ways and join Camp Christian, but he warns her that she'll have to give up her leadership role because “the movement won't let you preach. They agree with Saint Paul in that: ‘Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach or usurp authority over the man but to be in silence.’ But don't worry. There's plenty of other more suitable work for women to do to serve the movement” (*Talents* 323). Although this passage is quoted by someone who has motives for justifying men's superiority over women—Marc is angry that Lauren's Acorn followers listened to her and argued with him when he tried to preach the Christian faith—it is also inherently hierarchical. If a woman should not be “over the man” and should be silent, it's clear that the man is therefore over the woman and compelled to speak. Any interpretation otherwise requires a denial of the literal meaning of the text and of the way in which it has traditionally been interpreted.

Because such hierarchical passages are part of Christianity's core doctrine, the best of Christianity, the messages of love that can be found in the Bible and in Christian behavior, are contradicted by the message that inequality and hierarchy are God's will. It is this acceptance of hierarchy that allows ideologies of dominance to coexist with ideologies of love and acceptance. And in the case of Christian fundamentalists,

particularly the Christian America Crusaders in *Talents*, this allows messages of dominance to completely overshadow messages of love and acceptance, and for hypocrisy to overshadow any good intentions. Lauren notes this contradiction on several occasions. In one journal entry, she writes that the Crusaders “look at us with unmistakable hatred, disgust, and contempt, and they insist that it’s love that they feel. Their God requires them to love us, after all. And it’s only love that makes them try so hard to help us see the light” (*Talents* 248). In another entry, she describes the abuse of the Crusaders, writing that they torture them with the slave collars for their amusement and tell them that it’s so that they’ll learn to be good Christians. Lauren asks, “How can they do what they do if they believe what they say?” (*Talents* 209). The only answer that Lauren can comprehend is that they don’t really believe it, that they will simply twist their so-called faith in whatever ways necessary to simply do what they want to do.

Lauren’s critique of hierarchical ideology echoes a recurring theme in Butler’s work, a theme that she develops more thoroughly in her Xenogenesis Trilogy (*Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*) and discusses in an interview with Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating: she names the fundamental human flaw, the flaw that is at the root of the social and environmental crises, “the ‘human contradiction’ . . . Hierarchical behavior and intelligence” (53). What this means is that even as humans have grown increasingly intelligent, we have clung to the need to organize ourselves and everything around us into hierarchies of value. Butler argues that this is natural because hierarchical behavior is a biological trait shared by all living things. Unfortunately, she believes that humanity may destroy itself because of its combined hierarchical tendencies and intelligence. In Keating’s words, humans “use their intelligence to evaluate, rank, dominate, and control

others” (54). While Butler admits that human intelligence could be used to change the status quo, she says, “the dangerous thing is that the more hierarchical we become, the less likely we are to listen to our own intelligence or anyone else’s” (qtd. in Mehaffy and Keating 55). Instead, believes Butler, it’s more likely that we’ll find new ways to dominate others.

Butler does not only critique social hierarchies in her interview with Mehaffy and Keating; she is also concerned with the hierarchical ideologies that perpetuate humanity’s treatment of the Earth. She says, “Look at what we’re doing to the environment. We know we’re damaging it, but we can’t stop. The people who are making the money out of this keep telling us, ‘Don’t worry. It’s OK.’ We who are comfortable may not believe them, but we don’t push very hard” (qtd. in Mehaffy and Keating 56). Butler’s concern for the environment is reflected in Lauren’s critique of the Crusaders’ entirely self-serving treatment of Acorn’s land. The Crusaders appreciate the land insofar as it provides them with resources. Yet they destroy those elements of nature they don’t deem useful. Lauren writes that some of Camp Christian’s prisoners are forced to cut down

both the mature live oak and pine trees and the saplings that we had planted. These trees not only commemorated our dead and provided us with much protein, but also they helped hold the hillside near our cabins in place. Somehow, our ‘teachers’ have gotten the idea that we worshipped trees, thus we must have no trees nearby except those that produce the fruit and nuts that our ‘teachers’ like to eat. Funny how that worked out. The orange, lemon, grapefruit, persimmon, pear, walnut, and avocado trees were good. All others were wicked temptations. (*Talents* 216)

The Crusaders believe that nature is only valuable when it serves their human needs. Moreover, their belief that the Acorn community is a group of heathens who would believe in the intrinsic value of nature drives them to destroy those elements of nature that are unlikely to be used even before need or desire drives them to destruction.

Lynn White, Jr. explains the hierarchical implications of a worldview that assumes nature exists only as a resource for humankind. He argues that the man/nature duality that positions man above nature is made possible by the Judeo-Christian belief that God created man in his image and made everything else for man's benefit. Furthermore, in its defeat of paganism, the very spirituality of which Lauren and her followers are accused of holding, Christianity destroyed the beliefs in animism that instilled a sense of respect for nature, making "it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (White 10). This has been particularly true in the Western world even though Christianity offers an alternative view in which God communicates with man through nature, meaning that nature should be respected. Christopher Manes traces the more oppressive interpretation of Christian doctrine to "exegesis, the branch of religious studies dedicated to interpreting the Bible, [which] concluded that behind the *littera*, the literal (often mundane) meaning of a biblical passage, lay some *moralis*, a moral truth established by God. And beyond that lurked some divine purpose..." (19). The divinity of God's word was then applied to the rest of the world; everything in nature became sources of divine meaning rather than valuable in and of themselves. Nature became "a symbol for the glory and orderliness of God. This idea found its cosmological model in the so-called *scala naturae* or 'Great Chain of Being,'" which positioned humans at the top of a hierarchy of value in nature (Manes

20). During the Renaissance, the “Great Chain of Being” became a justification for the human exploitation of the natural world (Manes 20). The “faith in reason, progress, and intellect” of humanism solidified humanity’s position at the top, as perfectly justified in using all of nature for our needs and wants without concern for the creatures below us (Manes 20).

In *Talents*, the Crusaders take humanity’s dominion over nature as a given, and they act accordingly, destroying the natural world with no feeling or regret. Because of this destructive attitude, Acorn is quickly transformed from the beautiful home of the Earthseed community to Camp Christian, a dirty, ugly prison. Lauren notes this transformation with frustration. One of her greatest frustrations is the addition of a landfill. She writes, “We had had no dump before. We had a salvage heap and a compost heap. Neither was trash. We could not afford to be wasteful. Our teachers have made trash of our entire community” (*Talents* 255). Acorn’s destruction is implicitly tied to Earth’s destruction: the ideology behind the Crusaders and their degradation of beautiful Acorn is the same ideology that has allowed the degradation of the entire planet. And just as humanity will likely destroy itself through its destruction of the planet, the Crusaders destroy themselves through their destruction of Acorn. Lauren describes what happens during a severe storm: “The hill where our cemetery once was with all its new and old trees, that hill has slumped down into our valley. Our teachers had made us cut down the older trees for firewood and lumber and God [...] Because they forced us to do this, the hillside has broken away and come rumbling down to us” (*Talents* 253-254). While the landslide signals a final destruction of Acorn, Lauren and the other prisoners are freed because numerous Crusaders are killed and the collars that control the prisoners

are disabled. The prisoners escape, killing the remaining Crusaders and fleeing for their lives and freedom.

In *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren's rhetorical analysis shows that at least one root of the environmental and social crises is, indeed, spiritual. In particular, Lauren's critique points to the hierarchical thinking inherent in American Christianity—and therefore Christian ideology—as this spiritual root. Lauren's rhetorical analysis leads her to reject Christian hierarchy and to formulate criticisms of all kinds of hierarchies, thereby denying the logic of hierarchical thinking altogether. One important question for readers, then, is what kind of spiritual system or philosophy would be environmentally and socially viable and whether or not Lauren's Earthseed is up to the task.

## A CRITIQUE OF EARTHSEED

In *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren confronts what ecofeminist Carol P. Christ names the primary root of the environmental and social crises in the United States of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: a spiritual crisis. The spiritual crisis is not solely an issue of religion, however. While Lauren critiques Christianity as a religion and formulates a new religion, she ultimately decides to call Earthseed a religion only so that people will pay attention to it and not because she believes it's inspired by a higher power. She recognizes the power religion has in American society and in people's lives, and she utilizes that power to mobilize a social movement. Moreover, through her analysis of Christianity, she exposes the spiritual roots of her society's environmental and social crises. This is not a crisis of religion; instead, it is a philosophical or moral crisis in American culture: society is corrupted by guiding ideologies that allow hierarchical behavior and environmental degradation. This is the spiritual crisis Butler confronts in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, and Lauren attempts to solve the crisis through her creation of Earthseed.

Of course, the problem faced when discussing the very idea of a spiritual crisis is that there is no universally-accepted definition of "spiritual." "Spiritual" is widely viewed as synonymous with "religious" or "religion." Fittingly, then, Lauren's critique of Christianity and its dominance in American society indicate that any discussion of American spirituality must include a discussion of Christianity, and she exposes the hierarchy and oppression inherent in core Christian doctrine and, more so, in Christian

fundamentalism. Yet to equate spirituality with religion would be to argue that anyone who is not religious per se is therefore not spiritual. This is, indeed, what those who insist exclusively on the value of their personal religions, such as the Christian Americans who attack Lauren's Acorn community, would argue; moreover, they would argue that the only "spiritual crisis" in American society is seen in the declining membership in Christian churches. However, as Lauren's critique of the Crusaders and the Christian American Church shows, a view of spirituality as a quality of only a dominant religion—and therefore of only a person who loyally follows the tenets of a dominant religion—is not only inaccurate, but it also serves as a form of spiritual oppression. Therefore, this definition of spirituality is not acceptable to Butler, nor is it acceptable to most environmentalists, environmental justice activists, or ecofeminists who have made the connection between spirituality and social and environmental crises. This definition of spirituality, in other words, cannot establish the foundation for a socially and environmentally viable spiritual system.

Another commonly accepted definition of "spiritual" equates the term with that which is "of the nature of a spirit or incorporeal supernatural essence; immaterial" ("Spiritual," def. 4a). While this definition is certainly more general and inclusive, it is also overly restrictive. A definition of spirituality tied to a sense of the supernatural alone does not recognize a sense of spirituality in those who do not believe in a reality beyond the material world. True, this is another widely-held belief; materialists are often accused of lacking any sense of spirituality, and some materialists even claim that they are not spiritual in the least. However, the assumption that those who believe only in the physical world are not spiritual is also flawed because it rests on the presumption that the

supernatural is more valuable than the natural—the material world—and that those who believe solely in the material world value nothing of meaning and substance. Indeed, Lauren fits this category. Even though she forms her own religion, she does not believe in a reality beyond the material world. As Lauren points out, the Earthseed god is change, named a god so that people will appreciate its importance and not because Lauren aims to grant change status as a higher power. Furthermore, according to Lauren, “Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures” (*Sower* 219). Despite this belief, though, she is a spiritual leader, and she does develop a spiritual system. Moreover, the very idea that the supernatural is superior to the natural perpetuates the acceptance of environmental degradation. The truth of this is shown when Lauren details the Crusaders’ treatment of nature.

In a socially and environmentally just society, a definition of “spirituality” cannot be limited to religion, particularly one specific religion, nor can it be limited to spiritual transcendence. Instead, “spirituality” must be defined as the development of a philosophical and moral system that guides one’s life. This very definition is often viewed as an empty substitute for true spirituality: a religion that not only provides guidelines for how one should live his or her life but also a higher power that gives meaning and, ultimately, a reward if one follows those guidelines. On the contrary, however, a spiritual system that does not include a belief in spiritual transcendence still includes a sense of “higher authority” in the sense that the system’s guiding principles are of greater importance than any other responsibilities or desires. Again, Lauren’s actions exemplify this principle. In *Sower*, when she sets out with Harry and Zahra after their

Robledo community is destroyed, she is highly suspicious of outsiders and wants to remain isolated. But as one of her Earthseed verses says, she must

Embrace diversity.  
 Unite—  
 Or be divided,  
 robbed,  
 ruled,  
 killed  
 By those who see you as prey.  
 Embrace diversity  
 Or be destroyed. (*Sower 197*)

Lauren's initial survival instincts tell her that she, Harry, and Zahra will be safest on their own. Later, though, she is compelled to help and gather those she finds most deserving. This compulsion does not come from her survival instinct; instead, it is driven by Earthseed, from the belief that unity and not isolation is key to survival.

Another argument against the definition of spirituality as philosophical and moral code is that it posits spirituality as a free-for-all in which anything goes because it is the result of human thought and feeling rather than a higher power. This assumes, again, that spirituality depends on the belief in a higher power, and this assumption is not required for a spirituality defined as the development of a philosophical and moral system. And although it is true that this definition does not place any restrictions on what kind of morality results from this development, this does not mean that all spiritual systems are equally beneficial or that those spiritual systems that are socially and environmentally

destructive should be accepted. Instead, individuals should generally be allowed to exercise their spirituality freely, but there should be limits on this freedom when it infringes on the welfare of society and the environment. Moreover, a socially and environmentally viable spiritual system will understandably require certain qualities even as it aims to avoid becoming an oppressive system.

So if “spirituality” is defined as the formation of a philosophical and moral system to guide one’s life, the “spiritual crisis” faced in the United States is certainly not that of fewer people filling up Christian churches, nor is the fact that a diverse selection of spiritual systems are followed by the American people. Instead, the “spiritual crisis” is a moral crisis in American culture: society is corrupted by guiding ideologies that allow hierarchical behavior and environmental degradation. Again, this is the spiritual crisis Butler confronts in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, and Lauren attempts to solve the crisis through her creation of Earthseed.

The question, then, is whether Earthseed really could be the socially and environmentally viable spiritual system needed to solve the spiritual crisis in the United States. Critiques of *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* tend to praise Earthseed’s potential as a socially and environmentally viable spiritual system. Kimberly Ruffin, for example, argues that in Earthseed Lauren creates a religion and culture that is compatible with the survival of the human race. Ruffin suggests that Earthseed’s strength stems from Butler’s critique of the Bible, which is infused with an “Afrofuturistic vision,” a “fusion of futurism, liberation, and African-American history” (89). She argues that the *Parable* novels “‘write over’ Jesus’s allegoric discourse with both a new religion and a scribal mode of developing a religious language,” a practice which

coincides with the history of writing as a liberating force for African-Americans (Ruffin 91). Similarly, Patricia Melzer argues that “Earthseed transcends the definition of religion as well as philosophy by combining elements of spirituality with political and social issues” (5). By doing this, writes Melzer, “Butler conceptualizes the utopian impulse in her futuristic vision as a religious spirituality that rejects both the patriarchal concept of ‘God’ and the essentialist notion of an ‘earth mother goddess’ (Pearson 58) based in cultural feminism that is often an element within feminist utopias of the 1970s” (Melzer 5; Pearson qtd. in Melzer 5). Like Ruffin, then, Melzer views Earthseed as a spiritual system with the potential to solve social and environmental problems through human agency.

While it may seem unnecessary to analyze a fictional religion like Earthseed seriously, members of the SolSeed movement, a very small (eighteen members) yet growing real-world social and spiritual movement established online, have been inspired by Earthseed and have adopted it as the basis for a real-world spiritual system (*SolSeed.org*). But this system, like Earthseed, allows for flexibility and change and is not limited to the *Parable* novels for ideas and direction. As their website says, “Different people will want different things from SolSeed. The SolSeed organization can be viewed like a crystal, with four different facets. New members may wish to approach it by looking through one or more of these facets, depending where their interests lie” (“SolSeedFacets” par. 1). These four “facets” are as follows: actions, which lead to social movements that aim for positive change; words, primarily the concept of “Scripture [...] a kind of writing that can both inspire people to action and stand the test of time” (par. 3); ideas, which make up a Solseed philosophy intended to guide behavior

and inspire change; and emotions, “which inform all of our actions, words, and ideas. On this level, SolSeed is a Community” (par. 4). The hope to strengthen this last “facet,” community, has led the group to organize a retreat, Sol 2009, to be held in July.

The eighteen members of SolSeed have found in Earthseed a powerful and meaningful spirituality, one that can bring about real change in the world, and they have revised it according to their hope to apply the fictional spiritual system to the real world. SolSeed’s acceptance of the basic tenets of Earthseed and, in addition, Butler’s intention to make an impact on our understanding of the environmental and social crises plaguing the real world open Earthseed up to criticism of its potential as a real-world religion.

Earthseed’s greatest potential lies in its formation by one who experiences empathy at a heightened level and, in turn, its foundation on the spirit of empathy. Indeed, Carol P. Christ discusses the need for spirituality to “end injustice” (63). To work, this requires a system of spirituality that recognizes the interdependence of all humans. After all, don’t we also lack awareness of how much we depend on one another for survival? Doesn’t this lack of awareness allow us to go through life without the empathy that Lauren exemplifies? And couldn’t this lack of empathy be considered a lack of spiritual connection to each other? Figueroa argues that this is, indeed, the case. He puts forth a powerful ideology of “Moral imagination...our cognitive capacity as moral agents to sympathetically apprehend the moral experience, feelings, and judgments of others. This includes the ability to imagine ways of transforming social relations and political situations in order to conceptualize how things ought to be” (325). Lauren’s hyperempathy forces her to do just this. Moreover, this is what literature with environmental justice themes, such as *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*,

can do: they can help us imagine ourselves in the position of victims of environmental injustice, and in turn help us imagine how we might change the status quo.

In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval discusses the need for empathy in different terms. She describes the revolutionary potential of a “hermeneutics of love,” which she defines as “a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement” (Sandoval 140). Sandoval defines “love” as “affinity—alliance and affection across lines of difference that intersect both in and out of the body” (170). Love, as defined by Sandoval, is made possible through empathy. Sandoval suggests this very idea when she cites Donna Haraway’s belief that “differences should be seen as instances of the ‘elaborate specificity’ and the ‘loving care people might take to learn to see faithfully from another point of view’” (170). In other words, love is made possible when one person makes a genuine effort not just to imagine what it’s like to be in someone else’s position, but also to fully understand that position and its subsequent thoughts, feelings, and struggles. Without this sense of empathy, affinity, and love, hierarchy and oppression are allowed to continue. If a spiritual system were to incorporate the empathy, affinity, and love argued for by Sandoval, it would have the potential to radically change the world.

In the *Parable* novels, Lauren’s hyperempathy syndrome takes empathy to the extreme, and the spiritual relevance of her disorder in a violent, chaotic, and unjust world is not lost on Lauren. Her world is defined by the absence of empathy, affinity, and love. In her journal, she describes possible benefits that might be seen if everyone suffered from the disorder. Thinking of her brother Keith’s brutal murder, she writes,

It's beyond me how one human being could do that to another. If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help....A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all. (*Sower* 115)

Lauren's feelings about her hyperempathy syndrome and its possible benefit for society raise interesting questions about the root of social inequality and environmental injustice. After all, if the people with power and influence, those who are ultimately responsible for the degraded quality of life of others, were made to feel exactly what it's like to live without clean water, without safe working conditions, or without clean outdoor spaces, could they possibly allow environmental injustice to continue? Wouldn't they have no choice but to make society fair? The fact that these problems are allowed to continue suggests that there is a lack of empathy in American society, not just in Butler's future society, but in present society. Surely the lack of empathy in the *Parable* novels is, like the environmental degradation and social injustice, an extension of a present lack of empathy that influenced Butler's work.

Lauren's brother Keith serves as a contrast to Lauren's hyperempathy and exemplifies the consequences of a society that lacks empathy. Keith is a troublemaker from a young age. He rebels against their parents, especially his father, and acts without thinking of what's best for the family and the community. He is also violent and

obsessed with guns. One day after being punished for sneaking outside of the community and allowing the key to the gate to be stolen, “Keith shot a few more pigeons and crows, [and] threatened to shoot Marcus” with his BB gun (*Sower* 95). He eventually runs away for good, returning home only to visit. When he tells Lauren how he is surviving outside, she is shocked by Keith’s admission that he has killed and robbed people, and that he feels no guilt over the pain he has inflicted on his victims. She writes that he was “the most sociopathic person I’ve ever been close to. He would have been a monster if he had been allowed to grow up. Maybe he was one already. He never cared what he did. If he wanted to do something and it wouldn’t cause him immediate physical pain, he did it, fuck the earth” (*Sower* 115). Unlike Lauren, Keith does not feel empathy for others, and he therefore finds it easy to ignore their value as human beings. Keith’s lack of empathy eventually leads to his death, but, as Lauren points out, Keith is killed by people worse than him, people who are even less likely to feel empathy for another human being. Lauren describes his injuries: “Someone had cut and burned away most of my brother’s skin. Everywhere except his face. They burned out his eyes, but left the rest of his face intact—like they wanted him to be recognized. They cut and they cauterized and they cut and they cauterized....Some of the wounds were days old. Someone had an endless hatred of my brother” (*Sower* 113). How could people with feeling, with any concern for life, perform such terrible acts? For Lauren, the answer is that they can’t, and that these people must feel no empathy, no compassion, for others.

Lauren’s hyperempathy helps her see the truth behind human behavior, but her understandings are not based solely on horror and sorrow. She also uses logic to understand the acts she witnesses and hears of and to envision a more compassionate,

egalitarian way to behave. Clara Agustí argues that Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome is subversive because it embraces "difference without interposing society's symbolic codes, such as racist and sexist legal fictions. It is a source of stability and equality that can be used politically to counteract discourses of oppression" (357). This ability allows Lauren to see how hierarchical ideology functions as a source of oppression based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation and confront it through the rhetorical analysis that persists in her journals. Yet it also allows her to see each person as an individual shaped by his or her social status but not necessarily defined by that social status. The result is an extremely diverse community at Acorn, a community made up of male and female; black, white, and brown; homosexual and heterosexual; rich (comparatively speaking, at least) and poor; educated and uneducated; hyperempathic and "normal." Moreover, Lauren's acceptance of diversity sets the tone for the entire group, which works together as equals in order to survive and prosper until Acorn is destroyed.

According to Jim Miller, one reason Acorn is so successful is that despite the potential conflicts of diversity—racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and so on—Earthseed is itself a rejection of the Christian God and the authorities who lead the Christian church and is therefore a rejection of hierarchy and subversive denial of the "myths" of hierarchical thinking (337-338). Similarly, Sharon DeGraw argues that Butler's work repeatedly subverts "traditional power hierarchies" and establishes egalitarian social relationships (2). Patricia Melzer agrees, writing that "In the Earthseed community, the ordering principles are not hierarchies and a division of labor, but mutual respect, responsibility, and, formed by their current surrounding, the security of others" (9). The Acorn community does indeed seem to be based on an egalitarian social

structure. Everyone is required to work, to do his or her part for the survival of the community. Lauren, the community's leader, is no exception. And further evidence of the community's egalitarian social structure is apparent in its weekly Gatherings. These gatherings are unlike traditional church services in which an authority figure—a pastor or priest, for example—leads the church and is often the sole voice expressed while the congregation listens in either respectful silence or acceptable agreement. All Acorn members are welcome to speak, and those who do speak must be open to questions. No authoritative preaching is allowed.

While Earthseed seems to be devoid of hierarchy and oppression, Lauren's daughter, Larkin (later renamed Asha Vere by Christian America) argues that this is not the case. Indeed, she is highly critical of her mother and suggests that Lauren is motivated by pride and a hunger for power. At the beginning of *Parable of the Talents*, Larkin makes this accusation, writing,

THEY'LL MAKE A GOD of her.

I think that would please her, if she could know about it. In spite of all her protests and denials, she's always needed devoted, obedient followers—disciples—who would listen to her and believe everything she told them. And she needed large events to manipulate. All gods seem to need these things. (1)

Larkin's criticism of Lauren is far from subtle. She makes it clear that that despite Lauren's claims that Earthseed is antithetical to hierarchy and that all Earthseed followers are equal, she believes her mother is very similar to Jarret, the leader of Christian America. Sandra Govan concedes that Lauren can be "manipulative at times" (par. 28).

Yet she argues that Lauren really does avoid being authoritarian. She writes, “While taking control to save lives, she also tries hard to delegate authority and responsibility to others. Gently, through appeal to reasoned logical argument or through sharing her journal verses and ideas, she tries to persuade people that her vision of Earthseed, her vision of its ultimate purpose is an attainable, if long range, goal” (Govan par. 29). Agustí seconds this argument, suggesting that “In having little resource [sic] to authority because she is a woman, she does not base her leadership on charisma or on the retention of power. Instead, she builds a group of equally powerful and self-conscious individuals, seeking to uncover leadership potential in others” (358). While, again, this isn’t entirely true, and Lauren can be quite manipulative, these failings are human failings and, while created by a human, Earthseed is much more ideal than Lauren’s leadership of it.

Despite Lauren’s failings, Earthseed itself does subvert dominant hierarchies.

Peter Stillman explains why:

Earthseed does not assume or presuppose an autonomous individual subject or agent who acts in the world to realize his intentions [...] because a single individual can accomplish so little that is lasting, including even attaining security. Earthseed teaches, on the contrary, that individuals gain understanding, agency, and effective action in and through their interactions with others. (28)

Acting on the principles of Earthseed, members of the Acorn community realize that their identities are tied to the community identity. While they are still individuals, their well-being depends on the well-being of the community first and foremost. They put the needs of the group ahead of their personal desires, working even if they’d rather rest,

sharing when they'd rather express ownership, and so on. Jim Miller notes this tendency, writing that in its rejection of "traditional religious hierarchies, Lauren's God of Change "suggests a worldview based on the notion of a radical reciprocity. One is free to act but not free of the consequences of one's actions. We are all interrelated and responsible for each other" (356). This sense of equal belonging subverts hierarchy and rejects selfish individualism. Furthermore, it provides the basis for a spiritual system that recognizes interdependence. This awareness of interdependence in Acorn is another reason for its success.

As a condition that leads her to recognize the importance of diversity, affinity, and interdependence among humans, Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome has an undeniable influence on Earthseed and Acorn. However, Rebecca Wanzo argues that even though Lauren

presents the premise that empathy—specifically feeling *bad*—can serve a political and social good, she never argues that her hyperempathy syndrome can ensure political *progress*. To accomplish her political goals, Olamina [Lauren] displaces the centrality of feelings in politics and develops a liberation theology that revolves around 'change' instead of empathy or feeling. (74)

To prove this point, she points out that other characters suffer from hyperempathy syndrome but don't take the initiative to lead that Lauren does (Wanzo 76). This is certainly the case, but there is a major difference between Lauren and the other victims of hyperempathy, and this is that while they all experience the effects of hyperempathy, only Lauren seems to transform the pathological condition into empathy and, later, into a

“differential consciousness” (Sandoval 180). In other words, the other sufferers focus on their own pain, which means that they are really only suffering and not feeling empathy at all. Lauren, on the other hand, is able to experience true empathy when she feels the pain of others. She doesn’t just feel her own experience of the pain; she also feels the other person’s pain *as he or she feels it*. This, and not the actual experience of pain, is what is required of true empathy.

While Lauren’s experience of hyperempathy differentiates her from other sufferers of the disorder, Wanzo is right in arguing that Lauren does not stop with the feeling of empathy. Instead, she acts on her empathy, truly a requirement if empathy is to bring about change, and she establishes Earthseed as an action-oriented spiritual system. In one of her Earthseed verses, she expresses this doctrine of action:

We do not worship God.  
 We perceive and attend God.  
 We learn from God.  
 With forethought and work,  
 We shape God.  
 In the end, we yield to God.  
 We adapt and endure,  
 For we are Earthseed  
 And God is Change. (*Sower 17*)

In this verse, Lauren clarifies the difference between Earthseed and the Christianity of her father and the Christian America Church. While they worship God, conceived of as a higher power, passively, Lauren and other Earthseed followers view God—Change—not

as a higher power but as a reality that they must take action to anticipate, confront, and “shape.” The future is not left in a higher power’s hands; instead, Earthseed demands that the future is consciously “shaped” as much as possible and passivity embraced only when there are no other options. But even then, that passivity is only to last long enough for them to figure out their next move and act once again.

Although Earthseed requires action, this action is not unthinking, as the emphasis on “forethought” indicates (*Sower* 17). On the contrary, Lauren emphasizes the importance of reason. Indeed, argues Govan, “As a faith, or a philosophy, Earthseed offers adherents an inherent consistent logic which affords a methodology for confronting challenge or dislocation on any scale by equipping them with survival and coping mechanisms” (par. 53). Furthermore, Ruffin argues that Earthseed is compatible with science and critical thinking and that Earthseed’s “scientific insight” is what makes it a more hopeful spiritual system than Christianity. Dubey agrees, writing that “the epistemology of Earthseed unreservedly espouses scientific and rational methods of arriving at truth” (par. 28). The logic of Earthseed is frequently based on scientific insight. While this is often helpful to Lauren and her followers as they fight for their survival, it is not unproblematic. Science, argues White, is steeped in hierarchical Christian ideology. Furthermore, science has frequently been used to confirm that ideology (White 59). Lauren’s blind faith in science contradicts her tendency to view all ideologies as suspect. The problem is, of course, that Lauren views science as a certainty and not as an ideology.

More troublesome than Lauren’s blind acceptance of science is Earthseed’s ultimate goal: “The Destiny of Earthseed / Is to take root among the stars” (*Sower* 84).

This means that while Earthseed members are taking action that may better life on Earth, they are ultimately taking action so that they can leave the Earth. Like Christianity, Earthseed suggests that home is somewhere else. While the *Parable* novels are science fiction and it is therefore understandable that Butler's characters would aim for the stars, this belief is problematic when considering the possibilities of Earthseed as a socially and environmentally viable spiritual system in the real world, and we need to be aware of this flaw in Earthseed. However, argues Lawrence Buell, this flaw is typical of science fiction and can serve as a lesson to readers because science fiction texts "show how hard it is to imagine a plausible other or future world. Science fiction continually testifies against itself to how we're probably stuck, whether we like it or not, with the world we've got" (58). In the real world, we are far less likely to be able to travel to another planet for a new beginning, and the *Parable* novels remind us of that fact, and of the fact that we must make the world a better place to live if we are to survive.

Despite the hard lesson to be learned from the *Parable* novels—that escape to another planet is not a realistic answer in the real world—the idea of transcendence remains a problem in spirituality. Carol P. Christ explains why the idea of transcendence is problematic for any spiritual system. She writes that religion and philosophy typically don't recognize that humans are nature and argues for the necessity of recognizing humanity's connection to "the web of life" (62). Knowledge of humanity's interconnection with the natural world would lead to an awareness that the Earth is ultimately humanity's home, that "[w]e come from the Earth and to the Earth we shall return. Life feeds on life. We live because others die, and we will die so that others may

live. The divinity that shapes our ends is life, death, and change, understood both literally and as metaphor for our daily lives. We will never understand it all” (Christ 65).

Lauren’s practical knowledge of the natural world actually does make her aware of humanity’s interconnection with the natural world. This knowledge stems from her experience in a world of environmental degradation and social crises. In many ways, her original Robledo community in *Sower* has been forced to revive older modes of survival. They grow food in gardens and utilize the resources around them, such as the acorns that they grind into flour for acorn bread, and some of the neighbors raise and kill rabbits for food and pelts. This direct connection between Lauren and the Earth is very different from the way most Americans currently interact with nature. Indeed, Harold Fromm’s “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map” suggests that humankind’s distance from nature has made us less aware of nature, leading to the current environmental crises, which are, once again, forcing us to realize how dependent we are on our environment. However, the fact that we interact with nature primarily through technology continues to distance us from the realities of nature. This makes us think that we can sacrifice the natural world in order to live the way we want to live. Fromm points out that this is absurd because our very survival depends on the environment. This fact needs to be embraced in our lives, including in our spiritual systems.

Because of her experience living in a world thrown into chaos by social and environmental crises, Lauren knows very well that her survival depends on knowing her environment and taking advantage of what it has to offer, such as the acorns her community uses for acorn flour while many people overlook them as useless and the need for trees to hold up the Acorn hillside in a storm. While much of Lauren’s knowledge

comes from first-hand experience, she also believes in the importance of learning from books and other sources of information. When trying to convince Joann of the need to prepare for the worst in *Parable of the Sower*, for example, Lauren shares the books she has been reading in an effort to learn to survive outside the community when the time comes. Aside from books on guns and medicine, she shows Joann books on “survival in the wilderness” and “California native and naturalized plants and their uses, and basic living: logcabin-building, livestock raising, plant cultivation, soap making...” (*Sower* 57-58). She tells Joanne, “I’m trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there” (*Sower* 58). She advises her to look for “anything that helps you learn to live off the land and defend ourselves” (*Sower* 59). Earthseed encourages the use of this environmental knowledge for survival because this is part of what it means to “shape God.” These are entirely practical suggestions, however, and they reflect Lauren’s philosophy on nature. Like the Christian Americans, she sees nature primarily as a resource for humans; she just has more practical knowledge of how to get the most out of the Earth’s resources and is therefore more intelligent in her use of nature than the Christian Americans are.

Because Lauren sees nature—and therefore the Earth—as a thing to be used, it’s no wonder that she is so willing to journey to space and make a new home. For Lauren to move beyond the view that nature is for human use and to see the Earth as the one and only home for humanity, she would need to extend her empathy to the natural world. For even though the empathy at the root of Earthseed forces Lauren and other Earthseed members to recognize their interdependence with each other, this empathy does not extend fully to the natural world. Instead, their view of the natural world is practical,

built on an understanding of science, but it is not spiritual in the Earth-based sense put forth by Carol P. Christ. Certainly practical knowledge of the Earth can be viewed as one aspect of Earth-based spirituality. But in the case of Earthseed, this practical knowledge doesn't result in a sense of interconnection with the Earth because it doesn't lead to the necessary sense of Earth as home. If Lauren and the other Earthseed members did feel a spiritual connection to the Earth, they would be less likely to want to leave it so badly. Instead, they would likely make a greater effort to change the quality of human life on Earth, and they would work harder to improve humanity's treatment of the Earth. Their lack of spiritual connection to the Earth is understandable considering the society in which the *Parable* novels take place; there is so much suffering and despair that it's only natural for people to want to leave, whether it's to go to the Christian heaven or to the stars. But the Earth will never be a better place—we will never have a more equal, just society, and we will never learn to better care for our environment—if we don't focus on this world instead of the next. In short, for any spiritual to inspire a positive, sustainable, and proactive relationship to the environment, it must recognize the Earth as our home, and it must promote a spiritual, not just a physical, survivalist relationship with our environment. In other words, our moral and ethical decisions must fully consider the consequences our actions will have on the Earth and, keeping our interdependence with the Earth in mind, how those consequences will, in turn, impact our lives.

Christ's discussion of spirituality emphasizes the connection between humans and nature, yet Lauren's spiritual connection to the Earth is complicated and does not exemplify the connection argued for by Christ. While Lauren's empathy extends fully to other humans, that empathy does not extend to all animals equally or as intensely. For

example, writing about target practice early in *Parable of the Sower*, she says that her father has made her shoot birds and squirrels, probably to see if she would feel an animal's pain because of her hyperempathy. She writes, "I didn't like it, but it wasn't painful. It felt like a big, soft, strange ghost blow, like getting hit with a huge ball of air, but with no coolness, no feeling of wind. The blow, though still soft, was a little harder with squirrels and sometimes rats than with birds" (*Sower* 37-38). Her lack of hyperempathic response seems to be caused by her survival instincts: "All three [birds, squirrels, and rats] had to be killed, though. They ate our food or ruined it" (38). She is able to kill these animals without much in the way of consequences, at least when she is killing to survive. But her hyperempathy does respond more intensely in the case of dogs, even though dogs are now wild and extremely dangerous. When her father shoots a dog to protect Lauren and the rest of their group outside the community walls, she has an intense reaction, which she records in her journal:

I thought I would throw up. My belly hurt more and more until I felt skewered through the middle. I leaned on my bike with my left arm. With my right hand, I drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed, and shot the beautiful dog through its head.

I felt the impact of the bullet as a hard, solid blow—something beyond pain. Then I felt the dog die. I saw it jerk, shudder, stretch its body long, then freeze. I saw it die. I felt it die. It went out like a match in a sudden vanishing of pain. Its life flared up, then went out. I went a little numb. Without the bike, I would have collapsed. (*Sower* 44-45)

In this passage, it's clear that Lauren's hyperempathy extends fully to the wounded dog. And even though her action—mortally wounding the dog—might seem cruel, it's actually an act of compassion for both herself and for the dog. Because she can feel the dog's pain fully, she knows that it is doomed to die, and that the compassionate thing to do is to end its misery—and her own—as smoothly and quickly as possible. Even though she knows the dog needs to be shot in order to save the group from its hungry teeth, she is able to empathize with it and show it mercy.

While Lauren's hyperempathy extends fully to other people and dogs, it's not apparent why she reacts strongly to some living creatures and not others. The need to protect herself does not prevent her from feeling others' pain, a fact that is clear in the case of the dog and in instances where Lauren is forced to kill people. Nor is there an explicit indicator of which animals Lauren will feel intense empathy for and for which animals she will only experience a sensation of air. Yet the novels show that her hyperempathy does not extend to inanimate objects such as rocks, plants, and trees. For instance, in *Parable of the Talents* when Jarret's Crusaders cut down the trees the Acorn community has planted, she does not feel their pain, nor does she feel them die. Instead, she is upset because "These trees not only commemorated our dead and provided us with much protein, but also they helped hold the hillside near our cabins in place" (*Talents* 216). There is a spiritual reaction to the loss of the trees in the sense that they serve as a memorial, but ultimately Lauren's reaction is practical more so than it is spiritual; she does not view the act of cutting down the trees as morally wrong in and of itself. She even refutes the Crusaders' misconception that the Acorn community does feel spiritually connected to the trees, writing that "Somehow, our 'teachers' have gotten the idea that we

worshipped trees, thus we must have no trees nearby except those that produce the fruit and nuts that our ‘teachers’ like to eat” (*Talents* 216).

Why does it matter that Lauren’s connection to the Earth is practical rather than spiritual? Paula Gunn Allen discusses this very problem in her analysis of spirituality and the environment. Allen describes the American Indian belief in the interdependence and spiritual nature of all things: people, rocks, trees, animals, etc. She writes that Westerners have trouble understanding this belief because of Christianity’s hierarchical view of nature. She adds that “Christians believe that God is separate from humanity and does as he wishes without the creative assistance of any of his creatures, while....The Indian participates in destiny on all levels, including that of creation” (243). Allen shows the need for any environmentally viable spiritual system to extend empathy and the awareness of interdependence to everything: people and dogs, certainly, but also squirrels and trees. She writes that the failure to extend this empathy and awareness is caused by hierarchical thinking, the very kind of thinking Lauren criticizes in her society and in Jarret’s Crusaders. While Earthseed is rather successful at subverting hierarchical ideology in its social structure, it needs to extend this avoidance to its views of the natural world in order to be an environmentally-viable spiritual system.

When all of Earthseed is considered as a socially and environmentally viable real-world spiritual system, a system that can help us create a more just society and healthier planet, it has great potential. It recognizes the interdependence of human beings and the role empathy plays in helping us see that interdependence and relating to one another with love and affinity. It embraces diversity and subverts dominant social hierarchies, providing a potential basis for an egalitarian society. Moreover, it puts forth the

importance of a practical knowledge of the Earth that leads to an awareness of humanity's interdependence with the Earth. Unfortunately, Earthseed also contains two major ideological flaws: it does not demand of its followers an empathy that extends to the Earth, an empathy that would help them see the inherent value in the Earth and all its inhabitants, living and nonliving. And this lack of spiritual connection to the Earth leads to a belief that the ultimate goal of human life is transcendence: to travel to another planet and begin again.

## CONCLUSION

In *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Butler envisions the future of the United States. While she posits just one possible future, a fictional future, it would be careless of us not to take it seriously. Environmental degradation is real. Social inequality is real. Environmental injustice is real. Our world's environmental and social crises may be less dire than those depicted in the *Parable* novels, but they have the potential to be much worse if we do not change the way we treat each other and the Earth. This is Butler's warning to us in the *Parable* novels, and her novels are her attempt to expose environmental degradation, environmental injustice, oppressive social hierarchies, and a spiritual crisis that has led us to forget our connection to each other and the Earth.

True, Earthseed is flawed. However, it has great potential. While the Earthseed of the *Parable* novels has achieved a finality, an inability to revise itself and correct its flaws, members of the SolSeed movement have recognized its imperfections and are in the process of making it better. The most important revision is that of the Destiny. Instead of echoing Lauren's assertion that "The Destiny of Earthseed / Is to take root among the stars" (*Sower* 84), the SolSeed movement views the idea of space travel more practically. SolSeed's members don't see space travel as an immediate goal like Lauren does. Instead, they recognize that "at some point in the distant future, the sun will expand to the point that life as we know it may not be able to exist anywhere in this solar

system. If we really believe that life is precious, we should move decisively to nurture and protect it. Life is vulnerable here ... all our eggs are in one basket” (“The Destiny” par. 3). Instead of focusing on the idea of transcendence, SolSeed is focused on the here and now, making it a much more socially and environmentally viable spiritual system.

Finally, one of the problems facing the goal of applying Earthseed to the real world is that existing spiritual systems, including Christianity, are an essential part of people’s lives. Even those who see the flaws of these systems are often unwilling to give them up because a person’s spirituality is part of his or her personal and cultural identity. Lauren found this sentiment foolish and rejected Christianity outright. But, again, Lauren is a fictional character, and she doesn’t have to deal with the consequences of a real-world failure to solve the current spiritual crisis and end environmental degradation and social inequality. This is another area in which the SolSeed movement has improved upon Earthseed, though. Their website states, “Though SolSeed is not a religion, the SolSeedCreed can be added without conflict to the scripture of any major religion” (“SolSeedFacets” par. 3). SolSeed sees itself as a movement that can help people live according to the best their religions have to offer while embracing the tenets of SolSeed in order to live better. In this way, the movement allows contradiction. It also is more successful than Lauren at observing the following Earthseed verse:

Embrace diversity.

Unite—

Or be divided,

robbed,

ruled,

killed

By those who see you as prey.

Embrace diversity

Or be destroyed. (*Sower* 197)

Butler, too, did a better job of living up to Earthseed's tenets. While she created Earthseed and Lauren, she did not intend for the Earthseed system to be interpreted as a perfect system or for Lauren to be seen as an ideal leader. Instead, by including multiple and critical voices in *Parable of the Talents*, she allows for contradiction within her own texts. Indeed, as Melzer argues, "Larkin/Asha's critical perspective that opens the narrative in *Talents* interrupts the representation of Lauren as impartial leader of a movement [...] and negates the utopian vision within the narrative by declaring it empty and artificial" (9-10). Instead of offering answers to society's environmental and social problems, Butler created a dialogue, and that dialogue is meant to be continued by readers. This potential for dialogue is what makes Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* so important for environmental and environmental justice criticism, for it is a dialogue that is needed before any change can be attempted.

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