

Feminist Leadership in Octavia Butler's Parables: A Transformational Model for Utopian Community Building

SULAGNA CHATTOPADHYAY

ABSTRACT:

Leadership has traditionally been a gendered concept privileging values commonly associated with assertive masculinity and rigidly hierarchical organisation. However, with women increasingly assuming roles of responsibility in various social and professional domains, it is necessary to conceptualise a feminist model of leadership predicated on non-hierarchical, collaborative, and discursive styles of decision making. In this paper, I propose to examine the potential role of feminist leadership in utopian community building through a reading of Octavia Butler's remarkably prescient critical dystopias—*Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). These novels, which combine cautionary speculation with affirmative social dreaming, present a near-future America in which catastrophic climate change, extreme political and religious conservatism, ethno-racial segregation, and untrammelled corporate ascendancy have precipitated complete socio-political disintegration. In this bleak narrative landscape, Butler's black, female protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina emerges as a visionary and a leader *extraordinaire*, whose early philosophical and theological musings lead her to formulate a new belief system called Earthseed, with its striking central tenet: 'God is Change.' As the destruction of her childhood community compels her to fend for herself on the chaotic freeways of California, she encounters and forms

alliances with other deracinated and dispossessed individuals who constitute the beginnings of a nascent Earthseed community—an intersectional collective that steadily expands as the narrative progresses and engenders novel forms of grassroots activism. My paper will focus on the leadership strategies adopted by Lauren as she guides this inchoate community to its utopian goal through productive networking and harmonious interpersonal relationships. I am particularly interested in the ways in which Lauren as a feminist leader responds to contingencies, negotiates conflict, encourages the fierce contestation of ideas, reconciles collaboration with authoritative intervention, and celebrates diversity by accommodating rather than subsuming difference. Through my reading of the Parables, I hope to demonstrate how the specific model of transformational leadership envisaged by Butler may be seen as a valuable contribution to the burgeoning domain of feminist leadership studies.

*F*eminists seeking to engage with the concept of leadership often find themselves grappling with the difficulties posed by its deeply gendered history. Early approaches to leadership, for instance, tended largely to legitimise the cult of personality by celebrating the ‘great men’ of history who could captivate and steer the masses by virtue of their superior intelligence, charisma, and authoritative masculinity. Although subsequent developments in the interdisciplinary field of leadership studies resulted in a scholarly repudiation of such approaches, they continue to enjoy considerable popular credence and are bolstered by widespread patriarchal stereotypes regarding the unsuitability of women for leadership roles. As a result, the performance of women in positions of responsibility is often expected to adhere to predetermined standards developed in masculinist contexts and

reflecting cultural expectations of gendered behaviour. Further complications arise when attempts are made to reconcile the feminist values of collaboration, inclusivity, adaptability, and social justice with traditional models of leadership that over-emphasise the unidirectional discourses of power, hierarchy, and privilege. Feminist scholars have therefore turned to alternate structures and practices of leadership that offer positive and creative interpretations of power, eliminate systemic discrimination and oppression, embrace pluralism and diversity, and foster equitable social change.¹

This essay offers a reading of two critical dystopias by Octavia Butler—*Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998)—in order to explore how perspectives on feminist leadership may inform strategies of political activism and utopian community building, especially within unsupportive or hostile socio-political environments. Butler occupies a significant position in the history of science fiction because she chose to present strong black women as protagonists at a time when non-white characters were a rarity in the genre. Thus, her oeuvre presents an opportunity to examine how the dominant structures of power are shaped by the intersections of race, gender, and other related factors, and how resistance may be organised or enacted from spaces of marginality. My reading of the Parables takes as its basis the fundamental distinction between the transactional and transformational styles of leadership—a distinction that was introduced by James MacGregor Burns in 1978 and that has proved to be particularly conducive to feminist theorising on leadership. While the transactional style operates on the simple principle of contractual obligation or exchange and tends to be goal-oriented, the transformational style involves a more dynamic process that ‘engages the full person of the follower’ and creates ‘a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral

agents.²² Feminist leaders may further expand the scope of transformational leadership by paying close attention to organisational composition and structure and challenging the multiple oppressions and inequities rooted in gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and ability.

Set in a near-future California, Butler's *Parable of the Sower* presents an unsettlingly prescient catalogue of horrors extrapolated from contemporary global trends, including the rise of the neoliberal state, unfettered capitalist expansion, climate change and resource depletion, political and religious conservatism, and augmenting social polarisation. The inept government has effectively relinquished all control to multinational corporations, which regulate access to formerly democratic spaces and exploit powerless workers with total impunity. As jobs are scarce and basic necessities are exorbitantly priced, the streets are populated by 'squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general,'²³ who are desperate and therefore dangerous. Robbery, vandalism, rape, murder, and arson are everyday occurrences, and public spaces are littered with corpses in various states of decay and dismemberment. While the rich remain virtually untouched in their impenetrable estates, the remnants of the middle class struggle to protect their crumbling gated communities from frequent attacks by outsiders who resent their relative privilege. Butler's black teenage protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, lives with her family in one such community called Robledo—a multi-ethnic neighbourhood located on the outskirts of Los Angeles.

At the opening of *Parable of the Sower*, the wall that surrounds Robledo acquires narrative prominence when Lauren tellingly describes it as 'a massive, looming presence... more threatening than protective.'²⁴ Although it ostensibly shelters the community from the chaotic forces that run rampant outside its boundaries, it also has the effect of

imprisoning its residents, thereby limiting their prospects and precluding the possibility of fruitful political action. By its very nature, the wall is more performative than functional, and its presence immediately generates anxiety in the reader as it signals the inevitability of an impending breach. Yet it lulls the inhabitants of the community into a false sense of security and inviolability as they wait passively 'for the good old days to come back.'⁵ This nostalgia and the resultant inertia stem from an overly generous and uncritical appraisal of the past that fails to acknowledge its continuing role in precipitating the crises of the present. Moreover, the inter-personal relationships of Robledo's inhabitants are often marred by inherited prejudices pertaining to race, gender, and class. Each family attempts to preserve its insularity and upholds worldviews that are parochial, myopic, and occasionally incompatible with the larger needs of the community.

The most influential figure in Lauren's life is her father, a Baptist minister and college professor who has emerged as the unofficial leader of Robledo not only by virtue of his religious position but also because of his emphasis on pragmatism, initiative, and communitarian responsibility. He uses his authority to encourage the members of Robledo to work collectively for the protection of the community and its meagre resources. Although Lauren shares a close bond with her father and acknowledges his pivotal role in holding the community together in adversity, she quickly learns to notice his blind spots and to analyse his leadership style with a critical eye. Most importantly, she realises that his focus on segregated survival and localised self-sufficiency is reactionary rather than transformative and will prove untenable in the long run. Their differences surface most strongly in the section where, after an attempt to warn a friend about the need to prepare for life outside the walls of Robledo, she is admonished by her father for her 'scare talk.' He then

proceeds to educate her on what he believes is the best approach to leadership during a crisis:

It's better to teach people than to scare them, Lauren. If you scare them and nothing happens, they lose their fear, and you lose some of your authority with them. It's harder to scare them a second time, harder to teach them, harder to win back their trust.⁶

These remarks betray an overly cautious and paternalistic interpretation of the leader's role—almost a propensity to infantilise the members of the community by assuming their incapacity to handle the truth and suggesting the need for fear and authority to direct their actions. Lauren, in turn, questions this obscurantism and advocates a more balanced diffusion of knowledge and instruction aimed at long-term survival. Even after her well-considered suggestions on strategy and training are partially accepted by her father, she frankly reveals her misgivings about his approach in her final remark: 'I just hope things hold together long enough for us to do it your way.'⁷ The entire conversation is significant in that it reveals her extraordinary clarity of thought, perspicacity, farsightedness, and drive towards affirmative action—all integral characteristics of a feminist leader in the making.

Lauren's own preparatory measures for future contingencies are quite comprehensive. She extracts potentially useful information from an eclectic collection of books, assembles essentials in an emergency pack, and tries to develop a new worldview that will help her to negotiate the uncertainties of a dystopian society. Through a series of journal entries and occasional exercises in poetry, she lays the foundations of a rather unusual belief system called Earthseed, the essence of which she encapsulates in the following verse:

God is Power—
 Infinite,
 Irresistible,
 Inexorable,
 Indifferent.
 And yet, God is Pliable—
 Trickster,
 Teacher,
 Chaos,
 Clay.
 God exists to be shaped.
 God is Change.⁸

Earthseed's God, being a product of Lauren's disillusionment with her father's Baptist faith, is neither an anthropomorphic deity to be worshipped nor an authoritarian patriarch who doles out punishment or reward. As an arbitrary but all-pervasive and thoroughly impersonal principle, 'neither good/nor evil,/neither loving/nor hating,'⁹ it not only shapes humankind but can be shaped by it in turn. Earthseed's activist thrust lies in this very concept of God's dynamism and infinite malleability, implying the capacity of human beings to adapt to change, to exert a positive influence on the circumstances of their lives, and to empower themselves in the process. Belief in Earthseed either '[i]nitiates and guides action—/Or it does nothing.'¹⁰ In a certain sense, Lauren's religious system is paradoxically based on secular and scientific principles; some of the dimensions of her God are 'biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and, of course, the second law of thermodynamics,'¹¹ all of which revolve around the notion of change. The only reason why Lauren uses a divine framework to legitimise her vision is because '[p]eople forget ideas,' but '[t]hey're more likely to remember God.'¹² Moreover, her attitude

to Earthseed is not proprietary; she claims to have ‘discovered’ rather than ‘invented’ it through the observation of empirical phenomena and the exploration of established truths.

The choice of the name Earthseed is significant, as it evokes the natural processes by which seeds disperse themselves for fertilisation despite their limited mobility: ‘Even they don’t have to just sit in one place and wait to be wiped out.’¹³ Likewise, Lauren believes that humanity as a species can only survive if human beings ‘seed’ themselves farther and farther away from the ‘dying place’¹⁴ that is Earth. What she visualises is a complete rupture from the moribund patterns of familiarity for a new beginning in uncharted territories—a goal that she sees as achievable through the peopling of extra-solar worlds.

The Destiny of Earthseed

Is to take root among the stars.¹⁵

Within the socio-political context delineated in the Parables, where space exploration has been privatised and is motivated by profit-making impulses rather than the spirit of scientific enquiry, the Destiny naturally seems absurdly overambitious. However, Lauren is unwavering in her certainty that the difficulty of life on an alien planet will divert human beings from their self-destructive proclivities and give them renewed purpose. Readers familiar with Butler’s acclaimed *Xenogenesis* trilogy¹⁶ will be aware of her theory of the ‘Human Contradiction’—the premise that all human activity is ineluctably driven towards self-destruction due to the co-existence in the species of two incompatible characteristics, intelligence and hierarchical behaviour, with the former unwisely placed in the service of the latter. Butler hypothesises that the only way to alleviate this contradiction and facilitate the growth and immortality of the species is ‘to go out into space . . . we can use the stresses of

learning to travel in space and live elsewhere—stresses that will harness our energies until we've had time to mature.¹⁷ Lauren's vision is therefore transformative in a very broad and holistic sense: it not only seeks to imbue human existence with a constructive sense of direction but also holds out the promise of a literal heaven for its adherents in the form of new worlds waiting to be shaped.

As the narrative progresses, Lauren's worst prognostications about Robledo's fate begin to come true. Incidents of infiltration and attack become increasingly frequent; Lauren's father goes missing and is presumed dead after a futile search, thereby generating a leadership vacuum; and the entire community is finally decimated when rampaging 'pyromaniacs'¹⁸ break down the gates, set fire to the houses, and rape and murder the residents—young and old. Lauren manages to escape from the ruins and is joined by two other survivors as they undertake a difficult journey northward, where conditions are rumoured to be better. As they navigate the freeways of California amidst thousands of dispossessed people competing fiercely for resources and refuge, extreme paranoia and the willingness to kill in self-defence become necessary preconditions for survival. Butler also exploits the science-fiction framework of her narrative to fashion for her protagonist a peculiar delusional disorder called hyperempathy syndrome (a direct consequence of her late biological mother's abuse of a popular performance-enhancing drug), which prompts her to feel intensely the pain and pleasure that she sees other people experiencing around her. Thus, when she is required to injure or kill, she invariably inflicts the same pain on herself in helpless empathy. In a world where pleasurable sensations are rare and painful ones are plentiful, this condition becomes 'a weakness, a shameful secret'—'A person who knows what I am can hurt me, betray me, disable me with little effort.'¹⁹ By making empathy a dangerous biological imperative for

Lauren rather than merely a personality trait or a leadership ethic, Butler not only dispels popular myths of the leader's supreme self-assurance and invulnerability but also pre-empts the gratuitous wielding of power through violence that is all too common among figures of authority in the real world.

The northward journey has momentous consequences for Lauren's evolution as a leader because it allows her to meet and form alliances with other individuals who are similarly on the move in search of better living conditions for themselves and/or their children.²⁰ Initially, these alliances are purely transactional—Lauren wishes to strengthen the group to discourage troublemakers, while the new members are keen on embracing the additional protection and increased access to resources that a supportive and armed group of people can provide. As Claire P. Curtis observes, their shared vulnerability presents a common ground that 'allows them to be interdependent and to understand their contractual obligations as multidirectional.'²¹ However, Lauren soon puts her transformational agenda to work when she tentatively begins to share her ideas on Earthseed with her fellow travellers, hoping to draw them into her vision. The process is not easy; most of them initially respond to her Earthseed texts with scepticism or amusement and dismiss the Destiny as ludicrously far-fetched. Nevertheless, their vigorous critiques of Lauren's theories and her reciprocal willingness to address their questions and articulate the intricacies of her vision establish the inherently dynamic and discursive character of Earthseed at a very early stage. What Lauren solicits is not blind faith in a monolithic doctrine but an intelligent engagement with a belief system that is in a constant state of development. Her painstaking efforts soon yield fruits as she succeeds in gaining a few 'converts' who, despite their generally lukewarm response to the Destiny, are attracted by the idea of a 'community where people look out for

each other and don't have to take being pushed around.'²²

Virtually all of Lauren's travelling companions have traumatic histories of personal loss, oppression, slavery, and rape to recount; some are even hyperempaths or 'sharers' like Lauren and are easily debilitated by violence. By encouraging them to communicate and forge connections with one another on the basis of these experiences, Lauren foregrounds the confessional element that bell hooks identifies as a fundamental aspect of radical feminist leadership: 'I found that if people could identify with you through the act of personal testimony or confession in some way, they were more open to grappling with different jargon, different paradigms.'²³ Moreover, Lauren does not make it obligatory for new members to declare their belief in Earthseed before joining the group; she is averse to coercive proselytising and will only accept voluntary entry into the faith. Years later, when Lauren tries to rationalise why she was accepted as a leader despite her youth and inexperience, she attributes it to the strength of her vision, her purposiveness, and her urge to make a positive difference:

I was 18 when I began collecting people . . . People followed me, though. . . . And they didn't only do it because they were convinced that I could help them get what they wanted. They followed me because I seemed to be going somewhere. They had no purpose beyond survival. . . . But I wanted more than that for myself and for my people, and I meant to have it.²⁴

It must be noted that Lauren's self-fashioning as a *religious* leader is an ambitious act that has subversive possibilities due to the continued exclusion of women (particularly women of colour) from the upper echelons of institutionalised religious structures and the reluctance to acknowledge them as potentially creative

sources of theological ideas and practices. Earthseed is a distinctly open-ended, feminist interpretation of religion that encourages long-term commitment to an expansive mission without resorting to self-righteous dogmatism, prescriptive ritualism, or the circumscription of individual identities. At the same time, it offers a more immediate sense of solidarity and collective healing through the establishment of Acorn, a settlement comprising a thoroughly heterogeneous group of survivors who are bound together by mutual trust and dependence and by their varying degrees of faith in the immense scope of the Destiny.

When the events of *Parable of the Talents* commence, Acorn as a community is steadily expanding and thriving by virtue of the collective efforts of its members. Sustainable farming and animal-rearing practices and the focus on small-scale, environment-friendly development based on Earthseed principles ensure Acorn's continued self-sufficiency and recall the trope of 'living off the land' that is so popular in the feminist utopian literary tradition. However, as Patricia Melzer observes, 'the rejection of exploitative capitalist values and the promotion of ecologically safe production' do not signal 'a yearning for a pastoral, pre-technological past' in Butler's text.²⁵ Lauren diligently maintains a collection of world-news disks in order to keep in touch with radical technological advances in the outside world and contemplate their potential utility in furthering Earthseed towards its Destiny. Attention is also drawn to the daily functioning of Acorn, which is closely governed by the feminist values of inclusion, egalitarianism, and cooperation. Although Lauren's position as the leader of the community remains unquestioned, the actual tasks associated with leadership are collaboratively performed by the adults according to their specific talents and skill sets and without regard to traditional gender roles. The upbringing of children is a communal

responsibility (as in most feminist utopias), and immense importance is attached to their education and nurturance—an education designed to equip them to confront the challenges of an inimical society as well as to shape them as vehicles through which the human race may move closer to the Destiny. Most significant issues affecting the community are discussed during weekly sessions or ‘Gatherings’ oriented towards ‘problem-solving . . . planning, healing, learning, creating, . . . and reshaping ourselves.’²⁶ These sessions encourage participatory and consensus-based approaches to decision making, allow the negotiation of differences, validate the autonomous voices of individual members, and prevent the excessive concentration of power in the hands of the chosen leader.

The transformative feminist force of Earthseed also lies in its open acceptance of human diversity. Acorn is not only poly-ethnic—‘We’re you name it: Black, White, Latino, Asian, and any mixture at all’²⁷—but also includes people of various ages, classes, sexualities, and competencies, thereby generating a hybrid collective that bears close resemblance to what Gloria Anzaldúa has called a ‘new tribalism.’ In an essay entitled “(Un)natural Bridges, (Un)safe Spaces,” Anzaldúa expands her theory as follows:

Many of us identify with groups and social positions not limited to our ethnic, racial, religious, class, gender, or national classifications. Though most people self-define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include—what I call the new tribalism.²⁸

The new tribalism is born of an attempt to identify ‘commonality within the context of difference’²⁹ in a way that is non-hierarchical, dialogic, and inclusive. Anzaldúa points out that the familiar categories of ethnic, racial, gender, and class-based stratification

have historically been manufactured and imposed on subordinated communities by the patriarchal, hegemonic order and cannot therefore be used as launching pads for new kinds of political mobilisation. Moreover, human identity is neither one-dimensional nor stable; postmodern feminist theory has repeatedly emphasised its contingent, relational, and performative nature. Lauren's Earthseed community works on the same basic principles; it integrates but does not attempt to co-opt or subsume the ethno-racial, sexual, and gendered particularities of its constituent members. Melzer notes that unlike most feminist utopias that seek to erase conflict-causing difference through a contrived homogeneity, Butler 'bases the strength of her utopian community' on 'socially constructed difference.'³⁰

Despite the steady expansion of Acorn and the industriousness of its inhabitants, Lauren is acutely aware that Acorn is 'still only a single tiny hill community . . . sharing an almost nineteenth-century existence.'³¹ Its sequestered positioning and limited resources render it unsuitable for the growth of Earthseed, and Lauren is frustrated at her inability to conceptualise viable alternatives that can fully incorporate the vast complexity of the Destiny. In this context, one may recall bell hooks's critique of 'separatist-oriented communities' within the feminist movement that focused exclusively on the creation of safe spaces where women could 'live the "feminist" lifestyle':³²

[P]raxis within any political movement that aims to have a radical transformative impact on society cannot be solely focused on creating spaces wherein would-be-radicals experience safety and support. Feminist movement to end sexist oppression actively engages participants in revolutionary struggle. Struggle is rarely safe or pleasurable.³³

The notion of feminist community has had its apologists as well as its detractors: while the former argue that a communitarian existence is a useful alternative to the masculine ethos of self-absorbed individualism upheld by Western metaphysics, the latter contend that all communities operate in accordance with the hierarchical logic of inclusion and exclusion and thereby end up reinforcing or manufacturing boundaries between diverse social constituencies.³⁴ While Butler does not advocate a comprehensive rejection of communitarian ideals, she makes it clear that no separatist enclave can be truly safe within a larger context of systemic oppression when she subjects Acorn to a destruction that is as sudden as it is complete. The seeds of this destruction are sown when we learn that the country has elected a fundamentalist Christian President named Andrew Steele Jarret who vows to 'make America great again'³⁵ by resurrecting 'some magical time when everyone believed in the same God, worshipped him in the same way, and understood that their safety in the universe depended on completing the same religious rituals and stomping anyone who was different.'³⁶ Jarret's most fanatical loyalists have been known to burn religious non-conformists as witches and to mutilate women whom they deem unfeminine or insubordinate. Their bigotry and misogyny are initially directed against powerless vagrants and squatters, but they soon turn their attention to larger communities of 'heathen cultists'—an umbrella term encompassing all the ideologically dissenting forces in Jarret's Christian America. Acorn is thus invaded and re-christened "Camp Christian"; its children are abducted and placed in orthodox foster homes; and the adult members of the community are enslaved with technologically sophisticated collars that deliver unbearable jolts of pain if the wearers attempt to rebel or escape.

The neo-fascist slave masters justify their actions as part of a civilising mission aimed at the 're-education' of the Earthseed

community via the tools of religious terrorism, incarceration, forced labour, and relentless physical and sexual abuse. Butler presents this episode in ruthlessly brutal terms that make it a rather harrowing read, but she also frames it as an inevitable and perhaps even necessary test for her young feminist leader, who must devise a way to rescue her community as well as Earthseed from this crisis. Melzer points out that the entire narrative of *Parable of the Talents* is structured around this confrontation between ‘two conflicting concepts of leadership: one that encourages hate and homogenous cultural conventions on the one hand, and that which seeks diversity and justice on the other.’³⁷ At this juncture in the text, Butler has a word of caution for the reader:

Choose your leaders/with wisdom and forethought.
 To be led by a coward/is to be controlled/by all that the
 coward fears.
 To be led by a fool/is to be led/by the opportunists/who
 control the fool.
 To be led by a thief/is to offer up/your most precious
 treasures/to be stolen.
 To be led by a liar/is to ask/to be told lies.
 To be led by a tyrant/is to sell yourself/and those you
 love/into slavery.³⁸

Through this passage, Butler advocates a relational theory of leadership predicated on collective rather than individual responsibility, demanding careful deliberation and judgement on the part of every political participant in a democratic nation. Indeed, there can be no comprehensive analysis of leadership functions without a concomitant investigation into the subject of followership and its role in shaping organisational or political outcomes. Jarret is an efficient demagogue who uses his

formidable rhetorical skills to stoke the deep-seated insecurities and prejudices of his people through an exhibitionist display of patriotic fervour and the glorification of a completely imaginary past of Christian monoculturalism. Although the logical fallacies in his arguments are evident to any discerning listener, he obtains the enthusiastic support of people who are desperate for quick solutions and who derive hope and reassurance from the larger-than-life figure of the white Christian patriarch and saviour that he projects. In many ways, Jarret is less a fully realised antagonist than a symptom of the problems plaguing American society, and his tenure as President offers an interesting insight into the dynamics of contemporary race, gender, and class relations.

The Christian American invasion results in several deeply personal losses for Lauren—her husband is dead, as are some of her closest friends in the community, and she has been separated from her infant daughter. Moreover, as the founder and spiritual leader of Acorn, she cannot easily overcome her sense of guilt at having failed her community. Realising that overt gestures of resistance would be futile and potentially fatal, the only advice she can offer to her fellow captives is for them to try and survive, despite the morally compromising and dehumanising nature of their experiences. Gerry Canavan has observed that many of Butler's novels present situations that are structured around this idea of 'survival as the only choice, survival as itself a kind of resistance, a triumph':

[S]urvival is not necessarily the same thing as defeating your enemy, or even fighting back or standing up for yourself, but simply means that you (and, crucially, your children) have continued into the future. This was especially poignant for [Butler] as the descendant of generations of black men and black women who had

managed to survive through centuries of enslavement and segregation and degradation.³⁹

Lauren feels obligated to survive not only to locate her daughter but also to ensure the perpetuity of Earthseed, which she believes is the single most important purpose of her existence. She encourages her companions to observe their captors and collect relevant information even as they are being lashed, raped, and humiliated. It may be noted that the collared body of the slave is the ultimate ‘docile body’ theorised by Foucault; the collars enforce conformity, regardless of the wearers’ intentions, and the bodies thus collared are the idealised products of disciplinary control because they are simultaneously ‘productive’ and ‘subjected.’⁴⁰ Thus, when a fortuitous combination of circumstances finally results in the accidental disabling of the slave collars and the long-awaited liberation of their wearers, they have no qualms about killing their erstwhile ‘masters’ and destroying what is left of the settlement. Lauren also decides to make no attempt to rebuild Acorn—she asserts that ‘Acorn was precious, but it wasn’t essential.’⁴¹

The Lauren that emerges after the traumatic ordeals at Camp Christian is a changed leader in many respects. Although her ‘positive obsession’ with Earthseed remains undiminished, she is compelled to revise her original aspirations of establishing sister communities similar to Acorn on multiple inter-connected sites. She reflects:

I must build . . . not a physical community this time. I guess I understand at last how easy it is to destroy such a community. I need to create something wide-reaching and harder to kill. That’s why I must teach teachers. I must create not only a dedicated little group of followers, not only a collection of communities as I once imagined, but a

movement. I must create a new fashion in faith—a fashion that can evolve into a new religion, a new guiding force, that can help humanity to put its great energy, competitiveness, and creativity to work doing the truly vast job of fulfilling the Destiny.⁴²

This commitment to the process of shaping future leaders rather than followers represents the ultimate goal of transformational leadership in that it prioritises the vision over the visionary and paves the way for its continued growth. As Lauren moves from place to place in search of her daughter, she begins once again to disseminate her Earthseed verses among people using gently suggestive means. If her interlocutors are receptive to her arguments and explications, she persuades them to dedicate themselves more fully to Earthseed by using the talents and resources at their disposal. She also enlists the help of relatively affluent converts to meet the financial needs of her burgeoning theological and scientific movement, thereby tapping into the established networks of power and political influence. Gradually, the reader witnesses the birth of a remarkable form of grassroots activism based on 'outreach projects, door to door campaigning, city hall events, and speeches at schools and universities'⁴³ to create a communal network that is much more flexible and far reaching than the sequestered localism of Acorn. Although the details of the movement's evolution and rapid expansion are not fully traced within the narrative, we learn of its success when, at the end of *Parable of the Talents*, the first shuttles laden with seeds, frozen embryos, equipment, books, and human beings in suspended animation prepare to set off in search of other habitable planets. It is a proud moment for the founder and lifelong leader of the movement, who believes she has helped the human species make a much-needed transition to 'the next stage of growth.'⁴⁴

One must finally consider whether the strategies of feminist leadership and models of political community shaped by Lauren in the Parables may be regarded as utopian. Butler expressly stated in an interview that she found utopias ‘ridiculous’ and ‘incredibly boring’: ‘We’re not going to have a perfect human society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely.’⁴⁵ Earthseed is by no means a ‘perfect’ movement, and there is much in it that is open to criticism. Perhaps its most obvious weakness derives from Lauren’s disinclination to develop its potential as an oppositional socio-political project directed against the disconcerting nexus of state, corporate, and religious authoritarianism. Earthseed is conceptualised more as a radical alternative to the status quo than as a politically engaged tool aimed at transforming the here and now. As Tom Moylan argues, ‘While Earthseed’s separatism still suggests a relatively utopian response, that very position betrays the same detached stasis of the many utopian movements that have opted out of the self-reflexive processes of history.’⁴⁶ One may also question the extent of Earthseed’s commitment to inclusivity and intersectional alliances, as Lauren does not indicate whether individuals subscribing to different faiths stand to benefit from the monumental changes wrought by her movement.

However, Butler’s association of utopian thought with the idea of absolute perfection and stasis is based on problematic presuppositions. In his famous essay, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” Lyman Tower Sargent addresses this question of perfection as follows:

Perfect, perfection, and their variants are freely used by scholars in defining utopias. They should not be . . . there are in fact very few eutopias that present societies that the author believes to be perfect. Without the use of the word perfect, part of the logic of the anti-utopian argument

disappears.⁴⁷

Indeed, the transformative force of the Parables lies in this rejection of utopia as blueprint in favour of a more expansive and dynamic conceptualisation of utopia as a *process* of 'social dreaming'⁴⁸ that demands constant self-criticality, reformulation, and renewal. In embracing change and contingency rather than dogmatism or transcendental certainty, Earthseed confirms Darko Suvin's assertion that 'SF will be the more significant and truly relevant the more clearly it eschews final solutions, be they the static utopia or the more fashionable static dystopia.'⁴⁹ It must be remembered that the Destiny is not an end in itself: it is rather a new beginning that seeks to channel human enterprise and creativity in previously unimagined directions. Lauren's feminist politics, with its accommodation of heterogeneous subject positions and fluid notions of community, is fundamental to the actualisation of this process because it stems from a similarly utopian belief that human life has the potential to be other than (and hopefully better than) what it presently is.

NOTES

- 1 A variety of useful theoretical and practical approaches to feminist leadership are comprehensively discussed in: Jean Lau Chin et al., eds., *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).
- 2 James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper, 1978), 4.
- 3 Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (London: Headline, 2014), Kindle edition, chap. 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*, chap. 1.
- 5 *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

- 6 Ibid., chap. 6.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., chap. 3.
- 9 Ibid., chap. 20.
- 10 Ibid., chap. 5.
- 11 Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (London: Headline, 2014), Kindle edition, chap. 3.
- 12 Butler, *Sower*, chap. 18.
- 13 Ibid., chap. 7.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), later published collectively as *Lilith's Brood*.
- 17 Larry McCaffery, ed., *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 69–70.
- 18 Pyromaniacs are youngsters who abuse a dangerous new drug named pyro that causes them to derive wild, sexually charged pleasure from arson. This pleasure is so intense that they frequently end up being consumed by the very flames that devour their victims.
- 19 Butler, *Sower*, chap. 15.
- 20 The journey also invites comparison with African-American slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and recall figures such as Harriet Tubman who guided former slaves from captivity to freedom. At one point, Lauren even refers to her travelling group as ‘the crew of a modern underground railroad.’ (chap. 23)
- 21 Claire P. Curtis, *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: “We’ll Not Go Home Again”* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), 140.
- 22 Butler, *Sower*, chap. 18.
- 23 Mary S. Hartman, ed., *Talking Leadership: Conversations with Powerful Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 113.
- 24 Butler, *Talents*, chap. 20.

- 25 Patricia Melzer, "'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*," *Femspec* 3, no. 2 (June 2002), <http://www.femspec.org/samples/melzer.html>.
- 26 Butler, *Talents*, chap. 4.
- 27 *Ibid.*, chap. 2.
- 28 AnaLouise Keating, ed., *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 245.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 244.
- 30 Melzer, "Utopian Desire and the Concept of Change."
- 31 Butler, *Talents*, chap. 3.
- 32 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 27.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 34 Both sides of this argument are extensively presented in: Penny A. Weiss and Marilyn Friedman, eds. *Feminism and Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).
- 35 Butler, *Talents*, chap. 1. Incidentally, Butler's use of this phrase generated considerable interest in the Parables during Donald Trump's presidential campaign, with popular websites such as HuffPost and BuzzFeed claiming that Butler had somehow 'predicted' Trump's infamous slogan. This is, however, misleading, as Butler was undoubtedly alluding to Ronald Reagan's use of the same slogan as early as 1980.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Melzer, "Utopian Desire and the Concept of Change."
- 38 Butler, *Talents*, chap. 11.
- 39 Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), Kindle edition, chap. 3.
- 40 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995), 26.
- 41 Butler, *Talents*, chap. 17.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Melzer, "Utopian Desire and the Concept of Change."
- 44 Butler, *Talents*, Epilogue.
- 45 McCaffery, *Across the Wounded Galaxies*, 69.

- 46 Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 242.
- 47 Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 9–10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246>.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 49 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 83.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Burns, James MacGregor. *Leadership*. New York: Harper, 1978.
- Butler, Octavia. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Hachette, 2000. Kindle edition.
- . *Parable of the Sower*. 1993. London: Headline, 2014. Kindle edition.
- . *Parable of the Talents*. 1998. London: Headline, 2014. Kindle edition.
- Canavan, Gerry. *Octavia E. Butler*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. Kindle edition.
- Chin, Jean Lau, Bernice Lott, Joy K. Rice, and Janis Sanchez-Hucles, eds. *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.
- Crum, Maddie. "A Dystopian Novelist Predicted Trump's Campaign Slogan in the '90s." *HuffPost*, July 2, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/octavia-butler-predicted-make-america-great-again_us_5776d9dce4b0416464100242
- Curtis, Claire P. *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: "We'll Not Go Home Again."* Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Random House, 1995.
- Hartman, Mary S., ed. *Talking Leadership: Conversations with Powerful Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984.

- Keating, AnaLouise, ed. *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- McCaffery, Larry, ed. *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- Melzer, Patricia. "‘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*." *Femspec* 3, no. 2 (June 2002).
<http://www.femspec.org/samples/melzer.html>
- Moylan, Tom. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 1–37.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719246>
- Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Weiss, Penny A., and Marilyn Friedman, eds. *Feminism and Community*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- Yandoli, Krystie Lee. "A '90s Novel about Political Corruption Predicted Donald Trump’s Campaign Slogan." *BuzzFeed*, July 6, 2016.
https://www.buzzfeed.com/krystieyandoli/a-90s-novel-about-political-corruption-predicted-donald-trump?utm_term=.o15ROk8Wr#.gqZ1WPdk9