

THE DAY OF DOOM
AND THE MEMORY OF SLAVERY:
OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S PROPHETIC VISION
IN *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*

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Divine justice offended is
and satisfaction claimeth:
God's wrathful ire kindled like fire,
against them fiercely flameth.

MICHAEL WIGGLESWORTH, *The Day of Doom*

Parable of the Sower (1993) is Octavia Butler's apocalyptic vision of America and American society in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The novel is written as a personal journal and each entry is introduced with excerpts from a spiritual book that the protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, published after the journal's events took place. The narrative is a passionate attack on the social ills of overindustrialization and fierce competitiveness which have reduced a once prosperous country into a fractured society governed by outright violence and aggressiveness. It is a book about a historical dilemma which presents the image of a society laid waste, of human beings deprived of their humanity, and shows how the one-way journey of progress and mechanization has resulted in the demise of nature and even human life. America is presented as a dystopia with «landscapes in which the hard edge of cruelty, violence, and domination is described in stark detail» (Allison 472). In this sense this is a novel which «addresses the issues of survival and adaptation, in which resistance, defeat, and compromise are the vital elements» (Allison 472). The America of *Parable of the Sower* is «barely a nation at

all anymore.»¹ It is rather a society of fear, class strife and extreme poverty, a country which has endured serious economic and social upheavals: cholera is spreading in some southern states, others are being smashed by tornadoes, a blizzard is freezing the northern midwest, and eastern states are suffering from a measles epidemic. The possibilities of employment, material abundance, and an acceptable harmony of all citizens are gone. Social interaction with persons from other ethnic groups is dangerous since «people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind» (111), and problems of industrialization such as crowded miserable tenements, unemployment, sickness, and an unstable population of laborers plague daily life.

Butler is a remarkable creator of disturbing narratives set within the genre of science fiction. In a field dominated by white male authors, her African-American vision transforms and reshapes the conventions and limitations of this genre. Deeply committed to the political developments of America, she defends a literary perspective which presents politics by indirection. Yet far from being a mere political allegory wrapped up in science fiction mores, *Parable of the Sower* draws its inspiration from the most pervasive reference in Butler's writing: biblical rhetoric. The crucial role of the Bible in African American life is unquestionable. «The history of African Americans exemplifies the ways in which the Bible can and has been used, in the name of its supposed authority, to sanction the subjugation and enslavement of people or to instigate insurrection and buttress liberation efforts of oppressed people» (Weems 63). Lauren Oya Olamina explains the influence of the Bible on the formation of her new creed and on her writing:

‘A lot of it isn’t very poetical... But it’s what I believe, and I’ve written it as well as I could.’ I showed him four verses in all –gentle, brief verses that might take hold of him without his realizing it and live in his memory without his intending that they should. Bits of the Bible had done that to me, staying with me even after I stopped believing. (183)

In his article «Octavia Butler Writes the Bible» John R. Pfeiffer studies the great weight the sacred book carries in this writer's fiction. According to Pfeiffer, Butler «has transformed religious training and belief into literary myth» (140). This critic seems surprised at the fact that even if Butler «has set belief in Judeo-Christian theology aside and is keenly aware of the terrible suffering the Bible has been made to sponsor in the world,» she still «uses it in her stories as a touchstone» (141). Finally, he recognises that her «appropriation of the Bible is meant to subvert it where it is perverse, embrace it where it is cogent, and finally to substitute for it a personal scripture, indeed, a theology, of her own» (141).² Pfeiffer is right in his appreciation

¹ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (London: The Women's Press, 1995), 20. All further references in the text will be to page numbers in this edition.

² Pfeiffer explains succinctly how biblical influence is present in her Patternist novels (*Patternmaster*, 1976; *Mind of My Mind*, 1977; *Survivor*, 1978; *Wild Seed*, 1980; and *Clay's Ark*, 1984),

of Butler's narrative strategies of biblical appropriation. Yet, what he does not seem to realise is that she is not breaking new ground, but treading old paths. In fact, she is joining a legion of black women who have reread and revised Scripture from the beginning of black history in the United States: from Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison. The Book has often conveyed to the black woman its mixed messages within a context that has denied that such a woman has any substantive heritage in the printed word. Among many outstanding African American theologians, Renita J. Weems underlines the fact that the black woman «has had no one to write for her, and as an African, she has had no one to write to her» (69). Butler in *Parable of the Sower* shows herself to be another African American female reader responding to the Bible through some of the options Weems delineates for black women readers who identify predominantly with the interests of a female interpretative community. Thus Butler «elevates portions of the Bible that in her estimation are central for understanding God's liberating activity and allows those passages to become the norm by which all other passages are judged» (69).

From the period of slavery through contemporary times many black women engaged in religious, political, cultural or literary practices have preached and practiced racial uplift and social responsibility as a means of fulfilling what they understood as their duty to God and to humankind. In the last decades, African American women scholars have begun to theorize black women's religious perspectives and practices from the different fields of theology, religious ethics, the sociology of religion, and ministry practice. They use the term *womanist* (coined by Alice Walker³) to identify their tasks of retrieving, interpreting, and theorizing. Womanist theology engages black women's religiosity with other theological discourses and religious interpretations. «Through the work of womanist theologians and ethicists, the Christian community is discovering the theological import of liberation activity of some leading nineteenth-century African American women,» explains black theologian Delores S. Williams (1996, 299).⁴ In this sense *Parable of the Sower* can be considered from a twofold perspective. Firstly it is a literary example of how the Bible has captured the imagination of Butler, because significant portions of it speak to «the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice, and vindication» (Weems 70). And secondly and most important, it is a literary rendition of this writer's deep engagement with the traditions of black religious women's activism.

One of the most important aspects of an African American theological worldview is «the understanding that religious duty includes racial uplift and social

Kindred (1979), the Xenogenesis Trilogy (*Xenogenesis*, 1987; *Adulthood Rites*, 1988; and *Imago*, 1989); and *Parable of the Sower* (1993).

³ A *womanist*, in the terms coined by Alice Walker, is a writer «committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female» (xi).

⁴ For a description of how womanist writers use a variety of political strategies informed by African American women's faith, ritual practices and thoughts about God in their fiction, see Williams 1985.

responsibility,» two responsibilities that derive from «survival and liberation themes of Black religion» (Ross 2). Cornel West establishes two categories, «priestly» and «prophetic,» which correlate with survival and liberation themes, respectively. Of the priestly stream, West says that it regards «quotidian components,» whereas the prophetic stream is visionary and contributes to «every individual regardless of class, country, caste, race, or sex [having] the opportunity to fulfill his or her potentialities» (1982, 16). In the Preface to *Keeping Faith*, a collection of previously published articles, West poses two questions:

How then does a black philosopher keep faith as he, or she, focuses on the pain and paranoia in America's chocolate cities and on Africa's sense of impending catastrophe? What are the sources for brave thought and courageous action in this frightening moment of global cynicism and fatalism? (1993, xi)

And his answer in this text, written curiously enough in the same year that Octavia Butler published *Parable of the Sower*; turns to his profound commitment to what he calls «prophetic vision:» «the existential imperative to institutionalize critiques of illegitimate authority and arbitrary uses of power; a bestowal of dignity, grandeur and tragedy on the ordinary lives of everyday people» (1993, xi). This is also Butler's standpoint in this novel. Her protagonist demonstrates that it is «the love ethic of Christian faith» that enables her «to live a life of hope against hope without succumbing to a warranted yet paralyzing pessimism or to an understandable yet miserable misanthropy» (West 1993, xi).

As mentioned above and similar to many other black feminist writers, Butler regards the Bible as a meaningful resource for understanding and shaping modern existence. African American theologian James Cone explains that «because white theologians and preachers denied any relationship between the scriptures and our struggle for freedom, we by-passed the classic Western theological tradition and went directly to the scripture for its word regarding our black struggle» (64). Cone states that for black Americans the Bible has always embodied double meanings, speaking of freedom and emancipation as an earthly possibility and not simply a reward for the afterlife. *Parable of the Sower* offers then a spirited solution to the corruption, social unrest, human misery, and outright violence which blight the America of the twenty-first century. Butler's invectives against her own cultural, social, economic, and political moment give shape to an American future which in fact is more a redressing of the past than a building of a new and different future because, though the country has become a horrid world in need of drastic transformations, only readaptation –what the protagonist identifies as «change»– to the new conditions is required to make survival possible. The realization of the existence of an inferno beneath the contemporary American civilization is the motivating force for a narrative that tries to give an answer to the plight not only of an apparent female search for identity, but also to the Afro-American yearning for the collective rearrangement and reinvention of America.

To disclose her prophetic vision of the crisis of this end-of-the-century America, Butler responds to this society's deepest ideological needs by blending elements from different literary traditions. In fact, what really strikes the reader of this science fiction novel is not the bleak landscape of horror described in its pages but the way that Butler articulates that vision. Her glance into the future is shaped firstly by a millenarian approach to history that can be traced back to the Puritans; secondly by the pastoral ideal; and thirdly by her cultural heritage, that is to say by the Afro-American tradition, specifically by slave narrative conventions, by a revision of biblical rhetoric, and the presence of an Africanized Christian theology.

Firstly, the social implications in the novel recall the scheme of national salvation that has been embedded in American culture since the seventeenth century. In sermons, political speeches, fiction, songs, poems, geography and history books, diaries and tracts, American writers have left a continuing national myth of glorious salvation, as well as messianic task. The endurance of these beliefs in secular literature through more than three centuries of American writing testifies to the enormous power of the myth of the American New Jerusalem. Butler celebrates the social-spiritual renewal of the nation. Her novel, using a language both sacred and secular, reenacts the ritual –performed since the Puritans– of America's renewed millenarian impulses, symbolised in the construction of the new community of Acorn. Acorn is a new world, not «discovered» by Olamina and her fellow travellers –new pilgrim fathers and mothers– but created and energized by their motives of patriotism and passion for humanity, where each person is thought to have an equal share in the resources available. Given this cultural and literary tradition, it is not surprising that the novel is intended to work as a parable, that is to say, as a story illustrating a moral lesson.

Parable of the Sower also participates in an environmental as well as a spiritual tradition, which is to say that Butler concurs with those American writers who feel the anguish of an uncontrolled progress which leads to aggressive environmental change. Consequently, a return to a much more balanced civilization which respects nature and develops through its resources seems a preparation and requisite for the remembering of a lost pastoral ideal. Butler confronts an environment which, if not completely destroyed, is on the verge of utter destruction by human technology and abuse. The derelict cities, the desolate streets, the drug-addicts, the pyro drug that impels consumers to set fire to everything and everyone suggest an apocalyptic atmosphere. Butler believes it is necessary to counterbalance this state of physical destruction and moral barrenness by falling back not only on past vague resources but also on Native American lore and knowledge. It is inconceivable for the children of the present not to take into account the harmony, equality, abundance and stability of Native American cultures if they want to be reconciled to their environment and survive. Butler's «yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature'» is not only a nostalgic sign for a lost past, but an intense retrieval of the «myth of the garden» for the future (Marx 6-7). Americans' spiritual welfare is then directly related to their adaptation to a new way of life solely dependent on the careful cultivation of the land –the industrial hell can only be replaced by

the agrarian utopia. Human beings have to find a way to expiate their violation of natural resources. And those are the foundations upon which Olamina's community, Acorn, is built— upon nature.

Yet, the most outstanding feature of this science fiction novel is the skill with which Butler combines the restatement of the millennial myth with the Afro-American tradition; thus her social criticism is intertwined with some of its central concerns. Her lamentation on the misery of present-day America couples with her assurance of a transcendent optimistic future tuned to the experiences of the black population and their experience of racial discrimination and political rebuff. Thus, she uses the past, sure to strike a most familiar chord which facilitates her faith in a social redemption ingrained in an Afro-American rendering of history. Ralph Ellison in *Shadow and Act* states that

being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope for emancipation and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt inflicted by our former masters after the Reconstruction, and the myths, both Northern and Southern, which are propagated in the justification of that betrayal. (131)

The protagonist's search for identity is deeply imbedded in a conception of the journey as a slave fugitive running for freedom, that is to say, in «the memory of slavery,» Ellison mentions. The depiction of the turn-of-the century America recalls that of the nineteenth-century Gilded Age, and even more, the antebellum period, since slavery reigns in some parts of the country and manifests itself with surprisingly familiar traits. Images from the Afro-American tradition are then borrowed to depict the topography of this wasteland. The traditional traits of the peculiar institution are refashioned here to serve the ravaged twenty-first century landscape of America, a country which, according to Bankole —a middle-age witness to the United States' former magnificence, and Olamina's lover— «has slipped back 200 years» (278). A society with factories that use slave labor where «workers make things for companies in Canada or Asia» (294); places that «were supposed to provide jobs for that northward-flowing river of people... The workers are more throwaways than slaves. They breathe toxic fumes or drink contaminated water or get caught in unshielded machinery... It doesn't matter. They're easy to replace —thousands of jobless for every job» (295). A world where there are drivers who in the style of former overseers push slaves around and separate families selling away their children and where «sometimes jobs like that are the only jobs —slave or slave driver» (294). A country where domestic service functions as slavery as well. Four of the people who join Olamina's group on the road had been working for rich couples as domestic servants; in fact as slaves, and even one of the women was sexually harassed by her employer. Then, subverting the traditional trope of the jealous mistress —«the green-eyed monster»— Butler lets the mistress help the victimized slave escape. But Olamina is careful to note that «in slavery when that happened, there was nothing the slaves could do about it —or

nothing that wouldn't get them killed, sold, or beaten» (201). On the other hand, the social alternative for a better life is to join a company-city. This is not a new invention as it recalls a form of manipulating the workers that can be traced back to the past, to early American company towns in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which the companies cheated and abused people. This sophisticated form of indentured servitude is a business that, according to Olamina's father, sounds like «half antebellum revival and half science fiction» (112), and he adds, «freedom is dangerous... but it's precious, too. You can't just throw it away or let it slip away. You can't sell it for bread and pottage.» (112). In this state things, Olamina envisions her task as that of a «crew of a modern underground railroad» (268), and she emerges in the text as a liberator of oppressed people –«Things are breaking down more and more... I'll tell you, though, if we can convince ex-slaves that they can have freedom with us, one will fight harder to keep it» (268).

On the other hand, like the Gilded Age, the America of the end of the twentieth century seems a triumph only for a few tycoons who have amassed fortunes in industry, and illegal businesses, while trespassing law and ethics. This is Henry Adams's prophecy of how the disintegrative forces unleashed by science and technology have effected the destruction of the world. At the other end of the economic spectrum, the misery of American life in Butler's novel draws a disturbing picture. Among the wealthy and the jobless population only hostility reigns. In between, a pauperized middle class competes and struggles for a job to sustain daily life, threatened by both the contagious diseases and violence of the undernourished and over aggressive outcasts. And, even though their neighbourhood is surrounded by a wall, protecting them from the attacks of the outsiders, it will eventually be destroyed. Hence, the only way left for survival is escape, or better, retreating to a new oasis of harmony which can be identified as the new beginning for Western society.

Parable of the Sower is written in diary form and its action is divided into two parts spanning from July 20, 2024 to October 10, 2027. In the first part, Lauren Oya Olamina lives in a walled, besieged community where families and individuals come apart little by little, like «a rope, breaking, a single strand at a time» (107) and where «things are unraveling, desintegrating bit by bit» (113). The destruction of Lauren's community by pyro addicts sets in motion the second part of the novel –the flight to a North that stands for «anywhere where I can be paid for my services and allowed to live among people who aren't out to kill me for my food or water» (242). In this state of things, going north towards the mythical Canada is the alternative to a life «as some kind of twenty-first century slave» (155). And with this theme of the journey North, Butler revises one of the most important tropes of the Afro-American literary tradition. Slave narratives show the early connection between the physical journey and the process of psychological self-recognition of the individual. Thanks to this motif ex-slaves reconstruct their history and shape the experiences of their lives to validate their identity. The journey North –the road to freedom– becomes, thus, a central experience in the autobiography of women slaves, an experience which facilitates both the physical and spiritual liberation (Álvarez 264). Susan Willis further argues

that «journey in the novels by black women is not just a structuring device upon which the author might conveniently string the incidents of plot. Rather, the notion of travelling through space is integral to the unfolding of history and development of the individual's consciousness with regard to the past» (220). Hence,

the voyage over geographic space is an expanded metaphor for the process of one person's coming to know who she is –not as an individual, but as a subject who gathers up the collective experience of black Americans, who then, in writing about that experience, gives shape and substance to the self in history. (220)

However, Butler deviates from this in her novel. It is true that Lauren Oya Olamina has to come to terms with her own identity. The book opens with that problem: she does not know who she is. She is on a quest to define her selfhood and this haunts her in an apocalyptic atmosphere that makes her have a recurring dream whenever she tries to be her «father's daughter» (3), that is to say, whenever she tries to behave according to what is expected of her. Her dream is a metaphor of what she will have to do to embrace her selfhood and of what she will do later on in the narrative: fly away from the entombing of her house/community to be free, even if that implies courting death. Her journey is then a walk through a Dantesque inferno; a world on fire, disintegrating, crumbling around the travellers. A journey through a biblical valley of death and shadows which is in fact a separation from the past, from the idea of traditional family and community. «Something would remind us of the past, of home, of a person, and then we would remember that it was all gone. The person was dead or probably dead. Everything we'd known and treasured was gone» (183), she laments. Yet, the protagonist does not struggle merely to reshape the black experience according to what critics have defined as the «paradigm of the male slave narrative» which enshrines cultural definitions of masculinity (Davies 130). In fact, what she does is boldly to assume a collective interracial experience. Far from inscribing that search within the individual's boundaries, Olamina envisions a collective redemption where the seeds of a whole new philosophy of life are deeply planted in the black past. The novel, thus, speaks to the anguish of the end of the millenium and yet embodies the sustaining myth of the Afro-American literary tradition –that the adaptation, survival and perfectability of the human being, like the Phoenix, is possible in a new world, even if one's self has been reduced to ashes– «In order to rise/From its own ashes/a phoenix/First/Must/Burn» (141). She and her group walk a freeway crowded with a heterogeneous mass –black and white, Asian and Latin: «whole families are on the move with babies... Other old, ill, or handicapped people hobbled along as best they could with the help of sticks or fitter companions. Many were armed with sheathed knives, rifles, and, of course, visible, holstered handguns» (161). At the same time, she learns things on her journey: from simple physical reactions of her body –the fact that walking hurts, that sucking on a plum or apricot pit makes you feel less thirsty (165), that killing is necessary to survive–, to the knowledge of her own role in the reduced community she forms along

the road and that implies a transformation of her physical weakness into a religious messianic leadership. Her sharing of pain gives way to her sharing with others of her philosophy, her verses, her inner self. «We are Earthlife preparing to take root in new ground, Earthlife fulfilling its purpose, its promise, its Destiny» (141), she announces at the start of her work as a black prophetess who, unlike politicians deprived of the faith of the people, will keep the promise to return the country «to the glory, wealth, and order of the twentieth century» (20).

The urgency of Butler's message is contained in the title of the book, which is a direct reference to the Parable of the Sower as told in Luke 8: 5-8, a text which she includes on the last page of the novel and which closes the narrative as some kind of food for thought for the reader. Jesus likened the sowing of seed to preaching the word, the good news of the Kingdom. In John 4: 35-38, he was the sower of the Kingdom truths and his disciples were sent out to reap those truths in the fields. In the Parable as told in Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23 and Luke 8: 5-15, Jesus again relates preaching to sowing. Here the seed sown is «the word of the kingdom» and he points out that the conditions under which the seed is sown can affect the sprouting and growing of the seed in the hearts of men. Lauren Oya Olamina's prophetic vision in the novel recalls that of a new Messiah, even though it mirrors more accurately that of the Old Testament Jeremiah, God's true prophet, whose reputation for courage and boldness was such that some during Jesus earthly ministry took the Saviour to be Jeremiah returned to life (Matthew 16: 13-14). Similarly to this biblical character, Olamina is a researcher, a historian, and a writer. She writes a book which like the ones written by the prophet –*Jeremiah* or *Lamentations*– grounds its roots not only in strong denunciatory messages but also in courage, endurance, and love. In her *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* Butler's protagonist proclaims scathing denunciations and fearful judgments, especially to those Americans who have developed an enduring unfaithfulness (Jeremiah 8: 5-6); yet she believes that her task is also to convince others that «prodigy is, at its essence, adaptability and persistent, positive obsession,» since «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» (1). Her lamentations are evidence of her love and concern for people.

Butler is revisioning here the idea of the American jeremiad as an «essential ritual of continuity through generational rededication which requires a set of local precedents, a pride of tribal heroes to whom the community could look back in reverence, and from whom, therefore, it could inherit its mission» (Bercovitch 39). Olamina is that elected tribal heroine who, long before anybody else, feels the threat of social disintegration and knows that the only way to fight back chaos, public disorder and anarchy is to restore its lost dignity and innocence to the political and economic organization of society –«I believe in something that I think my dying, denying, backward-looking people need» (24), she manifests. Hence her engagement in a quest for her identity is linked to the idea of shaping a community of God: «The Self must create/Its own reasons for being./To shape God,/Shape Self» (237). In the

Old Testament the prophet Jeremiah is commissioned to «tear down» as well as to «build» and «plant» (Jeremiah 1: 10) and sees how the return of the Jews and the rebuilding of the temple and the city after seventy years' desolation are fulfilled. In the same way Olamina will «build» and «plant» a new community which will have as a foundation her text, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. She becomes thus the new American black prophetess who creates her own interracial text so that following generations can look up to her as the new Moses (Bercovitch 39).

Butler's use of central motifs of the Afro-American tradition also extends to one of its prime concerns: the inextricable link between literacy and freedom. The mastery of literacy for the slaves becomes crucial in their quest for freedom (see Davis and Gates). If learning to read and write meant that the Afro-American slave became a human being, in *Parable of the Sower* Butler also utilises literacy as a subversive tactic for rendering individuals both white and black free. There are several scenes where Olamina, one of the few to possess these skills, teaches some of her followers. She also underscores her condemnation of a social system restricting literacy. The mother of one of the runaway slaves who joins the group sneaked her employer's books to her son, the same way slaves did two hundred years ago —«they sneaked around and educated themselves as best they could, sometimes suffering, whipping, sale, or mutilation for their efforts» (201). Finally, her own writing, besides being a therapeutical act of exorcism, is above all the strategy for the discovery and exploration of a new reality and the community's survival in it. «I'll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense» (73), she states. Thus the construction of Acorn, her utopian community, is firmly rooted in words, in scriptural rhetoric, in short, in writing.

Her book, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, rereads and revisions *The Book of Jeremiah* in new personal ways. In *Jeremiah* God is portrayed as the Creator of all things, the King to time indefinite, the only true God. He is the only one to be feared and the Great Potter, in whose hand individuals and nations are as clay pottery, for him to work with or destroy as he pleases («O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself, Jeremiah 10: 23; «Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?' says the Lord. 'Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!»,» Jeremiah 18: 5-6). Differently *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* reveals the individual's unique agency in spirituality and religious faith: «All that you touch/You Change./All that you Change/Changes you./The only lasting truth/Is Change./God/Is Change» (3). Moreover, «We do not worship God./We perceive and attend God./We learn from God./With forethought and work./We shape God./In the end, we yield to God./We adapt and endure./For we are Earthseed./And God is Change» (17).

A further aspect of the novel to be taken into account is the fact that the black prophetess Olamina belongs to the type of women common in Butler's fiction. She is Butler's prototypical heroine —an independent woman who tries to control her life. She is the epitome of those women of this writer's novels who «die, if they

surrender;» because «those who resist, struggle, adjust, compromise, and live by their own ethical standards survive to mother the next generation—literally make the next world» (Allison 472). But most importantly, Olamina exemplifies the way African American women, according to social ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon, have «regarded survival against tyrannical systems of oppression as the true sphere of moral life» (1985, 4). Cannon explains in her *Black Women and Ethics* the ways black women have developed practices to sustain life through the cultivation of three virtues: invisible dignity, quiet grace and unshouted courage. Invisible dignity refers to their «capacity to preserve life and participate fully in what life offers.» Quiet grace identifies «the persistent struggle for human dignity in defiance of degrading oppression,» and unshouted courage is «the capacity to constantly confront threats to survival in the face of reprisals for one's determination to survive» (1988, 99-105). Olamina is the creator of a new world and her moral reasoning, based on the virtues Cannon explores, is the humanizing element in that future society —«taking care of other people can be a good cure for nightmares» (235). Her hyperempathy syndrome, what she names «organic delusional syndrome» (11) —sharing other people's pain or pleasure—, designates her as the mother with civilizing force in her deranged world. Thanks to that she can teach compassion and empathy. In fact, when she witnesses an attack on an interracial couple and their baby by two predators, she reacts as «a good Samaritan.» The sight of the baby, of the interracial family as a symbol of union and love that the future could have been and would not be, pushes her to defend them: «In a few more years, a lot of the families back in the neighborhood would have looked like that» (187), she ponders. But to play the role of spiritual leader in a new society is not easy as she is forced to mimic violent patriarchal ideologies to survive and attain selfhood. In fact, not only does Olamina learn about survival, but as a Butler heroine, she transforms «that personal power into social power by teaching others» (Shinn 203). Acorn becomes then not only what Dorothy Allison thinks is the essential vision of Butler —«the dream of an ideal family, the mother making possible her children's lives and freeing them to choose their own destinies» (478)—, but perhaps most relevant to her ultimate purpose, the embodiment of her black womanist consciousness. Olamina and her group of followers are people in search of a better life, but they are also an interracial community endowed with a mission and fortified with a new religion. In fact, Olamina the prophetess regards them as settlers in a new land, conquerors with a new faith to spread to the world:

It might be possible to find such an isolated place along the coast, and make a deal with the inhabitants. If there were a few more of us, and if we were better armed, we might provide security in exchange for living room. We might also provide education plus reading and writing services to adult illiterates. There might be a market for that kind of thing. So many people, children and adults, are illiterate these days... We might be able to do it —grow our own food, grow ourselves and our neighbors into something brand new. (206)

Butler uses her science fiction novel as a powerful tool for social reform. In a world that is falling apart, Olamina and her followers can begin «something purposeful and constructive» (253). She preaches a moral lesson and the book turns out to be a parable which, like its biblical homonym, can only be grasped by those whose ears are ready. The novel reworks science fiction motifs: a new class of mutants, drug addicts to pyro, who are prone to violence, madness, unreasoning hatred and destruction by fire. Among the most powerful scenes are those of human degradation and misery –scenes of cannibalism, rape, murder, assault. They are there playing a cautionary role. In fact, what Butler is essentially doing is employing the strategy of the Puritan jeremiad –the «immemorial mode of lament over the corrupt ways of the world» (Bercovitch 38)– not only to transform it for her own purposes into a vehicle of social continuity but to convert the crisis of the end of the twentieth century into a prophecy of a new cooperative interracial society –Acorn– which, as its name suggests, is firmly rooted in a return to the first principles of the American civilization. Hence, the optimistic message Butler delivers is firmly built on the idea that Cornel West identifies as «restoring hope» (1997, 45) and it assures us that, even if there has been a bloody social upheaval, this can be seen as a necessary transition to a cleansed, renewed society. To be a member of an Earthseed Community, Olamina's requisites dictate that «the essentials are to learn to shape God with forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the fulfillment of the Destiny» (240). And to the question of what is in it for them, she answers «a unifying, purposeful life here on Earth, and the hope of heaven for themselves and their children» (240). But the new society –interracial and middle class– is founded on basically the same principles as the old one. The present situation is a kind of bracket between «good old times» of the generation of Olamina's parents's and that new world she and her followers will construct. Hence the change, as it is announced in Olamina's verses –is only readaptation drawing on old principles and values.

Parable of the Sower exploits the potential horrors embedded in the American society, in a Babylon which has become the habitation of devils, eager to embrace the frenzy of unbridled capitalism, industrialization and racism so as to provide a warning note to those who let these dangers go unchecked. But the feeling remains that they are not that pernicious, that the only rub is that they have been overexploited. «I wish you could have known this country when it was still salvageable» (298), regrets the Afro-American Bankole, recipient of the historical consciousness, to immediately add –«I don't think you can understand what we've lost» (298). The novel proves that the future can still be constructed on the remnants of the past, only with more careful attention towards their management. The ideal Butler proposes does not solve any of the contradictions embedded in contemporary American society, rather it masks the real problems with her fascination for the impulse to move from civilization toward nature, and to enthrone interracial pastoral as a symbol of social reconciliation. Thus *Parable of the Sower* delivers the message that Afro-Americans, like a messianic Olamina and a Bankole, have also undertaken the mission to redeem their prostrated

nation, «the garden of ashes» –using Leo Marx’s phrase– and transform it into the twenty-first century example. And this is so because Butler’s perspective is deeply rooted in black religious women’s prophetic traditions of struggling against and overcoming the horrors of slavery and its legacies, which provide the foundations and means of moving from «survival and full social participation and social responsibility» (Ross 6) towards freedom. Recalling Anna Julia Cooper’s speech to the Congress of Representative Women on the status of black women in 1892, where she tried to broaden the vision of her predominantly white audience, Lauren Oya Olamina also takes her «stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition» (94). *Parable of the Sower* ends with an exhortation to readers to employ their own personal resources to advance a new civilization, a new city of God on earth, symbolized in Acorn, the community Lauren Oya Olamina will build with her group of followers. Acorn is created as the millennial city of God. Olamina is a black prophetess empowered by her understanding of the prophetic tradition of the Bible and by African American women’s religious traditions, and as such her searching and rewriting the Scriptures is the way she has, using Cannon’s words, «to dispel the threat of death in order to seize the present life» (1985, 40).

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