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The Future of Racial Classifications: Exploring Race in the Critical Dystopia

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## The Future of Racial Classifications: Exploring Race in the Critical Dystopia

### I. Introduction

Twenty-first century America is in the midst of a widely critiqued debate over the future of race. In a society where incessant racism and oppression and multiracial acceptance and pride exist concurrently, the future has never been more uncertain. While some individuals recognize the persistence of racism and oppressive acts of hatred targeted toward minorities, others suggest that the turn of the century marked a shift toward a post-racial society. With the existence of many conflicting sides to a very controversial topic, it is interesting to consider how writers have been imagining the future of race in the past several decades. Additionally, in a society where technological and scientific advances are progressing at an impressive rate, it becomes increasingly more important to examine whether or not racial discourses are affected by these rapid developments. As a genre, science fiction functions as a vehicle for exploring the possibilities of science and technology, particularly as they exist in future settings. In science fiction, the reader is able to question and consider the issues of their present-day world as they are shown a potential image of its future. These imagined futures are both utopian and dystopian in nature, making it important to consider how race and racism are portrayed in idealized or criticized worlds.

In his book, *Race in American Science Fiction*, Isiah Lavender III critiques the genre for its tendency to silence racial identifications and racism, and he argues that racial otherness is fundamental to science fiction. He writes, “Because sf helps us think about the continually changing present through the dual lenses of defamiliarization and extrapolation, it also helps us to think about alternate tomorrows as well as to question images of these tomorrows, distortions of the various historical presents and realities” (Lavender 27). Science fiction promotes critical

thinking and deep questioning about the present-day world as well as future projections of it. When race is depicted in these images of tomorrow, readers are forced to consider its significance—they must interpret how racial representations do or do not reflect current social issues as well as speculate about how a writer may choose to portray racial distinctions in the way they do. I appreciate Lavender's address of an important impending issue: in futures where cyborgs, aliens, and machine "others" exist, what happens to the constructions of race? Will black and white still matter? Will these new beings become new races? These questions permeate as science fictional imagined worlds become more technologically advanced, and Lavender argues that these questions must be assessed rather than silenced.

Because science fiction as a genre has been dominated by white male writers, it is no surprise that racial distinctions have ultimately been ignored or made insignificant in their texts. In these futures where race no longer holds hierarchical significance, racial minorities become irrelevant. Lavender, however, contends that, "... it seems unlikely that collective cultural attitudes on the subject of race will be overlooked if they are so deeply rooted. After all, sf writers depict futures of conquest, power-mongering, hegemony, greed, and the like. Race and racism are no less a constant than human greed or the desire for dominance" (Lavender 53). It is necessary to criticize the science fiction genre for its erasure of racial classifications and racism because it is true that the subject of race is too deeply engrained in American society and culture to be overlooked. Racial classifications, and the hierarchies which result, have caused centuries of oppression, violence, and hatred in America and throughout the world; to simply eliminate their existence and imagine a world that transcends race is naïve and unimaginable. In this essay, I will examine the ways in which science fiction writers of different racial backgrounds represent

race and its future implications in alternative realities. In order to do this, it is first important to establish clear definitions of central terms in science fiction such as utopia and dystopia.

In a discussion of science fiction it is necessary to discuss dystopia and utopia because the genre has always depicted the possibilities of advancements in science and technology as well as social arrangements in a way that criticizes or praises present day society. The scholar of dystopia, M. Keith Booker, identifies a dark turn toward pessimism in modern culture at the end of the nineteenth century. These cynical views are embodied through the notion of degeneration which Booker defines as, "...the theory that, far from moving inexorably forward in its social and biological evolution, the human race could quite possibly move backward toward savagery" (Booker 2). In science fiction, the theory of degeneration seems misplaced, as science fiction also seeks to portray successful advancements in science and technology in future realities; yet this is where dystopian fiction becomes a subgenre of sf in that many sf writers of the early twentieth century felt the pervasive sense of crisis in society as they experienced the effects of events such as World War I, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, and World War II. Writers like E. M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell captured these anxieties as they revealed the possibilities of scientific progressions resulting in dystopian nightmares. These writers reflected the social apprehensions of their time, and writers of science fiction have continued with this trend of depicting dystopian futures. The theory of degeneration can then also be applied to critical readings of more recent works of science fiction and the representation of race.

The political culture of the 1960s and 1970s motivated a brief revival of utopian fiction, although these utopias were more critical than the earlier utopias which were understood as idealized, perfect societies. Scholars of sf, utopia, and dystopia, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, identify these utopias of the 1970s as "critical utopias" in that these works were focused

more clearly on emphasizing social change through utopian imagination rather than merely painting a flawless future. These utopian visions were shaped by rising feminist movements and New Left thought. Baccolini and Moylan claim that, "...authors of critical utopias reclaimed the emancipatory utopian imagination while they simultaneously challenged the political and formal limits of the traditional utopia" (Baccolini and Moylan 2). The traditional utopia had a tendency to focus on the portrayal of one ideal in a future society; thus, the "critical utopia" arises as a new genre, offering more open futures and inspiring the desire for change. This period of utopian revivalism was short-lived, however, because the emergence of right-wing politics and economic and cultural reform in the 1980s caused the utopian dream to fade away as the dystopian genre reappeared.

In this essay, I will be examining dystopian science fiction works from the 1970s and 90s which can be classified as "critical dystopias." It is important to note that the 1970s marks a revival in utopian fiction, particularly written by women. However, alongside the production of many utopian works, there was also a surge in women's dystopian fiction, sometimes resulting in a blurring of these two genres. Notable utopian and dystopian female writers of this decade include Marge Piercy, Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and Joanna Russ. These women are well known for producing works that project both dystopian and utopian visions. I will be comparing Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) for their representations of racial distinctions in dystopian worlds that include some element of utopian possibility. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini identify this genre blurring as an essential element of "critical dystopia" because while depicting ravished dystopian futures, the texts include some utopian elements that provide a sense of hope or agency for the characters as well as the readers. Of the critical dystopias, Moylan writes, "...they go on

to explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health..." (Moylan 189).

These "culturally and economically marginalized peoples" vary depending on the work at hand, but critical dystopias become a fascinating place to explore racial identities and relationships in the future because of the imagined possibilities for racial minorities to shape a social reality of their own making. There is potential for minority characters to overcome or fight the oppressive nature of their pasts as they are written into the future. Regardless of whether the future setting is utopian or dystopian, these characters are given hopeful opportunities for change.

The critical dystopia functions as a useful genre for depicting race and racism because of its ability to inspire and promote change. Booker explains how the classic dystopia focuses on critiquing whatever social or political issues are explored within the text. In doing so, these dystopias tend to provide readers with visions of inadequate, undesirable futures. He suggests that the critical dystopia has a more fundamental relationship with utopian thought: "The critical dystopia, on the other hand, is more nuanced; while critiquing certain negative practices or institutions, this type of dystopia retains a strong utopian dimension, emphasizing that there are alternatives to the dystopian conditions being portrayed" (Booker 5). This emphasis on the alternatives makes the critical dystopia a powerful place to explore social and political issues because it instills a sense of agency in the reader. Whether the characters in the text are inspired by utopian possibilities, or the reader views the utopian elements as hope for the future of their own present day, the critical dystopia is an uplifting method for depicting social criticism.

In examining dystopian texts with utopian features, I think it is necessary to explore the fundamental function of utopia. Utopia can mean and represent different things according to

different people as is seen directly through a series of letters between two utopian theorists, Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson. In these letters dating from July 2001 to January 2002, Levitas and Sargisson debate the ability of utopia to promote change in society. While I will be examining these two sides to the debate, this is not to say that only two sides exist. There are many utopian critics whose ideas about the agency of utopia may differ, but Levitas and Sargisson outline two opinions that effectively highlight the types of utopian visions that are explored by Butler and Piercy. The correspondence begins with Levitas responding to Sargisson's assertion that Levitas's views of utopia are too pessimistic. Levitas defends her views, arguing that utopia should function as a means of creating action: "Utopian imaginings may be located in the future but without any convincing account of transforming agents and processes that could turn wishful thinking into political action. The alternative functions of Utopia, then, are compensation (or retreat and escapism) and critique" (Levitas and Sargisson 14). Levitas argues that her pessimism comes from the fact that the greatest function of utopia is to catalyze change; however, she believes that utopias should imagine future alternatives in a way that inspires and shapes social transformation. According to Levitas, through an exploration of alternative realities, readers should acquire the means and awareness of how to promote change in their own present day.

I appreciate Levitas' criticism of critical dystopia for its lack of ever showing the success of the utopian alternative, which can be seen in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. While Butler's portrayal of a utopian possibility instills hope and action for her protagonist, she leaves the novel open-ended without the fulfillment of the utopia. Sargisson is more ambitious about the power of utopia in that she sees the exploration of alternative realities as a transformative process in itself—one that is powerful enough to support and promote change. In Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, this is the function of her utopian vision. Piercy depicts an ideal community of

characters whose lives are essentially perfect in terms of the beliefs and values of the community. The issue with Piercy's utopia is that it does not consist of the "transforming agents and processes" that Levitas demands of utopia. Rather, it depicts a society that functions as a criticism of Piercy's society in the 1970s without offering any means of attaining a similar utopia for her readers. The sf elements that Piercy utilizes allow her protagonist to escape from the dystopian present and travel through time to the utopian future without undertaking any type of change or action to arrive there.

My intention in writing this paper is to explore how Butler and Piercy examine and portray racism in their texts. Because of the differences in their own racial backgrounds, Piercy being white and Butler being black, as well as the time periods in which they are writing (the 1970s and 1990s), these two women will have different visions for the treatment of racial differences in the future. Both Butler and Piercy redefine racial classifications in their future worlds. Butler neutralizes the racial hierarchy by establishing a union of racial minorities who embrace their multiculturalism. She implies that this unity and acceptance is not only possible, but she also portrays a potential future that differs from traditional images in sf and dystopian fiction in that these minorities create a civilized community of their own within a ruined world. In doing so, Butler instills a sense of agency in her readers by showing them a route to a multiracial future founded on acceptance and empathy. Piercy redefines the racial hierarchy altogether in her utopian future, creating a society in which skin color and other racially marked features no longer carry significance. Piercy differs from Butler in that she does not pave the way toward this future for her readers. The dystopian present-day she depicts is hundreds of years away from the utopian future. There is still the possibility of achieving the utopia, but Piercy does not provide her readers with the processes or methods for reaching it. Her utopia functions

as a critique of her society, and although she does not show her readers how to achieve the utopian vision, the resilience of her protagonist is meant to inspire readers to fight for change.

I think that in discussing race as it is portrayed in science fiction and dystopia/ utopia, it is also important to understand Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as the literature of "cognitive estrangement." Lavender explores how science fiction is successful according to this definition. Cognitive estrangement refers to the ways in which science fiction presents something familiar to the reader yet portrays it in a way strange enough to erase that familiarity. It is the creation of alternative worlds and realities that still manage to abide by the natural and expected ways of the universe. The reader is then able to recognize the imagined world, but they examine it with a changed perspective:

A change in perspective causes the reader to realize new ideas or interpret the world differently. Thus, this reader is able to see beyond old theories and wrap his/her mind around new ones...Certainly, the idealized reader can arrive at a new understanding of politics, social environments, materialistic desire, technological marvels, and perhaps even race through "cognitive estrangement. (Lavender 29)

I think Suvin's definition is well-maintained in that science fiction does create the possibility of removing readers from their world and what they know, placing them in a space that is still attainable to the imagination yet allows for a complete reconstruction of the reader's beliefs, theories, ideas, and values. In terms of the portrayal of race and racism in science fiction, this permits the reader to lay aside their previous notions and imagine a place where race and racism may or may not carry the oppressive history they do in present-day society.

Novelist Walter Mosley, in an essay titled “Black to the Future,” discusses the experiences of black writers in science fiction and highlights the important role that cognitive estrangement plays in a reader’s experience. He argues that black writers are too often unable to escape from writing about race and racism. Whether they are driven by their own desire to discuss the oppression endured by black people throughout history or are pressured by the white community to convey the experience of being black in a white world, black writers feel burdened with the responsibility to write about race (Mosley 406). Mosley appreciates the science fiction genre for its ability to cause cognitive estrangement: “The power of science fiction is that it can tear down the walls and windows, the artifice and laws by changing the logic, empowering the disenfranchised, or simply by asking, What if?...The destroyer-creator must first be able to imagine a world beyond his mental prison. The hardest thing to do is to break the chains of reality and go beyond into a world of your own creation” (Mosley 407). Because science fiction provides both readers and writers with the possibility of breaking the “chains of reality” and restructuring one’s ideas, values, and beliefs, it is a widely celebrated genre. In Butler’s and Piercy’s texts, the reader is pushed to think beyond the “walls and windows” of what they know as their ideas about race and racism are redefined. They are forced to consider the treatment of race in their own world as they are shown images of it in future settings.

## **II. Redefining the Racial Hierarchy in Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower***

One of the greatest contributors to the American science fiction genre was Octavia E. Butler. Butler is often referred to as the “grand dame” of science fiction because of her success as a female African American writer of science fiction and fantasy. Her publications in the genre throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century made a profound change in what was typically a white male dominated field. Butler grew up in the racially integrated community of Pasadena, California in

the 1950s, which exposed her to diverse cultural and ethnic experiences amidst a predominantly racially segregated nation. While she did not experience the harsher aspects of segregation in her racially mixed community, she did witness the pervasive racism in America, so the topics she explores through her writing are closely related to her recognition of racism and her personal experiences. Her writing itself has led to major developments in the thematic topics and types of characters that readers see in science fiction.

In a 1985 interview with Frances M. Beal, a black scholar, Butler was asked what interested her about science fiction. She responded that she likes the freedom the genre provides despite its tendency to be limited by what white authors have previously done: “It tends to be limited by what people think should be done with it, although less now than in the past. In the past, there were editors who didn’t really think that sex or women should be mentioned or at least not used other than as rewards for the hero or terrible villainesses. Blacks were not mentioned without there being any particular reason” (qtd. in Beal 14). Regardless of these limitations, Butler chases a sense of freedom in the genre as she reinvents science fiction characters, telling stories whose protagonists are both black and female. She takes the women in her stories out of their past positions as “rewards” or “terrible villainesses” and gives them a voice and a role that is integral to the plot. Butler’s celebration of black life and culture in her imagined future worlds places her as a prominent figure in the Afrofuturist movement.

The 1990s marked the emergence of a new mode of critical and creative inquiry: Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism is a popular aesthetic movement that has become increasingly relevant not only in terms of the art, music, and literature produced, but also in terms of its political mission. Ytasha Womack, the author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, defines Afrofuturism: “It is the intersection between black culture, the

imagination, liberation, technology, and I like to say, mysticism. But essentially it's really a way of looking at the relationship between black culture and science fiction" (Womack 13). Womack also discusses that, too often, people make the assumption that Afrofuturism is simply black science fiction. She explains that Afrofuturism is so much more than that, though, because the movement has taken root across many disciplines including music, dance, history, art, and literature. While the seeds of the Afrofuturist movement had been developing as early as the nineteenth century, it was not until more recent decades that authors and critics began establishing themselves within the movement, utilizing it as a means of celebrating and promoting black culture through art, literature, and music. A new sense of agency develops out of the movement as black readers are able to envision a future in which they can take part in changing the world around them. According to Womack, Afrofuturist ideals have always been ingrained in the production of black music, art, and literature, yet it is not until it was designated with the name of Afrofuturism that the movement really expanded and began promoting change in the treatment of African Americans in creative texts set in the future.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, American science fiction developed as its own form, and black science fiction writers emerged, although they were primarily published in black magazines and newspapers. Afrofuturist authors at this time, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Delany, sought to be taken seriously in their attempts to promote social change in America. It was challenging for emerging Afrofuturists to speculate about the future of race in America through their writing because other mainstream science fiction writers either completely omitted racial differences in their works or the racial prejudices of their present day carried over into their imagined futures. Lisa Yaszek outlines a brief history of Afrofuturism in which she explains, "While early Afrofuturists are concerned primarily with the question of whether or not

there will be any future whatsoever for people of color, contemporary Afrofuturists assume that in the future race will continue to matter to individuals and civilizations alike” (Yaszek 2). These contemporary Afrofuturists include black writers of the 1960s and 70s such as Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Charles Saunders, who have successfully established themselves within the science fiction community. Afrofuturist writers use science fiction to combat the historical erasure of black people by writing themselves into the future and addressing racial issues in their society through an exploration of the role of black people in technologically and scientifically advanced worlds. Writers like Butler, Delany, and Saunders use science fiction and elements of utopian/dystopian fiction to portray their ideas and concerns about the significance, or lack thereof, of race in imagined societies.

Although a text may not be easily identifiable as an Afrofuturist work, Afrofuturist ideals have been stitched throughout art for decades as is evident through the work of writers like DuBois and Delany and musicians like Sun Ra. Mark Dery first coined the title of the movement in his 1994 essay, “Black to the Future.” Once this cultural aesthetic and movement was named, it flourished and empowered black readers, writers, musicians, artists, and more to create art relevant to their lives and experiences. While Afrofuturism is closely connected to science fiction, it aesthetically has components that are not traditionally science fictional. In her book, Womack explains, “Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (Womack 9). These elements are at the center of the works of many Afrofuturists, particularly Octavia Butler, and they capture the attention of a wider audience, pushing people to imagine the world in new, fascinating ways and empowering them to see the future and take action.

Butler uses the science fiction genre as a platform to explore depictions of racial issues and hierarchical relations in alternative worlds, and in doing so, she paints herself as an Afrofuturist by writing black culture into the future. In 1993, Butler published the first novel in her *Earthseed* series, *The Parable of the Sower*, which opens in a dystopian future of the 2020s where society is in the midst of collapse. Global warming has caused drought and rising sea levels; schools and communities are being privatized by multinational corporations; middle-class families live in walled neighborhoods to keep out the poor and homeless who will stop at nothing to rob, rape, or kill; and the police are untrustworthy, placing charges on their services. Lauren Oya Olamina is a young black woman coming of age in a walled neighborhood in Robledo, a fictional town located twenty miles outside of Los Angeles. Her neighborhood is a gated community consisting of several families who are struggling to survive the poverty-stricken, violence-prone, and environmentally-ruined world beyond their walls. As a result of her mother's drug abuse during pregnancy, Lauren was born with an "organic delusional syndrome" called hyperempathy which causes her to share any pain or pleasure that she witnesses others experience. In the dystopian setting of 2024, Lauren's hyperempathy is seen as a debilitating weakness in that she shares all levels of pain endured by those around her. It is impossible for Lauren to avoid "sharing;" thus, she is at a great disadvantage in an impoverished world full of violence and chaos. Despite her heightened awareness of pain and its weakening effect on her well-being, Lauren has hope for humanity, and she embodies this hope in her Earthseed theology. Earthseed begins as a collection of verses written by Lauren in which she describes her vision of human destiny, imagining a possible utopian future where she establishes a community of followers who are capable of creating order and community beyond the destroyed American landscape.

The creation of a black protagonist who functions as the advocate for a better, utopian society implies that an ideal future requires cross-racial empathy and acceptance of mixed races and cultures. As Lauren travels North in hopes of founding her Earthseed community, she gathers its founding members along the way. These characters are primarily non-white racial minorities, and some are multiracial; characters are rarely described as having similar racial identities. Butler's establishment of such a mixed group who become the central focus and hope for a better future reveals her optimism and hope that the future will become one where minorities are respected and vital to the success of the community. Rather than eliminating the segregation of differing racial identities altogether in the present day United States, Butler writes so these characteristics of the non-white racial "other" become crucial markers that set these characters apart, while simultaneously making them catalysts for change. Butler redefines the racial hierarchy by placing empathetic, minority characters amidst a crumbling society in which their only hope for survival is to band together as one with a common purpose and goal. Butler's use of Lauren's character as a catalyst for change in a dystopian future creates a place for black audiences to imagine themselves taking action in the future. I will examine how Butler uses Afrofuturist and utopian motifs to critique American institutions of race, emphasizing the power of cross-racial empathy in promoting a future where the racial hierarchy and status of minorities is redefined in a way that does not cause discrimination against a person or people.

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* opens in the year 2024, on Lauren Oya Olamina's fifteenth birthday. The novel is written through Lauren's perspective in the form of a journal she keeps, detailing the events of her life and compiling verses for the beginnings of her Earthseed books: the founding principles and visions of the utopian future she imagines for herself and followers of her beliefs. In the present moment, Lauren lives a safe life in comparison to the chaos of the

outside world. Her mother passed away giving birth to her, and she lives with her black father, a Baptist minister and professor, her Latina stepmother, and her three younger half-brothers. Within their gated neighborhood, the Olamina family is well-respected and Lauren's father seems to be naturally designated as the leader of the neighborhood. The Olaminas, along with the majority of the other families in the neighborhood, are African American or some mixed racial identity. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2000, Butler was asked why she chose to place black women at the heart of her work, to which she responded: "I certainly wasn't in the science fiction. The only black people you found were occasional characters or characters who were so feeble-witted that they couldn't manage anything, anyway. I wrote myself in, since I'm me and I'm here and I'm writing" (Marriott). In this dystopian future set decades ahead from when Butler was writing, she places a black protagonist and mixed family at the center of her novel. Not only are these characters the central focus, but they also combat stereotypes of "feeble-wittedness" and inability to "manage anything" by becoming the leaders, those capable of establishing order and sanity amidst a chaotic, deteriorating society. Outside the neighborhood walls, the world is riddled with violence and danger-- people scavenge to survive as they face homelessness, poverty, and drug addiction. Political institutions are collapsing and each day brings about new fears regarding lack of drinking water and employment as well as increased robberies, murders, and destruction of neighborhoods. The only source of hope in Lauren's dystopian world are her Earthseed verses and her dreams of one day establishing a community of Earthseed followers.

In this dystopian world where morality and civilization have all but disappeared, a racial hierarchy still exists in which skin color and ethnicity are defining characteristics that have the power to segregate individuals and create hostility among them. Tom Moylan, in his book *Scraps*

*of the Untainted Sky*, investigates the history and aesthetics of dystopia and he focuses a chapter of his work on those aspects in Butler's *Parable* series. Of Lauren's character he writes, "Her intelligence and her upbringing by a father and stepmother whose lives are rooted in the church and in the struggle for African American freedom have made her into a contemplative, resourceful, and courageous young woman who reads signs of the times and refuses to give in to their destructive ambience" (Moylan 227). In other words, Lauren's life experiences have contributed in every way to making her an exceptional character who is designed to be responsible for the salvation of humanity. Lauren observes the racism that exists within the walls of her own community, but mutes its significance by focusing on the larger concerns that her community faces in regards to environmental decline, starvation, and gang violence. In describing her neighbors, Lauren explains, "The Garfields and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be a dangerous thing these days. On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind, but with all of us armed and watchful, people stared, but they let us alone. Our neighborhood is too small for us to play those kinds of games" (Butler 36). It is evident that Butler explicitly writes this racism into the novel, highlighting the issues she sees in America in the 1990s, yet while she represents this social issue in her literature, she immediately comments on the triviality of defining others according to the color of their skin. Lauren explains that outside of their neighborhood walls, where humanity is in ruin, no one is to be trusted and people are especially distrusting of those who are not "their own kind." The implication that Lauren's neighborhood, one that cannot be bothered with "those kinds of games," is more civilized and orderly than the outside world, emphasizes Lauren's and Butler's ideas about the destructive nature of racist and segregationist attitudes.

Despite Lauren's comments on her neighborhood's lack of involvement in such racial separation "games," she does not deny that they do have racial tensions. Upon discovering that a girl in the neighborhood is pregnant, she writes, "...Jorge admits to being the father...At least they're both Latino. No interracial feud this time. Last year when Craig Dunn who's white and one of the saner members of the Dunn family was caught making love to Siti Moss who's black and Richard Moss's oldest daughter to boot, I thought someone was going to get killed. Crazy" (Butler 86-87). Lauren admits to the existence of "interracial feuds" within her community. Even in her neighborhood where black and white families live in relative harmony, the mixing of races is still a taboo. It was not until 2000 that the United States census created an option for individuals to identify as more than one race. Prior to then, Americans who were of multiracial identity were forced to classify themselves as a singular racial identity. Butler began writing *Parable of the Sower* in 1989, so she witnessed the racist fears of interracial relationships during the 1980s and 1990s. When Craig Dunn and Siti Moss were caught in an interracial union, it stirs conflict within the neighborhood to the point where individuals' lives were at risk. Butler highlights the extent to which people were fearful and hateful towards interracial coupling and suggests that this issue is one that transcends time and boundaries. While Lauren's neighborhood can be seen as a safe place within the greater dystopian world, it is certainly no utopia as these people are merely existing and doing what they must to survive. It is clear that within the community, its members do not know, trust, and accept one another, so there is no model for an ideal future. Butler offers a dystopian vision and real-world critique of the present through her depiction of Lauren's neighborhood.

It is not until Robledo is destroyed and Lauren's neighborhood falls apart that Lauren's utopian Earthseed vision begins to take real, physical shape beyond the verses she has been

writing in her journal. Three years into the opening of the novel, it is 2027, and Lauren and her neighbors face their biggest fear: people from the outside drive a truck through their gate, set fire to their houses, and burn, steal, rape, and murder who and what they can. Lauren, unaware of where her family is, escapes the chaos, only to return in the morning to scavenge what money and resources she can. Upon return, she finds the neighborhood destroyed, littered with the street poor rummaging through the remains. As she walks through the charred carcasses of their homes, she finds the bodies of many of her neighbors abandoned and stripped of anything of value. Lauren is devastated by the loss of everything she has known, especially by the uncertainty of what happened to her family. As she is about to leave, she finds two surviving members of the neighborhood: Harry Balter, a white young man about the same age as Lauren, and Zahra Moss, a young black woman. Harry and Zahra witnessed the deaths of many of their neighbors and had been amongst the chaos. It was Harry who saved Zahra from being raped by an intruder, and the two immediately stuck together, assuming that they were likely the only two survivors.

Despite their having been living within the same walls for so many years, the three know very little of each other, yet their need to survive forces them to unite as a group. Zahra first tells them about how her husband, Richard Moss, had bought her from her homeless mother when she was fifteen years old, giving her a home and food to eat. She had spent the earlier years of her life living on the streets, starving and in constant danger. Although her situation as a co-wife to Richard Moss, a white man, mirrors enslavement in many ways, she admits that "...it was a thousand times better than living outside with her mother and starving" (Butler 169). Harry, Zahra, and Lauren are three very different people who, in any other situation, would be unlikely to create an alliance because of their differences both racially and in terms of their backgrounds.

However, they recognize that as a group of three they have more strength and ability, especially if Lauren disguises herself as a man and they travel as a black couple with their white friend. The trio must change and embrace their differences in order to survive, emphasizing the importance of embracing diversity, especially in a world where mixed couples and groups are more likely to “catch hell,” according to Zahra (Butler 171). Lauren struggles with whether or not to tell her new companions about her hyperempathy syndrome because all her life it has been considered a weakness, a trait that marks her as damaged or somehow less capable than others, but in order to fully trust one another they must be entirely honest and accepting. For the first time in her life, Lauren is surrounded by people who do not make her feel weakened by her condition, perhaps because Harry and Zahra have both experienced enough devastating conditions in their dystopian world to know that separating people and signifying them as less than others based on specific traits does no good for humankind.

Lauren, Harry, and Zahra function as the founding members of their new traveling community. Lauren shares pieces of her Earthseed verses with Harry and Zahra as the trio sets out on their adventure North. To Harry and Zahra, these verses are merely Lauren’s ideas and perceptions of her own view of God, but to Lauren, her vision of the foundation of an Earthseed community becomes increasingly more tangible as Harry and Zahra begin to listen and question, evolving into her first followers. On the road, they must be attentive and cautious at every turn because no one can be trusted. This lack of trust makes it challenging to establish allies because everyone must assume that the other is the enemy. As a result, it is rare that Lauren, Harry, and Zahra encounter strangers who appear trustworthy enough to band together with, yet they gather a small crowd throughout their journey.

The first additions to the group are a couple and their baby whose paths they cross at a water refill station. Lauren sees the young, mixed family and knows they are easily a target for theft or murder: “Tall, stocky, velvet-skinned, deep-black man carrying a huge pack; short, pretty, stocky, light-brown woman with baby and pack; medium brown baby a few months old-- huge-eyed baby with curly hair” (204). This family, the Douglasses, consists of a couple, Travis and Natividad, and their baby, Domingo. Travis, a black man, and Natividad, a Latino woman, had worked as a live-in cook and maid for a wealthy couple until they left to avoid the man’s growing advances towards Natividad. Their lives prior to leaving mirrors American slavery in many ways: both were children of workers for the same family, and were secretly taught to read by stealing books from their “master.” At first, Travis is hesitant to trust Lauren, Harry, and Zahra even when Lauren suggests that they are “...natural allies- the mixed couple and the mixed group” (Butler 208). According to Lauren, their mix of racial backgrounds makes them “natural allies” because they have a common experience and are stronger as a group of six rather than two smaller, more vulnerable groups. Natividad instantly accepts the group; Travis, however, is wary of trusting strangers because he feels responsible for protecting the lives of his wife and son. They are eventually the first to join the trio and quickly become a united group of six.

The continuation of the journey North brings with it more followers with a willingness to unite in order to survive. Taylor Franklin Bankole, a solo traveler, is the next addition to the group. Bankole is described as “...an older, but not yet old black man...” who encounters the group on the road and starts walking alongside them, eventually sparking conversation with Lauren (Butler 226). He later shares that he, too, had been living in a gated community with his wife who was robbed and murdered by junkies. When his community was seized and burned to

the ground in the same fashion as Lauren's community in Robledo, he escaped and set out to the North where his sister has property. Shortly after meeting Bankole, the group comes across two young, white women in need of rescuing after a house fell in on them. After extracting the women from the rubble and fighting off a gang who attempts to rob the weak and helpless women, Jill and Allie Gilchrist quickly become the newest members of the group. They are both medium-size, brown-haired white women: "They are sisters, 24 and 25 years old, poor, running away from a life of prostitution. Their pimp was their father" (Butler 237). Although Jill and Allie are white, their presence and acceptance within a group of racially mixed individuals is entirely expected because while Lauren does not make judgments based on race, religion, or any other number of attributes, her followers all have a common linkage: they are minorities in some way or another. Butler portrays these white characters who, contrary to the common depiction of white, middle-class characters, live extremely underprivileged lives on the margins of society. Jill and Allie have not been given any advantage or privilege because of the color of their skin. Rather, they have lived disadvantaged lives where they were forced into prostitution and faced oppression by their pimp father.

As the troupe continues their travel northward in hopes of a better life, they continue to grow in numbers along the way. One night after the group has settled for the evening, newcomers sneak their way into their camp, seeking refuge in the security and safety of a large group. Upon waking, they discover these two new individuals, startling them: "The two scared people turned out to be the most racially mixed that I had ever met. Here's their story, put together from the fragments they told us during the day and tonight. The woman had a Japanese father, a black mother, and a Mexican husband, all dead. Only she and her daughter are left. Her name is Emery Tanaka Solis. Her daughter is Tori Solis" (287). Lauren and the others are wary

at first of Emery and Tori because of their overtly timid nature. They come to learn that their skittishness is partly due to their prior experiences in indebted slavery. Emery and her husband had been making a living by performing farm work in exchange for food and shelter until the farm was sold to an agribusiness conglomerate and they became debt slaves. In this dystopian world, people are so desperate for food and safety that they will willingly go to work for those of a higher racial or economic status. Those with power, land, and money abuse this vulnerability and desperation of others, reverting back to eighteenth-century institutions of slavery: "...debt slaves could be forced to work longer hours for less pay, could be 'disciplined' if they failed to meet their quotas, could be traded and sold with or without their consent, with or without their families, to distant employers who had temporary or permanent need of them" (288). After her husband dies, Emery's two sons are sold as slaves and sent to an unknown place. With no hope of ever finding her children, Emery and Tori escape before they, too, are sold and separated, and the two, like the others, drift north.

The following day, the group adopts two more members: Grayson Mora and his young daughter, Doe. Lauren and Bankole suspect that Mora and Doe are also escaped slaves because the timid manner in which they interact is similar to that of Emery and Tori. Nonetheless, Emery, Mora, Doe, and Tori become an almost immediate bonded sub-group within the larger group of travelers. Mora is also of mixed races: "He was a tall, thin, black Latino, quiet, protective of his child, yet tentative, somehow" (290). Although he and Doe are welcomed into the group, Mora is very hesitant to trust anyone, and because Lauren's ideals for her community are founded in trust and unity, she is wary of Mora. Despite this wariness, she is not one to exclude anyone, so they all carry on to the north.

Butler poses an interesting commentary on racial status in her dystopian imaginings with her many parallels to slavery. Aside from the literal existence of slavery in 2024 America, she also references the migration of escaped slaves to the north in search of liberation. These minority characters—black, Hispanic, Japanese, prostitutes, ex-slaves—have all escaped oppression and hardships in some way or another, and their only hope for freedom, comfort, and safety is in uniting with one another to travel northward. No one is sure what lies north, whether social chaos and economic ruin have caused an even greater degree of racism or whether the north is just as ruined as where they are running from. Regardless of what is unknown, they find strength in their numbers as well as their acceptance and unification as a group.

Butler was writing *Parable of the Sower* in the late 1980s, amidst the development of many social movements promoting unity in diversity. While the 80s marked a shift to more dystopian depictions in literature, they also signify an awareness and tolerance of diversity in race, age, and sex. Moylan comments on the group's similarities to these social and political movements: "In their invocation of commonality and diversity, Lauren's words—and the reality of her group—recall...the unity in diversity of the social movements of the 1980s, even as it begins to offer a sketch of what could be the emerging alliance politics of the 1990s" (Moylan 234). The 1980s in America marked a return to more conservative ideals with the emergence of Ronald Reagan's presidency. At this time, many people supported Reagan in that his ideas for conservatism restored hope for the country after the economic devastation of the 1970s. However, racial concerns were in no way central to Reagan's political agenda. Racism was an undeniable factor in American life in the 1980s, but the Reagan campaign did not make any effort address these issues, which spurred the future multicultural movements. Butler mirrors the activism developing at the time she was writing in Lauren's group in this dystopian future. In

doing so, she comments on how a collapse of social structure will destroy any successful advances made towards equality or racial sensitivity. In other words, we can work towards equality with the establishment of groups and organization, but when wealth and class are no longer a means of classification, people will inevitably revert to racism as a means of classifying and dividing people. Despite her depiction of the fall of society and her highlighting of the prevalence of racist segregation, Butler also shows how people will inevitably band together with the hopes of escaping oppression and achieving equality.

Lauren does not look to ideals of individualism when laying the foundation for her Earthseed community. Through her own experience in her Robledo neighborhood, she recognizes that communities comprised of disconnected people, who are unified merely by location, will not grow or prosper. Rather, literary critic Peter G. Stillman claims of the *Parables*, "...the community must be a collective project based on the conscious interdependence and agreement of its members, who must know, trust, and be able to work with each other for shared purposes" (Stillman 22). In no way is Lauren selective in the members she gathers for her community; she does not exclude based on ascribed characteristics like race, gender, or age. Lauren is a strong, capable African-American young woman who remains determined to survive and share her thoughts and intelligence with others via her own new religion or worldview. Butler intentionally creates these minority characters to make up the foundation of Lauren's Earthseed community. Her implication is that these characters, perhaps because of their experiences as racial minorities, are somehow more capable of knowing, trusting, and working collaboratively for "shared purposes." It is certainly true that this common purpose is establishing a utopian community apart from the ravaged world. Butler suggests, however, that this community and shared purpose be one where blacks, Latinos, and mixed races are no longer

denoted below whites within the racial hierarchy. If this gathering of individuals with mixed racial identities is capable of establishing a stable living environment—obtaining fresh water, producing their own resources, and peacefully coexisting—as the government and the Earth disintegrates around them, then there is hope for equality.

While Lauren's image for an Earthseed future seems to be falling into place, it is questionable whether or not it is to be viewed as entirely utopian. Moylan argues that, "In Lauren's writing, as in Butler's, the existing hegemonic order has been at least momentarily neutralized, and a utopian space has been created in the content and form of the text" (Moylan 237). If we consider utopia as an idealized space of harmony and agreement, then I disagree with Moylan's view of Butler as a utopian writer because her motivation in portraying this vision is not to pursue a perfect society. Lauren has a utopian vision grounded in her hope for establishing an Earthseed community, but even as the community members come together, there is no true utopia because there is still distrust and wariness between its members. In a 2000 interview with the New York Times, Butler was asked whether or not she felt that racial and sexual attitudes would improve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She replied saying that they absolutely would not: "I just mean that we human beings are such naturally contentious creatures....In countries where there are no racial differences or no religious differences, people find other reasons to set aside one certain group of people and generally spit in their direction....It delights people to find a reason to be able to kick other people" (Marriott). Her response may initially cause confusion for a reader because she does in fact highlight the possibility of a more ideal future through Earthseed. However, it is evident that even in Lauren's idealized community, there is still contention. After Lauren confronts Mora for abandoning the group in the middle of a fight, she addresses his skepticism: "I hesitated. 'So what else is wrong? I can see that you don't trust us, even now.' He

walked closer to me, but did not touch me. ‘Where’d that white man come from?’ he demanded.” (Butler 302). Mora is untrusting of “the white man” just as Lauren, Emery, Tori, Mora, and Doe are marked as different because of their “sharing.” As Butler states in the interview, segregating and classifying people is, and always has been, an inevitability. Butler states that even in places where there are no visible differences among people of the population, individuals will still isolate others singularly or as a group.

Lauren’s community is an interesting case to analyze because the group, from the beginning, is racially, culturally, and religiously mixed. And it is arguably these differences that unite the group’s members because in a middle-class, white-dominated world, they are the minorities. Through Lauren’s gathering of individuals to create one community, Butler neutralizes the racial hierarchy in a way that does not denote one racial identity as better than any other. This momentary defusing of racist attitudes and beliefs gives the reader hope that Lauren’s Earthseed community could become the ideal utopia. However, in a 1985 interview, before the novel was published, Butler writes: “I’ve actually never projected an ideal society. I don’t write utopian science fiction because I don’t believe that imperfect humans can form a perfect society” (qtd. in Beal 14). Butler is clear in that she does not believe in the fulfillment of a perfect society. In these two interviews, set fifteen years apart, she reveals her unwavering views of the human race as “imperfect” and “contentious,” and therefore incapable of creating a utopian space. So, Moylan’s argument that Butler is creating a utopia is insufficient. The novel ends before we are able to see Earthseed plant its foundation and flourish as an established community with its own, established societal rules and expectations. Based on the current state of the surrounding world, it is safe to assume that it will not remain the perfect utopia it is painted to be in Lauren’s mind. Rather than considering the use of utopia as an established ideal society, it is important to

examine Butler's use of *Earthseed* as a means for promoting action. As Levitas had suggested, utopian visions require "...transforming agents and processes that could turn wishful thinking into political action" (Levitas and Sargisson 14). Butler is writing within the critical dystopian genre, depicting a utopian imagining, so as to show her readers the actions they may take to achieve a future with multiracial and multicultural acceptance. She redefines utopia as allowing for tensions to exist so her readers may find a connection worthy of driving them to take action in their own world.

*Earthseed* is cherished by Lauren because it is all she has when everything else has been taken away from her. While it is her ultimate hope for a better future in seeking out their destiny among the stars, Butler still suggests that something so utopian cannot be achieved. *Earthseed* succeeds in uniting a mixed group of individuals, but it is unable to eliminate the natural human tendencies to distrust and discriminate. Lauren has hope for a better future long before she is forced from the safety and community of her gated neighborhood, but she is unable to put her plans into action until she has cause for action and loyal followers. In one of her first entries, Lauren writes, "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church" (Butler 7). With her father being a Baptist minister, religion and the concept of God are central to her beliefs. She acknowledges the existence of God, but she questions the true meaning of the word: "Some say God is a spirit, a force, an ultimate reality. Ask seven people what all of that means and you'll get seven different answers. So what is God? Just another name for whatever makes you feel special and protected?" (Butler 15). As Lauren, Harry, and Zahra attract newcomers to their group, she sees in these people the potential to become her first converts. Those who join the group have their own notions of God, so they question and assess Lauren's theological creation. Lauren questions whether God is simply

whatever makes one feel “special and protected.” In their world of chaos and misfortune, it is easy for individuals to lose faith in what they may have once believed. Lauren’s Earthseed is more tangible than most other religions, so she is easily able to draw these characters into Earthseed despite the religious beliefs they hold as their own. It simply becomes a matter of feeling safe, valued, and protected, and if Earthseed can provide a sense of hope and security, then others will follow.

Moylan also mentions that perhaps it is Lauren’s hyperempathy which enables her to identify the primary concerns in her society and develop a means of addressing them. This is certainly true in the sense that Lauren recognizes racial status and differences as a main area of conflict in the world around her. One of her verses reads, “Embrace diversity./ Unite-/ Or be divided./ robbed./ ruled./ killed/ By those who see you as prey./ Embrace diversity/ Or be destroyed” (Butler 196). Through verses such as this one, Lauren comments on the destructive nature of racism. Butler argues that the only vehicle for combating racism is acceptance of one another’s differences. Earthseed promotes embracing diversity and uniting people despite their differences because the alternative is destruction. The gathering of people for the founding of the Earthseed community involves a uniting of very diverse individuals whose experiences as minorities place them in a position where they are vulnerable to being “preyed” upon. By embracing their differences and joining together as a whole, they break hierarchical boundaries of race because they are stronger amongst one another. As a group, they work collaboratively to ensure their safety because they recognize the importance of all members fighting to defend one another. Stillman comments on this union of minority individuals and claims that in the *Parable* series dystopian setting, the traditional American dream of individualism fails: “The ideals of a civic world of political discussion and action, a concern for the less fortunate, a sense of

mutuality among all citizens, and an effective appeal to due process and rights- all these ideals are collapsing” (Stillman 21). The 2024 America in *Parable of the Sower* portrays a collapse of these ideals, revealing Butler’s argument that political culture has been unsuccessful in enacting change for the poor, the minorities, and other groups who are deemed “outcasts” in society. Butler provides the reader with an alternative to combating the downfall of these ideals through Lauren’s establishment of Earthseed. Earthseed itself is a rather Afrofuturist idea in that it is a solution for humankind to find success despite disparity. Womack writes, “Afrofuturism is a great tool for wielding the imagination for personal change and societal growth. Empowering people to see themselves and their ideas in the future gives rise to innovators and free thinkers” (Womack 191). Lauren inspires readers to strive for “personal change” and “societal growth” through her persistence in gathering a community of members who otherwise would not be fully accepted in society. She seeks to restructure the American dream of individualism, valuing others for their differences and empowering them to see themselves as agents of change.

Earthseed’s status as an Afrofuturist and utopian vision makes it challenging to see how Butler is skeptical of the realization of a utopian society. I therefore make the argument that Butler is not creating a utopia that she expects to take physical form or become a flourishing community. Rather, it is the utopian idea and the hope and optimism that follows. We require utopian ideas to give us the hope which carries us through hardships; we require utopian ideas to inspire us to take action in order to make change. Butler’s characters understand the uncertainty of their current situation. At any moment, they could be overcome by a larger group and robbed, killed, or taken captive; they could run out of food or water and waste away; they could lose their weapons and be forced to travel defenselessly. Any number of possibilities could turn their fate around, but Lauren’s utopian vision keeps them going.

While Lauren's Earthseed is some compilation of numerous religious ideals, she has her own unique "destiny" in mind for her followers: "...And the/ Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among/ the stars" (Butler 77). In order to achieve this "Destiny" of new life creation in space, Lauren plans to first establish what she calls Acorn communities on Earth; these communities will be the foundation of Earthseed and eventually develop the necessary technology to travel into space where her followers can carry out their new lives outside of the destroyed Earth. Bankole questions Lauren about her theology, allowing her to explain the principles of Earthseed: "'The essentials,' I answered, 'are to learn to shape God with forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the fulfillment of the Destiny'" (Butler 261). Lauren proves herself to be a thoughtful, inspiring young activist. Rather than allowing the dystopia to overwhelm her aspirations, she finds hope and solace in her discovered faith, and she looks to others to support her in her prospects. These essential aspects of her beliefs encourage others to be as thoughtful and motivating as Lauren. Others must learn the importance of shared work and community and must always work to better themselves which will, in turn, better their community. Lauren's vision takes a turn towards the Afrofuturist when she explains the motivating purpose of Earthseed: "'A unifying purposeful life here on Earth, and the hope of heaven for themselves and their children. A real heaven, not mythology or philosophy'" (Butler 261). Followers of Earthseed are motivated to live a meaningful life on Earth because their reward is then a real heaven among the stars. Lauren does not create a mythical or philosophical heaven in which people live their lives according to guiding principles with the hopes of going to heaven after death. Instead she imagines a real heaven in the form of an established community in space.

Womack examines Butler's *Parable* series as Afrofuturist works and praises Butler for her advances as an Afrofuturist: "She gave many women a voice and validated their mashed-up mix of women's issues, race, sci-fi, mysticism, and the future" (Womack 110). The creation of a black, female protagonist who founds her own worldview and aspires to travel to space with a community of racial minorities to establish a new way of life is bold at the time. The idea of women in space, nonetheless black women, was rare, especially in the 1980s when Butler was writing. Butler uses Afrofuturist motifs to create a future in which her black readers see themselves in the future beyond what their present status is. Lauren sees the devastation in her society and she identifies viable solutions: "'Space could be our future,' I say. I believe that. As far as I'm concerned, space exploration and colonization are among the few things left over from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us. It's hard to get anyone to see that, though, when there's so much suffering going on just outside our walls" (Butler 20). While other characters are unable to imagine the possibility of a safe, secure future in outer space, Lauren makes it the founding hope for Earthseed. These characters are discouraged by the poverty and suffering that exist in the world around them, yet Lauren believes in the possibility of space and works towards achieving it. It is Lauren's hyperempathy that gives her the ability to look beyond the current state of her world and search for tools that will help her society rather than hurt it.

Moylan also recognizes this aptitude and optimism in Lauren. He examines her intuition in accepting space as a means of transcending the dystopia's issues and draws a comparison between her leading her followers to freedom and safety and the traveling of slaves to freedom in the North:

she understands that space travel is one of the key economic and cultural opportunities of her era, and she sees that it carries the potential to expand

humanity's self-understanding and self-respect by way of a temporal solidarity and a cosmic transcendence. For Lauren, space is a tangible heaven, and the means taken to attain that end harken back to the African American practice of 'following the drinking gourd' to liberation in the 'North.' (Moylan 229)

Lauren's vision of this "tangible heaven" in which humanity has the opportunity to begin anew by abandoning the starvation, poverty, and violence on Earth and establish a new society in space is entirely in line with Afrofuturist beliefs. Throughout the novel, there are a number of parallels to devastating racial institutions like slavery. Moylan draws a comparison between slaves escaping from the South to find freedom in the North and Lauren's leading of her followers to their own kind of freedom in the North and eventual liberation in space.

Lauren's hyperempathy functions as Butler's way of emphasizing how "contentious" humans truly are. It is significant that the only known "sharers" in the novel are Lauren, a racial minority, and Emery, Tori, Grayson, and Doe—some of the most racially mixed characters, in terms of the larger society. I argue that through the hyperempathy syndrome, Butler attempts to instill a sense of empathy in her reader, implying that minorities who have been oppressed are likely to have more awareness of the pain and suffering endured by others. Lauren describes her hyperempathy: "I feel what I see others feelings or what I believe they feel...I get a lot of grief that doesn't belong to me, and that isn't real. But it hurts" (12). In this dystopian world, Lauren's hyperempathy is a weakness. A world at the verge of ruin, riddled with extreme poverty, violence, and complete collapse of a social or justice system, is no place where one would want to share physical feelings because so few of them are pleasant feelings. In just the short time she has been alive, Lauren has likely experienced an unnecessary amount of pain as a result of her condition, very little of it being pain which was inflicted upon her directly. When she, Harry, and

Zahra first leave Robledo together, she knows she must tell them about her disorder, but is hesitant to do so because it makes her vulnerable: “Sharing is a weakness, a shameful secret. A person who knows what I am can hurt me, betray me, disable me with little effort. I can’t tell. Not yet. I’ll have to tell soon, I know, but not yet. We’re together, the three of us, but we’re not a unit yet” (178). With knowledge of her “sharing,” anyone could easily hurt Lauren. In a world where almost everyone is poor, starving, and desperate, one does not want others to be aware of their defenselessness. Lauren cannot fathom telling anyone about her “shameful secret” unless she knows they can be fully trusted because otherwise she has made herself susceptible to betrayal. Hyperempathy leaves Lauren and other “sharers” no choice but to be suspicious of others and wary of trusting them, which functions as Butler’s commentary on the idea that minorities, even though they have empathy, must also be cautious of trusting those who can use their racial status to oppress them.

While Lauren sees her hyperempathy as a weakness, something shameful and debilitating, it seems as if Butler may be suggesting that a condition like hyperempathy could strengthen a community. Butler imagines the possibility of shared physical feelings amongst individuals, and in doing so, she envisions a cross-racial empathy that could shatter the tendency of people to classify and make judgments according to race. Butler wonders if all of humankind possessed the same “sharing” abilities as Lauren, would anyone be capable of intentionally causing pain for others? After Lauren’s half-brother, Keith, is found tortured to death, she questions the morality of humanity in 2024 and suggests the potential benefits of hyperempathy: “It’s beyond me how one human being could do that to another. If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn’t do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone could feel everyone else’s pain, who

would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?" (Butler 115). These questions posed by Lauren are important considerations that transcend the novel, filtering into thoughts regarding how one might act in the real world. Again, Lauren refers to her hyperempathy as a "complaint," something unwanted and dangerous, but in this moment she considers the possible role of hyperempathy in eliminating oppression or unwarranted violence, questioning how one could cause harm to another if one were to share in the pain. Lauren goes on to discuss how her problem may be able to do some good, suggesting that, "A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all" (Butler 115). Lauren's dystopian world is a futuristic critique on many of the racial and social issues in America in the 1980s. Butler implies that in the latter decades of the twentieth century, America lacks morality, specifically in that humans tend to racially classify one another and discriminate against them according to their prejudices. Hyperempathy functions as a "biological conscience" that could eliminate or at least neutralize racial oppression by instilling empathetic feelings in everyone, preventing them from causing pain or harm to others. It is a possible solution to this human contention, but in giving so few of her characters the syndrome, Butler implies that a world where everyone is hyperempathetic could never exist.

Although a world in which all humans possess empathy and acceptance of one another cannot be achieved, Butler provides her readers with an understanding of what they must do to move in the direction of such a world. The critical dystopia is meant to function as a critique while offering some sort of method or process of change. Because Lauren's hyperempathy allows her to feel a deep level of compassion and understanding of others, she is a strong leader who is highly qualified to be the change agent in the novel. Butler's readers should take away an understanding that empathy is the key to a more accepting, flourishing future. As a racial minority, Lauren is capable of instilling a sense of hope for the future of race and racism in the

reader because she overcomes the history of oppression placed upon her and other minorities, unites a community of minority characters, and looks ahead to building a community founded upon empathy and acceptance.

### **III. The Oppressed Minority in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time***

An examination of the critical dystopias emerging from the 1980s presents questions about the critical utopias which preceded these dystopian visions. The early 1970s marked a period of optimism and excitement for those who desired change and sought a more egalitarian government (Moynan 194-195). This was a period in which there was hope for those who had continuously been made marginalized members of society—women, racial minorities, the poor—because there seemed to be a possibility for more opportunities for all people, not just a select few. In the introduction to the 2016 edition of her 1976 novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy states that the goal in writing about the future is not to predict it. She writes, “The point of such writing is to influence the present by extrapolating current trends for advancement or detriment...the point of creating futures is to get people to imagine what they want and don't want to happen down the road and maybe do something about it” (Piercy vii). This is certainly true of the numerous critical utopias which came out of the 1970s as a result of the second wave of the feminist movement. Piercy discusses how these feminist utopias were so prominent because there was “...a hunger for what we didn't have at a time when change felt not only possible but probable” (Piercy viii). Prior to the 1970s, utopias were often idealized settings depicting the preservation of humanity amidst rising technological advancements. These perfect or ideal societies were created predominately by white males, and the experiences of the characters in the utopias reflected the experiences of these writers; thus, their critiques of the world around them were aimed at social and political issues that concerned them. And these

utopian visions were just that—critiques of modern society. The evolution of the critical utopia in the 1970s marks a transition in the motives of utopia, as is seen through Piercy's comments on utopia in her introduction. Utopia is not merely used as a vehicle for criticism or predicting the future, but it should place the reader outside of their everyday lives and give them an experience that forces them to imagine what they do or don't want to happen in their future. These imaginings should then inspire readers to take action and make change.

In Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, this agency is promoted through Lauren's hope for her utopian vision. Although Piercy also depicts a utopian imagining, the call for action and revolution is less attainable which somewhat hinders the reader's acceptance of the novel as an inspiration for change. Because Piercy is writing *Woman on the Edge of Time* in the 1970s, prior to any dark shift toward dystopia, she is still able to envision a highly idealized utopia even if the means for obtaining such are more out of reach. The novel is focused around the life of the protagonist, Connie Ramos, a middle-aged Mexican-American woman with a troubled past who suddenly finds herself able to communicate with a future society. She struggles in the present to retain her dignity and independence in the face of being an oppressed minority. Connie is poor, a single woman, a racial minority, diagnosed insane, and has a violent past which cost her the custody of her daughter. Her experiences in the future awaken a determination to not let herself be controlled or victimized, by the doctors under whose supervision she is, nor the larger society in which she lives. Piercy declares this determination of Connie in her introduction to the novel in which she describes the future utopian community of Mattapoisett:

The lives and institutions and rituals of Mattapoisett all stress being a part of human nature and responsible for the natural world. In imagining the good society, I borrowed from all the progressive movements of that time. Like most

women's utopias, *Woman on the Edge of Time* is profoundly anarchist and aimed at integrating people back into the natural world and eliminating power relationships. (Piercy ix)

Piercy recognizes the flaws in her society and therefore depicts an alternative future in which the people and their values combat these flaws. The people of Mattapoissett have nothing but utmost respect for the natural world and everything in it, including one another which is not at all what Piercy was experiencing in America in the 1970s. Piercy admits to the utopia being "anarchist" in that Connie is driven to rebellion in her dystopian world after experiencing the perfect community in Mattapoissett. Her intention is for her readers to have a similar reaction to Connie and be inspired to take action towards a more egalitarian world.

Marge Piercy is a widely read and highly praised feminist and activist whose writing embraces feminism, sexuality, and political activism in ways that push conventional boundaries. As a result, Piercy has faced a great deal of resistance from readers. Piercy was born in Detroit in 1936 into a Jewish family that was affected by the Great Depression, but regardless of her socio-economic status, she was able to pursue her writing at the university level, through well-deserved scholarships and fellowships. While Piercy excelled academically in college, she has admitted that her values conflicted with what was expected of her as a woman in the 1950s. Piercy undoubtedly did not fit any image of what women were supposed to be nor did she conform to the expectations of women. She was divorced from her first husband at twenty-three, living in poverty in Chicago, surviving off part-time work. Society had defined Piercy as a failure as a woman, and this resulted in her failure to be taken seriously by many publishers. Despite the adversity she faced as a minority, both poor and a woman, Piercy remained headstrong, focusing on her writing and her involvement in the Civil Rights movement. In the time Piercy was not

writing, she was highly engaged in political movements, especially those of the New Left in the 1960s. Piercy is one of the founders of NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America), and she organized many events for SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) in addition to her avid campaigns for the women's movements. Her poetry, novels, and numerous articles focus on the possibility of radical social change.

Piercy's political activism motivates her writing of critical utopias; she can examine and critique the concerns of her society, posing alternatives or solutions to its undesirable aspects. Much like Butler, Piercy, too, has lived her life on the margins of society. As a lower-class woman living in America in the 1950s and 60s, Piercy was continuously beaten down by a system ruled by white men where opportunities for those who lived impoverished lives were scarce and social mobility was an unattainable dream. It is no surprise, then, that these experiences permeate into her writing. In a 2015 interview with Stephanie Rogers, Piercy responds to a question about speculative fiction as a genre:

I believe speculative fiction is one of the best ways to take on the larger questions about society, human nature, how we interact with history and the past and our assumptions about the future. With the ability to change variables in the world as we find it, we can study our own beliefs critically, we can explore the likely outcomes of trends we see developing... We can imagine societies that value different things, like the ability to take care of those who need it rather than buying up businesses and destroying them. (Rogers 126)

This is certainly how Piercy utilizes the genre in her writing of *Woman on the Edge of Time*. The utopian vision she presents here allows her to "change variables in the world" in a way that poses important questions about her present-day society. With the creation of a society with values and

beliefs entirely different from her own, she is able to present her readers with an interesting consideration of possible futures. Piercy seems focused on promoting critical thinking in her readers, so her future societies which are dependent on the actions of those in the present day remind her readers that every action and every choice they make create the future.

In her 2016 introduction to the novel, Piercy discusses her purpose in writing utopian speculative fiction, identifying her desire to examine the social aspects of society closely and critically. Piercy writes, “I am also very interested in the socializing and interpersonal mechanisms of a society. How is conflict dealt with? Again, who gets to decide, and upon whose head and back are those decisions visited? How does society deal with loneliness and alienation?” (Piercy xi). In terms of minorities in society, those who are “lonely” and “alienated,” Piercy is interested in looking at how society deals with these outcasts. She questions the conflicts and decision-making processes of America in the 1970s because she has experienced how these are areas of corruption and concern. As Butler had said in an interview, humans are naturally contentious beings. She portrays this human capacity for contention in her dystopian future, just as Piercy does in the dystopian present she depicts in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Because Butler and Piercy are writing during two different time periods, the seventies and the eighties, the issues at the center of debate in their society vary, so the issues they choose to focus on in their writing are different. Butler’s criticism is deeply rooted in multiracial acceptance and redefining the hierarchical statuses of race. Her racial minorities overcome their history of oppression through unity and empathy. Piercy disapproves of the inequality of women and the lower-class in her society, and she creates a utopia in which these issues, along with racial classifications, are erased altogether. The main difference in how these women express their concerns is in their methods for inspiring action in their readers. Butler provides her reader

with a potential solution to inequality and racism that may move her readers to take action. Piercy, however, leaves her reader with an understanding that one must take action to see change, but that taking action may require persistence and patience because a solution is not readily attainable.

*Woman on the Edge of Time* functions as a utopia embedded within a dystopia. Piercy paints the present-day world of her protagonist, Consuelo (Connie) Ramos, as a dystopia. The novel is set in New York in the 1970s, and Connie is a Mexican-American woman on welfare who has recently been unjustly committed to a mental institution. She has been in and out of psychiatric treatment, but her most recent admittance occurs after she is hospitalized due to an altercation with her niece's pimp/ boyfriend. Connie is responsible for hitting Dolly's pimp, Geraldo, in an attempt to protect her niece from an unwanted, illegal abortion. She fails to succeed, and instead she is brutally beaten unconscious by Geraldo, then framed as an insane assailant. While institutionalized, Connie has the ability to communicate with a woman who lives in a possible future, utopian society called Mattapoissett. Mattapoissett functions as a utopian possibility for the future that Connie is responsible for creating. The woman with whom Connie communicates is named Luciente, and she helps Connie to maneuver between the two worlds. Mattapoissett is a small community set in the year 2137 where there are sexual and racial equality, environmental purity, and highly advanced technology. They have eliminated all meaning behind racial and sexual differences—children are gestated in machines and share no genetic relations to their three co-mothers. They have erased the role of woman as mother, allowing for any male or female to take responsibility of the child, and they have removed any racial hierarchy. In her transitions back and forth from the present to the future, Connie learns about how Mattapoissett came to be, focusing on what problems and conflicts these people have

solved and how they do so. Connie is also shown another potential future, this one dystopian in nature. In this society, war is a constant, women are grotesquely exploited, and the world seems to live in a haze of virtual reality. As Connie spends her days captive in the mental institution, she becomes increasingly aware of her role in creating the future world and how important it is that she makes the right choices to ensure they are moving towards a utopian future.

Piercy's dystopian setting of 1970s New York is a reflection of her experience as a minority. Through Connie, Piercy criticizes the social system and its lack of understanding or acknowledgement of racial minorities, women, or the lower class. Throughout her life, Connie has been beaten and battered by a system that does not care about her well-being. As a Mexican-American woman, her identity as a racial minority causes her to feel a great deal of shame: "...and the shame, the shame of being second-class goods. Wore out fast. Shoddy merchandise. 'We wear out so early,' she said to the mirror, not really sure who the 'we' was. Her life was thin in meaningful 'we's. Once she had heard a social worker talking about Puerto Ricans, or 'them' as they were popularly called in that clinic..." (Piercy 33). Is Connie referring to other women when she says "we," or is she talking about other racial minorities? It seems as though even she is unsure, emphasizing the extent to which these populations have been marginalized and alienated. As a woman and as a Mexican-American, Connie has repeatedly felt ashamed of her identity. The idea of "wearing out so early" implies not just a physical deterioration, but a continuous mental wearing down by some oppressor. Connie considers the social worker talking about Puerto Ricans and calling these people "them." Grouping these people together because of a racial similarity and discriminating against them has a dehumanizing effect. These individuals are continuously told that because of their sex or because of their racial identity, they are

somehow less important, weaker, insignificant. Piercy highlights this unjust racism and sexism in the dystopian present.

Connie has lived a rather devastating life, one full of desperation and heartbreak, and her time spent in and out of mental institutions hints at the possibility of her unreliability as a character. She admits to there being three names inside her:

Consuelo, my given name. Consuelo's a Mexican woman, a servant of servants, silent as clay. The woman who suffers. Who bears and endures. Then I'm Connie, who managed to get two years of college—till Consuelo got pregnant. Connie got decent jobs from time to time and fought welfare for a little extra money for Angie. She got me on a bus when I had to leave Chicago. But it was her who married Eddie, she thought it was smart. Then I'm Conchita, the low-down drunken mean part of me who gets by in jail, in the bughouse, who loves no good men, who hurt my daughter. (Piercy 129)

It is interesting to consider how even Connie's perception of herself is riddled with racist views. Consuelo, a Mexican woman, is the one who "suffers," "bears and endures." Her self-description as a "servant of servants" implies that she is insignificant within the social stratification of the 1970s. Consuelo also blames herself for getting pregnant. Connie, the Americanized version of Consuelo, is able to make a life for herself—she goes to college, holds jobs, and raises her daughter, Angie. Then Conchita is a hopeless disappointment; it is Conchita who goes to jail and goes to the mental institution, becoming a violence-prone, depressive woman who beats her own child. Piercy presents the question of whether or not Connie is actually delusional, or whether her repeated abuse and disappointment as a minority has forced her to act in a certain way.

Despite her negative perception of herself and the endless abuse from her society, Connie refuses to accept defeat. As she reflects on a job she held in college as a secretary to an arrogant, white professor, she says, “The anger of the weak never goes away, Professor, it just gets a little moldy. It molds like a beautiful blue cheese in the dark, growing stranger and more interesting. The poor and the weak die with all their anger intact and probably those angers go on growing in the dark of the grave like the hair and the nails” (Piercy 50). Connie’s comparison of the anger of the weak to that of a beautiful blue cheese reveals her ability to prevent those with power from trampling her. The poor, the weak—women and racial minorities—will never forget the hardships that have been cast upon them by the government or by society. Their resentment may appear to subside, but Connie shows us that anger and hurt only grow stronger. She implies that even after death or after a tension has seemingly lessened, those angers will continue to exist, growing deeper and stronger. This stoking of anger is what fuels Connie’s resistance to the higher powers and those who continuously try to tear her down. The utopian future of Mattapoisett will not exist if Connie surrenders to their oppression, so her anger grows within, driving her to action.

Both Butler and Piercy address the possible existence of racial differences in their utopian futures. While Butler utilizes racial difference as a means of promoting multicultural acceptance and celebration, Piercy erases the significance of race as a marker of identity. When Connie first arrives in Mattapoisett, she observes that individuals are randomly distributed to villages that embody various differing cultural identities. These communities consist of people who are grouped together regardless of their racial marking. When discussing the process of the “brooder” where genetic material is stored and embryos grow, Luciente and Bee explain the significance of race in their society:

“At grandcil—grand council—decisions were made forty years back to breed a high proportion of darker-skinned people and to mix the genes well through the population. At the same time, we decided to hold on to separate cultural identities. But we broke the bond between genes and culture, broke it forever. We want there to be no chance of racism again. But we don’t want the melting pot where everybody ends up with thin gruel. We want diversity, for strangeness breeds richness.” (Piercy 108-109)

The citizens of Mattapoisett embrace diversity and encourage it within their community. As a result, they seek to eliminate any chance of racism, so they breed their citizens in a machine, eliminating the bond between genes and culture. Individuals are raised in a certain culture, but there is no racial marker or signifier that indicates what one’s culture is. Individuals are also free to fuse into another culture at any point in their life. Rather than moving towards a future where everyone is of some mixed identity, they found the best solution to be complete de-signification of the meaning of one’s racial markers, like skin or facial features. They erase racial difference, but they preserve cultural difference so as to promote “diversity,” “strangeness,” and “richness.”

A scholar of utopia, Edward K. Chan, performs a close examination of the subject of the 1970s American utopian vision. He is interested in answering the question of what 1970s utopian writers decide to do with markers of racial difference in their constructed utopias. He explores three utopian novels—Dorothy Bryant’s *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting For You*, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Samuel Delany’s *Triton*—all written in the 1970s and that each address race by re-imagining the signification of race. Chan discusses how, once the connection between racial signifier (racially marked physical features, skin, cultural practices, languages, etc.) and racial signified (racial identities) is disconnected, then the history of racial oppression

can be erased. He argues that the three novels he examines disrupt this linkage: “Their common objective is to make race a sign that does not signify—to dissolve the connection between signifier and signified—so that it no longer provides meaning” (Chan 470). It has often been ingrained in human societies to categorize individuals according to their differences. Once individuals are identified and labeled according to these differences, they become vulnerable to hierarchical classifications and discrimination. In the novels Chan addresses, he identifies three ways in which writers portrayed race in a way that prevented these differences from having any meaning: “non-signification, counter-signification, and de-signification” (Chan 470). One of the novels that Chan examines is Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and he discusses the effect of the reconfiguration of race in her utopia. Of the people of Mattapoissett, Chan says, “Although Piercy’s utopians still possess racial signifiers, racial meaning no longer exists. Once the chain of signification is broken between marker/signifier and identity/signified, race no longer works as a way to interpret bodies” (Chan 473). This is especially significant in comparison to Connie’s dystopian present-day because she is continuously made a victim to the racial meaning of her Mexican-American signifiers. Her immersion in a culture that does not base judgment according to one’s racial differences is enticing to her because her racial differences have been her plight all her life. She is able to see what a community without racism or sexism looks like and how it functions, inspiring her to enact change in her own world so as to achieve this utopian future.

Butler and Piercy treat racial differences in varying ways, and their overall motive in doing so is different. In Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* Lauren functions as the empathetic minority character who will lead her fellow minorities to a brighter future. It is this hope for the better future that inspires her followers and promotes the multicultural acceptance that Butler was experiencing in the 1980s. In Piercy’s novel, the utopian future already exists, as does a

dystopian one. Piercy's motives for promoting change at first seem less clear than Butler's. Rather than having a character, like Lauren, who is well-qualified to lead people and establish a community of their own, Piercy places Connie Ramos at the crux of transformation. In New York, in the 1970s, Connie is a minority in more than one sense—she is a woman, poor, Mexican, and allegedly insane. Her society is in no way prepared to accept her as a leader towards a utopian future; thus, she must take more drastic measures than Butler's Lauren Olamina because she will not be accepted or respected by others. In her analysis of Piercy's novel, Kim Trainor discusses Connie's character: "Connie has engaged, and continues to engage, in some critical reflection regarding the plan and purpose of her life but the resources available to her to fulfill these plans are so inaccessible that she has virtually given up" (Trainor 34). In other words, it seems as though Connie has accepted her role as a minority in the dystopian present moment in that she has no power or control over the future. Especially in the mental institution, she is dehumanized by the doctors and nurses who use her as a guinea pig for their projects. They place neurotransmitters in her head to control her behavior and refuse to see the truth in anything she tells them. As she visits Mattapoissett, she is made aware of her role in achieving this utopian future, yet she feels powerless to enact any form of change. The final chapter of the novel documents Connie's clinical history in the medical institution. Piercy includes excerpts from several hospitals that Connie had been kept at, ending with the following statement: "There were one hundred thirteen more pages. They all followed Connie back to Rockover" (Piercy 417). This extensive documentation of Connie's experience as a patient portrays her perseverance in refusing to allow the system to defeat her. She is determined to free herself and others from the mind-controlling doctors, so she will never stop resisting.

Piercy's plan for Connie to create change is then less easy to attain than Butler's plan for Lauren. In a 2016 interview with Stephanie Rogers, Piercy was asked about the violence she chose to portray in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Rogers mentioned how certain friends of hers were turned off by the level of violence which is depicted in the novel, to which Piercy responded:

We live in a very violent society. Women are murdered every day. Kids are gunned down in the streets. We pay for wars in other people's countries. Do your friends imagine that only soldiers die in wars? More civilians than combatants are generally maimed, crippled and killed. Old people, babies, children, pregnant women are routinely killed. Rape is a common act of war. We are supporting this every day...Are they so distant from the every day reality of most people on this planet that they do not understand violence is as common as rain? What world do they inhabit? Obviously not one I am familiar with. They support violence by their taxes and their political activities or lack of them but do not wish it to be dealt with in writing or art. (qtd. in Rogers 128)

Piercy's response to this question justifies the actions portrayed in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and reveals her beliefs that violence is a means to achieving equality. Piercy is interested in examining how minorities endure adversity to an extreme extent. It seems inevitable that an individual who has been consistently hurt and broken by others will eventually retaliate in a manner just as violent and spiteful as that which has been inflicted upon them. Connie's only way to escape the oppression of the mental institution and her society is through violence. When she obtains the poison she will use to kill the doctors in the institution, she justifies her actions: "But this was a weapon, a powerful weapon that came from the same place as the electrodes and

the Thorazine and the dialytrode. One of the weapons of the powerful, of those who controlled. Nobody was allowed to possess this poison without a license. She was stealing some of their power in this little bottle” (Piercy 396). The doctors have controlled her actions and behavior through drugs and electro-therapy. Connie identifies these as their weapons for maintaining power over her, but with the poison she has, the power is placed in her hands. Connie knows that because she is viewed as weak and because the doctors believe they have abused her into submission, she is no longer seen as a threat. This places her in the perfect position to exert her power as a resilient, fearless woman who will stop at nothing to ensure a good future. Although this future will not immediately be achieved by Lauren rebelling against the mental institution and her oppressors, her actions do reveal the power that growing anger and persistent action can have. Piercy implies that a better future must be fought for. Hate, violence, and oppression cannot be ignored or overlooked, but rather should be harnessed and used as a driving force for taking action.

#### **IV. The Future of Race**

Since the publication of Piercy’s novel in 1976 and Butler’s in 1993, significant changes have occurred in the battle for equality. While some may argue that we have in fact reached a post-racial society, I think we may never be capable of such an existence. Race as a social problem has been the root of so much violence and oppression throughout history. It is easy for individuals to see the smallest gains in equality and erase these histories, but this is unfair to those whose history it is. It is important that we continue to read and write about race and racism as it is a pressing issue that will never uproot itself from our past. By grappling with the problem, talking about its significance, and offering potential solutions to the contention inherent in humankind, we may work our way towards an egalitarian society in which the racial hierarchy is

finally redefined to promote equality. We must also continue to read and write utopian and dystopian texts because they are the windows to the past and the building blocks to the future.

These texts teach us about the social, economic, and political concerns of the past while providing us with the agency to build a better future. Womack writes of Afrofuturism:

“...Afrofuturism encourages the beauties of African diasporic cultures and gives people of color a face in the future. But from a global vantage point, the perspective contributes to world knowledge and ideas and includes the perspectives of a group too often deleted from the past and future” (Womack 191). Her words perfectly capture the need for readers and writers of black science fiction. People of color will always exist in the future, so the historical erasure of black people from literature and art is absurd. If we read more literature, view more film, experience more art that shares the perspectives of more “African diasporic cultures,” then perhaps perceptions of race will become less prejudiced and contentious.

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