“To shape God, Shape Self”:
The Political Manipulation of the Human Body and Reclamation of Space in Octavia E. Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower*

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To Suzy, for insisting I use my words.
To Peesh, for keeping my vocabulary sharp.
And to Jakob, who is everything to me.
ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of the human body in Octavia E. Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower* and the way it interacts with defined space to stage expressive forms of political opposition. Understanding the relationship between physical or metaphorical space and the contradictions of the societies they encompass is crucial to deciphering Butler’s near-future dystopia; a world where the problems of real-life Los Angeles and Southern California are distorted into a gross carnivalesque of gender stereotypes, sociopolitical tensions, and vigilante warfare. This paper places a special emphasis on the areas of social and political stagnation found in Butler’s vision of near-future L.A., and analyses the dangers of clinging to archaic, patriarchal systems that no longer resonate with contemporary audiences. Focus is also placed on potential methods of resistance against oppressive social institutions, particularly exploring the limitations met by protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, in her attempts to voice concerns in a society where language is so nuanced by “traditional” gendered qualities that the female voice carries no political value. This paper also questions theories which promote violent confrontation as a means to social reform, disregarding collateral damage and victims of war in favour of insurgency. By exploring the movement of the human body away from defined space, this paper supports Butler’s notion of alternative prosocial action which celebrates the margins of society, positing a nurturing, constructive means to resist political opposition.
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INTRODUCTION

Intelligence is ongoing, individual adaptability.

Adaptations that an intelligent species may make

in a single generation, other species make over

many generations of selective breeding and

selective dying. Yet intelligence is demanding. If

it is misdirected by accident or by intent, it can

foster its own orgies of breeding and dying.

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING (Butler, 29)

Octavia E. Butler’s 1993 novel The Parable of the Sower hit the shelves during a period of intense wildfire in Southern California and accosted a nation still reeling from the violence of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. As 700 homes and 16,000 acres of land succumbed to flames, Butler simultaneously presented an image of not-too-distant America on the brink of destruction through environmental, institutional, and societal neglect. Set in Southern California, 2024, a region similarly ravaged by fire, the reader follows adolescent protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, as she navigates the threatening landscape and attempts to find a safe space to carve new concepts of gender, ethnicity, and community. It is an environment where entire communities descend into abject poverty, with harsh segregation between the economic elite and the fundamentally desperate in a society fractured beyond repair. The elite hide behind high-tech, gated fortresses in the California hills, content to close their doors and minds against the damaging inequalities of society. Butler’s inner-city and suburban areas vary in degrees of poverty, with privileged members isolated behind makeshift, walled communities to safeguard against the true destitution of the street poor. Each walled community functions as a self-sufficient unit, breeding a culture of
“otherness”, suspicion, and paranoia at the supposed riches that lie behind crudely-constructed neighbouring walls. The street poor roam, haphazardly plundering for survival and hiding from the self-appointed rulers of the streets: the “painted faces”. Butler’s painted faces are a semi-organized group of violent looters and arsonists who forcibly claim inner-city properties and create gangland spaces filled with stolen goods and street drugs. They live like squatters, marauding the streets and committing insane acts of violence under the guise of some distant notion of social justice. Their original purpose, whatever this may be, is long gone, and they exist now in a chaotic vortex. Their actions are purely opportunistic, and the heading of “social justice” provides a mask from behind which targeted attacks are made against women, children, and specific races. The barbarism of the painted faces abounds, with rape, decapitation, and murder followed by maniacal laughter, yet each community idles behind closed walls, passively waiting for social change and clinging to the hope that the American nation will one day return to its assumed former glory. Butler’s near-future dystopia is instantly recognizable as an horrific vision of a late-capitalist, contemporary American society driven mad by its own relationship to power and commodity. It is a society on the brink of collapse; threatened by fire and riddled with socioeconomic segregation, gender stereotyping, and racial tension.

The first in a two-part series, The Parable of the Sower received immediate critical acclaim as winner of the 1994 New York Times Notable Book of the Year and nominee of the 1994 Nebula Award for Best Novel. Theoretical comparisons have been drawn between the violence of Parable’s inner-city chaos and the 1992 L.A. riots following the arrest and roadside beating of Rodney King, an African American citizen. The brutality against King sparked outrage across the city, and the pre-existing tension and resentment of black communities towards oppressive state institutions bubbled to the surface. After a speedy trial and verdict which acquitted all police officers involved in the incident, violent riots sparked across the nation,
concentrating in L.A. for 6 days, with 62 deaths, over 2,000 injuries, over 7,000 fires, and billions of dollars-worth of losses for businesses and private properties in the downtown area. The chaos of the riots provided a mask from behind which looters, arsonists, police officials, security guards, and violent opportunists were able to make targeted attacks on specific factions of society, such as Asian or Latino communities, revealing a web of tension and discord spanning individual citizens, businesses, and government officials alike. Butler engages with this loss of faith in institutions and suggests a version of society in which violence, opportunism, and brutality is taken to its extreme. She examines the oppressive systems that govern contemporary American society, and suggests potential strategies to adapt and move past the archaic structures that, if unchecked, may lead to self-destruction. The world she depicts is frightening in its similarity to our own. We find no aliens, monsters or vampires here; just a terrifying analysis of the human capacity for violence, greed, and gross misuse of power.

This paper considers the ambulant journey of protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, as she breaks away from society and attempts to forge new understandings of community, social responsibility, and equality. By positing L.A. as the geographical locus around which the institutional dominance of contemporary America takes root, I support Butler’s correlation between state oppression and social malfunction. In extreme scenarios, like the near-future America suggested in Parable, such conflicts inevitably lead to self-destruction. In positing Lauren as a political deviant, opposed to her upbringing in a heavily gendered, male-dominated environment, this paper claims that she manipulates her own body in direct challenge to the limitations placed on women in contemporary America. I draw comparisons between Lauren’s psychosomatic disorder, “hyperempathy”, and theories which consider traditionally “female” disorders, such as hysteria, to be a conscious or unconscious criticism of patriarchal society and female oppression. By analysing Butler’s discourse, I support her implication that static
understandings of the gendered human body are dangerous and lead to social stagnation, and that a cultural phenomenon is in progress to break apart rigid hierarchies and prioritization of the white, male consciousness, favouring instead a fluid understanding of the embodied subject. This paper also examines the significance of liminal discourse with nomadic themes, and the extent to which such styles of discourse engage Butler’s critical stance toward state-imposed, rigid gender boundaries. By considering Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concepts of the “nomad”, the “migrant”, and the “war machine”, I argue that social change and opposition to damaging institutional policy must begin with individual recognition of social responsibility, and that the health of a social movement is dependent on representation and inclusivity of its margins.

Butler’s differentiation between the violent confrontation of the painted faces and the compassionate guidance of “Earthseed” compares social change based on different motives, and highlights a potential flaw in Deleuze and Guattari’s preoccupation with the “war machine”.

Chapter 1 of this paper considers the location of L.A. as a microcosm for the contradictions of contemporary American society. The analysis focuses on the ecological and political volatility of Southern California as a region prone to wildfire and exacerbated by arson, institutional neglect, and lack of adequate provisions to cater for a society riddled with socioeconomic division. Chapter 2 analyses the gendered human body as a culturally constructed appendage of the state. This discussion highlights some of the ways that communication and language dictate individual expression, or a lack thereof, and points to the importance of differentiating between self and other. Chapter 3 looks at the use of space and movement when opposing dominant state institutions alongside Butler’s suggestion of an alternative prosocial action that constructs and nurtures future generations, rather than relying on destructive forms of social revolt.
CHAPTER 1

Fire and violence: The ecological and political construction of Southern California

_In order to rise_

_From its own ashes_

_A phoenix_

_First_

_Must_

_Burn._

*EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING* (Butler, 153)

The importance of location. Butler’s narrative begins in the “tiny, walled fish-bowl cul-de-sac community” (12) of Robledo, 2024; a makeshift society marooned in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Its self-imposed walls house a variety of races, genders, and ages who represent a cross-section of Southern Californian society. Butler’s choice of location is crucial to understanding the labyrinth of contradictions that underpin *Parable’s* world. In his essay, “The Far Side of Paradise: California, Florida, and the Landscape of Catastrophe”, Carl Smith argues that L.A. is a geographical indicator of the “diminishment of the human spirit” (355), with its “presentism over planning, unenlightened self-interest over community, rich over poor, [and] racism over the melting pot” (355). These issues incorporate the mood of what Smith sees as “the full incarnation of late capitalism” (355), and Butler’s narrative embraces this, transforming real-life L.A. from a mere expansive, hillside city to a carnivalesque world of “bread and circuses…[where] politicians and big corporations get the bread, and we get the circuses” (20). Butler is attuned to the “Dickensian inequalities and intractable racial contradictions” (Davis 612) of L.A., taking inspiration from the real-life setting to create the exaggerated locale of *Parable’s* L.A.; a world
with “more gangs, more cops, more suspicious, nervous people with guns. You tiptoe through
cities. You keep up a steady pace, keep your eyes open, and try to look both too intimidating to
bother and invisible” (272). It may be a fictional representation of a dystopian world, but the
veins of real-life L.A. are visible from the luxurious, hillside properties to the impoverished
hovels of the inner-city. Far from the “American Dream”, Butler’s L.A. represents “an American
society ruined by its neglect of environmental concerns and the perpetuation of bigotry and
conformity as methods of social control” (Jones 36). Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence of a
society on the verge of imploding, the political slogan of Butler’s America remains steadfastly
oblivious to its harsh social realities, insisting “Hey, we can run a space station, a station on the
moon, and soon, a colony on Mars. That proves we’re still a great, forward-looking, powerful
nation, right?” (20). This heedless declaration betrays the contradictory priorities of a nation that
focuses too heavily on upward mobility without stopping to consider the undeniable fractures at
its base.

Yi-Fu Tuan’s book *Landscapes of Fear* notes that “every dwelling is a fortress built to
defend its human occupants against the elements; it is a constant reminder of human
vulnerability” (6). He discusses the “landscape of fear” (6) in which humans construct various
components in an attempt to control chaos and “keep inimical forces at bay” (6). Butler’s
constructions emphasize the socioeconomic divisions of Southern California, particularly by
erecting walls in and around Robledo. The walls attempt to protect inhabitants from the dangers
of inner-city L.A., yet succeed only in enforcing a “socially constructed border that serves as a
marker of economic difference” (Hampton 106). Their micro-society relies on marking the
division between those within and those without. Robledo’s walls, however, cannot protect
against the contradictions of an American society that corals its desperately poor into inner-city
slums and blockades its wealth within protected inner circles. Robledo’s walls show an attempt to
conform to this division, revealing the extent of L.A.’s socioeconomic intersections. They boast very little wealth and what they do have is hidden behind walls, not by greed, but through fear that the “street poor who stare at us in their horrible, empty way” (Butler 37) will plunder their stores. Wealth, to the residents of Robledo, is not cash, but food, water, and protection from the elements; those vulnerabilities exposed by the universal human body. Rather than insulating against chaos, Robledo’s walls create a static location in which the contradictions and societal tensions of L.A. can fester in self-imposed stasis. The social hierarchy that Robledo’s walls surround is archaic, and ultimately destructive to those living within its confines. By closing itself off to the surrounding, albeit chaotic, environment, Robledo stagnates, offering its vulnerable inhabitants no more protection from socioeconomic conflict than inner-city L.A. offers to its street poor. Smith argues that we “inhabit only the world we imagine” (369), and Robledo, despite the “limitless opportunity” (369) assumed by America, has imagined a society based on antiquated notions of a patriarchal community, closing its walls on a neighbouring world of debilitating chaos.

Robledo’s perception of the neighbouring world stems from a single “Window Wall television” (Butler 18) that presents a carefully arranged glimpse of life beyond the wall. Communication through such a medium provides Butler the opportunity to critique the role of media representation in exacerbating social tension during times of crisis. By manipulating participants and observers, media intervention can strategically align with political purpose. Watching the events unfold from the relative safety of Robledo, Butler gives this “middle class family a suburban vantage on the urban crisis” (Menne 725), despite the events occurring mere metres from their television screen. Jeff Menne, in his article, “‘I live in this world, too’: Octavia Butler and the State of Realism”, posits that this is a tactic employed by Butler to allegorize “the very structure of representation that leads to what appears in the media at the LA Riots” (725).
The level of violence, in both worlds, is downgraded or increased based on political needs, and a constant reminder of the “other” shadows daily life. The eruption of inner-city violence in Parable’s L.A. recalls the 1992 L.A. riots, and provides a stark reminder of the damage that media interference can do in promoting wide-scale riots. The L.A. riots began as a social response to the injustice and gross misuse of police authority, but media hype encouraged opportunistic terrorism, and propagated violence masked by the “greater good”. Butler engages with the idea of distorted vigilantism, and allows the painted faces to latch on to the opportunism of the moment and wreak havoc in Parable’s L.A., making targeted attacks without official demonstration:

People are setting fires to get rid of whomever they dislike from personal enemies to anyone who looks or sounds foreign or racially different. People are setting fires because they’re frustrated, angry, hopeless. They have no power to improve their lives, but they have the power to make others even more miserable. And the only way to prove to yourself that you have power is to use it. (143)

Racial, economic, and ideological tensions are intensified using “bourgeois statecraft to convert would-be participants into spectators” (Menne 728), and the language of the media plays a fundamental role in deepening the fissures in society.

Vulnerability and the politics of catastrophe. The political and ecological volatility of real-life L.A. trails Butler’s dystopia, and the environment buckles under one catastrophe after the next. Like the “fire [that] crawled after us, coming no closer, but refusing to be left behind” (Butler 306), Southern Californian sociopolitical and economic tensions create an incendiary environment in which everything must burn: “the houses, the trees, the people: Burning” (153). The way a society responds to catastrophe, whether by arson or wildfire, reveals the dominant structures that underpin its institutions. It also reflects how a society conceives of catastrophe;
who gets to be affected by it, what provisions are needed, what processes can help a community move on from the trauma, and who is allowed to benefit from disaster. Race and economic relations determine progression in *Parable’s* L.A., and aid is afforded only to those who can pay for it. Smith comments that San Franciscans “survived the earthquake and fire by subsuming the experiencing into the spectatorial self” (Wyatt 109), however this differs for Butler’s world. Communities, like Robledo, peek into the lives of the “others” around them, like the street poor and violent painted faces, or even selections from the upper rungs of society via news broadcasts, but the elite households in the California hills have little interest in observing their lives. Robledo exists in the chasm between those wealthy enough to idle behind television screens, subsuming the action from a safe distance, and those poor or desperate enough to demand attention by revolting against a nation that places them in the path of approaching catastrophe. They are one among many struggling communities living on the sidelines of a fire-prone environment that is likely to erupt in social rampage.

Suzanne Keen, in her book *Empathy and the Novel*, investigates the extent to which situational empathy helps cultivate a sense of unity for experiencers of similar geographical, temporal, or historical events. According to Keen, situational empathy, which deals with aspects of plot and circumstance in a text, requires the reader to use “less self-extension in imaginative role taking and more recognition of prior (or current) experience” (xii). Empathy studies suggest that empathy is “so basic a human trait that lacking it can be seen as a sign of inhumanity” (6). However, Keen recognizes a flaw in an authorial approach that seeks to simulate reader empathy and she does not advocate prosocial action as a consequence of reading fiction. Instead, she notes that situational empathy depends on “chance relevance” (xii) of fictional circumstances to the individual reader, either immediately after publication or in future events that are “fortuitously anticipated or prophetically foreseen by the novelist” (xii). The challenge Butler sets for herself is
to engage the universal aspects of human empathy, rather than relying on readers to harness emotional responses that cross the racial, economic, and social intersections of contemporary America. As Keen states, “humans empathize naturally, but perhaps we don’t empathize with the right individuals automatically” (11). Despite the universality of the human ability to empathize, cultural differences affect the individual tendency to act on this emotion, such as experience of the electoral system, education, working conditions, and access to social support. Keen posits that for situational empathy to exist in fiction the author needs to create an “emotional hook” (69) that transcends the character’s position in terms of “species, race, age, gender, and other aspects of status” (69).

From a situational perspective, Butler focuses on the pyrocentric ecology of Southern California, with its parched vegetation, low budget, wood-framed houses, and cost-cutting reductions in fire prevention. This, coupled with urban interference and deliberate arson, is a daily threat to the Southern Californian reader. The houses of the economic elite sit high on the hills, atop the pile of combustible energy that packs into the cities below. As Keen rightly suggests, shared inhabitation of a fire-prone environment does not guarantee to elicit the same response for victims of pyrocentric catastrophe because the “division of emotion and cognition” (27) is far too subjective. Empathetic reactions vary due to cultural factors, like divisions between economic status, ethnicity and ethnic relations, or recognition of gender and difference. Individuals may live in close proximity to one another, but membership to cultural subdivisions can drastically affect the way that individuals relate to one another, and thus affect whether an emotional response is formed or ignored towards victims of trauma. For example, a rich, white household in a well-protected region of the California hills may respond with passive sympathy when hearing of fire damage or death in a poor, black, inner-city neighborhood, and vice versa, but this does not guarantee prosocial action, and should not result in prosocial action, according
to Keen. The other’s plight is easily dismissed as fictional, and, as Keen suggests, “fictional
worlds provide safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand
on real-world action” (4). It is a paradoxical response that allows the observer to momentarily
join the action and participate in the culturally appropriate response to human suffering, yet also
to immediately remove any assumed responsibility by simply changing the channel or putting
down their fictional world. The problem with this approach to catastrophe is that it often “erases
the subjectivity of the other, disables effective political responses, and demonstrates the
egotistical (and even perverse) motivations of privileged Westerners as they regard suffering
others” (142).

New perspectives on old trauma. Catastrophe helps the reader take a fresh perspective on
sociopolitical relations by providing a new outlook on communal space. Menne proposes that
“catastrophe lights up the reified world…so that one might see the moveable parts in social life”
(727). When catastrophe is encountered in literature, it provides a valuable distance between the
world of the reader and the fictional world in print, despite any situational correlations that may
emerge. It allows the reader to avoid becoming “discomforted by empathic overarousal” (Keen
19), something which empathy studies suggest can occur if the fictional world exactly matches
the reader’s own. Empathic overarousal may stop the reading process altogether, and even
prevent the reader from picking up similar fiction in the future. Maintaining the distance between
the fictional world and the reader’s own, therefore, is a delicate balancing act moderated by the
author. Texts such as The Parable of the Sower help to bridge the gap between what the reader
understands as their own world, and the strikingly similar world presented to them in text. It
helps locate the narrative and the reader in “at least two spaces simultaneously” (68), as Gregory
Jerome Hampton posits in his book Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves,
Aliens, and Vampires. In doing so, Butler is able “not only to comment on cultural politics of the
current moment but also to intervene in and change this moment” (Vint 20), bridging the gap between the literature of science fiction and the social realities of politics. Literary techniques which seek to defamiliarize the reader from their own environment and posit potential solutions through dystopian narratives can help reduce the potentially numbing effects of multimedia exposure of social crisis. It engages the “familiar and the strange…[and] returns us to what we know in a way that we had not known and experienced before” (McCormack 25).

L.A. is a microcosm of contemporary American society, with its socially diverse population hindered by archaic institutions who resist catering for its margins. Its late-capitalist structure creates a “‘bottom line’ on human value” (Vint 62) that participates in a “social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women” (Grosz 10). Its institutions construct social and cultural boundaries which exaggerate the stereotypical elements of a gendered body. In her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo argues that this is achieved through the “organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives” (165), through which our bodies are “trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity” (166). This is perpetuated by the stories that prevail in a media-rich society, such as L.A., which “widely advertises domestic conceptions of femininity” (171) and advocates traditional gender roles. The influence of media reporting segregates existing intersections in society, fragmenting communities even further and augmenting tense relations between sub-communities. Bordo finds that such stories “prey on anxieties about change” (166) rather than embracing the value of a diverse community. Deviation is institutionally discouraged, with multimedia providing the ideal platform from which to distribute stories that promote conformity to the homogeneity of rigid social boundaries and gender divisions. Media-rich terms such as the “melting pot”, or the “salad bowl”, attempt to fuse entire geographical spaces into homogenized
communities, erasing racial difference and remolding citizens to suit conventional “American” values.

Butler’s narrative confronts the idea that societal stasis is positive, and uses Parable to highlight the hierarchical structures that raise or lower bodies depending on their assumed value. Her dystopian novel successfully engages the “familiar and the strange” (McCormack 25) by avoiding direct, aggressive confrontation with readers who reside, often unknowingly, within dominant structures of thought. These constructions infiltrate the world of the reader and inform our cultural situatedness, dominating our understanding of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, disability, and other aspects of social life. It is crucial to challenge what we consider and accept as the “range of bodies that matter” (187), and this, as Vint argues in her book Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction should inform decision-making processes, ensuring all bodies are ethically considered. As more “types” of bodies pour into “melting pots”, such as L.A., it becomes apparent that the historical constructions that govern everyday life, particularly those concerned with traditional gender boundaries, are antiquated, and find less relevancy with contemporary audiences. As attitudes towards rigid boundaries begin to cede to fluid notions of individual difference, the national identity of “America” becomes dislodged from its grounding. Hampton voices the fears of American institutes by suggesting that as “racial, gender, and class identity boundaries fall by the wayside, so does national identity” (109). This anxiety towards change fuels social tension, and filters down from institutional heights to condense in micro-societies, like Butler’s Robledo. Here, we find a contained and constrained micro-community which ranks its members by rigid definitions provided by state institutions, determining interactions with religion, media, education, healthcare, security and food provision. Robledo places its members in their pre-defined role and those who do not fit the traditional boundaries are “othered” into submission, upholding the traditionally conservative image of
America. Chapter 2 will delve further into the image of the “American” and consider its treatment of ethnic diversity and conceptions of gender in an attempt to understand the institutional systems of prioritization that underpin regional societies.
CHAPTER 2

Constructing difference: The gendered expectation of home and social responsibility

All struggles
Are essentially
power struggles.
Who will rule,
Who will lead,
Who will define,
refine,
confine,
design,
Who will dominate.

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING (Butler, 94)

Conformity begins at home. With a male-dominant hierarchy that honours the patriarchal family nucleus, Robledo epitomizes the political construct of traditional American family values.

Parable follows Lauren through the contradictions of adolescence under the watchful eye of her father, Baptist minister and undisputed community leader, Revered Olamina. She exists under the microscopic lens of the community, a world in which any assumed deviant behaviour is immediately brought to the attention of Revered Olamina and stamped out by his authority. When words are judged insufficient, Reverend Olamina uses physical strength to subdue his family and combat any perceived threats to social order, as Lauren discovers on occasion: “My face had been memorable. Dad hadn’t beaten me as badly as he beat Keith, but I looked worse” (Butler 107). His actions are deemed necessary to retain order and control in a hostile environment,
however his excessive use of force within the confines of the family home suggest an inability to cope with the agency of his daughter, as well as the fear that her “shameful” (12) behaviour will dismantle his community status. But, despite representing an oppressive and male-dominant power, Reverend Olamina is not intended as the face of the enemy. As Michael McCormack argues in his essay, “‘Your God is a Racist, Sexist, Homophobic, and a Misogynist…Our God is Change’: Ishmael Reed, Octavia Butler and Afrofuturist Critiques of (Black) American Religion”, Reverend Olamina is “no charlatan preacher” (18); rather he engages a “deeply moral, hard-working, socially engaged” (18), if archaic, attitude towards management of his family and Robledo. Much like a government body, he controls education, religion, firearms training, moral guidance, protection, and security; unrelenting in his efforts to preserve a semblance of “normality” amid environmentally chaotic times. He handles his duty with stoic resignation, aware of the restraints placed on individuals like his daughter yet continuing to uphold such rigid conditions. He is the personification of power in Robledo micro-society, acting in accordance with the assumed standards of an “American” community, and confronting individual defiance with aggressive domination. He is inflexible to change and complicit in maintaining an institutional structure that all-but neglects its citizens. Social services are “guarded either by the police or by gangs. Both groups are there to rob desperate, fleeing people of their weapons, money, food, and water…the penalty for being too poor to be worth robbing is a beating, a rape, and/or death” (246). Paradoxically, the more conditions in Southern California deteriorate, the tighter Reverend Olamina clings to the social standards of a government that fails to recognize him, or his poor and racially diverse community, as citizens under the protection of the state. Robledo is “too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone” (120). Its population is undesirable, serving no economic advantage to the state and as such they are refused ideological membership to the national community of rich, white, high-tech, true
“Americans”. This institutional abandon shadows Robledo, and should be enough to show Reverend Olamina that change is a necessity, but his dogged insistence on preserving a rigid structure that promotes “toxic” masculinity as a means to social control betrays his inability to adapt to changing conditions. As Lauren notes, “we’re barely a nation at all anymore” (21), yet Reverend Olamina holds fast to the patriarchal notion that dominance creates unity.

Lauren’s relationship to her father is problematic; she defends him as an individual, but revolts against the “blind spots” (57) in the patriarchal systems he represents. He is loving and supportive to his family however this relies on their conformity to hierarchy and absolute passivity to traditional social conditions. Reverend Olamina is “the best man I know” (107) to Lauren, and he “tries to shield us from what goes on in the world, but he can’t” (37). As the “best man”, he embodies the patriarchal view of masculinity as intelligent and strategic, with complete physical control over an environment and the ability to detach emotional commitment from administrative responsibility. It is not his nature but his socialization behind the walls of Robledo that constructs such an unfeeling, robotic image of “man”. His socialization demands repression of the male emotional range to such a degree as to verge on inhuman, yet Reverend Olamina unquestioningly complies: he “never shed a tear…I wish he would. I wish he could…I wish Dad could cry for his son” (114). He belongs firmly behind the walls of Robledo, and is locked in position by the only society he understands. Robledo’s walls effectively condense the dominance of state institutions, magnifying deviations from the American “norm” and relying on patriarchal produce, like Reverend Olamina, who “looked more like a wall than ever, standing and waiting” (67) to pass judgement on any potential nonconformity. Yet, this reliance on imitating a “correct” social hierarchy (read: rich, white, male) is destructive to those within its walls. Robledo’s citizens are diverse, ethnically, economically, and in gender, and their imposed assimilation to a social order that places them lower in the national hierarchy is antithetical. Lauren is the first to
realize that the root cause of tension lies in the illusion of a fixed, pre-designed order: “nothing is permanent and all suffering results from our delusions of permanence” (27). But, for Lauren, her voice does not carry the authority needed to resonate within the walls of Robledo. She is young, black, female, disabled by hyperempathy, and in no position to demand respect. Robledo originally raised its walls to keep the dangers of inner-city L.A. out, but the actual result was to contain and magnify the dangers of social stasis. As Lauren notes, “the neighborhood wall is a massive, looming presence nearby. I see it as a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than protective” (5). The walls of Robledo represent a community in which members are fixed in place by a strict hierarchy; isolated, abandoned, and stagnating behind the walls of their micro-society.

Lauren’s family structure is racially diverse, yet gender conformative. Her responsibilities, alongside her step-mother, include cleaning, laundry, cooking, and household maintenance, and she complains, “I’ve been taking care of little kids since I was one, and I’m tired of it” (34). Her future prospects are similarly limited to traditional “female” objectives, such as to “grow up a little more, get married, have babies” (87), all within the confines of Robledo. This future, however, is destructive to Lauren’s sense of self: “if all I had to look forward to was marriage to him and babies and poverty that just keeps getting worse, I think I’d kill myself” (87). She is not the only female in the community to acknowledge such limitations, and her friend Joanne comments that skills are inadequate when “all you know how to do is take care of babies and cook” (53). Joanne submits to her place in society, reacting with denial and suspicion when Lauren suggests that things may be different if they are prepared to break away from Robledo before the walls inevitably come crashing down. Joanne’s attitude towards change is indicative of how Robledo society views female initiative, with dissidents like Lauren believed to be “sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong” (186), or, as her father says, “need[ing] more humility” (14).
By using subtle linguistic markers, such as her lack of adequate “humility”, Reverend Olamina is able to discredit Lauren’s vocal complaints as something inherently “unfeminine”. It is an archaic tactic used to suggest that she lacks the biological qualities and considerations usually found, and admired, in women. With just a carefully selected word, Reverend Olamina is able to bring both his, and the readers’, situatedness into play, illuminating the culturally-manufactured gender expectations that define women in patriarchal societies. By imposing the quality of “humility” onto Lauren, Reverend Olamina reveals the problem of the traditional family nucleus and the patriarchal assumption that respectable women should make a concerted effort to remain submissive to their male figurehead.

*Communicating the female ailment.* Lauren’s response to the oppressive gender-conformity of Robledo manifests as psychosomatic disorder, hyperempathy; a condition that allows her to “feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an ‘organic delusional syndrome’” (12). Lauren swoons, vomits, faints, and even bleeds when faced with the assumed pain of another. Her hyperempathy is unconsciously enacted and masked by her father as an emotional disorder, but closer analysis shows the hyperempathetic reactions to mirror the patriarchal image of the nurturing “female” as “housebound, frightened, squeamish” (194). Bordo considers the pathology of similarly “female” disorders, such as hysteria, anorexia, and agoraphobia, and suggests that such disorders stage an underlying cultural critique against the category of “female”. According to Bordo, the construction of this category is “always homogenizing and normalizing, erasing racial, class, and other difference and insisting that all women aspire to coercive, standardized ideals” (169). Lauren is one amongst many generic “females” in the eyes of her patriarchal community, and her body is a “locus of practical cultural control” (183), manufactured for reproduction. She is assembled, disassembled, and reassembled to suit the community’s image of the vulnerable “female”, ripe for exploitation. Her body is a
“surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view” (174). Comparing Lauren’s hyperempathy to “female” disorders, like hysteria, allows focus to shift from the symptoms of hyperempathy to its root cause. Bordo, quoting Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, argues that hysteria “became one way in which conventional women could express – in most cases unconsciously – dissatisfaction with one or several aspects of their lives” (Smith-Rosenberg 208), as an “embodied protest” (175) that supersedes speech. It is unsurprising that such steps are necessary to reclaim the female voice when oppressive linguistic markers, such as “humility”, are attributed to Lauren each time she attempts to voice objections through physical speech.

Language serves little purpose when attempting to communicate from a position of meagre authority in a community that has appropriated the traditional tools of expression. Instead of relying on speech, with all its situatedness and cultural connotations, Lauren transforms her symptoms of hyperempathy into textuality, layering meaning onto her body as a symbolic challenge to the patriarchal construction of her gendered body. By taking such extreme bodily reactions toward the delusions of her hyperempathy, Lauren is making the same political statement about the assumed vulnerability of women as the agoraphobic who remains resolutely housebound: “You want me in this home? You’ll have me in this home – with a vengeance!” (170).

Lauren’s hyperempathy is an unconscious act intended to reclaim conscious political control of her own body. Her hyperempathetic symptoms match those of traditionally “female” disorders like hysteria, listed by Bordo as “loss of mobility, loss of voice, inability to leave the home, feeding others while starving oneself, taking up space, and whittling down the space one’s body takes up” (168). After shooting an advancing dog in the hills, Lauren complains that “one more step and I would fall and lie in the dirt, helpless against the pain” (Butler 44); when advocating the value of all members of the group, she argues that “everyone should have a
chance to speak. Even the two little girls” (327); when considering freedom of expression, she finds “there’s a world of things I don’t feel free to talk to anyone about” (52); after witnessing her brother beaten by her father, she “sat on the steps in the warm darkness and let my body shake and hurt and vomit in helpless empathy with Keith. Then I guess I passed out” (97). Lauren uses her body as a form of defiance against what she sees around her, and it appears the implications of living under such conditions, without the ability to speak out in defence, has marked her body with contradictions. The myopia of the state and the toxic gender boundaries they enforce is reduced and intensified in the micro-state of Robledo, and Lauren is unable to speak out against the walls that confine her. Her voice falls on deaf ears, or is dismissed as just “one more weirdness: one more crazy, deep-rooted delusion” (26). But her hyperempathetic reactions all have symbolic meaning. They are politically-charged confrontations of the varying rules that govern the gendered body. It is an “‘expressive’ communication ‘addressed to patriarchal thoughts,’ ‘a self-repudiating form of feminine discourse in which the body signifies what social conditions make it impossible to state linguistically’” (Hunter 485).

Menne considers Lauren’s hyperempathy to be a “pathology” that causes her to submit to the “delusion that she cannot help but share in that pain or pleasure…Lauren believes herself biologically geared to participate in a just society” (731). The “delusion” Menne speaks of is not the haptic sensation of pain or pleasure to Lauren’s neurotransmitters, but the prevailing idea that she is programmed by her nature to react to the needs of others before her own. Lauren takes the category of “female” to its extreme, communicating a heated response to the feminine characteristics that mark women as weak from birth, and emotionally unstable throughout life. But, as Vint suggests, Lauren needs to “willingly participate in [her] own subjugation” (18) if she hopes to be recognized as a subject at all, with a voice of her own. Her chosen “sites of political struggle” (Bordo 16) place her body both within and without “the network of practices,
institutions, and technologies” (167) of oppression, leaving Lauren to struggle against their homogenizing, normalizing, and erosive ideals by placing her body in direct opposition to its cultural producer. Language is effective in maintaining societal power structures, and we see this clearly through the vocabulary chosen to describe Lauren’s hyperempathy as a “delusion”, or something that should be hidden from “normal” society. Lauren is groomed by her father to conceal her hyperempathy, and compliance with this assumes to keep her safely hidden behind the walls of Robledo: “my neurotransmitters are scrambled and they’re going to stay scrambled. But I can do okay as long as other people don’t know about me. Inside our neighborhood walls I do fine” (Butler 12). Like her hyperempathy, Lauren’s vocal critique of Robledo is dismissed as “crazy” behaviour that deviates from the “norm”, something that should be hidden, or at least contained to the family home where Reverend Olamina can manage the risk. Yet, madness, according to Menne, is liberating in a way that it helps to demonstrate the limits of reason. It helps to reimagine the way meaning is conveyed and transmitted from one source to another. For Lauren, her response to oppression negatively alters her body and results in the visual symptoms of hyperempathy, which can be “objectively (and, on one level, experientially) constraining, enslaving, and even murderous” (Bordo 168), but in doing so she duplicates meaning, transforming negativity into liberating, affirmative action that crosses the boundaries of meaning. Hyperempathy, therefore, has a rationale; it allows Lauren to take control of her own situation, even if this begins with participation in her own confinement.

Locating the self and understanding the other. The boundaries of Lauren’s body are permeable, allowing the personal body to engage with the public body and gauge the perspective of the “other”. Hampton sees this as crucial to overcoming the “superficial and superfluous boundaries used to establish hierarchies and hegemonies” (68), and allow perimeters to transcend the confines of a gendered body. In her book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of
Identity, Judith Butler recognizes this permeability as an “untidiness” (67) that reflects “a region of cultural unruliness and disorder” (J. Butler 167); an assumption which transforms Lauren’s hyperempathy from a debilitating illness to a political threat to social order. Judith Butler likens bodily “untidiness” to a pollution that occurs where the lines of social structure lack clear definition. She speaks of the margins of society, whose physically or biologically anomalous members lack proper recognition from the state. The boundaries of the body presume to differentiate between self and other, internal and external, however, in Lauren’s case, hyperempathy allows for the “ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness” (170). In essence, hyperempathy sees Lauren encounter the hidden parts of identity that fall outside state-approved definitions of “female”, and then expel them as something “literally rendered ‘Other’” (169) by her conscious mind. It is the crossing of culturally-imposed boundaries between self and other, something that is “not me” meeting the constructed “me”. In Lauren’s case, the violation occurs when the otherness is recognized as an inherent, yet unrealized, part of her identity; a suppression that is silenced by her culture. When recognizing this violation as part of herself, hyperempathetic reactions cause Lauren to “expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself with the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself” (Kristeva 3). These two identities “contradict and mock each other” (Bordo 182), upsetting conscious social and political aims by creating bodily turmoil.

The “not me” that Lauren encounters within herself is not a physical entity, but the constructed “female” addressing the “masculine” elements of her nature; those elements repressed by social conformity. Moments when she “damn sure talk[s] macho enough to be a guy” (Butler 182), or “had to smother a flash of anger” (172) before replying to provocation, or in the countless moments when she uses physical violence to protect her own safety while fleeing the ruins of Robledo, betray the dormant capabilities of her nature that found no means of
actualization within the confines of Robledo. These capabilities emerge on the road after her only known society has broken down, allowing her seemingly “deviant” behaviour to emerge unchecked. Lauren’s childhood was spent “trying to set a good example for my brothers and trying to live up to my father’s expectations” (172), but, on the road, we begin to see what Lauren fears is a “glimpse of the real me” (199). Whilst in this transitional period, she remains wary of her emerging “masculinity”, and fears that her “cold-bloodedness” (198) will result in her companions abandoning her to the streets. A similar conflict occurs in Grayson Mora, a newly acquired male companion who is discovered to have similar hyperempathetic responses to his role in society. Mora, a “tall, thin, black Latino, quiet, protective of his child, yet tentative, somehow” (290) is marked by seemingly “feminine” traits, and maintains a distance from the group in an attempt to conceal his “terrible vulnerability” (324). His hyperempathy is his shameful secret, and despite Lauren acknowledging that it must be more difficult for a “male sharer” (324), he shies away from society and avoids confrontation with all others. While Mora reacts against his clearly defined “male” role in society, he is unable to conceive of this in reverse by allowing Lauren, as a woman, to take on a more masculine role in their wandering community: “He stared at me for several seconds, then went over to Bankole. He turned his back to me as he spoke to Bankole. ‘Look, you know I need a gun to do any guarding in a place like this. She doesn’t know how it is. She thinks she does, but she doesn’t!’” (310). He is locked within the dominant structure of culturally-imposed gender binaries, and, although his body is unconsciously reacting to this via hyperempathy, his conscious mind cannot disassociate from state-sanctioned male versus female responsibility. Lauren also displays residual traces of the patriarchal view on gender roles by assuming that Mora, as an adult male, should jump at the change to protect “your women and your group” (300). She insults Mora with a “language I hadn’t realized I knew” (300), which betrays the insidious nature of institutional representation
and promotion of “toxic” gender binaries. Despite Lauren battling against the state-sanctioned definition of her own gendered body, she contributes towards Mora’s confinement by assuming that he, as a man, should take responsibility for the “weaker” members of the group. This reminds the reader that we are not searching for the “ideal” gender-fluid body, but engaging with the issue of gender representation in contemporary American society.

Lauren’s hyperempathy develops into early forms of sympathy as she moves further away from the confines of Robledo. Distinctions between feelings of empathy and sympathy rely on differentiation between self and other; an empathetic reaction absorbs the feelings of another and allows the observer to understand and share in their condition, whereas a sympathetic reaction allows the observer to appreciate the feelings of another while retaining a crucial distinction between their feelings and one’s own. Keen argues that the “fusion of the self and other occurs in babies” (17), with the ability to recognize the self as a distinct physical entity developing in childhood. For Lauren, natural cognitive development from empathy to sympathy was stunted by the rigid gender expectations of her youth and Robledo’s focus on the female as a constant source of nurture and support. Quoting Martin Hoffman, Keen posits that “automatic empathy can be stimulated as a result of conditioning and direct association” (17), meaning that children can be taught to respond in the culturally appropriate manner. This includes the “correct” response to a situation or context according to gender, as dictated by cultural upbringing. While on the road, Lauren’s hyperempathetic reactions begin to develop and progress from other-orientation towards her first, slightly confused, steps towards separation of self from other. When faced with the suffering of another, she begins to feel “half-conscious, half-detached from my body. I felt everything except pain as though through a thick layer of cotton” (300). This changing response to another’s pain coincides with the moment that she reveals her hyperempathy to her Earthseed companions and Lauren realizes that she has been accepted by the group as herself, her entire
self: “[Zara] took my hand and held it – “You ain’t got nothing wrong with you, Lauren – nothing worth worrying about” (193). Her transition away from hyperempathetic reactions is slow, but continual, beginning with an initial disorientation and finishing with a truer understanding of how the self differs from the other: “I had no sense of my own body. I hurt, but I couldn’t have said were – or even whether the pain was mine or someone else’s. The pain was intense, yet defuse somehow. I felt…disembodied” (297). Lauren no longer tries to conform to archaic notions of femininity, and what was previously understood as her traditional “female” body detaches from her true self. She undergoes a process of growth and transition, allowing Butler to show the freedom of reorientation that results from breaking apart rigid social boundaries and reclaiming autonomy. Chapter 3 will look at methods of reclaiming power and social responsibility, and the dangers of a rebellion that relies on violently “macho” qualities.
CHAPTER 3

The end of the war machine: Nurturing nomads and the reimagining of social conflict

*Embrace diversity.*

*Unite-

*Or be divided,*

*robbed,*

*rulled,*

*killed*

*By those who see you as prey.*

*Embrace diversity*

*Or be destroyed.*

_EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING (Butler, 196)_

*Opposing space and social dominance.* As Lauren moves away from the confines of Robledo and the chaos of the inner-city, she begins to amass a diverse gathering of exiles: Earthseed. They vary in race, age, and gender, electing to travel together first for security, and afterwards through their shared ideology of change as the solution to the dangers of social stagnation. Earthseed celebrates heterogeneity, and Butler honours racial diversity and cultural difference by gifting the members of Earthseed with naming conventions that highlight their genealogical backgrounds: “Travis Charles Douglas, Gloria Natividad Douglas, and six-month-old Dominic Douglas, also called Domingo... The first thing she told us was to call her Natividad” (Butler 210). Such celebration of racial hybridity and origin allows Butler to challenge the common Western literary practice of representing ethnic characters as mere objects to advance plotlines, whose genealogical roots are ignored or flattened out as irrelevant to the “real” story. Earthseed,
however, welcomes diversity and insists that it is a crucial element of social development. Their peaceful ethos is in stark contrast to the painted faces of inner-city L.A., whose response to social elitism is to “grab a rich guy and set him on fire” (111). The painted faces band and disband in a seemingly erratic fashion, with little sense of camaraderie between the “paints” (110). They lack a united philosophy, and the reader will find that arson, rape, or murder is not uncommon within their factions: “They’re crazy. I heard some of them used to be rich kids, so I don’t know why they hate rich people so much…Sometimes the paints like the fire so much they get too close to it. Then their friends don’t even help him. They just watch them burn” (111). Little is divulged about the background of the painted faces or their individual appearances. This allows Butler to remove any communal associations between the painted faces and other citizens, like Earthseed, the wealthy elite, or the street poor, and focus instead on their violent and opportunistic behaviour. Bodily violence, criminal activity, and a predilection for fire are the only elements of characterization emphasized by Butler in an attempt to disassociate the destruction of the painted faces from the peaceful migration of the Earthseed community.

Space, in Butler’s narrative, follows what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to as “smooth space and striated space – nomad space and sedentary space” (474), and forms an integral part of the process of opposing dominant state institutions. Sedentary space is marked by strata, and exists as a means of maintaining state-enforced social control. “Walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures” (381) effectively contain the power of the state, stratifying society and ensuring its immutable dominance. The city, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is “striated space par excellence” (481), both limited and limiting as the “relative global” (494) of undisputed power. Striated space, like the sedentary environment of Robledo, assigns “constant directions…divisible by boundaries, [which] can interlink” (382). It “contains” (382), checking growth and preventing movement. Nomad space, in contrast, is “localized and not delimited”
The nomad posited by Deleuze and Guattari exists outside the organization of the state, resisting classification by rigid state-sanctioned boundaries. Their space is smooth, marked “only by ‘traits’ that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory” (381) of their defiance. The nomad is in open rebellion against state institutions, creating “war machine[s]…which occupies or fills nomad space and opposes towns and States, which its tendency is to abolish” (430). The ideology of the nomad does not align with the “peaceful ethos” of the Butler’s Earthseed community; instead, their focus on effacement and abolishment synchronizes with the violence of the painted faces. Their line of thought “replaces the closed equation of representation, $x=x=\text{not}y$ (I=I=\text{notyou})” (xiii) with an open equation that allows for an infinite array of action and objectification, “…+y+z+a… (...+arm+brick+window…)” (xiii). There is a necessarily destructive quality to the nomad in which “war”, not in the military sense, but in the socially insurgent sense, is intrinsic. Parable, with its differentiation between Earthseed and the painted faces, helps to show that nomadism and the war machine is not the only way of opposing dominant state institutions, and offers instead a gentler response that is not all-consuming by “war”.

**Dissident flight and the power of migration.** Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between the “nomad” and the “migrant”; nomads have a “vague, literally vagabond ‘monotheism’, and content themselves with that, and with their ambulant fires” (383), whereas migrants are “local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of State power” (382). The nomad “rides difference” (xii), yet this is also true of the migrant group because of its constitutive commonality of “bands, margins, minorities” (360). The focus on differentiating from state dominance is not reserved solely for the nomad and remains an important factor in motivating migrant opposition, yet the incendiary characteristics associated with the nomad’s “war machine” (352) exist for the nomad
alone. Theirs, like Butler’s painted faces, posits a violent, revolutionary break with the state, as opposed to Earthseed’s passive reflection of social problems and collaborative efforts to forge new ways to transcend traditional, patriarchal state dominance. The migrant moves “from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized” (380). Much like the trajectory of Earthseed, migrants remove themselves from the striated space of a state that they find no affinity with rather than engaging in outright warfare. In Lauren’s case, she finds no commonality with the conformative members of Robledo, those “dying, denying, backward-looking people” (Butler 25) who are content to “ignor[e] a fire in the living room because we’re all in the kitchen” (63), yet she allows them the space to live as they choose. She offers the option to leave, yet, when this fails, her exit from Robledo society retains no antipathy for its members. After all, she is “still learning how dogged people can be in denial, even when their freedom or their lives are at stake” (121). She prepares to leave her childhood community in peaceful exile. The nomad, conversely, “goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity” (Deleuze and Guattari 380). War results because the nomad’s “war machine collides with States and cities…the war machine has as its enemy the State, the city, the state and urban phenomenon, and adopts as its objective their annihilation” (417). It is “a force that destroys both the image and its copies, the model and its reproductions, every possibility of subordinating thought to a model of the True, the Just, or the Right” (377) in which civilian life, even stagnating civilian life, must inevitably suffer in the crossfire. Butler’s painted faces spare no thought for loss of life during their violent riots; they do not premeditatedly stalk and terrorize individuals, yet they show no remorse toward victims of warfare. The differentiation between “nomad” and “migrant” is as conceptually different as “work” versus “free action”. The painted faces represent “work” as a “motor cause that meets resistances, operates upon the exterior, is consumed and spent in its effect, and must be renewed from one moment to the next” (397). The
“free action” of Earthseed, also a motor cause, finds “no resistance to overcome, operates only upon the mobile body itself, is not consumed in its effect, and continues from one moment to the next” (397). Butler’s unique method of Earthseed resistance is endurance, with the ability to mobilize, transcend, and adapt. The nomadism of the painted faces does not create freedom, but replaces one oppressive power with a newer, stronger force. After all, who will dictate new forms of “the True, the Just, or the Right?” (377)

Movement away from defined space is the founding philosophy of Earthseed, and their celebration of diversity and change presents a gentler approach to social reform, one that does not rely on destroying opposing groups. Butler’s narrative begins and ends without providing a conclusive solution, retaining the liminal process of becoming migrant. Deleuze and Guattari argue that “the middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed” (25), a “transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks” (25). The pace certainly intensifies in Parable, and its characters are encouraged to “adapt and endure” (Butler 17), but the Earthseed community seeks a stable, habitable space to rebuild, reconstruct, and survive. Deleuze and Guattari focus too heavily on “the life of the nomad [a]s the intermezzo” (380), with habitation “conceived in terms of the trajectory that is forever mobilizing them” (380). They wish to reside in the process of “becoming and heterogeneity, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant” (361), believing it to be a “paradox” to resist one state and fall into the “model” of another. The world that Butler seeks out is dependent on diversity, and freedom from state-imposition. Perhaps this is a paradoxical pursuit, but Lauren is not seeking a complete removal of power; she acknowledges that power must exist in a hierarchical, human society, but insists that it be constantly reviewed and adapted to suit a changing society. She captures the ideological difference between Earthseed and the painted faces when commenting that “prodigy is, at its
essence, adaptability and persistent, positive obsession. Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all” (Butler 1). Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad is not defined by movement, or positive adaptation, rather by their enthusiasm for the moment, “the nomad exists only in becoming, and in interaction” (430). In doing so, they are stuck in the process of war, achieving very little in terms of practical stability.

Restructuring social binaries and gender expectations. Butler’s Earthseed migrant “leaves behind a milieu that has become amorphous or hostile” (381) and sets out to forge new understandings of community, space, and individual relationship to power. The painted face, on the other hand, is “one who does not depart, does not want to depart” (381), content to remain locked in a “vortical or swirling movement…an essential feature of their war machine” (381). Despite writing with a clear focus on shattering damaging social binaries, Deleuze and Guattari inadvertently stray towards gendered concepts by positing firm distinctions between the nomad and the migrant. The potential for a nurturing nomad or a courageous migrant, one who spans both nomad and migrant ideologies, would make an interesting addition to this theory. Such intermediate concepts would bring greater flexibility and reduce the nomad’s militant focus on creating “war” and social hostility, which recall patriarchal notions of “macho” behaviour. The war machine is implicit in the revolutionary action demanded of the nomad, whereas the migrant is brushed aside as one who altogether avoids confrontation. Yet the migrant community consists of “the local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of State power” (360); hardly a group content to bury their heads in the sand. Their marginal composition allows for social representation that traverses intersections of age, gender, race, and other detailed aspects of society, and such a segmented community allows opposition to be demonstrated against damaging state oppression without the
need to invoke “war”. The migrant’s response places emphasis on the value of society’s margins, and focuses on acts of construction, not destruction. The nomad’s intention, by contrast, is to ensure that “he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principle” (381). Such traditionally gendered lines exist alongside Deleuze and Guattari’s insistence that we must break social binaries, and this juxtaposition creates a paradoxical conundrum by relying on traditionally “masculine” qualities to destroy the state and traditionally “feminine” qualities to rebuild and nurture future generations.

Butler’s narrative does not promote one gender over another, nor does it assume that gendered responses are a necessity. Gender is a construct of the state, so by engaging in state-sanctioned “macho” or “feminine” behaviour means inadvertently succumbing to the definitions of the state that are so vehemently opposed. Butler allows Lauren complete flexibility to engage with her own notions of femininity, masculinity, and everything in between. Lauren’s strength relies on this gender-switching hybridity and the ability to adapt to changing environments. By alternating between leader, caregiver, hunter, carrier, strategist, and lover, to name but a few, Lauren fully removes herself from the stagnation of Robledo and becomes the nurturing nomad, the courageous migrant, both rescuer and rescued. Lauren’s Earthseed journey pauses in a period of transition, somewhere between the environment that they have left behind and the world they have yet to create. In doing so, Butler provides no absolute safe space or attempted utopia, but leaves the narrative in liminal suspension to encourage the reader to consider their own environment as something incomplete and subject to review. Relationships between social groups, institutional powers, and ethnic communities contribute towards social progression, and *Parable* highlights the importance of challenging definitions of “value” in society without falling victim to mindless, opportunistic violence. It is a distinction “between weapons and tools…destroying people or producing goods” (395) and Butler certainly advocates participation
in prosocial action that favors fluid social and gender binaries without succumbing to the harsh divisions of “macho” aggression or “feminine” passivity.
CONCLUSION

The relationship between powerful social institutions and the life of the everyday citizen is historically problematic, as are the intricacies of building a societal structure that caters for all people, at all times. Octavia E. Butler creates the world of *The Parable of the Sower* not to advocate the complete removal of power and state institutions, but to suggest a process of continual evaluation in how we allocate value and social status. The inequalities of *Parable* span intersections of economy, race, gender, ethnicity, and age, with tensions along the dividing lines further problematized by state insistence that everything is in order and that re-evaluation is not a necessity. This myopic commitment to upholding archaic institutions exacerbates social tension, whether concerning the physical safety of the environment people are expected to live in, their access to social care and security provisions, or the freedom to express individuality without social constraints. Butler’s organization of *Parable’s* world allows the reader to walk among the cities and suburban areas with Lauren as their guide, looking through and past her gaze to the myriad of contradictions that litter the streets.

Butler’s critique of violent conflict is clear, favouring the peaceful migrations of Earthseed to the uncontrollable brutality of the painted faces. Her novel promotes alternative ways to combat social and political oppression, and focuses on measures that involve working with systems of power in society, not attempting to eradicate them. The first in a two-part series, *The Parable of the Sower* is followed by its sequel, *The Parable of the Talents*, in which Butler engages with the notion of power in Earthseed’s newly established community: “Acorn”. As the matriarch of Acorn, Lauren supersedes her father’s role as head of the community and leaves the settlement of Acorn as her legacy for future generations. Their peaceful retreat, however, is short-lived, and the arrival of a fascist political regime jeopardises their safety by electing a religious zealot to power. The Earthseed community is once again returned to the margins of society, and
risks oppression, slavery, and complete destruction by political interference. Butler reminds the reader that without constant re-evaluation and reorganization of power they risk succumbing to fanatical, short-sighted social structures that use the backs of the poor and the marginalized to climb the political ladder and attempt to “make America great again” (Talents 19).

The Earthseed religion, with its focus on diversity, growth, and shaping the structures of social power, leaves a lasting image for readers of both *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*. Taking the positive elements from numerous world religions and molding her own nurturing ethos, Butler intersperses lines of Earthseed poetry throughout the chaos of *Parable*. The Earthseed verses begin as gently flowing lyrics but migrate towards direct and borderline aggressive imperative sentences as the novel wears on. Butler uses the verses of Earthseed to address the reader and challenge passive audiences to register the lyrical dogma of Earthseed, and bring prosocial change to their lifestyles. The religious aspects of Earthseed were not intended to be mimicked by any actual religious community, yet Butler’s influence ranged further than anticipated. Earthseed has been adapted as “a real religion inspired by the science fiction of Octavia Butler” (godischange.org), showing the ability of Butler’s work to find life outside the confines of the pages. If only her doctrine could be adopted by contemporary political institutions, Butler’s attempt to use literature as a form of prosocial action could one day help to prevent the gross dystopia of gender stereotypes, sociopolitical tensions, and vigilante warfare heralded by *Parable*. 
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