

Patriarchy Poisons Religion:

An In-Depth Analysis of Religion and Systems of Power in *Who Fears Death* and
the *Parables* Duology

By

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

In

The Department of English
State University of New York
New Paltz, New York 12561

May 2021

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I, the thesis advisor for the above candidate for the
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For the Master of Arts Degree in English at the
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Introduction

In their groundbreaking feminist dystopian novels, Nnedi Okorafor and Octavia Butler redefine what it means to be religious. Okorafor's novel, *Who Fears Death* and Butler's novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* use the dystopian genre to expose how patriarchy and Christianity have benefited one another for a millennium. Patriarchy is built into the framework of Christianity, but it becomes only more powerful as language gets muddled and confused. When this happens, men are able to abuse and subjugate women under the pretense that it is religious, when it is not. But Butler and Okorafor do not leave us with this dire image. Instead, their protagonists, Lauren and Onyesonwu take harrowing journeys to overthrow the corrupt Christian religions in their respective texts with a new non-patriarchal religion. Unlike many feminist science fiction authors of recent, Butler and Okorafor are presenting the corruption that lives in Christianity, and as an alternative they offer a new religion.

By using the dystopian genre, Okorafor and Butler take real abuses and crusades of Christianity and mirror them in the abuses and systems of oppression in their novels. Both authors integrate slavery into their texts as place of reference for the history of Christian abuse. Christianity had been used to justify American slavery since its inception. And this same sort of religious justification is used by patriarchal Christianity that abuses and control women in these novels. Many other authors have argued that Christianity is corrupt and subjugates people through its rhetoric and laws, but Butler and Okorafor are exposing just how integrated patriarchy and Christianity really are.

Okorafor's novel, *Who Fears Death* follows Onyesonwu¹, a girl born of religiously sanctioned rape. She is on a mission to overthrow her father and rewrite The Great Book, the

¹ Onyesonwu will be referred to as "Onye" for the remainder of the paper. Onye is a nickname affectionately used by her friends.

religion which endorses the slavery, abuse and subjugation of women and the Okeke people. Patriarchy lives on in the text of *The Great Book*, but it also thrives in the cultural traditions which span out of this religious text. Through constant reference to America Slavery, and *The Great Book*'s emphasis on controlling population, we can see that this is a direct reference to Christianity. Alternatively, Butler's protagonist Lauren, in the novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, suffers sexual abuse at the hands of Christian America, and must create a new religion which defies the patriarchal and racist structures she was born into. Lauren's new religion, Earthseed focuses on creating non-Western community structures and families. Both of these novels are participating in the dystopian tradition by interrogating the current and past abuses of Christianity through their narratives.

Both novels are exposing first, Christianity's obsession with controlling and dominating the female body. And next, how men are able to abuse women under the guise that their actions are Christian when in reality this claim has no merit. Just like any other language, religious language is malleable and easily corrupted. Christianity already facilitates the patriarchy in its frameworks, by placing men at the head of the household, ordering women to obey their husbands, and the limited roles available to women in the church. But patriarchal abuse become more violent when the already messy language of religion is twisted and corrupted further to fit the needs of the oppressor. When a religion becomes so removed from its original text, who is to say what abuse is sanctioned and what is not?

But after Butler and Okorafor expose these abuses, what are we meant to do with this newfound information? To mediate this, the authors also provide an answer: new religion. Unlike most other science fiction writers of recent, Okorafor and Butler combat their representations of oppressive, patriarchal Christianity with new, positive religions. Feminist

science fiction writers have struggled with representations of positive religions since the 1960s, but Butler and Okorafor are able to present new religions, for women and by women. In doing so, these authors are demonstrating a change in 1990s and 2000s science fiction. No longer is religion only seen as the aggressor. Instead, Lauren and Onye demonstrate how patriarchal Christianity can be overthrown and dominated by a positive religion which does not require the abuse and subjugation of women. Through Onye and Lauren's journeys, readers are offered with the chance for a new positive outlook for religion.

Feminist Utopias and Dystopias of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s

The utopian/dystopian genre has been used by authors in the second half of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first century, to expose the systems of oppression and violence of history and today. Authors project these abuses onto a future society. The traditions of 1960s and 1970s utopias, and 1980s dystopias influence much of the work of the 1990s and 2000s. The 1960s and 1970s focused on a feminist return to nature, and a positive look into the future that highlights change and improvement for women. While the dystopias of the 1980s, emphasized the violent oppression of women and marginalized groups, through societies controlled by male oppressors who used religion and technology to dominate and abuse women. The 1990s and 2000s represent a turn in feminist science fiction. These authors offered depictions of positive religions, rebellious female characters who repurposed technology and other tools of the oppressor, and most importantly these authors blurred the lines between utopias and dystopias. In these decades, authors are working within new concepts of critical utopia, critical dystopia and utopian impulses. These new sub-genres actually take more from the utopian traditions of the 70s than from the dystopian tradition of the 80s. All the while, these new dystopias are complicating what it means to be feminist science fiction, and what it means to be religious. It is vital to

explain how Butler and Okorafor work within the tradition of feminist science fiction, so we as readers can begin to understand how they are not only building off of the work of authors before them, but also how they are paving a new way.

In the past, most of feminist writings, fictional or otherwise, have been in direct conversation with politics, and the hope for social reform for the future. The feminist writers of the 1960s and 1970s focused on creating feminist utopias. Marge Percy, Sally Miller Gearheart and Ursula Le Guin, all prominent utopian writers of the 1970s, worked to put new feminist politics into their novels (Melzer 33). These particular political frameworks were influenced by the civil rights movement, and the peace movement. By inserting theories of feminist politics into their works, these authors changed the function of utopias. Before, utopias were containers for male authors to work out their ambitions for a utopian society, but with the development of feminist utopias, the genre begins to become more nuanced, with depictions of what utopia means not only for men, but for women of all different social classes. Traditionally, male utopian writers, wrote about future societies where all forms of oppression were gone because there were no longer any differences between people. Alternatively, female utopian writers grounded their narratives in the idea that their characters were female first, before anything else, “Feminism, on the other hand, by insisting that gender is a primary, not just a ‘secondary contradiction,’ was forced to call established orders and paradigms of the political much more fundamentally into question” (Bammer 55). Feminist utopian writers’ first concern was how women functioned in Utopian societies. Unlike many male utopian authors, their female counterparts brought conversations around gender roles and identity to the forefront of their utopias. Feminist utopias changed what it meant to envision utopias, but this is only further

complicated into the 1990s and 2000s where authors are writing intersectional feminist dystopias which analyze racism and as much as they do sexism.

The 1960s and 70s feminist writers changed how they wrote about women, and politics. Coming off of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war protests and student demonstrations, women of the 1960s and 70s began analyzing their participation in gender roles, female agency, and how they fit in these movements (Bammer 52). After watching these groups gain some semblance of success and independence from their efforts, women looked to do the same. At the same time feminist theorists such as Betty Friedan, Charlotte Bunch, and Hélène Cixous began thinking about the future of women, feminist authors did the same: “Utopian thinking, as Bloch defined it, is such a transgression. For it envisions a future that already exists as historical possibility in the desire of people for a different, and better, world in their needs to make such a world happen” (Bammer 52). Utopias, at least for the 60s and 70s, were reactions to women beginning to perceive their place in society changing. Women no longer viewed themselves as housewives. As a movement, feminism began reconsidering what women could, and should do, whether that be taking up roles outside of the home, redefining their relationship with gender roles, or participating in politics. Feminist utopian writers represented contemporary conversations about politics and liberation from the patriarchy. In these texts, patriarchy represents any force that attempts to dominate and control women. Patriarchy is an ideology that wears many masks and presents itself as a government structure, religion or set of codes. In and of itself, feminist utopias were a political statement where women envisioned a positive future where they were guaranteed equality and freedom and at the same time their gender identity was not erased.

Utopias of the 70s focused on complicating and redefining how women could move through life concerning their gender and identity. In her chapter, "Rewriting the future: the utopian impulse in 1970's feminism," Angelika Bammer explains that feminist theorists and deconstructive theorists of the 70s argued that in order to create change they must reconceptualize gender, language, identity and history (61). Feminist authors saw the opportunity to imagine new worlds for women and created these new possibilities in utopias. Bammer later identifies that despite interest in the utopian genre, American feminist theorists looked to create equality for women in the systems already present. Alternately, French women believed laws and social structures needed to be torn down and replaced with new (61). French feminists believed in a need for radical change, and a disruption of laws and customs: the perfect recipe for a utopian society (and probably inspired by their own history of radical revolutions). If we follow Bammer's logic, then there was a division in American feminist fiction writers and theorists. Theorists believed that equality for women should come from within systems already present, while authors of utopias demonstrated that women needed fundamental changes to their society and way of life. Authors may have found it easy to imagine an entirely new society. But feminist theorists were working on women's rights in the moment, so their visions of the future of feminism may have been grounded in small, more attainable milestones. But eventually these ideas would culminate in a total restructuring of society. The feminist utopian genre was a way for women to work through their utopian impulses while living in a society that was not quite ready for that level of absolute change.

The 1970s also demonstrated an important moment of science fiction literature through its unique interactions with religion. Before the 1970s, religion was presented as a flat, and often demonized representation of the past, "[Science fiction W]riters typically include it to expose

religious adherents as ignorant and dogmatic without an accompanying investigation of how religion has the potential to bring meaning into individuals' lives or serve as a social good" (Mercer 4). Before feminist writers claimed the utopian genre for themselves, almost all representation of religion was negative. In utopian literature, religion and in particular Christianity, was often represented as the violent and archaic past, that the utopian society overcame. Christianity is one of the most dominant western religions, and because of its proximity to the patriarchy, many male authors struggled to see the possibility of a positive religion. If male authors are reluctant to acknowledge their privileges in religion, then it is nearly impossible for them to develop new religions that do hold this implicit bias. Instead, female authors offered the alternative: religions which uphold respect for women, and do not limit them to object of control or sexual desire. Women have the ability to uphold patriarchy just as much as men, but these feminist authors were not writing religions for men; they were writing them for women. Women gain back some of their power when they are provided the tools to rebuild and redefine a future for themselves.

Feminist writers of the 1970s reconfigured what religion could mean for the future. For the first time in the history of utopias, authors began to consider how religion could be malleable and positive. Similar to the science fiction literature of the 1990s and 2000s, the 1970s utopian authors created religions in their texts which placed women at the forefront: "Feminist utopian writers, in many respects, reclaim religion from fundamentalist orthodoxy and its resistance to recognizing the full humanity of women through gynocentric religions" (Mercer 6). By creating female-centered religions, many of these authors began to pinpoint ways in which Christianity and patriarchy have always been synonymous, and how it is possible to create new systems of faith for, and by women. It is easy to think of 1970s utopias as an antithesis to modern dystopian

fiction, but in reality, there are many similarities not generally highlighted by scholarship. These similarities come from the modern dystopia's concern with utopian impulses and critical utopias, which will be explored later on.

Feminist science fiction writers of the 1990s and 2000s, like their utopian counterparts of the 60s and 70s, began to shift rhetoric around religion. Feminist utopias leaned on the idea of a positive, religious future, while dystopias of the 1980s vehemently rejected this notion. Okorafor and Butler present alternatives to patriarchy and Christianity, through their new systems of faith. These authors are working as much in the genre of dystopia, as they are taking on questions of faith and religion. "Butler conceptualizes the Utopian impulse in her futuristic vision as a religious spirituality that rejects both the patriarchal concept of 'God' and the essentialist notion of an 'earth mother goddess'" (Melzer 36). Butler complicates the concept of a male God, through the theology of *Earthseed* and "God is Change." Instead of one male representation of God, *Earthseed* believes God is always changing and adapting. This framework is the first step of taking men out of the seat of power in religion. Next, Melzer tracks the way in which the discourse of 1960s authors affect feminist science fiction today. The concept of the "earth mother goddess" originated from 60s utopias that envisioned the only positive outcome for women in religion was a return to nature and healing. Instead, the novels of the 90s and 2000s, give us a more complex look into how religion can adapt for the future, through use of technology and repurposing the tools of the oppressor.

The figure of the "earth mother goddess" goes beyond religion and also reflects how 60s utopias and 90s and 2000s dystopias view different positive futures: one which values a return to the pastoral, and another which values technology. A lot of 1960s utopias were based loosely on hippie communities and the peace movement which emphasized a return to nature and a pastoral

lifestyle. Instead, Butler and Okorafor emphasize the importance of technology in revolution, “Here science and technology, both elements of science fiction, become the basis for survival. Butler re-appropriates the empowering potential of knowledge from the capitalist agenda and turns technoscience into a symbol of resistance” (Melzer 39). The characters of Butler’s and Okorafor’s novels take up technology, the tool of the oppressor, and use it to their advantage. Lauren uses space technology to bring Earthseed into space and Onye uses a combination of magic (which I argue functions as technology), and futuristic tech to defeat her father, Daib. Though through repurposing these tools, even the most altruistic people can fall into cycles of oppression (something I will focus on later).

Into the 1980s, there was a massive shift in the agency of female characters in feminist science fiction texts. Instead of writing utopias, feminist writers moved to dystopias, focusing on the subjugation women and marginalized groups. Naomi R. Mercer, and other scholars equate this drastic change to the rise of the religious right and the Reagan administration (7). The 1960s and 1970s was a time of ambitious and exciting reform and protests, but for many, the 1980s, felt like a setback. From this decade we get notable titles such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood. This dystopian novel tells the story of Gilead, a Christian authoritarian regime that strips women of their rights and sets up a system of handmaids who bear the children of the infertile wealthy. Peter Fitting’s article, “Reconsiderations of the Separatist Paradigm in Recent Feminist Science Fiction”, frames 80s dystopias around Atwood’s novel. And in many ways, Fitting is right to place emphasis on *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The most striking difference between Atwood’s novel and the work of Okorafor and Butler is her interaction with religion. Like the other three novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* showcases an oppressive and violent version of Christianity, but the only hope for escape is the underground operation called “may-day”, instead

of another religion. Atwood does not offer a positive, religious alternative to Gilead. Instead, Gilead must be taken down politically, and through intervention by the international community. Atwood's novel is a prime example of an 80s dystopia; Women and marginalized people are subjugated and controlled by a government fueled by patriarchal religion, and the only way to escape is through political insurrection.

Three new terms come out of the late 80s, and early 90s and define what new dystopias are attempting to accomplish. The first, and arguably the most compelling is the concept of the critical utopia, "a work in which both the utopian and the original society are presented. In these works, the utopian society is seen in a more critical light, where the political quest of the protagonist... is foregrounded" (Baccolini 17). Within a critical utopia, characters are not necessarily living in a utopia; they are striving for one. For the first time, utopias can also be a place of critique. Onye and Lauren both attempt to make utopias in their journeys and their ideas and techniques are critiqued by characters along the way. In Lauren's narrative in *Parable of the Talents*, her daughter, Larkin, doubts and often criticizes her mother's work. And for Onye, not only do Daib and his followers oppose her mission, but so do many of the people who are unwaveringly devoted to The Great Book. Critical utopias are defined by characters within a text questioning the validity of the "utopian" societies around them, not necessarily the impulse to create one.

The last two developments in feminist science fiction literature are integrated parts of one another. Similar to the critical utopia, the critical dystopia is another way dystopian and utopian settings can interact. In a critical dystopia, characters, and readers have a chance for change and escape. Unlike the many hopeless dystopian novels of the 80s, the characters in these new critical dystopias follow a utopian impulse and have hope for escape. "In fact, by rejection of the

traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups...” (Baccolini 18). Lauren’s and Onye’s stories both end with hope for the future. Lauren’s story ends as she watches Earthseed’s ships fly into space, and Onye dies with the old religion and her legacy, (and her spirit) lives on. Both novels present dystopias, but through utopian impulse and the lens of a critical dystopia, there is hope for the future.

Another shift in 1990s and 2000s dystopias, is intersectional representation. Butler and Okorafor wrote stories about Black women in dystopic settings. Unlike the feminist utopias and dystopias of the 1970s and 1980s which were written predominantly by white women, Butler and Okorafor are taking the first steps towards intersectional feminist science fiction. Butler and Okorafor write novels which are as much about over coming patriarchy and oppressive Christian religions as they are about combating racism, “Rather than envisioning an ‘overcoming’ of difference (as it is present in liberal discourse of ‘multiculturalism’), [Butler] creates a less-than-perfect world where the potential for negotiating difference in non-oppressive ways constitutes the utopian desire” (Melzer 40). Butler and Okorafor are complicating what feminist dystopias have been in the past by incorporating racism into their texts. Butler presents a 2020s America where biracial couples are threatened, and people of color are arrested and enslaved at higher rates than their white counterparts. Okorafor’s novel breaks down systems of colorism, as the Nuru, a lighter race, dominate and enslave the Okeke, the darker race through the justification of The Great Book, a metaphor for the Christian Bible. These authors are exposing how racism works alongside patriarchy to justify and sanction violence in the name of Christianity.

Butler’s and Okorafor’s texts fall under two more specific categories under science fiction: Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. Onye and Lauren particularly demonstrate these

genres in their use of technology. By taking up and embracing technology, Butler and Okorafor are participating in a new mode of Black literature which, like the feminist utopias, repurposes the tools of the oppressor, “Neither a manta nor a movement, AfroFuturism is a critical perspective that opens up inquiry into the many overlaps between technoculture and black diasporic histories” (Nelson 35). Butler and Okorafor are participating in this tradition because of how their protagonists interact with, are oppressed by, and eventually reclaim futuristic technology around them. Though, this term can be limiting, and scholars have attempt to use it to encompass more than it is meant to. Okorafor herself pushes against this term, and labels her work, “Africanfuturist”:

Africanfuturism is similar to “Afrofuturism” in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West (Africanfuturism Defined).

Okorafor is telling stories about African characters based in Africa. Her narratives meditate on African traditions, culture and history instead of focusing on the West. Okorafor makes this distinction herself so it is important we do the same.

To further complicate their place within science fiction, Butler and Okorafor, along with other feminist science fiction authors, undermine what is considered highbrow and lowbrow literature. Butler and Okorafor participate in this shift by utilizing the slave narrative in their works, “The slave narrative, always set in a dystopian society, nevertheless tells a story of change. Science fiction writers of the 1990s turn to the slave narratives to find a way out of failures and dead ends of stalled political reform” (Donawerth 54). By utilizing slave narratives,

both authors are referencing a long tradition of African American literature, while informing their future stories, with realities of the past. We often think of dystopias as a thing of the future, something looming over our heads, but was slavery not a dystopia? “...writers of 1990s dystopias use the slave narrative to give hope to the dystopia, to provide examples of choosing resistance in the worst places” (Donawerth 54). Slavery, along with the genocide of indigenous people, the holocaust, and the Rwandan genocides, are a few examples of world events we can consider “dystopic”. Dystopias are defined as fictional systems and events, but we can still draw comparisons between the horrors in our reality to those in novels. If any of the events aforementioned were written about in a fictionalized setting, there is no doubt that they would be considered dystopias. Butler and Okorafor are pulling from real life to inform their narratives, and in doing so, they continue to ground their narratives in reality and create intersectional feminist science fiction.

Butler’s and Okorafor’s novels are an important part of the feminist science fiction literary canon. Not only are these authors providing new, positive reflections of religion for women, and by women, but they are also telling diverse stories, which give voice to oppressed and marginalized people. Unlike much of the science fiction of the 70s and 80s, both of these authors are Black women telling unique stories about not only what it means to be a woman in a dystopia, but what it means to be a Black woman. The remainder of my argument will frame both novels on how they interact with critical utopias, and the utopian impulse. Along with, analyzing how these novels reinforce the inevitability of Christianity and patriarchy as one entity, while also providing readers and characters with an equally religious alternative through utopian impulse for change.

Sexual Violence, Choice, and Control

Men have used sexual violence against women as a tool of control and domination for a millennium. And the easiest way to control and subjugate women is by using accepted practices such as religion as a justification for this violence. Christianity has always, and most likely will always obsess over the female body. Sexual violence against women in these novels is almost always outwardly state-sanctioned or purposefully ignored by male characters, and quietly allowed to continue. Yet, the rituals which violate, and abuse women are more often than not, presented as religious, when in reality they are cultural. Religion is an agreed upon set of beliefs, generally with a foundational text that provides laws, customs, a clear faith, and a moral code. While a culture encompasses a group of people, often from different faiths who co-exist and practice and enjoy structures not necessarily linked to religious belief. But over time, the already patriarchal and controlling moral code of Christianity is corrupted further. A religion becomes corrupted when it loses its connection to its original text. When this disconnect occurs, rituals remain but their original meaning is lost. Now, new and often more violent forms of abuse can be justified by claiming it is religious, without having any real connections to faith or religious practice. These novels present how Christianity and patriarchy are one in the same, but also expose how men further corrupt Christianity by diluting it down to culture. When religion is reduced to culture, even the very base line respect for women can be ignored if the religion, turned culture is just a shell of its original self.

Many of the abuses women face in these texts are predicated on the confusion of what is religion and what is culture. Abusers are able to claim that their abuse of women is justified by Christianity, what in reality it is not. Because patriarchy and Christianity are so linked, it is easy for abuse unrelated to the religion to be pushed under the rug and incorrectly labeled as pious. In, Beverly Howell Belser's chapter on religion and the postmodern she explains how religious

language functions, “[Haraway] transforms religious language into language that is inextricable from the discourses of science, technology, and the human, and in so doing reveals that religious language, like all language, has always been messy” (80-81). Much of this confusion and reappropriation of religion comes down to language, and how religion is understood by characters. Belser is discussing the pitfalls of language generally, and she exposes that in the same way language is messy, confusing and misconstrued, so can religious language. In Butler and Okorafor’s novels we see religions which have been modified to fit the cultural need of the moment. Like any other form of language, religious language is malleable and dangerous. In Okorafor and Butler’s novels we see how the language of these Christian-based religions are corrupted in order to fit the needs of those in power.

In his work on Derrida and religion, Michael Nass explains how women's bodies function in religious settings: “... in these contemporary ‘wars of religion’ women are often the primary victims of a new archaic violence, ‘singled out as victims (not ‘only’ of murders, but also of the rapes and mutilations that precede and accompany them)’” (221). Women are the centers of religious violence. And despite scripture that claims to protect and value women, these same women are more often than not the victims of religious violence. But the individuals who claim the right to abuse women under religion, without any true connection to the original text, are the biggest threat. When abusers are working under the guise of religious law, there is a metaphorical line they should not cross, whether that be rape, murder, or even torture. But abuse becomes even more deadly when men are able to abuse and subjugate women under the pretense that it is religious, when it is not. If a population is led to believe their abuse is warranted under religious law, in many cases they will be less likely to question their subjugation or fight back.

The basis for dystopian control is focused on the subjugation of a population, and in order to succeed, this subjugation must be organized and supported by the government in power. Now, this control can either be overt, and the government/religion outwardly support the abuses, or it may be covert, and government and religious structures can hide their involvement in, and support of violence. Butler's novel demonstrates the balance between covert and overt subjugation within Christian America, the right-wing nationalist organization in control of the government. Their figure head, President Andrew Steele Jarrett is focused on cracking down on groups he deems a threat to his regime. One of these threats is Acorn, Lauren's first Earthseed community which is overthrown and turned into a concentration camp labeled a "re-education" camp. During their time in the "re-education" camp, the women are sexually abused, yet are always seen as the aggressor, "Women are temptresses, you see. We drag innocent men into trouble. From the time of Adam and Eve women have dragged innocent men into trouble" (Parable of the Talents 224). While serving time for their crimes against Christianity, the citizens of Acorn are forced into manual labor, and must devote themselves to Christianity, and repent their former Earthseed beliefs. And despite how the "teachers" preach about sexual sinfulness, the women are used as the "teachers" see fit.

As the women of the camp are sexually assaulted and beaten, the "teachers" continue to deny responsibility for their actions. After a long sermon about "sexual sinfulness" which covered bestiality, homosexuality, pornography, and prostitution to just name a few, rape was left out: "But there was nothing at all said about rape. The good Reverend Benton himself has, during earlier visits, made use of both Adela Ortiz and Christina Cho" (245). The "teachers" at the camp manipulate and change religious doctrine to fit their sexual needs. Instead of preaching about preserving and protecting the female body, these men leave this out of their speeches to fit

their motives. Here, pious men are altering religious language in order to fit their own needs. In *Parable of the Talents*, sexual violence against women is justified by Christian America, and is used as a form of control. By raping these women, the “teachers” not only have another form of torture, but women no longer have control over their bodies. By stripping these women of their dignity and control of their bodies, the “teachers” are objectifying and degrading women down to an object rather than a human being. What is important about these particular moments of sexual assault in Butler’s novels is that they are sanctioned by the hierarchy of “teachers” at the camp, but also Christian America. Institutionalized and encouraged religious violence against women is the first clear connection between *Parables of the Sower*, *Parables of the Talents*, and *Who Fears Death*.

In Christianity, the line between what is protecting and what is subjugating women’s bodies is often blurred and confused. Michael Naas explains the connection between protection and violence of women’s bodies in his book, *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion*: “[T]o all the attempts to indemnify the living body—and often the female body—by protecting or safeguarding it or else, for this is the other side of the same logic, scarifying or sacrificing” (11). Naas expertly lays out the dichotomy of what it means to be a woman living in a “re-education” camp in Butler’s novel. The teachers claim to be rehabilitating the prisoners and bringing them back to Christianity. When in reality, their “protection” comes out in violent and erotic torture: “There are a few men here, though, a few “teachers,” who lash us until they have an orgasm. Our screams and convulsions and pleas and sobs are what these men need to feel sexually satisfied” (230). The men who assault and attack these women are sexually aroused by their pain. Like Naas explains, when religious people claim to “indemnify” the female body, more often than not they are actually hurting the women for their own pleasure.

Christianity has a history of pretending to protect women to gain their compliance, and then abusing these same women under this guise of protection. The nature of the re-education camps demonstrate how patriarchal violence and Christianity are easily blurred. The violence in these camps is easily accepted because language around women's bodies in the bible is so blurred.

Christian America publicly funds and organizes the "re-education" camps, but most of the horrors of every-day life at the camps is kept secret from the public and even high-ranking members of the organization. With that in mind, there are other examples of violence against women which is accepted and publicized. In *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor presents a system that publicly condones the sexual assaults of women. The Great Book is a religious text which provides more clear cultural boundaries than it does faith and tells the story of the conflict between the Nurus and the Okekes, "[I]t was well known that the Okeke were born to be slaves of the Nuru. Long ago, during the Old Africa Era, they had done something terrible causing Ani to put this duty on their backs" (17). The Great Book sets up clear divisions of who is oppressor, and who is the oppressed. Through these religiously sanctioned social structures, the Nuru have free reign to enslave and punish the Okeke, and rape is often a part of this punishment. The text of The Great Book does not clearly state that rape can be used by the Nuru as a form of violence and control, but it not prohibited. Similarly, the Christian Bible does not support the sexual abuse of young boys by priests. But because of the pedestal priests are placed on, and the Christian Church's unwillingness to crack down on these abuses, they are allowed to go on. Great Book and the Bible may not instruct men to rape and subjugate powerless people, but what it does is create room for the oppression, destruction, and control of other people's bodies.

Traditionally, in Christianity, men are meant to protect and covet women's bodies as a cite of holiness. But even figures such as the Holy Mary who we traditionally associated with

virginity and holiness represent a form of sexual violence at the hands of religion. In Christianity, the Holy Mary, is celebrated for giving birth to Jesus through immaculate conception. But immaculate concept in of itself is not consensual. Mary's body was used as a vehicle for God's plans, and even if she had the choice to say no, could she? And similarly, how often do men use women's bodies not only as a place of sexual pleasure, but also for reproduction? The question around consent and immaculate conception will be raised once again in Onye's violence to defeat Daib.

Like the Holy Mary in Christianity, women across texts are used as vessels for men's children, consensually or not. In *Who Fears Death* the Nuru men justify their rapes of Okeke women by claiming a divine justification through The Great Book, but why do they do it? Onye explains in her narration that these men impregnate Okeke women to disrupt Okeke families and communities. Ewu children are the product of a Nuru man raping an Okeke women, and these children are believed to be violent and dangerous because they came from violence. These children are created in order to disrupt communities, "However, custom dictates that a child is the child of her father... An Okeke woman who gave birth to an Ewu child was bound to the Nuru through her child. The Nuru sought to destroy Okeke families at the very root" (21). These ewu children are linked genealogically to their fathers. Onye's father, Daib, raped her mother to create a male heir who would help him gain more power and infiltrate Okeke communities. To Daib, Najeeba was just an incubator for his offspring. Harkening back to Frank Ocean's song, "Pink Matter" with the poignant lines, "Sensei replied, 'What is your woman?/ Is she just a container for the child?'". Women are limited to what their bodies can do for others. In some situations, this means sexual gratification for a man, or it may mean acting as a means to carry someone's child. In a different, yet equally compelling way we can see that while women's

bodies are generally a space of sexual gratification, they are also used as a way to pass on offspring without any consent involved. Nuru men use Okeke women as containers for their children in the same way the Virgin Mary was used to carry Jesus.

The violence of these texts presents the illusion of choice for the female characters. The women who experience violence and sexual abuse in these novels are sometimes given the “choice” to be mutilated or injured. Cycles of abuse can continue because abusers justify their actions under the pretense that victims agreed to be mutilated, hurt or raped. The eleventh rite ritual, in *Who Fears Death* asks the question of what choice means for young girls. The eleventh rite ritual is female “circumcision” done by the women of Jwahir. Eleven-year-old girls are given the “choice” to go through this ritual, but as we will explore, the question of what is choice and what is not will be complicated. The eleventh rite ritual is not religious; it is a cultural tradition of Jwahir, and we learn through Najeeba, Onye’s mother, that it is no longer performed in other towns.

While this tradition does not have direct links to The Great Book, it mimics Christian religious ceremonies in many ways. The girls are dressed in white robes which symbolize their new journey into adulthood (Okorafor 41). Christian baptisms symbolize the removal of the original sin from Eve, and these babies (or adults) are welcomed into the world traditionally wearing white. At the eleventh rite, the girls also receive stones which they hold under their tongue called, *talembe etanou*, and they receive belly chains which are sacred and worn for the rest of their lives and only meant to be seen by their husbands (45). Onye explains that though her mother approves of the *talembe etanou*, no one seems to remember the origin of this practice. Even in the seemingly nonviolent parts of the ritual, no one knows what belief or tradition they came from. By explaining that no one knows the origins of these almost religious traditions,

Onye is exposing how easily practices are followed just because it is said it should be done. If simple traditions of *talembe etanous* are followed, who is to say the mutilation of these girls is not also a tradition that has lost all meaning, and therefore, an excuse to mutilate these girls under the guise of religiosity or faith? The eleventh rite ritual demonstrates how once religious ceremonies can be further corrupted when they lose connection to their original roots. These girls are mutilated under the guise of local customs, but what is the function of this ceremony other than to stunt the sexual experiences of these girls and control their bodies?

When the girls of Jwahir turn eleven, they are presented with the choice of the eleventh rite ritual. But these girls are making life-changing decisions and violent alterations to their bodies at only eleven years old. But because they are so young, can we even consider this a choice they can make? First, there is the question of societal pressure. It is one thing to have a parent make the decision for you, but what about a community? Onye chooses to go through with the ceremony for her family, “‘Every girl here has it done,’ I said. ‘Papa, you’re a well-loved blacksmith. Mama, you’re his wife. You both have respect. I’m *Ewu*.’ I paused. ‘To not do it would bring *more* shame’” (48). Even though the eleventh rite is meant to be a sacred practice for women, the next day the entire town knows the girls have been mutilated. The girls who choose not to be circumcised will never be “fit” for marriage and can never be full citizens. So, what choice do these young girls have? Onye agrees to the eleventh rite because she believes it will take shame away from her family, and the other girls must do it in order to be seen as women. The illusion of choice is presented by the citizens of Jwahir, but to uphold the honor of yourself, and your family, you must be mutilated. If you agree, you are forever damaged, but fit for marriage; but if you refuse, you can maintain bodily autonomy, but never have a husband, or respect in Jwahir.

The illusion of choice is quickly gone when the girls begin the ceremony. Even if the girls beg to stop, they women carry on, “‘I can’t do this,’ Luyu started babbling. ‘I can’t do this!’ Still, she allowed her to be held down...” (42). Despite Luyu’s frantic and panicked attempts to stop the women, they hold her down and perform the cut anyway. These girls are presented with a choice, but as soon as they arrive at the ceremony, that choice is gone. “[Diti’s] face was a mask of terror, as she tried to wordlessly scramble away. The women must have seen this reaction often because without a word, they grabbed her and quickly held her down” (43). Not only does Onye notice that the women grab Diti, and hold her down, but she notices how swiftly they react. The women who perform the eleventh rite have held down many girls before. The eleventh rite ceremony is an example of girls presented with a choice. But in reality, these girls are forced to go through with the mutilation, no matter if they truly want to or not. Religions (and in particular, Christianity) are able often able to subjugate and abuse women because they *convince* women it is normal and accepted. Think of how many religions stifle and control women’s sexuality in order to “protect” the women. When in reality it is all to maintain a virgin fantasy for those men.

Willful ignorance allows for the abuse of women across both texts. Binta is the first woman, (or should I say, girl) in *Who Fears Death* who falls victim to the negligence of those around her. At the eleventh rite ritual Binta reveals that her father has been raping her, to which the women respond, “‘You’re safe here,’ [Nana the Wise] said. She looked disgusted and shook her head, ‘Now we can finally do something about it’” (41). The women knew that Binta was being raped by her father, but because she was a child, they could not stop it, or listen to her. Now that she is about to be a woman, her father can be punished for his crimes. Binta’s suffering is accepted violence by the people of Jwahir, because she is a child and therefore cannot speak

for herself. In this patriarchal system, the women know that young girls are being raped and molested, but they cannot do anything to protect them. Binta had to suffer years of abuse before anyone would do anything about it, and even then, she was abused even after her father was punished. Binta's abuse is also a clear form of a girl stripped of choice, this violence is entirely against her will, and the citizens of Jwahir facilitate this by letting the abuse go on. The men and women who do not rape or abuse women, but let it go on without intervening are the backbone which keeps patriarchy in power.

Individuals who aim to subjugate and abuse women will warp religious teachings and rhetoric to justify how and why they abuse women. The Nuru men and the "teachers" at the "re-education" camps both take religious rhetoric and warp it to fit their specific forms of assault and torture in the name of religion. But characters can also alter religious rhetoric in more nuanced ways. In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren's brother Marc continuously makes excuses for his sister's suffering at the hands of Christian America, to protect his place in the organization. When Lauren approaches her brother and asks for help finding her daughter who was stolen by Christian America, he refuses to help. In an attempt to have him empathize with her pain, Lauren brings up his trauma,

‘Their names were Cougar Marc. Every one of them was named Cougar!’

He turned—wrenched himself around as though he had to uproot himself to move—and started back towards the corner.

‘Marc!’ I grabbed his arm, pulled him back around to face me. ‘I didn’t tell you this to hurt you. I know I have hurt you, and I’m sorry, but these bastards have my child! I need your help to get her back. Please, Marc.’

He hit me (313).

Like Lauren, Marc faced years of sexual abuse. Marc's abuse came from sex-slavery where he was bought and sold as an object. In an attempt to get Marc to empathize with her, Lauren compares her captors to a man who raped and enslaved Marc for years, named Cougar. But because of Marc's place in Christian America and the comfort this organization has given him, he is unwilling to believe her. Marc is demonstrating how often male characters will overlook the suffering of the women around them if it means benefiting themselves in the long run. Even though the sexual assaults that occur at the "re-education" camps are illegal and against Christian America's doctrine, Marc and many other male characters are able to bend religious laws and morality in order to protect themselves.

Marc's treatment of Lauren's trauma exposes a new element to religious violence and oppression of women: willful ignorance. The men and women who turn a blind eye to suffering are as culpable as the abusers themselves. Marc is willing to overlook Lauren's suffering to maintain his new life with Christian America. Unlike many other instances of accepted violence, Marc is not justifying Lauren's experiences because it is "for her own good". Instead, Marc is out to protect himself. But, by ignoring the problem Marc may as well be sanctioning it. By denying Lauren's story, he is allowing this abuse to continue for his own comfort.

Binta and Lauren's suffering is mirrored in the Christian church's history of sexual abuse scandals, as mentioned briefly earlier. Years after children are abused by members of the Church, the now adult victims come out and tell their stories. And as these survivors tell their stories, the public tends to learn that other "innocent" members of the church knew about the sexual abuse but chose to cover it up. In order to protect the priests and the image of the church, many children and adults have suffered at the hands of Church officials with no one willing to stop the abuse. Both of these texts interact with how religious leaders are willing to overlook the

abuse others face under the religion they represent, in order to keep their positions and upkeep the status-quo, so that their faith and comfort does not get questioned. Very often religious violence is as much about ignoring the problem, as it is about participating in it.

Lauren's and Onye's New Religions as Forms of Resistance

In order to participate in the dystopian tradition, Okorafor and Butler pull from the realities of the past. Both authors explore the tradition of American slavery to expose, first how racism and oppression functions in their texts, but also how Christianity is often the strongest force to “justify” said abuses. Butler and Okorafor both participate in this conversation through utilizing the slave narrative. In doing so, both authors are exposing how the events of their novels are grounded in reality, and often in American slavery itself. *Who Fears Death* is set in Africa and looks to many aspects of African history, but the text also draws many influences from American slavery and Jim Crow. Alternatively, Butler's text is set in 21st century America, and is steeped in America's history of oppression, racism and slavery in order to inform its political and religious structures. Not only are both of these authors grounding the systems of oppression and suffering in reality, but they are also using these historical references as points of change and development in each new religion that is created. Both authors are presenting the slave narrative through content, but also form. We learn at the end of Onye's narrative that we have been reading the accounts of her story told to a young scribe who wishes to carry on Onye's story. And Lauren's narrative is told through journal entries of multiple characters. Slave narratives are first-person accounts of suffering and these historical references and allusions are another way these authors are working within a dystopian tradition. Dystopias are about putting a mirror to the society reader are living in and exposing the abuses within these realities.

Early in *Who Fears Death*, a traveler comes to Jwahir and shares stories of the slaughter of the Okeke people by the Nurus. And instead of mourning the deaths of these people, one man exclaims, “‘Or what?’ some man asked. ‘It’s been written in the Great Book. We are what we are. We shouldn’t have risen up in the first place! Let those who tried die for it!’” (101). Onye’s journey to rewrite the Great Book is motivated by this kind of sentiment. The Great Book teaches the Okeke that they are born to be subjugated and enslaved. The Nuru can abuse the Okeke because The Great Book tells them to, but also because many of the Okeke are taught it is natural and inevitable.

Like the Okeke, American slaves were often taught to accept their enslavement under the guise of Christianity. Joshua Yu Burnett discusses this phenomenon in his article, “The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction”. Many of the Okeke believe that their oppression is part of their religious duty. Burnett relates the brainwashing of the Okeke to American slaves who were often taught that their slavery was God’s choice. In-turn, these same enslaved people were expected to worship the God who justified their suffering. “[T]hey imprint ideologies into themselves and the oppressed that remake the oppressors as extensions of the divine and the oppressed as something less than human” (144). The Nurus, like the white slaveholders, use religion to justify their oppression and subjugation of the Okeke. Onye’s journey is to rewrite The Great Book, which will free the Okeke from literal enslavement, but also from the feeling that they *deserve* to be enslaved. In order to free the Okeke, Onye must rewrite and define social structures, culture and religion. Without destroying The Great Book, it would have been impossible to free the Okeke from a system they believed their God had rightfully placed them

in. Christianity and The Great Book are linked in the way that abusers use these texts to justify the subjugation of those they oppress.

Instead of destroying and rewriting a religious text, Butler's protagonist, Lauren, develops Earthseed as an entirely new religion. Through her new religion, Lauren forms communities, which provide safe havens for people away from slavery, sex trafficking, and the controlling hands of Christian America. Both protagonists must create new ways of life in order to protect their people. Earthseed is as much a religion as it is a community and lifestyle. By joining Acorn or one of the many Earthseed outposts developed by the end of *Parable of the Talents*, you are required to follow the religion and work in the community; but in return you receive housing, food, family, education and protection. Just in the structure of the community itself, Earthseed acts as antithesis to capitalism, slavery and other forms of subjugation or forced labor. Patricia Melzer describes Acorn as a shelter for people on the "receiving end of patriarchal capitalism's oppressions" (38). Acorn is a safe haven for people attempting to escape the looming hand of Christian America and capitalism. Melzer does go on to argue that Earthseed as a whole is anti-capitalist, and while this concept does carry merit, Earthseed's global missionary work complicates this.

Another aspect of Christian America that Lauren reconsiders is the concept of the nuclear family. Butler expertly introduces the possibility of organized and widespread groups of people which uphold non-western values of family structures and community. Heidi Hutner, in her chapter, "Ecofeminism, Motherhood, and the Post-Apocalyptic Utopia in *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*, and *Into the Forest*", explains, "Butler's concept of mothering rejects the white stereotypical ideal of the nurturing self-sacrificing mother within the patriarchal society. Instead, it embodies involvement and commitment to the community at large that in principle is

independent of gender” (72-73). Unlike Christian America which upholds Western family values, the families in Acorn are not necessarily created by blood. Lauren develops a system of chosen family where members of Acorn can choose who they are bonded with. These are change-sisters, change-brothers and also change-aunts and change-uncles, etc. Earthseed creates family structures which rely on all members of the community, not necessarily related by blood. But these families are created as another sense of structure and support. Acorn, and its successors, create communities where family is through vows or protection and bonds.

Western colonizers placed the emphasis on the nuclear family as we know it today. The image of family defined by a mother, father and children, is a limited perspective, generally found in western culture, but not elsewhere. We have evidence of many pre-Columbian indigenous populations in North America that had family structure that valued the child's maternal uncles more than the father. These matriarchal family structures created more intergenerational bonds than many western family structures today. This is just one example of how nuclear families are not always “natural” or “right”. Many cultures have different parameters to who is considered family, who raises children and who is valued as close or distant relatives. Every step of Lauren's journey is a battle against patriarchy and religion, and one of the ways she fights this is by creating communities and families which rely on a large set of connections rather than a small set of individuals. The Earthseed communities are revolutionary in their socialist structures of money, work and housing; but they are most groundbreaking when we consider how they utilize non-western frameworks of community to uplift themselves while working against Christian America and the violence it stands for.

Lauren creates Earthseed in the ever-changing and violent setting of a 21st century America that is in the grips of climate change, a failing economy and an authoritarian

government. And because of this setting, Earthseed's main beliefs are based on the concept, "God is Change". In order to begin to mediate, and explain the senseless violence around them, it is helpful to envision God as ever changing, to mimic how they feel in their everyday lives.

Lauren explains this to Travis and Natividad, two travelers she meets on the road who become dedicated members of Earthseed, "Change is ongoing, everything changes in some way—size, position, composition, frequency, velocity, thinking, whatever. Every living thing, every bit of matter, all the energy in the universe changes in some way..." (*Parable of the Sower* 218).

Lauren's theology rests on the understanding that everything is change and we cannot control the world around us, so much that even God is not stagnant; and in a way, this is what Onye and the Okeke need. Lauren believes that if nothing is guaranteed or predictable, how are we meant to expect God to be stable? The Okekes are damned to a life of subjugation and slavery by their assigned place in The Great Book. The Great Book offers clear lines of social class and hierarchy, and Earthseed's religious language, and its socialist communities defy that notion. By adopting the concept "God is Change," Onye and the Okekes could break free of the feeling of absolutism in the text. If God is Change, then how could social structures and theology not be as well?

Imagery of the Christian Bible dominates the structure and function of The Great Book, but it also echoes Onye's identity as a messiah. At the end of the novel, Onye dies but leaves a legacy behind that lives on in women, "All the women, Okeke and Nuru, found that something had changed about them. Some could turn wine to fresh sweet drinking water, others glowed in the dark... thousands of abilities. All bestowed upon women. There it was. Onye's Gift" (413). Onye's gift to the world was empowering women. Onye rewrote The Great Book to free the Okekes from oppression, but she also freed women by giving them these powers. Onye's lasting

effect on the world is first, the new religious text, but she also fundamentally reshapes society for the Okeke, and for all women. This is what makes her a messiah. Even the gifts Onye gives to these women is an homage to Jesus, instead of turning water to wine they are turning wine to water. By reversing this famous Christian miracle, Onye is metaphorically turning the Christianity back on itself. No longer are people going to rely on Christianity, or The Great Book, when they have the new freedom awarded to them by Onye. Onye's new religion is shaped by racial equality, but also feminism. In a way, this is Onye's version of "God is Change." When she dies, she becomes immaterial and enters a form of the afterlife. Her connection with death is blurred and confusing, and in doing so represents change. Even in her death, Onye is complicating clear boundaries and limits, which the Nuru and Okeke were bound to before. But instead of cultural or religious demarcations, she is complicating what it means to be alive.

Onye's journey to change The Great Book and the fate of the Okeke people takes two forms. In order to stop the violence and oppression of the Okeke, she must rewrite The Great Book, and she must also kill her father, Daib, a Nuru man orchestrating massive attacks on the Okeke. The Great Book is corrupt on its own, but Daib is able to take this a step further and facilitate violent destruction, "I... don't believe in Daib," he said. "A lot of us don't. Those of us who pray five times a day, love the Great Book, and are pious people know this isn't Ani's wish" (Okorafor 406). The man who says this to Onye, sacrifices his life to bring Onye to the Great Book. Many people in the text are firm believers in the Great Book but oppose Daib's rule. Like President Jarrett and Christian America, Daib is able to take an already flawed, and patriarchal religion and use it to justify his own violent actions. Onye was the first person strong enough to kill Daib, and only through this murder were the Okeke finally able to become free.

After Daib's death, his control over the Nuru population was broken, and all that is left is rewriting the Great Book which signaled this violence. Daib and Jarrett are able to warp religion to their advantage and use it as an excuse to abuse women and take control.

At the end of *Who Fears Death*, Onye is able to rid the Okeke of the curse of subjugation and rewrite The Great Book. But Onye does not just take the curse off of the Okeke. She erases it from history, "Read it in your Great Book. You won't notice that it has been rewritten. Not yet. But it has. Everything has. The curse of the Okeke is lifted. It never existed, *sha*" (410). Onye is removing the curse from history, not just taking it away for the future. Onye is changing ideology; she is changing how Okeke people will be seen in the future, and how they were thought about in the past. Onye must strip the history of oppression from the Okeke to protect them from being subjugated and abused again. Onye must destroy and rewrite to survive, while Lauren has the ability to work within the systems of oppression. Angelika Bammer frames this same idea in concrete feminist terms in her article, "Rewriting the future: the utopian impulse in 1970's feminism": "Therefore, these new feminisms envisioned a transformation of patriarchal culture so all-encompassing that not only the political, economic and ideological structures, but the structures of human identity, relationships, and language - of consciousness itself - would be fundamentally reorganized" (53-54). Onye needed to free the Okekes from this oppression, and she could only do this by destroying the structures which continued it. One of the clearest distinctions between Onye's and Lauren's narratives is how they are able to overcome their respective oppressive religions. Onye must destroy all the powers that oppress the Okeke, while Lauren has the means to move towards her utopia within her dystopian landscape.

Faults of New Religions

Onye and Lauren develop their new religions within the systems they were trying to overthrow. And because of the limitations of their environments, it is inevitable that even though these religions and ideologies are fighting against violence and oppression, they will begin to mimic the very systems they oppose. Lauren's development of Earthseed, and Onye's journey to defeat Daib are littered with violence, in order to protect themselves, or to punish others. In more covert ways, Earthseed even demonstrates how these new religions can mimic the structures of oppression utilized by Christianity as well. Lauren and Onye perpetrate violence and oppression in two ways. First, characters *react* with violence; this is generally to protect themselves or their companions. Or the characters create new violence and oppression; instead of using violence as a reaction, and a form of self-defense, the characters create new forms of oppression and violence not linked to an immediate, external threat. Onye and Lauren are attempting to remove patriarchy from their religions, and in doing so, other forms of oppression and violence sneak in and take root in their journeys and ideologies. These new forms of violence and oppression inadvertently, or otherwise, hurt those that oppose their missions.

In many ways, violence is unavoidable, and characters must be violent to protect themselves and their companions. In order to protect themselves as they travel north, Lauren and the early Earthseed travelers demonstrate reactionary violence in self-defense. Lauren is aware that violence is necessary for self-defense and writes this into the framework of Earthseed. In the beginning of chapter 17, the verse reads,

Embrace Diversity.

Unite—

Or be divided,

robbed

ruled

killed

By those who see you as prey.

Embrace diversity

Or be destroyed (Parable of the Sower 196)

This verse could be about Christian America, violent mobs on the highways, or anyone who opposes Earthseed and what it stands for. Lauren acknowledges the threats of the outsider by claiming them as, “those who see you as prey”. Earthseed is built off of the understanding that it will face backlash and adversity, and the members must embrace one another in order to survive and continue Earthseed’s mission. It is written into Earthseed verses that they are preparing for violence.

While traveling north, Lauren, Zahra and Henry must strategically choose who they align themselves with and who they choose to help or ignore. The culture of the highway travelers and the world outside of the walled communities is steal or be stolen from, “While the victim was distracted by the little kid, two bigger kids tripped him, cut his pack straps, dragged the pack off his back and ran off with it... If he had a home nearby with other supplies, he would be all right. Otherwise, his only way of surviving might be to rob someone else—if he could” (*Parable of the Sower* 181-182). Lauren, Henry and Zahra do not help the man, because it could put themselves in danger. Travelers must be on the lookout for, sex-slavers, rapists, murders and people called “paints”. The “paints” are people addicted to Pyro or just “ro”, a drug which makes watching fire burn better than sex. The “paints” will burn people alive just to see the flames. Lauren and the Earthseed travelers are constantly on edge and need to pick and choose who they help and bring along. Like the people who ignore the abuses of Christian America, and those who ignored

Binta, Lauren and her companions are participating in neglectful violence. By neglecting these people in order to protect themselves, Lauren and her companions are forced to play into a system of violence.

Though Lauren and her followers tend to threaten and evade people as needed, it is very infrequent that they will attack first. But they are quick to kill if it means protecting themselves. Lauren explains to Zahra why she killed a man who attacked their camp “I killed him because he was a threat to us, To me in a special way, but to you, too. What could we have done about him? Abandon him to the flies, the ants, and the dogs?” (*Parable of the Sower* 191). When their camp is attacked in the middle of the night Lauren smashes an attacker’s head in to knock him out, and then shoots him to finally kill him. Lauren’s violence is always in order to protect herself and her friends, but also as a mercy to the man, “I hope you’d find the courage to shoot me if I were like that, and out here with no medical care to be had” (189). Despite suffering as they travel north, and the constant threat that others will attack them, Lauren is merciful to the man by killing him. Lauren uses violence first as a form of self-defense and next as a way to stop this man’s suffering. Unlike Onye, Lauren’s reactionary violence is almost always unavoidable, and in this moment, it is a mercy to others.

Lauren is so successful when she travels because she has been planning for this her entire life. Since she was a young child, Lauren has prepared for the collapse of her community, and she gathered supplies in case it did. Lauren’s planning and paranoia is what enabled her to survive. Raffaella Baccolini expands on Lauren’s paranoia in her article, “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler”: “Awareness of exploitation, economic slavery, and oppression is the first step toward resistance – and also, sometimes, for necessary, if painful, negotiation” (25). From the beginning of

Parable of the Sower, Lauren has gone out of her way to question the systems in place in her walled community, and beyond. But this questioning can only go so far. In order to survive in this 21st century America, Lauren must work within those same violent frameworks, just so she can survive one day to the next. This negotiation of violence and oppression are the necessary decisions Lauren, and her followers must make in order to just survive. Lauren's preparation is a direct reaction to the world around her, and so is her violence. Preparation allowed Lauren to survive, but it could not stop her from having to be violent to protect herself.

Though both Onye and Lauren are violent in their texts, Lauren's particular forms of violence change and deviate from the reactionary model. But, unlike Onye, Lauren's oppression and violence are more nuanced in the *Parables* duology. Much of Lauren's work within Earthseed is something we should consider creationary violence and oppression. Earthseed as an organization reacts to the needs of people suffering under Christian American rule, but it does so by creating *new* forms of oppression. Earthseed becomes an international organized religion with members who hold government office, doctors, lawyers and rich donors who are more than happy to pour money into Earthseed's endeavors. These colonial and imperialist endeavors demonstrate how Earthseed, and its community outposts slip into oppressive frameworks.

From the inception of Earthseed, Lauren has made shared knowledge and education a priority. And this framework becomes a cornerstone of Earthseed communities nationwide. In the journals of Lauren's estranged daughter, we learn about Lauren's plans to expand, "She meant to make Earthseed a nationwide movement... she seemed to have vague plans to someday send out Earthseed missionaries to use Acorn as a kind of school for such missionaries" (*Parable of the Talents* 151). Lauren's plan to spread Earthseed was reliant on missionaries who would spread education and the word of Earthseed. Most people associate the term "missionary" with

European imperialism and in particular, the violent religious subjugation of Central and South America by the Spanish. This particular form of missionary work forced Christianity on indigenous population, and if the indigenous people did not comply, they were brutally murdered. Much of Butler's novel is steeped in references to America's past, and could this not be another reference? Within Earthseed's ever-growing framework, they begin to mimic the ideas of the same oppressors they are attempting to distance themselves from.

Earthseed's work on community structures and the Acorn communities themselves, are socialist and non-western in nature. But as an international organization, it is more capitalist than not. Earthseed is able to thrive because of its reach into politics, literature and the social sphere. These accomplishments are nearly impossible without divulging in capitalism, "I found that Earthseed was a wealthy sect that welcomed everyone and was willing to make use of everyone. It owned land, schools, farms, factories, stores, banks, several whole towns" (*Parable of the Talents* 377). Acorn, the first Earthseed community, begins as almost entirely socialist. The community members grow food, share knowledge and make supplies some of which is used within the community and divided evenly, and the rest is sold to the outside world, often through bartering and trading. This community structure is what gives scholars like, Patricia Melzer the evidence to claim that is anti-capitalist. But when Earthseed becomes a larger organization, it must work with larger structures. It is hard to argue that Earthseed is entirely anti-capitalist when they own banks and even entire towns. Earthseed creates new ways to participate in capitalism, which allows them to spread their message and uphold their communities.

From the beginning of Lauren's journey with Henry and Zahra she makes it explicitly clear that she intends to bring Earthseed to space. We, as readers are once again left with the moral dilemma of how Earthseed interacts with colonialism and imperialism; two violent

ideologies which created many, if not all of the issues in the *Parables* 21st century America, and our 21st century America as well. Unlike Earthseed's missionary work and capitalist impulses, Lauren attempts to critique and explain the space expansion, "All this is to be off-loaded on the Earth's first starship, the *Christopher Columbus*. I object to the name. This ship is not about a shortcut to riches and empire. It's not about snatching up slaves and gold and presenting them to some European monarch" (*Parable of the Talents* 404). Lauren is attempting to distance Earthseed's mission from the colonialism that destroyed America, but other characters seem to find it appropriate to name the ship, *Christopher Columbus*. Because the Earth is so desolate, and natural resources are dangerously low, the members of Earthseed must expand into space, but is this not what the Europeans justified when they colonized "virgin" lands for their resources? Instead of colonizing indigenous lands, Earthseed is colonizing space, and while Lauren may not see these in the same light, it is colonizing none-the-less. Earthseed is not reacting to a violent threat to their organization, instead they are creating another form of oppression. They are escaping the desolate landscape of earth, but their decision to go into space is of their own creation.

Reactionary violence is the most common and clear-cut way Onye, and Lauren mimic the violence of the past. Onye's journey to overthrow Daib is scattered with examples of Onye responding to violence, with violence. And while Onye must protect herself and her companions, the specific ways she uses violence mimics Daib. Early in their journey, Onye and her friends enter a town, and they are quickly met with violence, because the citizens of the town fear ewus. After a rogue rock hits Onye's friend, Binta, and she is stomped to death, Onye turns to violence, "I screamed the words I'd spoken back in Jwahir's market. But I didn't want to show these people the worst of the West. I wanted to show them darkness. They were all blind and that's

what I made them. The entire town” (259-260). After seeing her friend attacked and killed, Onye reacts with a righteous vengeance. Onye punishes an entire town for the death of her friend. This action mimics her father’s war techniques. Nuru men rape and impregnate Okeke women in order to destroy entire communities, the ewu children left behind will always have Nuru connections. And in a way, Onye is doing the same thing. Onye is destroying a community by blinding them. Like Daib, Onye’s violence not only affects an entire community, but who is to say not multiple generations? There is no evidence of what lasting effect this curse will have on future generations, but can the people survive until then? Onye blinds the town to protect herself and her surviving friends; but she also blinds the citizens as punishment.

In Onye’s journey with her mother as a baby, through her childhood and into her adult life she has faced violence just because she is an ewu. The Okeke and Nuru people both believe that ewu children are violent, because they are born from violence. And because of this, Mwinta (Onye’s lover and an ewu man), and Onye spend much of their journeys avoiding conflict so that they do not feed into the stereotypes everyone expects them too. Though, it is nearly impossible to avoid violence when people are constant attacking and threatening Onye, and her friends. Though, Onye’s forms of reactionary violence becomes more excessive as the novel progresses. At the climax of the novel, Onye has killed Daib, and her violent actions that follow begin to blur lines of morality, “Every single male human in the central town of Durfa capable of impregnating a woman was dead. My action had killed them all... *[Daib] is my father and I am his child*, I thought. *We both leave bodies in our wake. Fields of Bodies*” (401). Even though Onye’s violence is a reaction to the threats around her, the scale of this violence begins to look more like something of Daib’s nature than it does of righteous revenge. Onye not only leaves heaps of bodies in her wake like her father, but she also forcibly impregnates women just as her

father did to her mother. Nuru men do two things in warfare: rape women and kill men; and Onye did both on a massive scale. In her last-ditch attempt to protect herself and Luyu and get them safely to The Great Book, she mimics the very violence that caused her birth and fulfills this prophecy. At the same time, Onye is referencing the immaculate conception of Jesus in Mary. Another moment where we are forced to consider if immaculate conception could ever be consensual.

Despite the massive amount of violence Onye perpetrates, this is once again reactionary; maybe not to a direct threat, but rather to the tradition of violence Onye has experienced. Just after Onye impregnates the women of the town and kills all the men, she watches the video Daib raping her mother, “I thought of the pained women, children, old men around me, wailing hurrying, and sobbing; *they had allowed* this to happen to my mother. They wouldn’t have helped her” (403). Even though this comes after Onye’s destruction, this video is a justification, (at least for her), of her violence. Onye believes that the people she killed and impregnated would not have helped her mother, and because of this, she is punishing them. Even if Onye comes to this realization after she has impregnated the women and killed the men, we can see Onye’s violence always circling around her mother’s suffering, and Onye’s status as an ewu.

Reactionary vs creationary violence in these novels exposes the settings in which each protagonist created their new religions. In order to create a new religion and social structure in *Who Fears Death*, Onye has to destroy everything that came before. In doing so she must always *react* to the violence around her with more violence in order to protect herself and her friends before she is able to destroy it and start new. Alternatively, Lauren and the followers of Earthseed participate in reactionary violence in the beginning of their travels before developing communities. But after Earthseed creates communities their violence and oppression takes the

form of creating new modes of imperialism and capitalism. Lauren and Earthseed are not attempting to take down and destroy all of the fabric of their world, instead they are working within it until they can reach space. Because of Lauren's limitations for expansion, Earthseed must create within the system it opposes, inadvertently continuing some of the oppressive structures it claims to be against.

Whether the violence is reactionary or creationary, it still exposes how Lauren and Onye can only create new religions with the tools they are given. And because both protagonists are stuck working in the worlds that tries to oppress them, it is inevitable that they themselves would fall back into these patterns. Whether that be creating new violence or using violence as a desperate way just to keep themselves alive long enough to create their futures. Patriarchal violence is the most prevalent and deadly form of violence in these texts. And while Onye and Lauren are able to dismantle patriarchy, there are many more nuanced forms of violence and oppression they begin to undermine or are forced to work within. These novels are about overthrowing patriarchy entangled with religion; Because of this, characters are unable to tackle all of the forms of oppression at once.

Conclusion

Dystopias are not about discovering something new. The dystopian genre is about projecting the abuses of the past, and present onto another society, or future. In doing so, authors can expose more about the abuses in history than their reader may realize. *Who Fears Death* and the *Parables* duology exposes how patriarchy and Christianity have always been synonymous, and how this can be abused by men in power. Both novels use the slave narrative, and dystopia to expose how racism also plays into systems of power created by Christianity and the patriarchy. In conversation with one another, these genres tell the stories of Lauren and Onye,

two girls born into violent religious systems which aimed to dominate and control them. But instead of succumbing to this violence and domination, both young women were able to evade the looming hand of patriarchal Christianity through new religions.

No matter how dire the endings of these books may seem, they are spaces for hope. Onye and Lauren are providing their followers, and the reader with a possibility for new positive religions. These novels are ushering in a new wave of feminist dystopian texts, which values religion through technology and advancement, while always valuing the body of the woman without dominating it. Butler and Okorafor are offering new religions which defy patriarchal Christianity, and racism in the systems of their texts. With this anti-patriarchal framework in mind, these novels lend us to consider our place in religion. No longer, does Christianity need to get a free pass to abuse women and individuals without power. Instead, religion can be feminist, intersectional and a place of safety, rather than a place where people are abused. Onye demonstrates this in the legacy she leaves behind by dismantling systems of racism and oppression and giving women the power to defend themselves. And Lauren gives her community, and the reader: Earthseed, a religion which thrives off community and mutual aid. Without a sense of hierarchy in Earthseed, men are unable to dominate women. More than anything, these novels are a space for hope. Young women in desolate future landscapes are able to escape systems of oppression and discover new, non-patriarchal religions. If Onye and Lauren are able to succeed, why can't we?

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