

Octavia E. Butler's
Redefinition of Motherhood in
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Jasmine Matthey

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Octavia E. Butler's Redefinition of Motherhood in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*

Octavia E. Butler's groundbreaking novels, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and its sequel *Parable of the Talents* (1998), present a compelling and thought-provoking exploration of a near-future America devastated by social, economic, and environmental collapse. These dystopian works showcase Butler's mastery of speculative fiction, blending elements of science fiction, social critique, and spiritual awakening.

Set in the 2020s and 2030s, the novels introduce us to Lauren Olamina, a young African American woman who possesses an extraordinary ability called "hyperempathy," which allows her to share in the pain and pleasure of others. As society crumbles around her, Olamina embarks on a journey of survival, resilience, and the conception and birthing of a new belief system called "Earthseed."

In this absorbing science fiction duology, Butler redefines expectations for a "typical" mother through an anti-ableist, Afrocentric lens, by extending the role beyond biological conception and birth to include all genders and entire communities. Butler demonstrates how the traditional Eurocentric role of a mother can be reshaped, changed, and transcended through crafting a maternal protagonist, Olamina, who embodies a multi-faceted, intersectional, and Afrocentric mother to a child, religion, community, and new world. Through her own meta-exemplification, Butler takes the diverse mothering represented in the *Parable* novels beyond the page to develop an inclusive, intersectional, nonhierarchical future.

There are multiple perspectives on motherhood, so much so that scholars have argued for a distinct field of maternal theory, as evidenced in Jennifer C. Nash's work "The Political Life of Black Motherhood." Nash identifies the growing discipline of maternal theory and points to its range of representation from literary genre to activism to cultural discourse. She situates Black motherhood in the context of Black feminist theory to reveal an Afrocentric mothering tradition that is founded in Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist theory. In her seminal article, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships," Collins articulates an ideology of Afrocentric mothering that includes othermothering and communal mothering networks. Afrocentric mothering includes the norming of non-nuclear families, which Patricia Melzer reveals as essential to Butler's representation of

motherhood as discussed later. Furthermore, Collins positions Afrocentric mothering in opposition to Eurocentric motherhood, assigning different tradition to different lived experiences.

While not explicitly focused on Black motherhood, in “Mothering and Motherhood: Experience, Ideology, and Agency,” Min Jiao approaches a critique of motherhood through decentering the Eurocentric, patriarchal institution that oppresses and controls women as it is superimposed onto them. Whereas “mothering” refers to an empowering, female-defined experience that leaves space for diversity and intersectionality, similar to the Afrocentric mothering described by Nash and Collins. In this way, Min Jiao differentiates “motherhood,” the institution, from “mothering,” the experience and connection. Collins identifies the general American expectation and institution of motherhood as marked by white feminine performance. This institution directly opposes the integration of “othermothers” and the communal mothering networks prevalent in African American communities. As Collins explains, othermothers are women who assist biological mothers, called bloodmothers, with mothering responsibilities (Collins 4).

Underlying most of this discourse on motherhood is the underlying assumption that motherhood is synonymous with guiding, shaping, and teaching. This assumption is implied linguistically, if not overtly, when Collins highlights the diverse teaching strategies mothers use to raise their children, or that mothering is the conduit for education and cultural transmission. Mother as teacher and guide is the ideal set in opposition to motherhood as performance. The perpetuated performance of motherhood is distant, unengaged, and treats the parenting role as a duty. On the other hand, Butler situates a mothering that transcends the gender binary to include any figure willing to teach and guide others. Building on this ideal, in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Slavery? The Problem and Promise of Mothering in Octavia E. Butler’s ‘Bloodchild’,” Kristen Lillvis argues that mothering is a primary vehicle for educating to improve the future circumstances for new generations. For Lillvis, Butler “suggests that marginalized men and women connect to the heritage of the mother in order to create less hierarchical families and communities” (Lillvis 13). Lillvis’ take exemplifies how Butler actively seeks to create a nonhierarchical system. As it

follows, this assertion clarifies how Butler wields maternal agency as the primary mode for dismantling hierarchical power structures and consequently developing egalitarian societies within the *Parable* novels.

Although many critics are interested in the theme of motherhood within Butler's oeuvre, they are typically most concerned with her novels besides the *Parable* duology. As previously mentioned, Kristen Lillvis examines motherhood in the context of Butler's short story "Bloodchild." Likewise, in a chapter of her novel *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* entitled "Discourses of the Mother in Postmodern Film and Culture," Ann E. Kaplan explores motherhood in the context of reproductive agency in Butler's novel *Dawn*. While numerous critics like Lillvis and Kaplan evaluate motherhood in Butler's larger work, very few make more than a glancing reference to motherhood in the *Parable* duology, even though Lauren Olamina and the system of Earthseed is a shining example of Afrocentric mothering. Like Jiao, Butler redefines the institutionalized idea of "motherhood" through an Afrocentric lens. She develops "mothering" as an experience rooted in personal connection as opposed to performance through her maternal protagonist, Olamina, the Earthseed religion, its mothering principles as implemented in its first community, Acorn. This new definition incorporates tenets that Collins and Nash worked to situate as Afrocentric: the inclusion of non-nuclear families in a representation of mothering that transcends biological conception. This transcendence includes all genders and, in Case's terms, othermothers, as well as the entire maternal community networks as teachers who will conceive a new generation and, consequently, a new world rooted in the diverse, inclusive, and intersectional teachings of Butler's reconceived motherhood.

As previously mentioned, Kaplan argues that a new discourse of motherhood entered American culture during its postmodern period from the 1970s to the 1990s. She identifies an inherent mother-paradigm shift due to scientific developments, feminist movements, and political and social changes that lead to a woman's life no longer necessitating childbirth and care (Kaplan 24). Butler was writing *Sower* towards the end of this shifting discourse in American popular culture. In "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler," conducted by Charles H. Rowell in 1997, the pair discuss Butler's childhood influences, as well as her writing advice and process. Throughout the interview, the reader can track how Butler's

experiences growing up came to shape her writing. As a self-proclaimed film and TV consumer (Rowell 53-54), Butler would have inevitably been exposed to these pervasive motherhood ideologies.

Consciously or subconsciously, the varying discourses of motherhood within popular culture show up in Butler's writing. We can follow the threads of her Afrocentric influence, personal ideas, opinions, and ruminations on the topic throughout both *Sower* and *Talents*.

Additionally, feminist utopian writing increased during this postmodern period (Melzer 3). Within the *Parable* novels themselves, Butler identifies how "strong female characters were out of fashion in the fiction of the time" (*Talents* 218), and as a response, she creates Lauren Olamina, her amalgamative retort to the mother paradigm shift of the time, one who embodies a strong, Black female yet androgynous character. Olamina describes the dystopian setting of the *Parable* as

caused by accidentally coinciding climatic, economic, and sociological crises [...] caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas [...] I have watched education become more a privilege of the rich than the basic necessity that it must be if civilized society is to survive. I have watched as convenience, profit, and inertia excused greater and more dangerous environmental degradation. I have watched poverty, hunger, and disease become inevitable for more and more people. (*Talents* 4)

This is the potential future that Butler warns of, and for which she creates a solution—a critical utopia. Literary critic Tom Moylan coined the term "critical utopia, and he explains that a critical utopia differs from a standard one in that it "shifts from simple negation to a negation with alternatives" (qtd. in Melzer 5). In context, Butler does not just point to and present the myriad of social, racial, class, political, and environmental disparities within the grander dystopian setting of the *Parable* novels. Instead, she uses her concept of mothering to pave the way forward. Similarly, and as the primary marker of Butler's "critical utopia," Patricia Melzer argues that mothering, guiding, shaping, and educating children is the central means of lasting survival of a community and a religion within the *Parable* novels. In her article, "'All That You Touch You Change': Utopian Desire and the Concept of Change in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*," Melzer explores how Butler redefines the typical role of a

mother by writing an “un-motherly” maternal protagonist (1) who rejects the passivity of institutionalized motherhood. Butler’s maternal protagonist does not fit into the conventional archetype of a mother as perpetuated by Eurocentric patriarchy who is submissive, whose sole responsibility and duty is caring for children and tending to the home. Olamina is the complete opposite; she is strong, independent, and values guiding those that she mothers as intrinsically worthwhile, not just a duty to fulfill or a role to uphold.

What places the egalitarian future that Butler births firmly into the category of critical utopia is that she offers alternatives and constructive and actionable ways for her characters to realize her vision. She writes, “Earthseed is about preparing to fulfill the Destiny. It is about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities and, at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment. It is about treating education and adaptability as the absolute essentials that they are” (*Talents* 356). Butler’s critical utopia is an Intersectional Ecofeminist utopia that dismantles the patriarchal institution of Western motherhood. She paves the path toward this critical utopia in the novels and makes it replicable for her readers outside of the novels. Earthseed exemplifies Butler’s argument for a new definition of motherhood. She charts the actionable path forward when she writes:

the growing Earthseed movement [...] financed scientific exploration and inquiry, and technological creativity. It set up grade schools and eventually colleges, and offered full scholarships to poor but gifted students. The students who accepted had to agree to spend seven years teaching [...] or otherwise using their skills to improve life. (*Talents* 376)

This is the *critical* part of Butler’s *critical utopia*; Earthseed is the means, and mothering is the mode toward the egalitarian end. Even more, Butler fills this mothering role herself and, through her writing, guides her readers toward the same critical utopia beyond the page.

Earthseed is the proposed solution to the systemic patriarchal institution of motherhood in that it exemplifies Butler’s reprise of the role. Earthseed and communities like Acorn *are* Butler’s critical utopia. The recurring sentiment that “the destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (*Sower* 77), reflects the belief system’s aspiration to transcend the limitations and inequalities of Earth by expanding

into space. By envisioning a future where the many mothers and children who make up all of humanity can colonize other planets, Butler situates Earthseed as a possibility for a fresh start free from the oppressive systems that perpetuate inequality on Earth. Earthseed is intersectional, diverse, and inclusive; it welcomes all members that would fall under the illustrated line of domination. Additionally, it mothers all members to shape people connected by community and guide them toward a nonhierarchical future. Lauren Olamina acts as a Mother to All, spreading a religion that mimics her mothering role and consequently guiding the characters toward Butler's critical utopian vision on the page. Even her biological child, Asha/Larkin, refers to Earthseed as her mother's "other child" (*Talents* 292, 376) throughout the novels.

Through conceiving the critical utopia within the *Parable* duology, Butler argues for a new conception of motherhood that breaks the Western patriarchal mold and its gendered hierarchies. Earthseed and its Destiny is the critical utopia realized. Its means of operating, guiding, and shaping others toward this future is through a new concept of mothering. Butler proposes and portrays "mothering" rooted in inclusion, anti-ableism, intersectionality, and diversity. It is "mothering" that necessitates education as a means of pioneering an egalitarian future. It transcends the institution of motherhood and nuclear familial relationships, instead focusing on the experience of "mothering"—whether toward children, other people, entire communities, a religion, or ideas.

Min Jiao argues for placing motherhood strictly in the social and cultural realm instead of through biological inscription. She explains that examining motherhood through a social and cultural lens accounts for intersectional identities and experiences. Likewise, this perspective will dismantle the superimposed idealization of mothers and the marginalization of nonwhite mothers (Jiao 541). Jiao places the term "motherhood" strictly in the category of patriarchal institution, whereas "mothering" accounts for the empowering, female-defined, and centered experience (Jiao 541). Jiao's connection between "motherhood" and institutionalized patriarchy and "mothering" and empowering maternal agency ties into how Butler redefines "motherhood" the institution. In the *Parable* novels, Butler rejects the white

feminine performance of “motherhood” as characterized by hierarchical exclusions and has her maternal protagonist, Olamina, engage in Afrocentric “mothering” instead.

As a trailblazer in the realm of Black feminist theory, Patricia Hill Collins positions Afrocentric “mothering” in opposition to Eurocentric “motherhood” in that maternal agency is not one-size-fits-all, especially when each tradition stems from different lived experiences. Collins compares the dominating Eurocentric ideology of motherhood to an Afrocentric ideology and exemplifies how expecting the latter to emulate the former is discriminatory and erasing (Collins 3). Instead, Collins locates Afrocentric mothering as outside of Eurocentric patriarchal gender roles, treating child care as a collective responsibility through collaborative, communal mothering networks (Collins 4). Afrocentric mothering relies on “othermothers,” which are other people—neighbors, friends, community members—besides a child’s biological “bloodmother” who shares in the responsibility of caring for the younger generation (Collins 5). In contrast, the Eurocentric policy relegates biological conception to the highest determining factor of motherhood. Collins argues that

Motherhood, whether bloodmother [...] or community othermother, can be invoked by Black women as a symbol of power. A substantial portion of Black women’s status in African American communities stems not only from their roles as mothers in their own families but from their contributions as community othermothers to Black community development as well. (Collins 6)

Butler empowers her community othermother characters with this same sense of agency. In the novels, we can easily replace the “Black communities” that Collins references with “Earthseed communities,” and the assertion would still be accurate. In *Talents*, the whole reason that people started turning to Jarret’s hate-fueled regime, underscored by white patriarchal supremacy, was that they were desperate for change, for someone to fix the injustice of post-Pox America (22). What drew people to Earthseed was its return of empowering agency. The community of Earthseed is a symbolic extension of power for each community member—each teacher, each shaper, each “othermother.” Olamina births this empowering

religion and community based on the principles of Black “mothering,” which exercises maternal agency to pioneer an inclusive and diverse future.

The Eurocentric ideology of motherhood is portrayed in the *Parable* dystopia and depicted in the Christian American hate-fueled regime that's popular in post-Pox America. Take, for instance, Madison and Kayce Guest Alexander, the middle-class Black Christian Americans who “adopted” Asha/Larkin (218), Olamina's abducted child. They “believed it was the duty of good Christian Americans to give homes to the many orphaned children from squatter settlements and heathen cults” (*Talents* 218). Asha clarifies that she “didn't exactly become their daughter, but they meant to do their duty—to raise [her] properly and save [her] from whatever depraved existence [she] might have had with [her] biological parents” (*Talents* 219). These quotes demonstrate how Kayce's motherhood is part of a white-washed larger institution; it is a duty, a service provided. Not only does she constantly compare Asha to her biological daughter that passed, but she degrades Asha as a lesser replacement (*Talents* 262). In the epilogue of *Talents*, Asha recounts the culmination of her relationship with her adoptive parents when she says, “I never saw Kayce and Madison again [...] They did their duty toward me” (*Talents* 392). Butler juxtaposes the institutionalized “duty” of motherhood with Olamina's “mothering.” It is the experience of mothering; it is guiding, shaping, and teaching. It is not exclusive, and it is not a performance.

This Afrocentric definition of mothering connotes the mothering that Butler establishes through Olamina, Earthseed, and her own meta-exemplification. As noted, one of the components of Afrocentric motherhood is that it leans toward being genderless, especially in comparison to Eurocentric motherhood, which is strictly in the category of feminine and female mothers. In the article “Mama's Baby, Papa's Slavery? The Problem and Promise of Mothering in Octavia E. Butler's ‘Bloodchild,’” Kristen notes the theme of motherhood that pervades many of (if not all of) Octavia E. Butler's work. Lillvis explores the role of gender in the article but focuses on its interplay within the context of Butler's short story, “Bloodchild,” where men take on the role of surrogate mothers for an alien race. While based in a near-future human context, Butler's dismissal of gender as intrinsic to motherhood is similarly present in the

Parable novels. One of the Earthseed community members in *Talents* remarks, “Our God isn’t male. Change has no sex” (*Talents* 148). Since God is Change to followers of Earthseed, and Change is the larger purpose of mothering inherent in how the religion shapes its members, it follows that Butler’s motherhood, Olamina’s mothering, and Earthseed’s foundation of communal mothering networks is genderless.

Similarly, “shaper” is the Earthseed equivalent of a reverend or minister; a “shaper” is a community leader, a genderless title for a community mother (395). Lillvis asserts that Butler’s heroes and heroines, the many “mothers” in her works, find purpose in destroying hierarchical power structures and developing new futures through their mothering (Lillvis 7). This genderless maternity depicts a rubric of motherhood different from the perpetuated white feminine definition that Olamina births a religion and mothers a community in order to change the world.

In addition to being Afrocentric and genderless, Butler’s motherhood is inclusive. *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* serves as the Earthseed equivalent of a Bible, Quran, or Torah. It is the system of truths that Butler’s redefinition of motherhood and subsequent communities of Earthseed are based on. One of the central tenets of Earthseed, as written by Olamina in this sacred text, is to “Embrace diversity / Unite— / Or be divided, / [...] Embrace diversity / Or be destroyed” (*Sower* 196). This verse illustrates how the Earthseed doctrine acts as an extension of Butler’s portrayal of mothering as necessarily diverse and inclusive as a means to being nonhierarchical and egalitarian. An instance where Olamina embodies this mothering inclusivity in *Talents* is when she remarks how “Mary Sullivan and Allie combine their blankets and make love to one another late at night. It comforts them” (*Talents* 220). Moreover, when directly questioned by Mary if they “disgust” her, Olamina replies by asking if Mary loves her friend. That is enough for her. She even welcomes Mary and her sisters into Earthseed (*Talents* 220-221) acting as Mother to All as she populates the growing Earthseed family. Butler presents the key to egalitarian society as being inclusive of all beings—to leave behind matters of race, class, sexuality, gender, etc., in the pursuit of mothering and shaping a new societal generation or community that is nonhierarchical.

Building on the Afrocentric, genderless, and inclusive mothering that Butler depicts in the *Parable* novels, it follows that her “motherhood” transcends biological conception. Butler has already established through the Afrocentricity of her motherhood that gender does not play a pivotal role in guiding/shaping/teaching/mothering. Another notion of Afrocentric mothering identified by Collins is centering the non-nuclear family, any family that does not conform to the “traditional” (Eurocentric) notion of a marriage between a man and a woman that results in biological children. Not only does Butler extend her “mothering” to children but also to a religion, whole communities, and ideas. It stands to reason that biological conception does not play into what Butler portrays a mother to be, especially since she incorporates the Afrocentric refusal to other non-nuclear families by incorporating communal mothering networks and othermothers into Earthseed. Olamina explains the communal parenting network within Earthseed in *Talents* when she writes:

So many members of our community have come to us alone or with only little children that it seems best for me to do what I can to create family bonds [...] I want [god-parents relationships] taken seriously here [...] No one has to take on the responsibility of joining in this way to another family, but anyone who does take that responsibility has made a real commitment. (*Talents* 63)

Again, Olamina further drives home the importance of this communal mothering network that is intrinsic to Afrocentric motherhood when she writes, “We each stand ready to parent one another’s children [...] It makes us more truly a community, somehow, now that so many of us have had children here” (*Talents* 172). The members of the Earthseed community and Acorn parent each other's children. They all form a network of mothers—men, women, older children—who teach, shape, and guide others toward the egalitarian critical utopia that Butler conceives.

Butler’s communal mothering goes a step further in that the community of Acorn is seen as a “parent” to future subsequent Earthseed communities. Olamina describes this in her journal; she states that “a community whose population grew to more than a thousand should split and ‘parent’ a new

community (*Talents* 168). When you have genderless mothers, communal mothering networks, and communities mothering other communities, it is evident that Butler's portrayal of motherhood transcends biological conception. This idea of genderless mothering and motherhood transcending biological conception through non-nuclear family dynamics coalesces in the relationships between Olamina, her biological child Asha/Larkin, and Olamina's brother, Asha's Uncle Marc. Throughout the majority of *Talents*, Olamina is working toward finding her kidnapped daughter and rekindling their relationship. Unbeknownst to her, her brother, Marc, finds Olamina's daughter, and instead of reuniting the two, he selfishly builds his own family with Asha and leaves Olamina in the dark (*Talents* 374). When all comes to light during the novel's conclusion, Asha's loyalty remains with her Uncle Marc. When she finally meets Olamina, she tells her that "he took care of me [...] He and I...we're a family. We didn't have anyone before we found one another" (*Talents* 399). Asha holds true to this assertion that Marc is her family, not Olamina, when she says, "Uncle Marc was, in the end, my only family." (*Talents* 392). Asha's maternal bond is genderless and attaches to her Uncle Marc over her biological mother or adoptive mother. She does not feel any intrinsic maternal bond with Olamina, showing how Butler's definition of motherhood is not purely based in experience and does not necessitate biological conception.

Arguably, the most crucial principle within Butler's redefinition of motherhood is how it necessitates education to bring forth or birth the critical utopia that Butler envisions. Returning to Melzer's work, she argues that mothering, guiding, shaping, and educating children is the central means of lasting survival of a community and a religion within the *Parable* novels. Butler employs *Earthseed* to emphasize the importance of literacy for individual agency within the *Parable* novels. Melzer notes how "Butler re-appropriates the empowering potential of knowledge from the capitalist agenda and turns technoscience into a symbol of resistance" (Melzer 8). Within the sacred text of *Earthseed*, Olamina asserts that the way "To benefit your world, / Your people, / Your life, / [...] Minimize harm, / Ask questions, / Seek answers, / Learn, / Teach" (*Talents* 58). In this way, teaching and learning are intrinsic to the structure of *Earthseed* and act as a means to pave the way toward a new future. Whereas a Eurocentric mother's "duty" would be to provide food and shelter for a child, as evidenced by Kaycee's

relationship with Asha, Butler's version of mothering differs. Olamina connects the "duty" of Earthseed mothers to education when she writes, "One of the first duties of Earthseed is to learn and then to teach" (*Talents* 71). Olamina herself exemplifies this "Shaper" role—this role as Mother to All—as a means to give her people "a belief system to help them deal with the world as it is and the world as it can be—as people like them can make it" (*Talents* 123). This quote illuminates Butler's vision of motherhood—to teach those you are responsible for how to navigate the world around them, or ideally, how to create a better one. Ultimately, Olamina "recruited the people of Acorn because she came to believe that she could accomplish her purpose by creating Earthseed communities where children would grow up learning the 'truths' of Earthseed and go on to shape the human future according to those 'truths'" (*Talents* 352). It is through its communal mothering network which prioritizes education, teaching, and learning, that Earthseed will shape and birth the egalitarian future that constitutes Butler's critical utopia.

Furthermore, Earthseed serves as both child to Olamina and a mothering system to others that acts toward guiding, shaping, and teaching its communities how to realize Butler's critical utopia. The goal of Earthseed and the mothering that Butler situates in *Talents* is "important for the lessons it forces us to learn [...], for the people it encourages us to become. It's important for the unity and purpose that it gives us[...] And in the future, it offers us a kind of species adulthood" (*Talents* 154). For the Destiny to be a "species adulthood," the entire religion is an upbringing, a raising, a mothering that teaches others and shapes them into beings that will pioneer Butler's critical utopia. The inclusive mothering that Butler defines surpasses preconceptions and norms and becomes the foundation for what is an encompassing human responsibility if the egalitarian future that she portrays is to ever be realized. Furthermore, Butler confirms that "Earthseed is the dawning of adulthood of the human species [...] It enables the seeds of the Earth to become the seeds of new life, new communities on new earths. The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars, and there, again, to grow, to learn, and to fly" (*Talents* 323). This "dawning of adulthood" evidences Earthseed as "mother" that will shape the nonhierarchical future that Olamina envisions and that Butler guides her readers toward. Olamina establishes this notion in *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* when she writes, "Earthseed is adulthood. / [...] Leaving our mother, / Becoming men

and women. / We've been children, / [...] But Earthseed is adulthood. / We are men and women now. / We are Earthseed. / And the Destiny of Earthseed / Is to take root among the stars" (*Talents* 392). In this way, the religion mothers, guides, and shapes its members toward adulthood. Like any other religion, Earthseed is a means of teaching communities of people to live by its tenets. Moreover, Earthseed guides its members to live by its intersectional, inclusive, and nonhierarchical mothering system.

In the interview with Rowell, Butler asserts that "writing is an expression of your inner feelings and thoughts and belief and self [...] anything that happens that makes you emotional is almost certain to come out in your writing" (48). To this end, Butler is no exception. She admits that an author's writing is infused with their individual essence, which emanates from personal lived experience, beliefs, and identity. Butler advises her writing students to "fictionalize an emotional experience" (Rowell 49). Since she teaches from her own process, she implements this method in her writing. Take, for instance, Butler's personal struggle with "disability." In the interview with Rowell, she admits that growing up, she was stronger than she realized and would accidentally hurt people. She continues, "I had a lot of empathy, and hurting somebody really bothered me. So I found that I was hesitant to hurt them for those reasons" (Rowell 52). Regarding Butler's assertion that an author's writing is a fictionalized emotional experience, we can reflect on Lauren Olamina's struggle with "hyperempathy syndrome." Olamina asks

if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it, and live among them. (*Sower* 115)

Olamina echoes Butler's empathetic perspective in that what others may perceive as a disability can be a powerful hyper-ability to connect and empathize with other humans. Empathy is an essential component toward realizing an egalitarian future. We can see Butler's appreciation for disability as strength, which translates as anti-ableism in her redefinition of motherhood, which she incorporates into her critical utopia—Earthseed.

Butler rejects the essentialized patriarchal institution of white motherhood and births a critical utopia that holds the future she wishes her mother, grandmother, and ancestors could have experienced. Butler situates this critical utopia by having Lauren Olamina deconstruct Eurocentric motherhood as typified by white feminine performance and, instead, becoming a Mother to All—to a religion that furthers this reinvented concept of mothering, to entire communities, and to a new generation as a means of pioneering an egalitarian future. Butler, the writer, is just this sort of Mother to All as acclaimed author N.K. Jemisin notes in her forward of *Sower* (2020) in which she credits Butler with pioneering an avenue for marginalized voices to engage in science fiction writing and publishing. Jemisin likens the many marginalized authors who have found inspiration, strength, and a role-model in Butler to her “spiritual children numbering in the thousands, come to claim the future” (Jemisin x). This claim depicts how Butler birthed ideas that prompted the amplification of diverse voices, much like Olamina birthed a religion as a pathway to a just, nonhierarchical future.

Butler walks the walk of Afrocentric othermotherhood for burgeoning writers and further exemplifies a role model for writers of color. Butler offers a plethora of writing advice she also personally follows and discusses teaching writers' workshops and speaking at colleges and writers' conferences (Rowell 47-49). She epitomizes her redefinition of motherhood as a figure of acceptance and guidance, an educator, and a shaper of the future. Although Butler does mother her readers by guiding them toward her vision of critical utopia, her concept of motherhood goes beyond birthing or nurturing people to include conceiving ideas as well. We can see it firsthand as Olamina births and nurtures a religion or how Butler birthed books instead of babies. Butler exudes the same portrayal of mothering that she interweaves in the *Parable* duology through fostering creative inspiration and techniques for students of the writing craft and birthing ideas herself.

Interdisciplinary artist and Black Feminist/Womanist Scholar, OlaRonke Akinmowo, speaks on the lessons she learned through reading Butler's *Parable* novels in her piece “Octavia Taught Me/12 Things.” She details the “lessons upon lessons” (Akinmowo 47) that Butler—acting as writer, mother,

teacher, and shaper—interweaves within the duology. Lessons that vary from defying gender binaries (Akinmowo 51) to the importance of knowledge and education (Akinmowo 57) to the imperativeness of building community (Akinmowo 56-57). Akinmowo posits, "In a world that feels unsafe, harsh, and antagonizing; in a world that feels anti-woman, anti-Black, and anti-Life; what can we do to not just survive but thrive? In the Parables, Octavia lovingly teaches us how to center out humanity and affirm our lives" (Akinmowo 47). Through this teaching, Butler mothers us readers; she guides us toward a new way of thinking and living. It is not just a nameless mass of marginalized readers and writers that Butler has mothered and shaped; it is published authors like Jemisin and respected scholars like Akinmowo. There is even an entire conference, the Octavia Butler Shaping Change Conference in San Diego, where Butler's students, her "spiritual children numbering in the thousands" (Jemisin x), gather and organize to "claim the future" (Jemisin x).

Octavia E. Butler redefines the institution of "motherhood" typified by white feminine performance by having Lauren Olamina break the mold through the birth of a religion that will create a new institution of motherhood. One that shifts the narrative toward the experience of "mothering" as marked by Afrocentric tenets of othermothering and communal mothering networks. Furthermore, this genderless, anti-ableist, diverse, inclusive, and intersectional mothering transcends biological conception. It is a mothering that necessitates a community's responsibility to mother—educate and guide—the new generation as a means to shape a critical utopian nonhierarchical future. Within *Talents*, Olamina explains how "parables [are] stories that taught, stories that presented ideas and morals in ways that made pictures in people's minds [...] stories were so important as teaching tools [...] the parable of the talents...education, hardwork, and personal responsibility. 'Those are our talents'" (*Talents* 10). Jemisin likens the *Parable* novels to a guidebook leading toward a future that dismantles the perpetuated Anglo-European patriarchal system—novels in which Butler takes her portrayal of mothering and the critical utopia she has built beyond the page. Olamina remarks how her "'talent,' going back to the parable of the talents, is Earthseed" (*Talents* 17). Butler's talent is her writing. She uses her talent to create stories that

serve as teaching tools—stories in which she serves as a guide, teacher, and mother to a new generation of marginalized writers. These diverse and intersectional voices will take up her mantle of equality now that she has passed to lay claim to the anti-hierarchical critical utopia that she birthed and that we all deserve.

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