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Mercedes Alayna Reid-X

Bridgewater State University

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Mercedes Alayna Reid-X

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Dr. Emily D. Field, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Halina Adams, Committee Member

Dr. Ann Brunjes, Committee Member
Octavia E. Butler’s *Earthseed* and the God of Change

When it feels like the world is burning down around you, when everything is falling apart and nothing seems to be able to offer you any solace, when people are losing their lives to war and senseless violence and you feel powerless to stop it, it may seem like everything around you is signaling your defeat, and what do you do? Whom can you turn to? If you were Octavia E. Butler in Pasadena, California, in the late 1940’s to early 1950’s you would have a mother guiding you to put your faith in God by way of the Baptist church. Butler’s mother, also named Octavia, like many people, utilized religion as her source of strength and the inspiration to keep her going. Baptists, a denomination of the Christian church, have a foundational belief in God in Heaven, Jesus Christ as the son and the savior of humanity, and the Bible as the word of God. Although she was grateful for the way her mother’s faith in God was utilized to sustain her, Butler never believed in God the way her mother raised her to: “I used to despise religion. I have not become religious, but I think I’ve become more understanding of religion. And I’m glad I was raised as a Baptist, because I got my conscience installed early” (qtd. Brown 187). Believers, like her mother, credited the Baptist God with being responsible for their salvation, yet all who believed in Him didn’t seem capable of truly embodying that belief and showing love the way God intended. Where was that conscience that Butler said she developed early because of religion, and why didn’t all believers seem to have it? Once, while at a church service, Butler was stunned to hear hatred being spewed from the pulpit:

I remember a minister from a different church coming to our church. He was really spewing out prejudice against the Jews and Catholics and anyone else who disagreed with him. Just as telling, he didn’t get the kind of congregational
feedback that you would expect from people who worshipped the Prince of Peace. The kind of religion that I’m seeing now is not the religion of love and it scares me. We need to outgrow it. (qtd. Harrison 9)

Butler felt that religion was a powerful tool that could—and should—be used to unite all people. The God of a more inclusive belief system would prevent the judgment of others based on differences and encourage people to work together towards survival and true peace in the name of love. With a new version of God, humans could achieve the thing we need the most to save ourselves. In her novels *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), Octavia E. Butler addressed her own fear of religion being more harmful than helpful and created a God of Change.

It is my intention in this paper to define Butler’s Change God and illustrate how she created it to end oppression in all forms. It is important to start with a bit of background on Butler herself, sharing how her upbringing and experiences in life influenced her feelings about religion. These feelings are what encouraged writings such as the *Parables*, helping the reader to understand why Butler felt the need to create a new type of religion instead of making use of one that already existed. Next, I include an introduction to Butler’s journey as a Black science fiction writer. Breaking into a genre in which initially there were very few Black people, Butler used her voice to speak out against injustice, paving the way for Black science fiction writers for generations to come. Then I will outline the most important aspects of *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, focusing specifically on Earthseed (the religious belief system created by the main character in the books) and the God of Change. Many scholars have written on the *Parable* series; whereas many scholars see Butler as addressing singular forms of oppression, I build on the work of those who see her in more holistic terms. The focus here is to show how the
God of Change is a God for everyone with a specific mission of directing humanity to reflect and rebuild. I argue that there are three key differences between the God of Change and the Baptist God: function, access, and relationship. These key differences are highlighted in the way believers and God use and respond to one another and are how Butler illustrates the God of Change as capable of serving humanity in a more direct and useful way. The inspiration for Earthseed is explored next; in explaining more about what Black Theology is, I argue that Butler used its fundamental values as inspiration in creating the God of Change. In conclusion, I explain the importance of recognizing how Butler’s God of Change is her creative way of eradicating oppression by gifting humanity with a God that grows along with it.

Butler described herself as “[a] pessimist if I’m not careful, a black, a former Baptist, an oil and water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty and drive” (qtd. Canavan 1). Her clarification that she is a former Baptist is important; she is choosing to separate herself from religion but also acknowledging its influence on her life. Though she no longer believed in God the way her mother taught her, she very much respected what religion did for her family, stating, “Religion kept some of my relatives alive, because it was all they had. If they hadn’t had some hope of heaven, some companionship in Jesus, they probably would have committed suicide” (qtd. Brown 186). Historically, Black Americans have relied on the Christian God for help to combat their earthly oppression: “African-Americans have always believed in the living presence of the God who establishes the right by punishing the wicked and liberating their victims” (Cone 756—757). The promise of salvation taken from God’s word provided them with a type of security blanket, protecting the essence of their spirit by promising them that at the very least their belief in God would be rewarded in Heaven. The idea of a God that would reward their faith and service to Him in the next life gave them hope while surviving in a society that
deemed them powerless and worthless. Despite the fact that religion was such a powerful tool, the way it was being used and interpreted seemed to be causing more pain than peace. In interviews, Butler shared her feelings on how it seemed that God’s word was beginning to lose its hold on believers. In a 1980 interview where she was asked about how being a science fiction writer affected how she thought about the religious view that people are living in the last days, she said,

I see religion as something that really isn’t controlling people and helping to channel their energy away from destruction. Sometimes it becomes destructive itself. It scares me… What we’ve done is create for ourselves the massive power of a Big Policeman in the sky. It would be nice if we police ourselves. I think that in one way or another we will do ourselves in. Sooner or later the generation that says “we’re living in our last days” really will be. (qtd. Harrison 9)

Here, Butler suggests that religion should be utilized as a tool that eradicates oppression instead of creating the space for it to grow rampant, destroying unions between people based on differences no one can control or change. God should challenge people to function in the world as harmlessly as possible, encouraging them to be in constant conversation with themselves over how their actions affect others.

In 1993, Octavia E. Butler published the first book in what would become known as her *Parable series*. In *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* Butler attempts to create a religion that addressed injustices and couldn’t be misinterpreted and used to harm others. As expressed in these novels and gleaned from interviews and nonfiction writings, Butler’s vision for humanity’s true salvation was to eradicate oppression completely by creating a God that sought the problem at its source. Since religion was being used by humanity in a negative way,
Butler knew she needed to create a God that would fight against this, “almost ‘weaponizing’ religion as a tool for improving lives rather than making them worse” (Canavan 129). Religion was powerful and familiar enough for people to understand her vision, which made it the perfect tool. Being a science fiction writer gave her the unique opportunity to envision a God of her own. If she could write of aliens from distant galaxies as she does in *Dawn* (1987), and vampires who bite as a form of affection as well as to feed like in *Fledgling* (2005), surely she could use her talent to create a God. Both believers in religion and non-believers are familiar with systems of belief. You don’t have to believe in anything to know that there are believers and to understand their belief as different from your own. Instead of a God whose words can be manipulated and used to harm others, or one who promises of a greater reward in death, Butler conceptualizes a God of Change. Change is something that happens whether we want it to or not. We are always changing, and everything around us is always changing. We enter a relationship with change from the very moment of our conception; Butler presents us with this fact as a representation of God. The very first page of *Sower* opens with this epigraph:

All that you touch you change.

All that you change changes you.

The only lasting truth is change.

God is change. (1)

Before she illustrates her belief system, she is planting it in the mind of the reader in a way that is easy to comprehend. The way she uses simple language to deliver her message leaves very little room for confusion. These words send a crystal-clear message of how much each person is directly responsible for and affected by change. In defining what it means for God to be Change. In illustrating this relationship between Change and each person individually, Butler is already
telling us to be more responsible with our actions and more vigilant about what directly affects us and how.

A God of Change is revolutionary because this God is connected to every person in the exact same way. It doesn’t present as parental or emotional, and it doesn’t make any promises. In the novels, Butler introduces this God of Change as part of a belief system called Earthseed. Anyone can be a part of Earthseed, and Butler uses it as a tool to break down systems of oppression by forcing each of its believers to examine how their actions can contribute to the oppression and suffering of others. Throughout the course of the book, the main character is creating a sort of religious guidebook called *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, where verses are dedicated to helping people understand God as Change and to use it to dismantle oppression by starting with themselves. Unlike any other religion or any other God, Butler’s Change God offers the world a permanent solution to injustice by leaving no room for hierarchies, favoritism, or misinterpretation. Earthseed verses are direct and concise, challenging believers to partner with and shape God. Instead of praising the God of Change, an Earthseed verse says,

We do not worship God.

We perceive and attend to God.

We learn from God.

With forethought and work,

we shape God.

In the end, we yield to God.

We adapt and endure, *(Sower 16)*

The God of Change doesn’t require praise, it requires partnership. Another verse warns believers to think about how they partner with God: “To get along with God, / consider the consequences
of your behavior” (Sower 86). This verse illustrates the fundamental values of Earthseed, which are essentially to teach people how to work on themselves so they can work together for everyone’s benefit. Notice how many of the Earthseed verses have been constructed to encourage people to think about themselves and their own actions rather than focusing on what God does. Butler is sending a clear message: people have the power to shape God, meaning God acts in accordance with how you interact with God. Each person is held accountable by being challenged to think about how their behavior causes God to act. In this way, Earthseed addresses every form of oppression simultaneously by forcing its believers to work within to dismantle systems of oppression. Shaping God successfully means actively working to make sure that you are influencing God to operate at its best. Understanding that God reflects the very best of you and the worst of you encourages you to make better decisions about how you cause God to function. Putting the focus on the believer allowed Butler to present a creative solution to the injustices she felt and witnessed. With the Change God, the Earthseed belief system offers a version of God that is malleable, and capable of being partnered with.

**Black Science Fiction: Butler’s Journey**

When Butler began publishing in the 1970’s, science fiction in the Black community wasn’t popular. Not only were there very few people of color known to be writing science fiction, but Black people were also not represented in the genre as relatable characters in the story. The absence of Black people from science fiction “has been employed to reify socially entrenched notions that portray blacks as lacking the mental agility to engage in visionary speculation or so encumbered by the oppressive realities of everyday racism that their imaginative abilities have been impaired” (Russell 256). Lacking the mental capacity or being
too weighed down by oppression was said to have kept Black people from envisioning themselves as magical beings or dreaming of life on distant planets. This notion was furthered when “one of the earliest speculations on the issue occurred in 1974, when Theodore Sturgeon, writing in Galaxy magazine, wondered why there were so few science fiction writers and surmised that ‘the average black, especially the ghetto black, is far too concerned with reality than to try to escape it’” (256—257). If it wasn’t that Black people were too focused on life to dream about anything else, it was that Blackness itself was too distracting. During her first year of college, Butler sat in a creative writing class and listened as a teacher told another student “not to use black characters in his stories unless those characters’ blackness was somehow essential to the plots. The presence of blacks, my teacher felt, changed the focus of the story—drew attention away from the intended subject” (qtd. Canavan 181). The common consensus seemed to be that Blackness didn’t belong in the storyline in creative or science fiction works.

Though there weren’t many Black sci-fi writers when Butler was writing and publishing, there were some and they were fast becoming well-known names in the small but always existent Black science fiction literature circle. Just ten years after Sturgeon’s racist remark, in a 1984 interview in the Black American Literature Forum, Charles Saunders praised Black sci-fi authors for their contributions to the genre: “until recently there wasn’t much science fiction and fantasy for black readers to identify with.... Today, fortunately there is excellent work being produced by such black writers as Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and Steven Barnes” (qtd. Saunders 91). Butler was one of the artists who proved that Sturgeon and others who thought like him were wrong.

Octavia E. Butler published her first book, Patternmaster, in 1976. By the time she passed away thirty years later in 2006, she had published over ten more books and won “Hugo,
Nebula and Locus awards, as well as a lifetime achievement award from the PEN American Center” (Canavan 2). Though science fiction was a field that Black people were not represented in for so long, Butler started writing with a clear vision. When asked what her role was as a science fiction writer she responded, “to say what I feel is true. Obviously, I mean verisimilitude as well as the literal truth. But also, I mean, for instance, if I see things going as they have been for the past several years, and us taking so many paths to disaster, I almost have to say something about it” (qtd. Jackson 45). It was always her goal to use her work to speak to the truths she believed in and fight against injustice. In a 2005 interview with Democracy Now, Butler referred to the Parable series as “cautionary tales,” stating that “if we keep misbehaving ourselves, ignoring what we’ve been ignoring, doing what we’ve been doing, to the environment for instance, here’s what we’re liable to wind up with” (qtd. Democracy Now). The Parable series serves as a reminder of past mistakes and warning against making the same ones in the future. When asked to read something from Parable of the Talents in that same interview, Butler chose to share Earthseed verses because she said they “apply forever” (qtd. Democracy Now). One of the verses she shared in this interview was written as a direct reflection to something she felt was happening around her all too often: “I got the idea for it when I heard someone answer a political question with a political slogan. He didn’t seem to understand that he was quoting someone else, he seemed to have thought that he had a creative thought” (qtd. Democracy Now). Butler went on to share the entire Earthseed verse found on page 313 of Parable of the Talents, part of which reads:

Beware:

All too often,

We say
What we hear others say.
We think
What we’re told that we think.
We see
What we’re permitted to see.

Repetition and pride are the keys to this.

The fact that Butler not only drew inspiration from real life issues to inspire Earthseed verses but also brought it full circle and used Earthseed verses to speak to real life problems illustrates how much she believed in her own ability to combat injustices with her work. Today she is hailed as one of the best sci-fi authors of all time. Science fiction, the genre she initially had very little representation in, became the genre she excelled in by using something that was said to have kept Black people too preoccupied to be bothered with writing it: oppression.

The Parables: A Brief Summary and an Introduction of Characters

In Parable of the Sower, we are introduced to the main character, Lauren Oya Olamina, who is in the middle of a post-apocalyptic warzone where she and her family and fellow community members are just trying to survive. From behind the walls of their gated community housing, her father, whom we only know as Reverend Olamina, is the local Baptist minister who sometimes holds church services for the community in their home on Sundays. Lauren, a fifteen-year-old nonbeliever, is frustrated with her father’s version of God and the reality that the world is literally burning down around her, but Reverend Olamina’s God had yet to show up to save them despite his dedication and belief. People were being raped, mutilated, and murdered and she didn’t feel as if she could rely on her father’s God for security. Death and destruction
become accepted norms, and Lauren witnesses it from the very beginning: “I saw at least three people that weren’t going to wake up again, ever. One of them was headless” (Sower 9). In the world around her, religion is being used by fanatics to persecute one another, and Lauren realizes that religion was too powerful of a tool to be used in such a negative way. A belief system should unite people by challenging them to do and be better. The passive, submissive relationship her father and other believers seemed to have with God was too dangerous because it left too much room for the possibility of misinterpretation. As Lauren puts it, she developed Earthseed because “I was looking for God… I wasn’t looking for mythology or mysticism or magic. I didn’t know whether there was a God to find, but I wanted to know. God would have to be a power that could not be defied by anyone or anything” (217). She was looking for a God that helped her reconcile all the things that were going on in the world around her, one she could use to actively combat the hardship of the times, and since she couldn’t find one, she created her own. Although it is always important to separate the character from the author who created her, Butler used a lot of her own personal beliefs in the creation of Lauren: “In personal journals Butler admitted that Olamina was her idealized self, her best self—and the poetry that drove the Earthseed religion actually closely mirrored the style and form of daily affirmations, self-help sloganeering, and even self-hypnosis techniques Butler posted around her home to keep herself focused and on task” (Canavan 131). The rejection of the parental belief system as well as the desire for a God that more effectively addresses injustices is something Butler used to help build Lauren’s character.

Lauren develops Earthseed over the course of the destruction of her father’s community and in her subsequent fight for survival in Parable of the Sower. When the community is destroyed, she loses all she has left of her family and barely escapes with her life intact. Instead
of feeling let down by her God, her belief that “God doesn’t love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all” (25) keeps her focused. In life, things are going to happen for the good and for the bad whether we like it or not, she doesn’t need to question her God; instead, she needs to be vigilant and watch how things change. Anticipating and preparing for change provides the opportunity to create the change needed to survive. Lauren believes that humanity “can rig the game in our own favor if we understand that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, with or without our forethought, with or without our intent” (25). Her God is constantly active and is always moving. The best way she can live is by trying to move with her God in the least harmful way.

In Butler’s 1998 sequel to *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*, we witness Lauren settle into the community she had just begun to establish in the last pages of *Sower*. This new community is called Acorn and for the first time we see Earthseed in action. This community of people is the true definition of a democracy, welcoming of all people and dedicated to working together. Once, while outside of Acorn scouting for supplies, Lauren and others help to rescue a young man named Dan and his younger sister after their family was attacked. Once they get back to Acorn to have the children examined and taken care of, Lauren offers them a home in Acorn and a place in Earthseed. When Dan asks her about what it means to have Change as God she says, “It means that Change is the unavoidable, irresistible, ongoing reality of the universe. To [Earthseed] that makes it a powerful reality, and just another word for God” (*Talents* 84). Here we learn that what makes Earthseed even more dynamic is its own susceptibility to change. Lauren isn’t claiming to be recreating the wheel, and she isn’t setting anything in stone. She views her belief as “a collection of truths. It isn’t the whole truth. It isn’t the only truth. It’s just one collection of thoughts that are true” (134). Lauren recognizes and
accepts that there is more to it than she knows and establishes Earthseed as being accepting and welcoming of all change. Change can present itself in various forms, but Lauren believes that it exists to be shaped and the best way to do this is to do it thoughtfully:

To shape God
With wisdom and forethought,
To benefit your world,
Your people,
Your life,
Consider consequences,
Minimize harm
Ask questions,
Seek answers,
Learn,
Teach. (*Talents 71*)

Starting in line six, ever line here is in the imperative, something that needs to be done by each individual to partner with God in the least harmful way. The purpose of shaping God is to create a better world overall, with each person focusing on how their personal actions contribute to the way God functions. *Talents* is Earthseed in full practice, and Lauren shows us how shaping God is true activist work by never wavering from Earthseed, even when her life was in danger, and she loses her family and community for a second time.

In *Sower*, we watch Lauren rebuild her own community, home, and family only to lose it all over again in *Talents*. After working so hard to establish a safe place for them to live, Acorn is attacked by religious fanatics who believe Earthseed is some kind of cult that needs to be
reformed. The attackers separate the men and women and force them to take orders or be painfully shocked by electric collars that have been placed around their necks. One of the attackers says to the women: “You do what you’re told and only what you’re told… You don’t touch one another. Whatever filth you’re used to, it’s over. It’s time for you to learn to behave like decent Christian women” (210). Members of her community are murdered, their children taken from them, and the adults are essentially forced into slavery where they are made to learn about the Bible and uphold Christian beliefs. Again, Lauren focuses on adapting to her reality and working with her God of Change to survive, telling the women in private “Do put up with it… Don’t throw your lives away… Learn everything you can from these people, and bring what you learn back to the rest of us” (207). Even when she is surrounded by devastation, she is still focused on how they can work together to help one another, a fundamental value of Earthseed. More than just her own freedom and safety is the freedom and safety of every person who was captured. The belief in Earthseed and the God of Change directed her to act in the way that is least harmful to the collective, most beneficial to everyone involved, and to actively shape God.

**Scholarly Conversations Surrounding Earthseed and the God of Change**

When we fail to understand the intentions of Earthseed in its totality, we unfortunately reduce it to being incapable of living up to its full potential. Some scholars argue that Butler’s creation of a God of change is intended to address one thing or another, neglecting how it focuses on dismantling all forms of oppression at once and with equal attention to each. For example, Delia Shahnavaz views the Parable series through an ecofeminist lens, arguing that the text highlights the importance of a woman’s role in saving humanity and the world it inhabits. In her assessment of the text, Shahnavaz believes that “Butler shapes her story around the rejection
of patriarchy, using language and metaphor to further develop her idea of a planet in desperate need of the feminine” (Shahnavaz 41). Viewing the destruction to earth in the Parables as essentially symbolizing the patriarchy harming Mother Nature, Shahnavaz argues that “viewed through an ecofeminist lens, the world of *Parable of the Sower* becomes all the more visceral as readers assess the horror of what a white capitalist patriarchy has done to humankind and the Earth” (41), but what she fails to understand is that viewing it in this lens restricts the function of God by requiring us to focus on the dismantling of an outside oppressive force instead of dealing with the direct oppression we can cause. Viewing Earthseed through an ecofeminist lens is appropriate only when highlighting how Butler used feminism as an inspiration for it, otherwise it essentially goes against the fundamental values of Lauren’s beliefs. If Earthseed were created to fight the patriarchy, it would leave out too many of the oppressed people that Butler specifically brings to the forefront in the books. Queer people, people of color, poor people, those oppressed by religion, etc., all would take a backseat to the issues between feminists and the patriarchy.

Similar to the way Shahnavaz focuses on one aspect of what Earthseed is addressing, Anna Hinton also views Earthseed though a feminist lens and couples it with disability studies. She believes that Butler is saying something in representing the creator of a God of Change as a Black woman whom she refers to as disabled. In the novels, as a result of her biological mother abusing drugs during her pregnancy, Lauren experiences something called “hyperempathy,” which causes her to feel the pleasure and pain she witnesses in the world. Hinton refers to this as a disability and argues that “disability and motherhood are strong themes in *Sower* and *Talents*” (Hinton 444). Hyperempathy was defined by Lauren in *Sower* as a “biological conscience” (115), not a disability. Taking note of the way Lauren seems to naturally take care of others leads
Hinton to recognize a sense of maternal energy in her. This maternal energy as well as her “disability” are what Hinton claims serves as the inspiration for Lauren in developing Earthseed into a belief system. She draws a direct parallel between Lauren’s sex and her hyperempathy, stating that:

Lauren cannot escape this unstable embodied self and refuses to ignore that the world is also dynamic and vulnerable, open and subject to change but also capable of being shaped. These lessons relate to the fact that others can physically shape her by manipulating her disability, yet she can also influence and shape others as a teacher and othermother. (454)

While it’s an interesting take, by focusing in on Lauren’s connection to women or disabled people and arguing that they served as her main inspiration in creating Earthseed, Hinton doesn’t make enough space for all of what Earthseed intends to accomplish. Earthseed was meant to express to each person how they could contribute to the salvation of all people as a whole, not to highlight any person or people as champions of the cause.

In direct opposition to Shahnavaz and Hinton, Elham Mohammadi Achachelooei and Carol Elizabeth Leon highlight how the Parables bring many themes to light simultaneously, and how Butler strategically writes them in in a way that acknowledges them all rather than championing any one of them individually. They state that “while the Parables reflect concepts and themes found in black feminist, or Womanist, arguments, these concepts and themes are not limited to a sexistracial frame that prioritises female black identity as the reflection of true humanity. In this way, the Parables stay away from ‘being mired in essentialist humanism, nostalgically longing for maternal origins’” (122). To limit the main concepts of Earthseed to being rooted in feminism isn’t a true representation of all who face oppression. While they
understand that Earthseed shouldn’t be reduced, these scholars fail to comprehend how it was created out of lessons and teachings of the past when they argue that in the books, Change is illustrated in Lauren “through showing her losing all connections with her past. She loses family, community, and Christian faith as the main defining elements of her social and personal identity and gains new ones, which symbolise the rebirth of a new person and society” (123). In fact, Lauren doesn’t “lose” connections with her past or with the Christian faith. She only loses her family because they die or choose their own God over Change. These scholars don’t recognize how Lauren’s father, his God and her initial walled community impacted her journey and the creation of Earthseed. When they argue that “in [the Earthseed] society no role model figure or idea of past norms and traditions or preferred concepts are strictly established, recommended, and followed; this society is open to different options and alterations” (127), they have forgotten how Lauren explained that “all of the truths of Earthseed existed somewhere before [she] found them and put them together. They were in the patterns of history, in science, philosophy, religion, or literature” (Talents 135). God being Change, and Lauren teaching her community to embrace this version of God isn’t her rejecting past ideas and traditions; rather, it’s her taking the truest parts of what she has learned and experienced and using it as a lesson in how to function in the world as an asset to the earth and its people. The idea for God being Change, at least in part, came from Reverend Olamina teaching Lauren about his God.

The Baptist God and The God of Change

The most important thing we know about Reverend Olamina is that he is a Baptist Minister. Butler clearly made him a Baptist according to his faith, but she never bothered to define exactly what that meant. Baptists can “believe many things. They affirm a variety of
doctrines, some shared with other Protestant groups and some distinct to Baptist traditions” (Leonard 65). Without any background information on Reverend Olamina’s specific set of beliefs when it comes to his Baptist faith, it can be concluded that Butler intended for the reader to identify the basic beliefs that Baptists share across the denomination in reference to the Reverend’s God. Though specifics can vary, “certain beliefs, such as baptismal immersion, congregational polity and local church autonomy, evoke a general consensus that is endemic to Baptist identity” (Leonard 65). Early in Sower, Reverend Olamina gathers up the children to take them to be baptized, illustrating his belief in God. Though it was unsafe to travel outside of the walls of the community, his faith in God meant that it was important to him for his children to be baptized “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost” (Sower 14). This baptism early on in the book shows how Baptists “affirm a belief in one God ‘in three persons, blessed Trinity’ They insist that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is expressed in three hypostases: Father, Son and Holy Ghost” (Leonard 68). Besides this belief in the trinity, Baptists “affirm that the Bible alone is the foundational source for doctrine and practice; that justification by faith alone (not works) is the basis of salvation; and that salvation was made possible only by the grace of God” (67). This basic understanding of the Baptist belief system helps readers understand Reverend Olamina’s belief system compared to his daughter’s.

Just like Butler had for her mother, it’s important to note that Lauren had an immense amount of love and respect for her father. In a 2022 stage production of Parable of the Sower created by Toshi Reagon and Bernice Johnson Reagon and performed at Emerson’s Cutler Majestic Theater in Boston, Lauren was illustrated as her father’s adversary. Instead of the way she accepted her father’s religion in Sower, in their depiction she was adamant about pitting her God of Change against his God in heaven. Although this change might have been made to
communicate clearly that Lauren developed a different belief system than her father, it sends the wrong message about their relationship. Her criticism of the religion her father taught her to believe in wasn’t a reflection on the way she thought of him. Though she saw his version of God as problematic, she never fought him to accept her Change God. She practices her father’s religion alongside him, stating, “I love him. He’s the best person I know, and I care what he thinks” (Sower 24). Early in Sower we find out that despite her difference in belief, she is going to be baptized by her father. This causes her to think about the Christian God and His actions, referencing the book of Job from the Bible. Lauren says that in Job, “God says he made everything and he knows everything so no one has any right to question what he does with any of it” (16). She is not impressed by this, likening God to Zeus and saying that God plays with people like He is playing with toy soldiers. Comparing people to toy soldiers shows that Lauren believes that her father’s God operates as if people are disposable. If God is all powerful and people are just like toys, “Who cares what the toys think? Wipe out a toy’s family, give it a brand new family. Toy children, like Job’s children, are interchangeable” (16). Illustrating God as powerful and capable of destruction in this way helps the reader to understand the necessity of having a God that wouldn’t intentionally harm you just because he could. Lauren is setting the stage to show exactly how the God of Change is different from her father’s Baptist God.

In comparison with her father’s God, Lauren’s Change God is different in three key ways: function, access, and relationship. Her father’s God functions as God, creator, and savior if you choose to believe in Him. Whether you subscribe to Lauren’s belief system or not, she makes a valid argument when she says that “[e]verything changes in some way—size, position, composition, frequency, velocity, thinking, whatever. Every living thing, every bit of matter, all the energy in the universe changes in some way” (218). Due to the sheer frequency of change,
people encounter it every day in every aspect of life. It functions whether you know it or not. Its existence cannot be denied; it is in every movement, thought, and action. Lauren says, “God will shape us all every day of our lives. Best to understand that and return the effort: shape God” (220). Lauren is illustrating how a successful relationship with the God of Change is a continuous cycle of shaping and being shaped. This ability to “shape God” means that God is malleable, unlike her father’s God. While Lauren is listening to a sermon on the Christian God’s function in *Talents*, the man preaching the service quotes the book of Malachi from the Bible: “For I am the Lord. I change not” (157) and then from the book of Hebrews: “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever” (157). Because her God can be shaped, it suggests that Lauren’s God essentially doesn’t function as a traditional Judeo-Christian God at all, but instead acts as a kind of mediator. By working with Change to shape a more desirable outcome, this God becomes partner, but it functions as teacher, always. Change will shape you whether you want to be shaped or not, not forcefully because it cares for you because it doesn’t, but simply because that is its nature. Being able to shape God in return gives humanity the opportunity to even the playing field. Instead of God functioning as the savior or an unchangeable force that rules over us, God is functioning as teacher and partner.

Lauren’s father is the religious leader in his community. He preaches sermons to share the word of God with his followers. He serves as their spiritual link to God as they go to him for spiritual guidance and clarification of God’s word. Even though she collected the truths of Earthseed and shared them with others, Lauren never serves as a link between people and the God of change. Accessing her God is something people already do on their own; Lauren just wants them to understand that the ultimate access to the God of Change comes in shaping it with good intentions. With positive intent you can “[a]lter the speed or the direction of change. Vary
the scope of change. Recombine the seeds of change. Transmute the impact of change. Seize change. Use it. Adapt and grow” (*Talents* 33). Through the God of Change, believers gain unique access to themselves. When Lauren says, “To shape God, shape Self” (*Sower* 258), she is illuminating how an intended and thoughtful interaction with Change requires people to be in constant conversation with and evaluation of themselves.

The final key difference is that Change doesn’t have feelings like the Reverend Olamina’s God, and this sets believers up for a different kind of relationship with the Change God. Her father’s God was capable of emotion and required loyalty and worship. In order to have a relationship with her father’s God, you had to believe in Him. Lauren watched people pray to and praise her father’s God; these believers believed that God loved them and in turn, they loved God, but this love didn’t always save them. In *Sower*, one of her neighbors, Mrs. Sims, dies by suicide, which deeply bothers Lauren. Despite the fact that Mrs. Sims was a devout Christian who believed that killing yourself resulted in spending an eternity in hell, she still went through with it. Lauren wonders if this was because the woman’s relationship with God became too overwhelming for her: “maybe she went just went crazy because her God was demanding too much of her. She was no Job. In real life, how many people are?” (24). Mrs. Sims had been through a lot of trauma; the book of Job says that God does allow people to suffer but that they should be happy about it because He is God: “Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou chastening of the Almighty: For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole” (Job 5:17-18). Mrs. Sims was never made whole. She died feeling alone, afraid, and unloved. Lauren tells us that her God is incapable of loving her: “My God doesn’t love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love for or loyalty to my God. My God just is” (25). Her relationship with her God does not consist of an
emotional connection because her God is not an emotional being. What use is it having a God that cannot love you? Isn’t one of the benefits from religion love? Well, yes. Lauren tells us that her God not caring about her gives her “all the more reason to care about myself and others” (221). Not seeking that acceptance from Change allows her to look more closely at the way she shows love. Change causes her to hold herself accountable in such a way that she has to learn to express love for herself and others positively in order to effectively shape Change.

**Earthseed: Foundations in Black Theology**

Lauren tells us early on that she didn’t just invent Earthseed: all the parts of it are truths she collected from scientific facts, religion, part of history, philosophy, etc. Butler also gained inspiration from other areas, one prominent one being Black Theology. Black Theology was born out of the need for oppressed Black folks to define God for themselves. James H. Cone explains how Black Theology’s fundamental quest was developing a new starting point within theology that was “defined by people at the bottom and not at the top of the socio-economic ladder” (Cone 768). Black Theologians looked at the Bible the way their ancestors did, not the way the colonizers taught them to, reemerging with themes of “justice, love, suffering and hope” (768). All of these are also fundamental themes in Earthseed; from the very beginning, Lauren tells readers to be aware how their actions affect others and world around them. The cycle of Change she creates in that very first Earthseed verse reminds people that what they change changes them, urging them to think about how to love one another. Lauren’s fight against the outsiders who come to destroy her home represents her belief in justice and illustrates her suffering. Applying a Black Theological lens to the *Parables*, Clarence W. Tweedy points out how “Lauren invents a God that not only explains the chaos of the world but also is an agent of
liberation, social change, and action: a God that empowers self as well as communal liberty” (Tweedy). There are no hierarchies within Earthseed. Every person is equal to the next no matter what they look like or where they’re from. Lauren’s God of Change resembles the God of Black Theologians in many ways because “Black theology works to end socio-political distortions of religion and God as a means of achieving individual or national power. To this end, Black theology argues in favor of creating a society based on social equality and justice” (Tweedy). Earthseed is a community where equality is a requirement, and if equality is required, oppression cannot exist in any form.

In creating a community where each person is encouraged to shape God into what they need God to be, Earthseed essentially follows the same blueprint as Black Theology. There is no leader who can define God for another person or speak to God on another’s behalf. The relationship you have with God is based on how you interact with God and in Earthseed, just as in Black Theology, people are encouraged to cultivate a relationship with God as they see fit. Lauren doesn’t dictate how people interact with change; she only warns them to be aware of their intention in doing so: “Any change may bear seeds of benefit. Seek them out. Any change may bear seeds of harm. Beware. God is infinitely malleable” (Sower 116). What both systems of belief have in common over anything else is the way they both attempt to provide a sense of hope to help believers sustain themselves. This is done in the encouragement of fighting for what’s right. In Black Theology, “[t]he themes of justice and liberation are closely related to the idea of hope” (Cone 757). Lauren says, “There’s hope in understanding the nature of God—not punishing or jealous, but infinitely malleable” (Sower 220). Oppressed people tend to struggle with maintaining hope in the face of injustice; Black Theology works to restore hope by helping people fight against injustices, and so does Earthseed. Tweedy points out how Earthseed,
“attempts to provide security as well as hope in a world looming on the verge of an abyss”
(Tweedy). Hope is an important factor because it functions like fuel in driving people to make the necessary changes they need to achieve equality.

Conclusion

With forethought and intent, Butler managed to create Earthseed as something that is timeless. God being Change having the adaptability it does means it can easily fit into any setting. It’s designed to improve society because it forces each individual to mold themselves into better versions of themselves. All are welcome, “There are no monetary taxes, no commandments etched in stone to follow and enforce. No rejection of individuals based on different sexualities, races, genders, ages or classes” (Hampton 22). All are encouraged to shape God because the consequences of not shaping God could cost lives, other people’s if not your own. Earthseed asks us to change the world by first starting with ourselves. Butler creates a God that asks for nothing yet is responsible for everything. By giving humanity a God of Change, Butler is challenging mankind to think of their every choice. Aparajita Nanda proposes that “in her writing, Butler actively works out a philosophy in which spirituality meets religion, a practicing world view that creates, accommodates, and embraces the principle of radical change” (30). If everyone practiced the basic idea of Earthseed, it would result in the end of oppression because Lauren says that if people want to be successful, they must shape God: “It isn’t enough for us to just survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. If that’s the shape we give to God, then someday we must become too weak—too poor, too hungry, too sick—to defend ourselves. Then we’ll be wiped out” (Butler 76). Butler’s Parable
series offers us a version of God that teaches us to honor the God in ourselves and in one another.

Failing to understand how the God of Change seeks to end all oppression changes the meaning behind Earthseed, making it impossible for it to do all that Butler intended. If Butler intended for Earthseed to speak to the injustices against some folks and not others, she wouldn’t need to use religion to connect all people together. She could have simply written the powerless in as more powerful than their oppressors, but instead she sought to use religion as bridge, unifying people in their humanity and using God as a sort of mirror to promote self-reflection. This speaks to her original intention: she was afraid of religion being used in a harmful way and envisioned a belief system that would actively try to reduce and eliminate harm. Earthseed requires believers to work together for the success of everyone instead of promoting individual glory. Even when Lauren invited new folks into her community, she made it clear that the space was welcoming to all. Even though she developed the concept of Earthseed, she in no way served as the right hand to God and she was never relieved of following the same practice as everyone else by shaping herself and in turn shaping God.
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