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## Eden, Just Not Ours Yet: On *Parable of the Trickster* and Utopia

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# Eden, Just Not Ours Yet: On *Parable of the Trickster* and Utopia

The last chapter of Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Talents* (1998) sees an aged Lauren Olamina in 2090, surrounded by several of her most devoted disciples at the launch of the first Earthseed mission, the beginning of the extrasolar colonization project to which she has devoted her entire adult life. We are told very early on in *Parable of the Sower* (1993), when Olamina is still a young teenager, that “The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (Butler *Sower* 85)—and by the end of *Talents* that dream seems to have been achieved, though it has personally cost Olamina nearly everything else in her life, including her daughter, her husband, her brother, and her personal safety. She herself is now much too old to go on such a mission, a Moses permanently denied her own Promised Land—though she imagines her ashes someday being brought to one of the Earthseed colonies after her death. Regardless of this fact, she feels not disappointed, but defiant; her last words in the novel are a confident “I know what I’ve done” (Butler *Talents* 409)—though the repetition of the phrase at the beginning and end of the three-page epilogue may suggest to some readers that she may actually be attempting to convince *herself* of its truth. The name of the ship in orbit, too, strikes a subtly discordant note: against Olamina’s wishes it has been dubbed the *Christopher Columbus*, suggesting first the danger of repeating a toxic colonial history and second suggesting that some other parties, with different values than the Earthseeders, have exerted some sort of noxious influence over the mission, in competition with Olamina’s. “I object to the name,” Olamina writes. “The ship is not about a shortcut to riches and empire. It’s not about snatching up slaves and presenting them to some European monarch. But one can’t win every battle. One must know which battles to fight. The name is nothing” (Butler *Talents* 408).

Here *Talents* ends, as does the Parables series, which never saw its completion in future books beginning with the long-promised, never-completed *Parable of the Trickster*. In my Modern Masters of Science Fiction monograph *Octavia E. Butler* I detail how the release of Butler’s archives at the Huntington Library reveals the enormity of her fifteen year struggle with *Trickster*, beginning even before the publication of *Sower* with her original 1989 concept for

*God of Clay*, and continuing through her unexpected early death in 2006.<sup>1</sup> In (not) writing *Trickster* Butler found herself stymied by writer's block, by medications that she felt sapped her creativity, and by what she saw as an inability to move from what she called a "situation" (OEB 2076) into a proper story. In this article I build on my published treatment with something on the order of a deleted scene from my book: a utopian close reading of the world-building for the initial setting of the *Trickster* narrative undertaken by Butler between 1989 and the early 2000s period in which she finally abandoned the project. If, in *Octavia E. Butler*, I focused on the "story" part of *Trickster* that never really materialized, here I am concerned instead with what Butler saw as mere "situation": the originary, quasi-utopian backdrop of the extrasolar colony, against which the grim disaster of *Trickster* would have later unfolded.

Even to the extent that the literary estate continues to publish more of Butler's unpublished fiction from the archives,<sup>2</sup> it is bit hard to know exactly what to do with the *Trickster* fragments. While she tried unsuccessfully to sell works like the original 1970s story bearing the title "The Evening and The Morning and the Night" and *Blindsight*, the *Trickster* narrative she simply began and abandoned over and over and over again, a nearly impossible number of times. Despite her inability to complete it, or even to really begin it, what exists of *Trickster* is utterly fascinating and provocative, and it gives us a beautiful and necessary glimmer of what the extension of the *Parables* series might have been like without closing any doors or providing any solid answers or definitive conclusions. *We need Trickster*: we need *Trickster* to get us out of the hopeless trap that *Talents* leaves us in, where the soaring hopes and ambitions of *Sower* wither, disciplined and betrayed by the unending unfolding of the nightmare of history; we need *Trickster* to tell us whether the utopian break in history promised by the Earthseed project has been squandered or compromised by whatever Powers-That-Be have circumvented Olamina and given the ship its macho, retro-conquistador branding.

Butler writes in one of her journals that the alien planet the Earthseeders will go to (there called Ola, though more commonly in other versions called Bow) will *itself* be "the Trickster, always tripping us when we get arrogant, and yielding when we feel beaten. At every crossroads, Ola waits, pushes, guides, tears, blocks, threatens. Ola tricks and Ola teaches" (OEB 3147). I have always adored Nisi Shawl's suggestion in "The Third Parable" that *Trickster*, the book, is a Trickster figure too; the book itself is slippery and untrustworthy, it can't be wrangled or tamed, it keeps slinking out of Butler's (and out of our) grasps. It trips us up when we think we can ever understand what the *Parables* are teaching us and it yielded to us (quite literally, in fragmentary form in the archive) just when we gave up hope and decided it was never going to come. It's the one missing piece that would have solved the puzzle—if only it'd been written. But we can't allow the unhappy fact that the book doesn't exist to silence its message; like our anxiety at discovering the name of the Earthseeders' ship, that feeling of disappointment at the end of *Talents* shouldn't and *can't* be where our learning ends. The *Parables* books just mean so much; on Twitter I see new people discovering the books daily, twenty years after their composition but somehow feeling even more relevant now, after the election of Donald Trump has unhappily proved them righter than we ever would have dreamed. In whatever form is practical, readable, and economically viable, I hope non-scholars are someday allowed to see for themselves these

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<sup>1</sup> See Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (2016), chapter 6, "God of Clay." For details on the way the failed *Trickster* narratives eventually mutated into *Fledging*, "Amnesty," and "The Book of Martha," as well as into other incomplete works existing only in the Huntington Archives, see also chapter 7, "Paraclete."

<sup>2</sup> I argue that the estate should feel empowered to publish that fiction, over and against Butler's stated wishes to the contrary when necessary, in my essay "Disrespecting Octavia" in *Luminescent Threads*.

tantalizing glimmers of what *Trickster* might have been. In some sense it may be that the book is always all the more powerful for its eerie nonexistence; *Trickster*, unfinished and unformed, will always remain available to be discovered, will always be out there waiting to teach us something new.

## Parable of the Trickster

So then what do we actually have in *Trickster*, now that we have the Huntington archive to guide us? We have another planet: sometimes Ola or Olamina, occasionally Trickster, but most typically Bow, for the occasional rainbows that provide the dreary world its only splash of color. Other than that the place is typically described as a sickly gray from top to bottom, even its vegetation, a fact the human colonists find maddening and miserable. The colonists have no way to return to Earth, or to even contact it; all they have is what little they've brought with them, which for most (but, crucially, *not* all) of them is a strong belief in the wisdom of the teachings of Earthseed. Some are terrified; many are bored; an increasing number teeter on the brink of severe psychological crisis; nearly all are deeply unhappy. The colonists are homesick; they are in the wrong place, a place that human beings can't live without constant, tremendous exertion. Having lived on Bow only a short while, most, maybe all, would happily go home if they could. But this is their life now, and always will be.

The point of view character for these events is nearly always a woman named Imara, who (usually) has some sort of connection to Olamina. Sometimes she is a distant relative, a child of Keith's, or some lost great-uncle; sometimes she is an adopted daughter, taken in by Olamina or by the Earthseed church itself in her childhood after a horrific personal tragedy (often sexually violent in nature). The most characteristic version of the narrative has Imara as the bearer of Olamina's ashes: Olamina having died between the launch of the first space mission and this one (almost always the second). Olamina's ashes, and the relationship to Olamina's vision to these new circumstances, form part of the emotional core of most versions of the *Trickster* narrative; Butler often imagined that the end of the narrative would involve either the deliberate, ceremonial burying of Olamina's ashes at a key moment of transition for the new colony or else their unceremonial scattering in a breeze. Similarly, the strong suggestion is that Imara will be the St. Paul to Olamina's Christ, fulfilling the ambiguous, dual-edged prophecy of Larkin at the beginning of *Talents*: "They'll make a God of her" —a reversal of the impersonal vision of God-as-Change that made Earthseed so vital and adaptable, and the threat of return to the bad discourse of holy texts and sacred cows that Lauren had sought to overthrow.<sup>3</sup> She imagined the subsequent books in the *Parables* series detailing the way the true history of Earthseed, and indeed the actual history of the human race, would ultimately "dissolve into myth."<sup>4</sup>

As I attempted to show in *Octavia E. Butler*, extrasolar colonization was in some sense the idea that Butler had thought about, and planned, and been bedeviled by, nearly her entire life, dating back to the many "Missionary" narratives she planned to write her Patternist series in

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<sup>3</sup> Quite a few of the sketches take this connection to St. Paul quite far, imagining Imara as a Earthseed skeptic or even a reporter who has gone undercover to expose what she sees as a cult, only to become a true believer.

<sup>4</sup> However unintended, Butler has anticipated us all here: in giving us the fragmentary, multi-directional story of a flock that doesn't quite know what to do with itself once its prophet is gone, she has surely foretold our own story as Butler scholars post-2006.

1970s (of which only her disavowed *Survivor* [1978] ever actually saw publication).<sup>5</sup> When she began the Parables series at the turn of the 1990s, it was the *Trickster* narrative, not the Olamina narrative, she was concerned with—and when she stepped back to tell the story of Olamina’s childhood and young adulthood first it was only ever to tell the *Trickster* story better and more fully. From the 1970s to the 1990s Butler wanted to tell the story of a human race that is no longer Earthbound, and the triumphs and the pitfalls and the very hard choices and the unexpected new social forms that interstellar colonization might make possible. That she never finished it is thus both a tragedy and somehow perversely appropriate: in a lifetime of brilliant thinking about bewildering problems it is one (maybe *the* one) she was never able to solve for herself.

As I discuss below, *Trickster*’s initial situation is something of a utopia: “Starting over rather than world-fixing. This is another case of people getting a totally fresh start as far as the new world is concerned. Beginning again environmentally, educationally, governmentally” (OEB 2070). This is the most optimistic version of the Earthseed dream, one even Olamina would not have quite allowed herself to believe in. But if it is a utopia it is always also something of a false one, teetering on the brink of a terrible precipice Butler couldn’t help but imagine hurling it into. As with the bait-and-switch that sees the happy Acorn community at the end of *Sower* utterly decimated and destroyed by the midpoint of *Talents*, the first settlement of *Trickster* (however utopian) must ultimately burn so something more wholly new and sustainable can arise from its ashes. Post-*Talents* she imagined as many as four books, telling either the story of four separate colonies, some which failed and some which succeeded (as she always imagined the Missionary milieu progressing) or else (more commonly in her notes) the story of a *single* Earthseed colony as it transformed (in typical Butler fashion, usually quite unhappily!) over four generations. By the fourth generation she imagined the society on the alien world would have transformed so much as to be unrecognizable, even perhaps from our Earthbound perspective even disturbing and grotesque—though I am always struck here by the note in her personal journals that notes that it was four generations that separated Butler’s own generation from the horrors of American slavery, too. In any event it was perfectly within the spirit of the Earthseed ethos to view this spirit of change and dynamism without revulsion or horror; life evolves, Butler and Olamina both would remind us, that’s what makes it *alive*. Indeed, there’s every reason to think (as Butler seemed to, and as Olamina certainly did) that only in the new context of adapting to a new and largely hostile alien planet could genuine sociohistorical change be possible; only there (not here) could our bad history, our bad habits, and even our bad biology be challenged to change and grow. The long arc of the *Trickster* narrative would have explored the promises and pitfalls of that cosmic possibility—in ways that would deeply challenge us. Given her tendencies towards decidedly non-utopian thinking, we should not be surprised to find the unfinished *Trickster* narrative is a place where some of Butler’s most utopian thinking emerges—not in the sense of naïve, Big Rock Candy Mountain fantasy, but in the hard and vital work of critique, glimmers of other sorts of possible worlds that are hidden in the wreckage and pain of this one. As I will endeavor to show in what follows, both before and after the catastrophe, life on Bow offers just such a glimmer, however fleeting and incomplete.

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<sup>5</sup> A last footnote to *Octavia E. Butler* would direct you to chapter two on the Patternist series, which discusses the mostly unwritten Missionary stories as an unrealized Asimovian or Heinleinian future-historical “saga” that gave birth to Butler’s later space fictions (including both the Parables and *Xenogenesis*).

## Trickster Utopia

The fraught dialectical nature of the Bow colony’s emergent utopia—brittle, besieged, doomed in some sense to a horrific final unraveling—can be seen in a note Butler left herself in one of her many world-building brainstorming sessions for *Trickster*: “For reasons psychological as well as practical, the only human beings in the world have chosen to huddle together” (OEB 2068). This sense of huddling together in the face of a hostile planet dominates Butler’s notions of the Bow colony’s social institutions; while she has notes for a wide range of characters based, in her typical style, on historical personages,<sup>6</sup> her imagination of the colony is primarily spatial. The OEB 2068 version of the layout of the extrasolar community envisions four communities in a clover shape, centered around the landing craft that brought them to the planet; another version, written around the same time, imagines a concentric “arc of arcs” fractally expanding a tiny sliver of human settlement further and further into the wilderness of Bow (OEB 2076).

**INSERT IMAGE ONE AROUND HERE. CAPTION: *The “arc of arcs” (OEB 2076). The tiny human settlement on Bow must stay close together in order to have any chance of surviving on the hostile alien world; “In unity there is survival,” reads one notation, while the other soberly warns “Here be dragons!”***

These four larger community-structures would then be subdivided into smaller “housing groups,” which would be the “elemental unit” of sociality for people on Bow; many of these groups would be organized around particularly crucial communities of labor specialty, like blacksmithing or power generation. Butler’s vision for the housing groups seems ultimately routed in primitivist observations about the appropriate scale of human society—something much closer in size to the nomadic bands in which the human species first evolved, rather than the giant cities post-Agricultural-Revolution.<sup>7</sup> In a document titled “Some Matters of Life in an Extraterrestrial Community,” dated May 20, 1999, she imagined the groups as containing between 30 and 100 people at most; “a housing group of 100 should be planning a breakup and working to spin off a daughter group successfully. A housing group of 150 is too large and must break into two or three separate groups. A housing group of fewer than 25 is too small and needs for its own safety to join other groups or bring in a few (at least 5) more people.” These groups would be centered on a Gathering House—a communal space that would be the largest and grandest structure in the housing group, suitable for events ranging from school to church to communal dinners to dances and parties, and always situated in the “place of honor” across from the main entrance—and

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, OEB 2061, with proposed characters based on personality types ranging from Isaac Asimov, Ernest Hemingway, Harry Truman, Al Gore, and Bill Clinton to Gregory Benford, Roy Cohn, Newt Gingrich, George Bush, Richard Nixon, and Clarence Thomas, often with the genders switched to allow for greater female representation in the story. The conflict between Olamina and the people who named the ship seems reflected in the conflict between the different sorts of people in the colony, not least of all in the attitude they take towards Olamina’s teachings.

<sup>7</sup> Butler may have been influenced here by what is called Dunbar’s number—the number proposed by British anthropologist Robin Dunbar of the total number of people with whom the human brain can sustain ongoing social relationship. The idea has been popularized in a wide variety of outlets and contexts, including Malcolm Gladwell’s 2000 bestseller *The Tipping Point*. Undoubtedly there is an element of personal nostalgia here, too, as well as civilizational nostalgia: Butler’s notes on the housing groups frequently reference the town of Victorville, California, a community on the edge of the Mojave Desert where she briefly lived with her grandmother when she was very young—a place where “you could stand in the center of town and look out both ends” (OEB 2076).

would be largely self-sufficient, with individual farms and small livestock. With 5000 original colonists on Bow, there would be approximately 50-60 such groups at founding; the small size and self-sufficiency would help prevent any one housing group or set of housing groups from becoming dominant over the others (OEB 2076). As figure one notes, attempts to “farm on the outside” on unclaimed land—what Marx once described as primitive accumulation—would be deemed “antisocial” by the larger community; “in unity there is survival” (OEB 2076).

Butler describes a radical post-patriarchal vision for these groups:

A nuclear family is too small, and will be too small for the foreseeable future. A housing group is a modern day family band, although there is no kinship requirement. People generally marry out. Usually men go out looking for girls. Men are invited into dances, meetings, classes, whatever. Women are permitted to go out, but most don't. The model is Hopi in that the house belongs to the women and her children. (OEB 2076)

While the nuclear family would still exist in some form—her vision of housing groups still includes individual homes for nuclear families—much of its social functions and ideological authority would have shifted to more collectivist social structures, understood to belong to the women both practically and ideologically (see “daughter groups” above). Crucially, these vestigial nuclear families would in some sense be entirely a legal fiction; she imagined most of the “children” of these families would be adopted “egg children,” brought from Earth as frozen fertilized eggs and in almost all cases would “not be related to the few adults who care for them and teach them.” Indeed, such children would likely not match the ethnic or racial identity of the nuclear families charged with their upbringing, as “genetic diversity demands that as many different kinds of human beings as possible be represented in the children, less some essential trait be lost” (OEB 2033, dated January 3, 1999). Another set of notes for later in the *Trickster* narrative imagines a social tradition of child exchange and adoption emerging to insure sufficient genetic diversity in otherwise isolated communities on Bow (OEB 2078).

Still—and here we see one possible source of strain on the extrasolar utopia, an anti-utopian drag on the possibility of genuine historical difference—the very next bullet point in the 1/3/99 document suggests that this utopia of transracial adoption might prove to be only be a temporary measure, designed to stabilize the population during initial colonization, and that more “traditional” family structures might reemerge as the colony becomes more populous. A rumination about a male preference for “narrow-hipped women” over “wide-hipped women”—which Butler apparently saw as unchangeable even as it was evolutionarily irrational, like the peacock's tail—unexpectedly culminates in a similarly dyspeptic speculation about the place of women in Bow, both in the “present” of the *Trickster* narrative's beginning and in its grim, post-disaster future:

Since there is no logic in the choice of a sexual partner, this [evolutionary irrationality] will not stop any man getting himself a prize—a thin, narrow-hipped, boyish woman. Women with bigger hips will have to settle for lesser men—men who earn less money, who may be less intelligent, who are probably of lower social standing, and who will be more likely to absorb unquestioning the values of their societies. Such men will be the fathers of most of humanity after a period of chaos. Genetically and psychologically, they will pass on much of what they are, however inappropriate it is. And, of course, of the ways they will do this is by physically bullying even the very bright wives into accepting

their values and choices and teach them to the children. Physical bullying works as well as it always has. (OEB 2033)<sup>8</sup>

The unhappy possibility that patriarchal social structures might actually be inexpugnable—that human biology might triumph over cultural experimentation—is similarly implicit in OEB 2076, in unnumbered pages that come just before “Some Matters of Life” in the folder; under a brainstorming heading “NORMAL LIFE AND CRIME GOES ON,” the first entry is “People still beat their wives or their kids” (OEB 2076). A year later, though, Butler remained troubled by this essentialist tendency in her imagination, which she saw metastasizing across the entire fictive storyworld of Bow:

Why have I put the men on top and the “ladies” content to be wives, secretaries, and librarians? The top two leaders are male. The two engineers mentioned are male. Only the physicians are sexually integrated.

How about a rule: each leader must have a deputy leader of the opposite sex and unrelated. Heads of housing groups as well as heads of community are required to be two, male and female, unrelated by blood or marriage. (OEB 2032, dated July 10, 2000).

Thus we see in the housing groups another flickering vision of the feminist utopia that Butler always wanted to write, which imagines a new vision of communal life dominated by women and untethered to the patriarchal form of the nuclear family line that is currently hegemonic in the West—but disciplined by the sort of biological determinism that governs her other fictions that see men and women according to fundamental and perhaps in some sense permanently unchangeable different logics (OEB 2076). Butler was disturbed to find herself unable to root out these maladaptive modes of thinking even in her own imagination: in OEB 2032 she goes on to document six versions of female leadership that themselves show how completely patriarchal, gender-essentialist notions of have distorted our collective imagination of female power:

1. The firm, but kind and generous mother—a loving tyrant (“[*Star Trek: Voyager*’s Captain] Janeway”)
2. The bitch goddess, a terror, demanding, raging, hard-working, very tough (Thatcher)
3. The would-be man who competes on every level with men (Sherry Lansing [prominent 1990s-2000s-era Hollywood executive])
4. The queen, commanding from on-high—distant from her people and their needs (Marie Antoinette)
5. The teacher/manager, responsible for her people, caring for them, teaching them, focusing them, but not their mother, goddess, master, or queen. Very simply, their leader, respecting their dignity and insisting that they respect hers (Olamina)

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<sup>8</sup> To gloss Butler’s complicated argument here quite briefly, what she is imagining here is that the most successful men (by whatever measure) will still be driven by maladaptive sexual desires to select narrow-hipped women over wide-hipped women—and that such women “will be more likely to die in childbirth or manage to produce only one child,” especially after the collapse of technologized society in a place like Bow. Thus—in a darkly eugenic vision parallel to something like the film *Idiocracy* (dir. Mike Judge, 2006)—she imagines the less-desirable men producing more offspring due to the reproductive superiority of their putatively less-desirable, wide-hipped wives, and thus eventually having both their genes and their more-backwards-looking social attitudes becoming dominant in the colony. See again OEB 2033.

6. The politician, buying and selling votes, human rights, and human needs (any pimp).  
(OEB 2032)

All these versions save #5 seem to derive, in classic reaction formation, from their relationship to men and male power, and seem to produce toxic visions of female power as a consequence—and indeed, as I note in *Octavia E. Butler*, a large part of her struggle with *Trickster* was in crafting a vision of Imara that could lead as well as Olamina had, something she found difficult in no small part because she viewed Imara, somewhat self-loathingly, as much more clearly a version of herself.<sup>9</sup>

Happily, other elements of life on Bow retain a much more straightforwardly utopian character, both in and outside gender relations. Butler envisioned much of the reproductive labor on the planet as functioning through what she called “crews,” meaning temporary and rotational work assignments distinct from more specialized duties like science, construction, medicine, or law that required training and expertise. “The word ‘crew’ implies temporary duty. One’s actual work is elsewhere” (OEB 2067).<sup>10</sup> Specifically this division of labor spreads across the community unpleasant work that, today, is disproportionately done by women and people of color, as well as economic underclasses and immigrant and undocumented workers. “KITCHEN CREW—everyone serves by turn. We all eat. We all cook. ... MAINTENANCE CREW—again, everyone serves by turn. We all dirty, we all clean” (OEB 2068). While she imagined some variance for personal ability and personal taste—some people are bad cooks, while some people just hate doing it—she imagined a world where no one was able to escape the requirements of contributing to the common good by privilege, wealth, or right of birth. On Bow—even in the early days, before the cataclysm(s), when things are still “good”—everyone chips in. Perhaps nowhere can we see this extraplanetary vision of communism more clearly—both in terms of its optimism as well as in terms of its permanent fragility and state of threat—than in Butler’s requirement that 10% of the community serve as a volunteer fire brigade to fight fires and other emergencies, any one of which could end the life of the entire colony were it to get out of control (OEB 2076). Each housing group would thus devote a huge portion of its resources to the collective good, by necessity, for their own survival.

Butler’s utopian imagination of the Bow colony included aesthetic speculation as well. Although she imagined Bow to be a deeply unpleasant planet—with some of the drafts of the *Trickster* novel suggesting that merely being on the planet at all would produce a deep depression in some of the colonists—she imagined that the colonists would devote attention to creating beautiful spaces for themselves despite the ugliness of the world outside. Thus every housing group also had a prominent park (“a place of flowers, beautiful trees, grass, benches”) and paid tremendous attention to the planting and care of trees (OEB 2067). Indeed, some crew duty would rotate not by coercion or compulsion but because of colonist desire; in most housing groups, Butler writes, greenhouse duty would actually be voluntary and in demand, as “most people want this duty because it enables them to work with beautiful and familiar things—plants” (OEB 2068). Unlike too many utopian visions, Butler’s pre-disaster Bow has ample

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<sup>9</sup> Butler’s earliest visions of Olamina actually veered much closer to “bitch goddess” than the synergistic Olamina of leadership style #5; some original drafts of the Parables at the Huntington see a middle-aged Olamina as a stone-hearted warrior-woman, personally executing thieves, dissidents, and other enemies of Earthseed.

<sup>10</sup> Butler seems to have imagined this division of labor as having its origins in the original transfer to Bow, in which some portion of the colonists needed to be always be out of hypersleep in order to run the ship; in one version of the narrative (c. 2002) she imagines colonists asking each other “what year did you do your ‘crew year’” (OEB 2100).

space for music and the arts; her list of “Daily Work” ends with a list of avocations that would fill people’s spare time and enrich their lives (“painting, sculpture, music, dance, drama, flower gardening and arranging, journalism, fiction writing”) (OEB 2076) while a similar contemporaneous document lists other sorts of work that people would take on, unpaid, in service of their community and their own personal gratification (beauticians and barbers, potters, pastors, crafters, tinkerers and inventors) (OEB 2068). In the scarcity conditions of the early Bow, these volunteer positions would be unpaid and unofficial, though she imagines people would gradually develop a reputation for the tasks they were especially good at; as the colony became more stable and had more surplus to devote to leisure and luxury, they might eventually become specialized jobs themselves.

As in a work like Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, with its similar “utopia of scarcity,” the harsh economic conditions of Bow dialectically produced both crisis and opportunity for the colonists: by severely winnowing the possibilities for self-actualization and fulfillment, and by forcing all colonists to focus their attention much more directly towards the perpetuation of the conditions necessary for mere survival, Bow’s miserable ecosystem paradoxically produces several conditions Butler saw as necessary for utopia. The sheer riches of Earth, she suggested, actually make things worse for us as a civilization, by allowing us space to chase maladaptive choices and obscuring the true cost of our mistakes; by limiting our ability to make bad choices and brutally punishing errors Bow clarifies which behaviors are actually necessary to human flourishing and which are maladaptive, producing more unhappiness than they salve. In Le Guin’s novel, it is the contract between the lush planet Urras and its barren moon Anarres that produces this recognition, the juxtaposition between Urras’s abundance and Anarres’s radical scarcity, a place so poverty-stricken and inhospitable that “human solidarity is our only resource” (Le Guin 167). For Butler’s *Trickster*, the parallel would have been between Bow’s miserable scarcity and the colonists’ memories of Earth, a place she imagined them to be consumed by toxic nostalgia for despite all the unpleasant things that had caused them to leave in the first place. But the overall effect would likely have been quite similar; the early chapters of *Trickster* would have shown the importance of Peter G. Stillman’s position that a utopia of social relations trumps the false utopia of “a place of plenty”: because suffering is inevitable no matter what level of material wealth is obtained, what is needed is a “sympathetic community of human beings” that can transform pain into a “movable feast” (Stillman 65-66).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Butler closely echoes such critical readings of *The Dispossessed* in her claim in an interview with Larry McCaffrey that we as a species would *benefit* from the “stresses of learning to travel in space and live elsewhere—stresses that will harness our energies until we’ve had time to mature” (McCaffrey 26). The social structures of Bow are designed to support precisely that sort of harnessing in the name of collective human flourishing, and to be flexible and resilient enough not to snap under the strain.

As Butler put it in her personal notes:

The struggle to survive on Bow should absorb enough of our aggressiveness, adventuresomeness, and competitiveness to permit us a long tradition of peace, good government, and good sensible long-term environmental behavior. All we need is to be guided in good direction in spite of the temptations toward the quick and dirty, the easy, the temporary pseudo-realistic tradeoffs. (The last includes where we put our waste, how

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<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson similarly reads *The Dispossessed* as “a sociopolitical hypothesis about the inseparability of utopia and scarcity” (Jameson 277).

we usual natural resources, and that we never accept the idea of oppressing one group of humans like women, racial minorities, religious minorities, gender minorities, developing class minorities just until we fix some other problem.) The idea, of course, is not to get into easy (there's plenty so why conserve?) bad habits that then become rights and traditions. WE ARE CREATING THE CULTURE, THE TRADITIONS, THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF OUR WORLD. (OEB 2062)

There is a fierce and undeniable utopian futurity implicit there, despite Butler's tendencies towards biological reductionism, and her famous distrust of utopia and of utopians—despite all that, she retains the fundamental utopian critical insight that the future is a social choice we make collectively, one of many possible futures, rather than the unfolding of some supposedly automatic, “natural” process we can't interrupt or control. The future doesn't just happen; it is something we choose, something we craft.

In a series of pre-departure colonist interviews that Butler imagined as possibly starting chapters, Butler described what she saw as the perfect sort of person for positively shaping such a utopia.

### **Why do you want to be part of a colony on a new world?**

I want to make a difference. I need to do something that matters—something good, something that will help. Here on Earth, we all run around in tiny circles. We think we're doing important things. We think we matter. We don't. We circle. We wallow, we root. As long as we stay here, we are no more important than pigs. We can leave. We can broadcast our seed to the universe. We can become so many different wonderful, and... well, perhaps terrible things. Or we can stay here and wallow. Your Lauren Olamina says something like that. She thought we had to leave to move on to the next stage of our growth.

[...]

### **What can you contribute?**

I am a trained psychiatrist. I am an amateur musician. I've done some teaching. If you cause me in any of those categories, I will serve. I can learn. If there is other work that you want me to learn and do, I will try. (OEB 2076)<sup>12</sup>

This character is Imara, the figure who Butler envisioned as being at the center of the novel (though the specifics of her background and relationship to Olamina and Earthseed charge dramatically from formulation to formulation). The utopian space of Bow makes possible an unusual sort of hero: “A brown mouse of a woman. A LISTENER, a WATCHER, a shadow, a fly on the wall, and also a QUESTIONER. When the time comes, she is one who SHOWS people what to do by doing it, beginning it herself, drafting others where necessary” (OEB 2076). As Imara's list of key specialties shows—therapy, music, teaching, alongside an open willingness to contribute wherever her talents proved more useful—despite the austerity of Bow

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<sup>12</sup> The copy of this writing that exists in the Huntington was later highlighted by Butler to show its importance and usefulness to her as proto-writing for *Trickster*.

Butler still saw the real threat of Bow to be mental, not economic, deprivation: depression, learned helplessness, and the (re-)development of toxic social structures that impoverish human life and imperial human dignity in regardless of economic or ecological conditions.

## When the Time Comes

Unfortunately, of course, however creative or flexible or resilient their institutions, the colonists of *Trickster* would have been doomed by Butler's desire to tell a different sort of story about their experiences on Bow. The best description of the likely shape of *Trickster*, and the fall from grace of the colonists from something like utopia to something much, much worse, comes from OEB 2055:

Having foreshadowed trouble, begin happy—truly, truly happy. No war, no poverty, no disease, no vicious, stupid, short-sighted politicking. A new start. Then begin the long, terrible slide that nearly kills us.

All of Butler's notes for *Trickster*, across all the many versions she experimented with in the last decade of her life, indicate that disaster of one sort or another would quickly befall the once-utopian colony. Most of these cataclysms originate in a sort of existential bad luck, usually a plague of some sort or another caused by negative interaction with the organisms native to Bow, with mass blindness and contagious hallucinations recurring especially often in her thought. Other versions had more down-to-earth origins: either a spree of criminal murders committed by an individual, to be solved by a version of Imara who was a cop rather than a psychologist, or the slow-motion social variety: "quick-and-dirty ecological methods, corruption, and tyranny" (OEB 2062). But whatever the cause of the catastrophe Butler's thoughts often returned to biology: to the central, inescapable problem of gender difference, and to the existence of men as a sort of accelerant to any problem that might arise in the colony. A very early version of notes for the Earthseed narrative contains a list of negative characteristics associated with young males from "touchy vanity" to "arrogance and argumentativeness" to excess emotion and a desire to show off without accepting responsibility or surrendering to proper authority and rational judgment (OEB 2056). In one version of the plague narrative—where the plague is an epidemic of telepathy, in this case occurring only in the women of the colony—Butler imagines the men ganging together to prevent this power from upsetting the balance of the sexes, refusing to bring any more women out of hypersleep until a cure is found (OEB 2203).

Indeed, her earliest vision of the narrative that would eventually become the Parables allegorizes the entire endeavor in terms of a metaphor of toxic masculinity, imagining the colony as a sperm cell trying to force itself way into an egg by any means possible ("batter, hammer, smash, push, shove, crash"); she saw the ultimate story of the Earthseed colony as a lesson against this sort of masculinist thinking, "learn[ing] that force does not work—that force rebounds and does more harm to those who would use it. Other methods must be discovered and used" (OEB 2056). It seems little wonder that when, in her notes for *Trickster* and beyond, she imagined the likely future of the colony, it was specifically *men* that she worried about. "In every generation," Butler wrote in OEB 2078, "there are men who would happily lay waste to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of their country if they could rule the remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$ . They are vile. They are sociopaths with a taste

for great power. Most of the time, they have no chance to do their worst. They are held down by the functioning society they inhabit. They become thugs or cops or soldiers or important executives in powerful companies.” In the finished and unfinished stories that ultimately spiraled out of the failed *Trickster* narrative, she often resorted to magical thinking to solve the problem of men, not only in the pheromonic vampire matriarchy of *Fledging* but also in unfinished stories like *Paraclete* and “Frogs” which saw women empowered by implausible, fantastic, or out-and-out exterminationist scenarios to upend male authority. She doubted, on a basic level, that there was any social solution to the problem of human biology—that the only way for to see a “male-run humanity shift to a female-run humanity” would be for men to “change in a basic, genetic way” or else for “their numbers were permanently and absolutely diminished [...] Real change, is, in this case, biological change” (OEB 1143, entry dated May 21, 2003).

But in other places she retained the glimmers of a way out, a way out to the conundrum between hierarchy and intelligence first posed to her by the Oankali that *doesn't* require the magic intervention of their divine healing touch (or the Ina's bite, or a plague that luckily eliminates all men, or...):

Consider: ALL PEOPLE SHOULD BE TAUGHT EARLY ON THAT MANY OF THEIR URGES AND TENDENCIES ARE BIOLOGICAL, GENETIC, FIT FOR CHIMPANZEE TROOPS AND, PERHAPS, FOR FAMILY BANDS, BUT LETHAL TO LARGER HUMAN COMMUNITIES. AND ALL PEOPLE SHOULD BE TUTORED IN ALTERNATIVE MEANS OF SATISFYING THEIR URGES. In such a world, all children would be permitted to masturbate—even taught to do it. Games should be a major part of life for everyone so that everyone would have ways, physical or mental, to compete. Strivers must be taught and helped in acceptable ways. Power should always come with responsibility. Everyone must see you not only take on power, but accept responsibility. For instance, ALL CHILDREN OF NORMAL INTELLIGENCE MUST TUTOR YOUNGER KIDS. IT IS BOTH A PRIVILEGE AND A RESPONSIBILITY. One may begin anywhere between eight and twelve, depending on when one is ready. As all children tutor, also all children are to receive some tutoring. Personal attention can enable a kid of ordinary intelligence to perform and genius level. For the very bright, perhaps they need help at outdoor games or at work with wood, glass, metal, cloth, farming, cooking, whatever. Even the brightest people need help somewhere. And even the dullest can give some help at something. (OEB 2078)

There is something concretely utopian here—not Oankali, not Ina, not (God help us) Patternist, but down to earth, concrete, *human*, about the other world and other history she imagined we might come together to create, everyone contributing what they can. Here she retained hope that the bad patterns of adult humans were rooted in the bad education of childhood—and that they therefore might be transformed by a different sort of affirmative, careful education in every arena from gardening to games to sex.

Her doubts—one of the structuring doubts of her long delay on the book—was how long it would take us to truly adapt, to truly learn—but she did believe we *could* adapt, and *could* learn, when push came to shove. And through the *Trickster* false starts, despite her great frustration with the narrative she can't make work, she always retains the inflationary edge of that vision. “This place really is something to be shaped and molded into what we need,” one of

her characters says to another in one of the many dozens versions of the first fifty pages of *Trickster*:

“It will shape us and we will shape it. That’s the way of things. But none of us have been able to look outside or go outside without great disappointment.”

“Eden,” I said, and he understood at once.

“Eden, yes. No matter what we’ve said or read, no matter what we were warned of, on some deep level, we expected to land in a beautiful, fertile garden. Well, leave off the ‘beautiful’ part, and we did land in a fertile garden. It’s just not ours yet.” (OEB 2110)

Eden—but not the one you wanted, and you’re going to have to *work* for it. Eden—but not the kind that flatters who you already are and what you already value, but which forces you to totally transform to try and survive it, if you can. That’s the only utopia Butler would allow herself to imagine—but it could yet be a utopia, of a kind, at least for a while.

## A Hope in Lieu of a Conclusion

At Marquette I often teach the work of J.R.R. Tolkien—we actually have his drafts in our university library, another improbable and and unexpected and utterly wonderful archival gift in my life as a scholar—and have come to rely in my teaching on much of the *legendarium* that exists only in fragments, in the work done by Christopher Tolkien to schematize and systematize the *legendarium* beyond *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In many ways we only see the totality of Tolkien’s incredible imaginative vision—grim, grotesque, righteous, holy—in the material that he never incorporated into the completed, publishable work. These archival additions are not mere excess or DVD extras or cynical money grabs: *The Silmarillion* and the Letters and *The Children of Hurin* and *Beren and Lúthien* and *Unfinished Tales* and twelve *immense* volumes of *The History of Middle-Earth* all show us new sides of the *legendarium* we couldn’t see without them. We wouldn’t understand Tolkien, in this fullness, without them.

It is my belief that the Huntington collection will prove to do the same thing for Butler fans and scholars—perhaps nowhere moreso than in the way the *Trickster* fragments can extend and transform our understanding of the actually existing Parables. Without them, the Parables are not only incomplete, they are *sad*. Beautiful, yes, but sad, and sad in a way that is hard to recover from, as anyone who has seen a happy undergraduate leap with eager enthusiasm from Sower to Talents knows—they come back, eyes wide, feeling *betrayed*. If any utopian impulse remains vital in the Parables after *Talents*—and I hope one does—it is only to be found in *Trickster*. Of course there’s probably no way to narrativize *Trickster*, to bring in someone else to “complete” it and produce some supposedly definitive version—there’s just not enough there that was Octavia’s to finish the job without her, and no one would trust that the end product really reflected her personal vision or match her unique authorial voice. But all the same there is enough there to tease us, taunt us, tantalize us, teach us, perhaps someday in a volume not unlike *The Silmarillion* or *The History of Middle Earth*. As Butler’s students, working in her shadow in

her vast archive, making a God of her, for better and for worse, our task now is to keep wrestling with the Trickster, exactly as she did.

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