

Neither Paradise Lost nor the Promised Land

Anti-Nostalgic and Anti-Utopian Visions of Past, Present, and Future in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents*

journal doi <https://doi.org/10.31944>

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Abstract

Octavia Butler's speculative fiction novel, *Parable of the Talents* is a time-shifting narrative that moves between a fictional near-past (dystopian) and our possible future (disastrous, but then hopeful). True to Butler's own principled ambivalence, her postapocalyptic novel eschews facile and overdetermining ideologies of any sort: left or right, political or religious. The novel's refusal of dominant political ideologies makes it both anti-nostalgic and anti-utopian.

Through the methodology of literary analysis and hermeneutics (interpreting the story against the overdetermining lens of either political ideology), I show that *Parable of the Talents* rejects both conservative and progressive narratives about our past, present, and possible future. Conservative nostalgia for an idealized past that never really existed is negatively depicted in the novel. Progressive utopianism is likewise rejected: first, by depicting the dystopian reality that results from a utopia-promising moral crusade; then, more broadly, through dramatizing the horrific drawbacks of nominally righteous causes.

Instead, by offering dire warnings about a bleak future should current trends continue, *Parable of the Talents* figures prominently as cautionary tale. Fortunately, the novel also provides us with a roadmap for surviving tyranny and creating a freer, more rational, inclusive, and tolerant society in the years ahead.

Keywords

Octavia Butler, science fiction, speculative fiction, conservatism, progressivism, utopianism

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Anti-Nostalgic and Anti-Utopian Visions of Past, Present, and
Future in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents***

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents* is a work of speculative fiction (sf) set in a dystopian near-future. The characters of the novel must survive in a world ravaged by a global pandemic, and in a hollowed-out democracy now ruled by a fundamentalist demagogue. In response to the collapse of democratic institutions and social trust precipitated by the plague, the protagonist, Olamina founds a naturalized religion, one that does not require belief in the supernatural. Around this religion a community begins to form, Earthseed, whose members are diverse, tolerant, and open-minded. For their difference they are persecuted as heretics and cultists. Their sin: refusing to conform to the doctrinaire orthodoxy of religious and ideological fundamentalists.

What is striking about this futuristic novel (published in 1998), is the extent to which the future it depicts so eerily resembles our current reality. In the novel, the trend of rising political and cultural polarization leads to identity-based tribalism, and the persecution of opposing views and religions. The populace in the novel elects an autocratic ruler whose populist campaign slogan is "make America great again" (*Parable of the Talents* 20). Among other current trends coming to disastrous fruition in Butler's fictional universe are the crisis of public schools, the decline of reliable journalism, and surging intolerance of minorities, immigrants, and diverse views. Though a work of speculative fiction, *Parable of the Talents* couldn't feel more real. This in large part because the novel extrapolates from contemporary social, economic, and political trends to depict the dystopian future we are headed for should these trends continue.

However, though reflecting the worst aspects of our polarized politics, socioeconomic challenges, and rising identitarian tribalism, it would be a mistake to classify *Parable of the Talents* as a work of literary realism. Certainly, the novel embodies a gritty-realist aesthetic in its believable action, authentic feel, and psychological realism. It is also sociopolitically realistic. But ultimately, *Talents* stands as a dystopian and postapocalyptic sf novel, a narrative that goes beyond merely depicting present-day sociopolitical trends. More pointedly, *Parable of the Talents* amplifies those trends, extends their trajectory, and dramatizes their possible future consequences for society and humanity.

To invoke an optics metaphor, the novel does mirror our sociopolitical reality, it also *magnifies* troubling social, political, and economic trends in the present—so as to paint a grim, dystopian future. In so doing, the narrative conjures up an imagined dark future, a narrative device for offering indirect commentary on troubling contemporary trends. The novel is thus neither mirror (a “realist,” mimetic, or nonfiction depiction of our actual present), nor crystal ball (predicting—or claiming to predict—an unavoidable future). Rather, it is a magnifying glass, whose concentrating powers increase our awareness of existing social forces and trajectories that we may have become accustomed to, or whose danger we fail to see.

In addition to amplifying present-day trends, the novel also turns its magnifying lens on episodes from the past. For example, *Parable of the Talents* resurrects historical events such as the Crusades, concentration camps, and witch hunts—three of history’s most iconic never-again stories—to further amplify the novel’s social commentary on current social and political realities. These never-again stories from history stand as a warning against troubling trends in our present-day world: such as, rising intolerance and polarization, as well as greater political, religious, and ideological extremism. Thus, *Parable of the Talents* invokes lessons from the past to cast withering commentary on tribalism and intolerance in the world of the novel...but also to warn us (present-day readers) about our possible future should we follow a similar path.

By offering dire warnings about a bleak future should current trends continue, *Parable of the Talents* figures prominently as cautionary tale. However, though warning us about dangerous social and political trends, *Talents* does not pretend to give us all the answers, suggesting instead that there is no one way to fix a broken world, and no one way the future should look. Though anti-nostalgic in its rendering of the past, *Parable of the Talents* also rejects utopian fantasies about the future. True to Butler’s own principled ambivalence, the novel eschews facile and overdetermining ideologies of any sort: left or right, political or religious.

The novel’s refusal to either romanticize the past or idealize a utopian future stands as a realist rebuke to prevailing assumptions—on both the left and the right—about the cultural and political functions of history. Conservative thinkers romanticize the past, urging us to get back to what made us great at some earlier enchanted era, such as the moment of the nation’s founding. In contrast, critical theorists on the far left excoriate the past as a way to romanticize the future, promising a utopia of perfect equality and social justice...if we will just follow the precepts of the right

critical theories, submit to their political views, use politically-correct speech, adhere to ideologically-correct identity narratives—and make related ideological commitments. Succinctly put, conservatives want to take us back to paradise; critical theorists promise to take us to heaven.

Critical theorists on the progressive or far left, such as Frederic Jameson tend to view the interpretation of history as a tool for transforming the present, and thus creating a better future—better, that is, by the lights of their (in Jameson’s case, Marxist) ideological commitments. Emblematic of this view, Jameson writes of the argument and aims of his 1981 book that, “*The Political Unconscious* accordingly turns on the dynamics of the act of interpretation,” and “Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in *rewriting* a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code.” (*The Political Unconscious* 1937; emphasis added). More to the point, the teleological purpose for deploying this critical methodology—a hermeneutics of suspicion applied to everything from literary texts and culture to the interpretation of history—is to achieve “a dialectical or totalizing, properly Marxist ideal of understanding” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 1937), the ultimate aim of which is to “see[s] history in the salvational perspective of some ultimate liberation” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 1959). Liberation, one presumes, from capitalism—or perhaps some version of what many critical theorists today might call “neoliberalism”—which may or may not entail associated (if not always intersectional) discourses of power as instruments of oppression and domination.

The countervailing assumption, on the Burkean right, is that the past was better than the present in some sacrosanct way (or at least certain founding, social contracts were), and that we are obligated to the social order that preceded us. For conservatives and reactionaries, utopia is a golden age in the receding past (paradise lost), rather than an idealized future (the promised land). As opposed to the progressive left’s preoccupation with oppressive structures of the past (which have led to a “fallen” present), the conservative impulse maintains a certain reverence toward the idylls (and idols) of the past—whether conceived as a pastoral past, or simply as deference to a preexisting social order.

The preservationist sensibility inclines conservative intellectuals toward a reverence for the selfsame histories, precedents, and continuities that progressives and critical theorists—through a variety of postmodern, Marxist, and related critical methodologies and radical critiques—are intent on interrogating and, in some cases, dismantling. Conservative veneration for the past also inclines conservative thinkers to cite precedent (or a

preexisting social order) as justification for maintaining the status quo. As conservative philosopher Roger Scruton writes, “For conservatives, all disputes over law, liberty, and justice, are addressed to a historic and existing community. The root of politics, they believe, is *settlement*—the motive in human beings that binds them to a place, the customs, the history, and the people that are theirs” (Scruton 2). It is easy to see how conservative sensibilities of this sort would predispose one to romanticize the past, and even to sanctify it.

While conservatives worship at the altar of tradition, progressives adulate (as an absolute good) radical social change. Where the conservative stance cites history, tradition, and a preexisting social order as justification for the status quo (including existing hierarchies of power, wealth, and status), the progressive stance deploys critical theory and critical methods (such as deconstruction or dialectical materialism) to dismantle such justifications—and to offer progressive alternatives. As such, critical theorists adopt a “hermeneutics of suspicion” toward texts, dominant narratives, and the status quo (including existing institutions, structures, systems, and “knowledge”) in general—and in particular toward the conservative tendency to either sanitize or romanticize the past in defense of the social, political, or economic status quo.

Scruton sums up the acerbity of the progressive (and critical theorist) critique of the conservative vision when writing, “And a whole language has developed with which to abuse those who cling to the social order, the inherited hierarchies, the old and tried conventions” (6). Indeed, the appeal of critical theory to activist scholars and the far left, is that it provides them with the conceptual tools for radically (and in some cases with rebellious glee or acerbity) deconstructing and dismantling the existing social order.

Both sides engage in revisionist history, but toward different ideological ends: conservatives to preserve the status quo and certain traditional beliefs (through ideology-serving narratives about the decline of contemporary culture and society relative to an idealized past); progressives to serve the telos of steering a present tainted by the sins of the past toward the promised land of a progressively-sanctified utopian future. Conservatives tell us we must submit to custom, authority, and a preexisting political-religious order—and that failing to do so is the root cause of apparent social and cultural decay. Progressives tell us we must repent of our past sins, and radically change our political views, so that we can achieve utopia for the masses—if we will just accede to the political and moral mandates that follow from a critical-theory interpretation of history.

Parable of the Talents rejects both conservative and progressive narratives—speculative fantasies in their own right—about the past, present, and future. The novel rejects conservative nostalgia for an idealized past that never really existed. And it rejects progressive utopianism too. Rather than proffering utopian schemes or would-be saviors, the novel presents readers with messy realities.

By novel's end the marginalized, underdog protagonist we so admire has become a powerful and dominant figure in her own right, and the once-marginalized religion she founded has likewise consolidated political and institutional power. While Olamina's scheme of migration to the stars offers a sense of purpose to her followers—as well as the promise of social change by leaving behind a shattered world—it will be no utopia. That leaves readers to puzzle out things for themselves, and to reject simplistic slogans, impractical panaceas, and reality-denying paradigms.

Fortunately, Butler's work of imaginative fiction also provides us with a roadmap for surviving tyranny and creating a freer, more rational, inclusive, and tolerant society. *Parable of the Talents* teaches us to recognize and reject the idols of worshipping the past, even as it also rejects the false prophets of utopianism. Rejecting such fantasies, the novel depicts a more practical and less partisan way forward: one in which we adopt a reality-based mindset to deal with the complex, social and political problems engendered by the breakneck pace of change, modernity, and technological disruption. It imagines a society in which we work across our differences—the diversity of views, conflicting values, and cultures of a pluralistic democracy—to achieve peaceful coexistence and human flourishing...and to endow each with the freedom and opportunity to pursue their own version of the good life.

POX AS PROLOGUE: the Apocalyptic Past, and Anxiety about an Uncertain Future

Parable of the Talents is postapocalyptic in both the “disaster world” and chronological senses of the word. The story is set after the time of “the Pox” proper (an abbreviated tag for *apocalypse*): the civilization-collapsing time period (2015-2030) of *Parable of the Talents*' prequel, *Parable of the Sower*. (*Sower* was published in 1993, *Talents* in 1998.) There is no single cause (and no straight-line etiology) to serve as scapegoat for the disastrous state of their world. But there can be no doubt that: “We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises” (*Parable of the Talents* 8). As backstory-character Bankole explains, the Pox was “caused by coinciding climatic, economic, and sociological crises” (8). (Bankole is

a prominent character from *Parable of the Sower* who is killed off early in *Parable of the Talents*—but whose memoir, *Memories of Other Worlds*, appears in *Talents* as text-within-the-text excerpts.) Bankole remarks that since he was born in 1970, “education has become more a privilege of the rich than the basic necessity that it must be if a civilized society is to survive” (8). Indeed, free, universal education through public schooling no longer exists in their world. The enumeration of crushing civic decline such as this, along with the apocalyptic backstory, sketches a searing portrait of the postapocalyptic condition endured by the characters in the novel.

In addition to being post- (post-Pox, postapocalyptic), the novel is also pre- (prequel to an intended sf series). In his magisterial literary biography of Butler, Gerry Canavan categorizes *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* as “prequels” to the “space colony narrative” that Butler had intended to write all along (126). As Canavan explains elsewhere, “Butler’s ambition was to use the Missionary stories to tell multiple stories of interstellar colonization, à la the long-running *future-history* ‘saga’ series of Golden Age SF writers she admired, such as Heinlein and Asimov” (35; emphasis added). In short, both *Sower* and *Talents*, though set in the reader’s near-*future*, were intended to describe the fictional *history* of the off-world colonies that would constitute a later timeline in the planned series.

Parable of the Talents is set between the years 2032-2090. The novel begins in 2032: our future. When the novel was published in 1998, the fictional Pox years of 2015-2030 (the novel’s past) was still in the reader’s near-future. For those reading the novel in the present day, however, most if not all of the imagined past of the novel (the Pox years) now overlap with the reader’s present (now only a few years shy of 2032...or perhaps past it—depending on when you are reading this). That fact, though perhaps dating the text a little, is not an obstacle (any more than when reading Orwell’s *1984* in the post-1984 present day) to the reader’s sense that the past of the novel could yet play out as our dystopian future. And thus, the backstory to *Parable of the Talents* still figures as our possible future (what Frederic Jameson, as we shall see, might call “future history,” or the *future-past*), and which characters at a later timeline in the novel look back on as their dystopian past. The dizzying time-and-narrative recursiveness of the novel leads the reader to pay greater attention to troubling social and political trends in our own times, their awareness amplified by the narrative’s refraction of such trends through the prism of dystopian literature.

The time-jumping narration of *Parable of the Talents* serves both to juxtapose attitudes and worldviews as they change over time (including the changing beliefs of the same character at different epochs in society, and at different points in their own lives) as well as to emphasize the extent to which our *interpretation of the past* (the key Jamesonian and critical-theory insight) can significantly determine our perspective about the present—and thus our political stance on the future direction we should take. The timeline of *Parable of the Talents* spans 58 years (the imagined-future years of 2032 to 2090), in addition to jumping back to the “Pox” years (2015 to 2030) for the novel’s backstory. Some chapters are separated by decades, though adjacent in the narrative. Through this narrative time traveling, the novel destabilizes the tidy separation of past, present, and future—much as Faulkner does in his oeuvre, and which he memorialized in his famous dictum on the extent to which the past is alive in the present: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

From there it is a short step to a critical-theorist notion of “future history,” a beguiling concept if you’re a critical theorist—or someone heavily invested in progressive utopianism, and reinterpreting the past to achieve a more perfect future. Jameson introduces the term “future history” (in a somewhat cryptic passage) in an essay well-known to critical sf theorists, “Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?”:

We must therefore now return to the relationship of SF and future history and reverse the stereotypical description of this genre: what is indeed authentic about it, as a mode of narrative and a form of knowledge, is not at all its capacity to keep the future alive, even in imagination. On the contrary, its deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished, the atrophy in our time of what Marcuse has called the *utopian imagination*, the imagination of otherness and radical difference; to succeed by failure, and to serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for a meditation, which, setting forth for the unknown, finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits.

As is clear from Jameson’s use of the term, the critical-theory concept of “future history” is very different from the “*future-history*” that Butler had in mind as a sf book series (and fictional concept). Jameson’s notion of “future history” seems to indicate a literary genre (a speculative fiction variation on historical fiction) and defamiliarizing way of thinking,

to which the critical theorist adds a social and political purpose (and perhaps also a utopian telos, or end goal): to imagine a radically different future, and—as his essay title suggests—thus propel “progress.” Other critical theorists and postmodernist scholars easily expand the suggestiveness of the term *future history* by at times slipping into metaphor, pure theory, or a playful (but antirealist) notion of time. In addition, many critical theorists (especially those heavily influenced by postmodern theory) hold that all human interactions (as well as what we can know of reality) follow the logic of discourse, in which social reality is reduced to narrative and relations of power. Hence, “the imagination of otherness and radical difference,” that Jameson refers to in “Progress versus Utopia.”

Moreover, the impulse to conceptualize the relationship between past, present, and future as a purely narrative one is particularly tempting to postmodern theorists, given that a slippery notion of time (and time travel) is ubiquitous in sf narrative. (Think: the sf film *Arrival*, based on a short story by Ted Chiang, in which humans encounter an alien species seemingly capable of time travel by virtue of the linguistic artifact that their language lacks a distinction between past, present, and future tenses.) While feeling plausible—at the narrative level of reality, such as in sf novels—the literal conflation of past, present, and future no more conforms to the unidirectional quality of time (in the real world) than does the possibility of actual time travel.

But let us entertain the idea briefly. It could be argued that a future history (or future-past) theme plays out on two different levels in *Parable of the Talents*. The first future-past theme plays out through the diametrically-opposed historicizing gestures of the two competing ideological camps in the novel—one promulgating nostalgic narratives (and urging our return to paradise lost), the other promoting anti-nostalgia by either demonizing the past or focusing on history’s worst moments. Through a propagandist interpretation of historical events, both ideologies (right and left) are appropriating the past in an attempt to gain political power and control the nation’s future.

The second future-past theme entails the anticipation and hope—by readers—of a better future (for both ourselves and the characters in the novel), despite historical missteps, wrongs, and trauma from our past. This hope of a better future is imparted notwithstanding the suffering, misery, and felt despair that—as dystopian lit—is also present in the novel. Despite their bleak setting, dystopian novels are not entirely pessimistic. We triumph in the characters’ resilience and ability to survive, despite their circumstances. What is more, the dystopian angle gives an even sharper

edge to the novel as cautionary tale. The cautionary tale serves as a harbinger of hope, if we will just notice and respond to the danger ahead, we may yet escape the folly of our current path.

As Charlotte Naylor Davis neatly summarizes, “In the *Parables* there are two main reactions to the uncertainty of the future and the terror of the past: Olamina and Earthseed’s declaration of adaptability and hope among the stars (a human future), and Christian America’s rigid hold to a ‘traditional’ homogenous Christianity with hope in eternity” (66). (The fictional “Christian America” in the novel are intolerant fundamentalists, an extremist wing of which kidnaps Earthseeders, treats them inhumanely, and imprisons them in a reeducation camp.) Davis is describing the progressive impulse (which is forward-gazing) as opposed to the reactionary one (which is backward-gazing, though sometimes combined with the religious promise of a supernatural afterlife). Davis continues, “The latter has strictly delineated rules it believes will keep it safe; the former has tenets that speak of movement, diversity, and growth in the face of many dangers” (66).

Butler turns that stark contrast between progressive and reactionary impulses into the central conflict of the novel, which she dramatizes as the ruthless persecution of the Earthseed community by Christian America. By the end of the tale, Earthseed’s numbers have grown and it has become a dominant religion, complete with the moral compromises and other tradeoffs that religious and political power entail. The novel concludes in an open-ended way (travel to the stars and new homelands imminent), anticipating Butler’s intention to write a sequel in which the Earthseeders become colonists on other worlds. *Parable of the Talents* thus ends with a forward-looking gaze: leaving the reader on a hopeful note, but commingled with a good measure of pessimism about the perfectibility of human nature.

The fictional Christian America characters in the novel view the past in much the same way that Mark Lilla describes the prevailing sentiments of the reactionary mind: “Hopes can be refuted. Nostalgia is irrefutable” (xiv). They seek to return the world to an idealized pre-Pox past that never really existed. As we have seen, politically they support an autocratic ruler who vows to “make America great again” (*Parable of the Talents* 20). In contrast to this revanchist notion of a lost national past, the journal entries of Olamina, Bankole, and Larkin/Asha describe a harrowing present reality, and a recent past that is even worse. Their orientation toward the past is anti-nostalgic: taking never-again incidents from both the recent and distant past as a warning of what to guard against. Rather than imagining the past

as some *belle époque* we might understandably yearn to recover, they see the past as the anvil of hard experience that teaches us about the worst of human nature, and how to avoid it. The Pox is past now, but it is also prologue: setting in action forces, attitudes, and beliefs that will shape their future. The long reach of that apocalyptic prologue—and the misery, suffering, and psychic trauma it inflicted—still haunts the post-Pox world.

It could be said *Parable of the Talents* resembles historical fiction in its invention of the past. That is, the novel imagines a narrative past that never existed: the backstory of the Pox years. I do not mean to say that historians completely invent the past, in the way that fiction writers create backstories. Far from it. Nevertheless, to an unavoidable degree, what we call history is largely narrative, albeit one woven from historical facts and judged by its overall coherence and adherence to what we can reliably know about the past.

Nor do I mean to imply that historical fiction is wholly untethered from historical facts and the documented events of known history. Just the opposite: it is the genre's basis in established historical events and real-life historical figures (as well as the accurate rendition of a historical period, and authentic-feeling portrayals of a past society) that give historical fiction its appeal and its punch. For the same reasons, memoir packs more punch (such as the poignant life stories told by Mary Karr and Tara Westover) than if the same life story were presented as a novel: because we are told that it really happened...that it is—with minor embellishments—a true story.

In a similar vein, Butler's extrapolation of actual events make *Parable of the Talents* more narratively- and morally-compelling than it would if taking excessive flights of fancy from the real world. Indeed, it is the grounding of the novel in a world that could realistically be our own that makes the novel so effective as a cautionary tale...as Butler intended. Butler even announced her intent in a 2005 Interview on *Democracy Now!*: "I had been doing the two Parable books—*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*—and they were what I call cautionary tales: 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" (*Conversations* 222-23). It is rare that a "story first" author so clearly spells out the political "message" she had in mind when writing the story. Butler describes herself in interviews as not very political, and she avoids being tied to a particular political or identity agenda. But in the broad sense, she clearly has a political message, and it is clear which current social and political trends she is critiquing.

PAST: Lessons from History as Cautionary Tales

As we have seen, Butler reaches into our past to paint a possible dystopian future. Particularly striking are the parallels the narrative draws between never-again events in history and the revival of those atrocities in a future imagined by extrapolating from our present. When members of Earthseed are viciously attacked by men in long tunics and wearing “big white crosses” Olamina writes, “This was something new. / Or something old” (18). The something old she is referring to is, of course, the Crusades: the murderous, ideologically-motivated Holy War that Crusader armies perpetrated on a religious Other, often noncombatants. The Crusades stand in our collective memory as an iconic episode of religious intolerance, and that is exactly the association that Olamina intends to draw.

Olamina goes on to draw other parallels from history: the Inquisition, Ku Klux Klan, and Nazi atrocities. Each of these is emblematic of bigotry, intolerance, and a misguided belief in the righteousness of one’s own cause. Trying to figure out just who their new attackers are, Olamina muses, “It sounds like the sort of thing his people might do—a revival or something nasty out of the past....So now we have another group that uses crosses and slaughters people” (19). The “his” in this passage refers to then-candidate Andrew Steele Jarret, the autocratic demagogue who is soon to be elected president on a “make America great again” campaign slogan. It is stunning for us to read these words post-2016—in a novel that was published in 1998. The eerily prescient nature of the passage—seemingly predicting (in 1998) the campaign slogan and MAGA hats of the real-life 2016 and 2024 Presidential elections—adds to the visceral sense that fictional world she is describing could quite plausibly become our reality.

In the dystopian world of *Parable of the Talents*, Jarret’s supporters “form mobs and burn people at the stake for being witches” (19). As Olamina explains, “A witch, in their view, tends to be a Moslem, a Jew, a Hindu, a Buddhist” or anyone who “doesn’t quite match Jarret’s version of Christianity” (19). Add unorthodox “cultists” to the list of witches to be persecuted and hunted down. That is, not just members of official religions, but also small groups of dissenters, the unorthodox, or those expressing heterodox views. The Earthseed community (“that cult”) is one of the targets of Jarret’s supporters. Earthseed members are being attacked and murdered. Some of their number, including Olamina, are captured and sent to reeducation camps by cross-wearing zealots.

Of course, witch hunts aren’t really about witchcraft. They’re about enforcing ideological conformity and political obeisance by intimidating

dissidents, political opponents, and nonconformists. At their most fundamental, witch hunts, McCarthyism, and other such purges and purity tests are terror tactics deployed with the same end goal in mind: to make an example of those who espouse opposing views or refuse to conform to the prescribed group identity.

Intolerance can come from any ideological or identity position: from the left as well as the right, from secular as well as religious fundamentalists, from a social location of grievance as well as one of privilege. But in the storyworld of *Parable of the Talents* it comes from the reactionary impulse of Jarret's supporters. They believe in an idealized past, and see any cultural, religious, or competing worldview as a threat. Theirs is a reactionary view, and the reactionary narrative follows a common script. Mark Lilla describes the reactionary script as such: "[the] story begins with a happy, well-ordered state where people who know their place live in harmony and submit to tradition and their God (xii-xiii)."

Reactionaries see this perfect past as threatened by change, modernity, and other "alien ideas" that threaten the harmony and social order. The reactionary becomes convinced that society is rushing toward destruction, and that "Whether the society reverses direction or rushes to its doom depends entirely on their resistance" (xiii). Jarret and his supporters fit this reactionary mold to a T. In Olamina's words, "Jarret insists on being a throwback to some earlier, 'simpler' time....He wants to take us all back to some magical time when everyone believed in the same God, worshipped him in the same way, and understood that their safety in the universe depended on completing the same religious rituals and stomping anyone who was different" (*Parable of the Talents* 19). Of course, as Olamina tartly observes of this idealized past, "There was never such a time in this country" (19).

Butler's pessimism about history and human nature is in the same spirit as America's Founders—men such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton—who were distrustful of human nature, and therefore of overreliance on personal virtue (rather than democratic structures) to keep rulers from turning into tyrants. Their pessimism about human nature led them to insist on a system of political checks and balances and other democratic guardrails, which they saw as essential to preserving freedom and democracy. Such are the benefits of an anti-nostalgic view of history.

Rather than worship the past, *Parable of the Talents* problematizes our narratives of the past. That is, the novel depicts a healthy skepticism toward the myths and other stories we tell ourselves as a people, and through

which we interpret past and present events...and also imagine possible futures. For example, at novel's end, Asha/Larkin questions the mythology and aura of sainthood that surrounds her mother, offering a counternarrative that details what Olamina sacrificed (including losing her own daughter) in the name of spreading her religion and achieving its purpose of travel to the stars.

That is not to say that—given how deeply flawed people and past deeds can be—there is nothing worth preserving from the past. Far from it. Indeed, the Earthseed community and religion passionately preserve a tradition of religious texts and wisdom literature: “a few members of the community stood up to quote from Earthseed verses, the Bible, The Book of Common Prayer, the Bhagavad-Gita, John Donne. The quotations took the place of the words that friends and family would have said to remember the dead” (*Parable of the Talents* 58). The Earthseed religion also readily absorbs wisdom from long-established scientific laws and theories: “the faces of her god are biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and, of course, the second law of thermodynamics” (46).

As these passages make clear, Olamina and her Earthseed community, though forward-gazing, also strive to preserve the great gems of the world's cultural and intellectual heritage. That impulse to conserve the best of human creativity, invention, and hard-earned wisdom gives conservatism (in the broadest sense) its name. Though in the narrower sense, the question of what to conserve becomes more political, such as when conservative philosopher Roger Scruton writes that “Conservatism is what its name says it is: the attempt to conserve the community that we have—not in every particular since as Edmund Burke put it, ‘we must reform in order to conserve,’ but in all matters that ensure our community's long-term survival” (12).

Our “long-term survival” is exactly the objective that *Parable of the Talents* is seeking to ensure when raising the ugly specter of never-again events (such as in the “Crusaders” passage) from our past. Though not our whole past, the object of critique is clear: namely, violent incidents of intolerance, imposing our group's religious values on others, and the identity-justified persecution of other groups. These are the never-again stories that most galvanize us, and that we tell (and retell) as warnings and reminders to ourselves in a pluralistic society and world: *this*...we must never repeat.

PRESENT: from Author's Present to Storyworld to Reader's Present

Academic responses to Butler's fiction tend toward affinity with the novel's anti-nostalgic view of the past: inclined to figure the dominant arc of national history as one tainted by colonialism, bigotry, and other systemic ills, rather than as (in the conservative view) a sacred heritage, *belle époque*, or tradition worthy of preserving. But for critical theorists and progressive-leaning scholars, skepticism about romanticizing or looking favorably to the past does not positively correlate with an equal skepticism of utopianism about the future they wish to steer us toward. If anything, there is a negative correlation: for progressive scholars, the upswing of the anti-nostalgia pendulum arcs toward utopian dreams of a more perfect future. However, the progressive impulse is not entirely future-oriented, as the underlying motivation for utopian thinking is often ideologically-driven discontent with the present. The progressive utopian vision often starts with the deeply-felt sentiment that people (or society) have been corrupted (think: Rousseau) or kept from the perfectibility of their nature by an unjust and miseducating society, culture, institutions, and other systemic structures.

Matthew Mullins, for example, argues that "*Parable of the Sower* calls the history of oppression to mind even as it imagines what the United States will be like thirty years into the future" (26). Mullins goes on to argue that *Kindred* and *Sower*, for example, give us "an opportunity to construct an understanding of time in which the past has a tangible connection to the future and the future can be seen as resolutely historical. Butler creates such historicized futures throughout her fiction to help us see that we cannot comprehend and analyze our present world, let alone imagine a future, if we do not have a well-developed historical consciousness" (28). The imagined future that Mullins has in mind is "a positive change" that deploys the well-honed instrument of historical consciousness to critique a present—that is, the status quo—which is inherently suspect for both the existence of existing hierarchies of power and for its connection to never-again incidents in our history (28). Mullins continues: "At the same time, imagining the future is vital to fully understanding the past. Without such a historical consciousness we will not question the status quo, embrace positive change, or value works of art that encourage us to do both" (28).

Certainly, there should be robust criticism from within and without (as critical theory urges) of whatever political system and cultural beliefs currently hold sway. However, the risk of invoking historical consciousness as an instrument of sociopolitical critique is that one may well distort history

(as well as present reality) in the zeal to criticize the present by condemning the past (and anyone associated with it). Likewise, Samuel Delany famously remarked, “science fiction is not about the future; it uses the future as a narrative convention to present significant distortions of the present” (cited in Streeby 18). In both cases (looking backward with a critical eye, or looking forward all glassy-eyed), the actual focus is on the present, and present-day concerns.

In the illuminating “Introduction” to her *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism*, Shelley Streeby elaborates: “A good deal of cli-fi works on this principle, distorting our present by representing it as the past of an imagined future, as literary critic Fredric [sic] Jameson says classic science fiction writer Philip K. Dick often does, in ways that can help us think critically about what we need to do in the present to keep the worst from happening” (18). By way of further explanation—and to elaborate on where Jameson is coming from—Patricia Meltzer argues that, “As a genre defined by its relationship to technology as well as by its futuristic framework, science fiction is understood as a cultural arena that explores the anxieties of what Frederic Jameson termed the ‘post-modern condition’” (4).

As readers or scholars of speculative fiction, we must be ever-vigilant against our own utopian or presentist inclinations, as well as remaining cognizant of how sf writers might be distorting the present in service to their own political message or agenda.

To imagine the dystopian world she depicts in *Parable of the Talents*, Butler drew heavily from her own present (in the 1990s), extrapolating from the social, economic, and political trends of that decade. For instance, Butler calls attention to the varieties of neo-slavery to which countless wage workers at the bottom have been subjected, as well the vast inequality at the border after NAFTA, specifically noting the slave-like situation of workers in *maquiladoras* just south of the border:

[I]n *Parable of the Sower* [prequel and backstory to *Parable of the Talents*] I talk about the return of slavery, which is real. I mean, that’s not something I pulled out of history; that’s something I pulled out of the newspapers....[T]hey’ll either bring in illegal aliens and work them and not pay them and forbid them to leave and generally mistreat them...or they’ll do it with Black people who are not well enough educated or connected to get out of there, or they’ll do it with homeless people who, you know, don’t have anywhere to go and are abused. Also throwaway labor....[I]n the Maquiladora Plants in Mexico....where people are worked under horrible

conditions and live under horrible conditions. (1994 Interview with Jelani Cobb; in *Conversations* 55)

Butler was living through the worst effects of a NAFTA-fueled economic order, when globalization and wage arbitrage were creating devastating labor conditions for the working poor in other countries, with spillover effects back home. And that world—our world—is the wellspring from which flows the dystopian world of *Parable of the Talents*. Those capable of shutting their eyes to the inequality and injustices of the present might see the book solely as a warning about our *future*, but in many ways the novel could rightly be called our *present*, given the actual conditions of many Americans and countless global workers since the book was published in 1998.

As for the present of the novel, that is a shifting target, given the narrative time-jumping between entire decades—particularly the years 2032-2090, which bookend the chronological sequence of the novel. The novel is episodic, relating different stages of the early years of the Earthseed community (such as when Olamina’s brother Marc is rescued from slavery), then dwelling for a portion of the narrative on Olamina’s year of imprisonment in a reeducation camp (until her and the other captives make their daring escape), and then—after a few more episodes and incidents—jumping forward to 2090 for the novel’s conclusion.

Lastly there is the reader’s present, which may date anywhere from publication year to the present day. Since many of the social, economic, and political trends that Butler depicts remain salient and very much with us, those aspects of the book continue to engage readers. The key point here is that (to date, in the mid-2020s), the troubling trends of the novel’s near-past are still very much with us. And the novel stands more than ever as cautionary tale.

FUTURE: The Extrapolation of Social, Political, and Economic Trends

The 2007 paperback reprint of *Parable of Talents* includes a helpful “Reading Group Guide,” as well as this illuminating blurb (excerpted from Mike Davis’s *Ecology of Fear*): “[Butler] uses disciplined extrapolation to explore the dark possibilities of the near future” (backside of front flyleaf). Davis is referring to the literary technique of *sf extrapolation* which—as we have seen—extrapolates from present-day trends, culture, technologies, and

political and socioeconomic forces to imagine, “predict,” or at least depict what our future world might look like. That near-future possibility is precisely what makes Butler’s story so gripping, and downright unnerving. The reader very much feels (in a visceral and immediate way) that this could happen to us, that the postapocalyptic world of the story could quite easily become our reality as well. And the reason it feels so visceral and real (and at times prophetic) is that Butler extrapolates her dark world from social, economic, and political trends that we are all too palpably aware of in our present reality.

Among the most salient current trends that Butler extrapolates to paint her postapocalyptic future are: the decline of public education, the political and technological forces threatening reliable journalism, and the widening opportunity gap between the wealthiest few and the rest of us. We readily recognize these trends today because we are currently—agonizingly—grappling with them, and already starting to feel their social and political impact. Bankole’s observation that, in his apocalyptic world, “education has become more a privilege of the rich,” could just as well describe today’s vast disparities between schools in affluent zip codes and those in poor ones. The current K-12 educational trend is one of growing inequality, with differences in school resources and education levels mirroring a growing cultural and wealth divide.

Butler then extrapolates this trend to its logical conclusions: “But these days when more than half the country can’t read at all, history is just one more vast unknown to them” (19). The inevitable outcome of no longer providing free, universal, public education to all citizens is an increasing illiterate and undereducated society. Not only that, but a society divided between those who can afford the high cost of private education, and those who cannot. Butler shows us the civic peril of forsaking public education, not least of which is lower literacy rates and a rising education gap—which only adds to the social-media amplified rise of tribalism, misinformation, and belief of propaganda and “alternative facts.”

Given the sheer degree to which the novel’s extrapolations accurately reflect aspects of our world today, it is no wonder that Michael Brandon McCormack describes *Parable of the Talents* as nothing short of prophetic: “Butler’s prophetic imaginings of possibilities for survival, care, and healing in the wake of violence and death” (209). More to the point, “Butler warns of unimaginable violence unleashed on the bodies of those rendered vulnerable by the interplay between religious and political extremism. Through the violence of Christian America culminates the futuristic modes of enslavement, torture, rape, burning, and slaughter of

‘alien’ bodies” (209). As McCormack suggests, the novel is looking backward (depicting tribalism and fundamentalist righteousness, which is marshalled into Old Testament-style vengeance on anyone holding opposing beliefs) and forward (imagining futuristic forms of oppression and new technologies of control, such as remote-controlled slave collars) at the same time.

As we have seen, proleptic gestures (such as anticipation of our possible future) like these in the novel, are often enacted by leading the reader to reflect on deplorable and iconic events from our past...with the aim of waking us up to present ills or trends that should concern us. Over the course of the novel, multiple interrelated themes of social critique emerge as *Parable of the Talents* plunges us deeper and deeper into its dystopian world.

One of those themes is the vital role of journalism in maintaining an informed citizenry. Because it is neither prolonged nor repeated, the “news bullets” passage can feel a bit like a passing comment at first (81). However, the “news bullets” commentary fits in with the larger themes of civil society and becoming a democracy-in-name-only—and thus adds to the big picture, and overall thematic impact of novel. Also, when we read that the characters “have to make a special effort to get news from outside—real news, I mean, not rumors,” we can’t help but think of the demise of local journalism and objective reporting (and the concomitant rise of partisan infotainment) in our own world today (81).

In its depiction of the complete and total monetization of reliable news coverage, the passage anticipates the present crisis in journalism. Though written almost three decades ago, before the digital disruption of media and journalism, the parallels with the funding challenges facing journalism today are almost uncanny. For example, though it is (or should be) a public good (vital to a healthy democracy), reliable and credible journalism is not publicly supported. The result is an unformed (and often misinformed) public, because the old business models no longer support “free broadcast radio,” local newspapers, or informing the public in an unbiased way (81). As Matt Taibbi explains in *Hate Inc.: Why Today’s Media Makes Us Despise One Another*, the rise of “free” internet “news” eliminated the revenue stream of paid advertising for objective, credible, and reliable reporting in print or television, pushing media outlets (especially in television) toward the entertainment end of the spectrum...and away from producing informative, substantive, and fact-checked content. This largely explains the rise of partisan infotainment—an even more troubling trend, and a source of propaganda and division. We

live in the age of “fake news,” and are all too familiar with Olamina’s yearning and need for “real news.”

Even more prophetically, Butler predicts the emergence of internet memes, social media newsfeeds, and Twitter-like platforms that thrive on clickbait and divisive content that push our buttons, manipulate our emotions, and drive us into separate information silos. She describes “news bullets” as flashy tweets that “purport to tell us all who [sic] we need to know in flashy pictures and quick, witty, verbal one-two punches. Twenty-five or thirty words are supposed to be enough in a news bullet to explain either a war or an unusual set of Christmas lights” (81). Underscored are the social and political implications of the technology, rather than the geeky specifics of the technology itself. In this case, the implications are revealed by asking the basic question: are we more informed—or are we misinformed—by this new digital media?

In this and other ways, *Parable of the Talents* goes beyond “hard” science fiction’s focus on the novelty and technical aspects of the *tech novum* (the new technology, innovation, or idea), to emphasize the narrower sense of sf scholar Darko Suvin’s illuminating term, (*novum* means “new thing”). Hard sf puts more emphasis on the story’s invented gadgetry, mechanical devices, or engineering marvels. Hard sf also tends to feature “techy” sf tropes, such as robots, space ships, and time travel, as well as a propensity for bending—but not breaking—the laws of physics. For many readers, it is these techy tropes that most distinguish science fiction from other genres. Butler, however, broadens the technique of sci-fi extrapolation, by focusing instead on *social* technologies, such as economic forces, political trends, culture, and belief.

More to the point—while even the hardest sf touches on the sociopolitical sequelae following the introduction of new gadgets, tech whizbangs, or human interaction with other levels of reality (digital, quantum, or alien)—*Parable of the Talents* takes as its primary focus the sociopolitical aspects themselves. While it is fun (as readers of sf) to geek out on the technology (and Butler does give us a few innovative—and horrifying—tech gadgets to ponder), the storyworld of *Parable of the Talents* is shaped more by social and political forces than by any single gadget-type technology. As in our world, sociopolitical reality largely determines how new technology will be applied: whether it will be weaponized for oppression, or mobilized to serve the common good. Arguably, the focus on sociopolitical trends, rather than strictly technical ones, makes the story even more believable (as our possible future) than sf scenarios that rely on less likely (though sufficiently plausible, and still

allowing for the suspension of disbelief) technological devices, such as teleportation and faster-than-light space travel.

Despite many sobering prognostications, the future is not all bleak in *Parable of Talents*. Just the opposite. In the most inspirational passage of the novel, Olamina exhorts us to look to the *future* rather than the past in order to forge a shared sense of purpose:

We need the stars, Bankole. *We need purpose!* We need the image the Destiny gives us of ourselves as a growing, purposeful species. We need to become the adult species that the Destiny can help us become! If we're to be anything other than smooth dinosaurs who evolve, specialize, and die, we need the stars (179).

As Olamina explains, “When we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves” (179). Olamina is expressing an attitude of hopefulness about the future of humanity—but without uncritical utopianism, or otherwise substituting fantasy for a worthy and realistic vision of our collective future.

The Destiny provides this sense of shared purpose and clear direction to our lives without (as organized religions often do) having to supernaturalize some version of an afterlife.” But Earthseed’s promise to the faithful of achieving a better future is a shaky promise at best. For, as Claire Curtis points out, “we know (both as readers of Butler and because Lauren reminds us) that all will not be well among the stars” (184). Curtis’s caveat encapsulates the ever-present, anti-utopian thrust of Butler’s work. What is more, Curtis adds, “if Earthseed is the answer to the social contract—if it is what we are to contract for—then the novel again challenges our expectations by refusing to let us see Earthseed getting to the point where the Destiny might be something reasonable to affirm” (184).

Though *Parable of the Talents* rejects both progressive utopianism and reactionary nostalgia for an idealized past—and though it seems pessimistic about our present and near-future—it ends on a hopeful note about the better future we could be headed toward. Better, though imperfect, that is.

Namely, the direction we could be headed, if likewise guided by a vision of “the Destiny” as peaceable coexistence (despite our differences of identity, religion, and viewpoint) and human flourishing in a pluralistic, liberal democracy. But liberal democracy is hard work, and democratic backsliding a constant temptation. To keep our democracy, freedom, and cosmopolitan society, we must manage to: check our tribal and identitarian impulses; recommit to humanism and the core values of liberalism (freedom, tolerance, and nonaggression); and be ever-vigilant against

authoritarianism, tribalism, the erosion of civil liberties, and other forces of illiberalism.

CONCLUSION: A Roadmap for Realists

Though easily classified as disaster lit, *Parable of the Talents* also gives us—as members of the reality-based community—a roadmap for averting disaster. By avoiding the delusion-inducing lure of both the nostalgic and utopian impulses, the novel depicts characters facing crisis after crisis, yet remaining resilient and resourceful...precisely because the key characters are realists and political pragmatists rather than ideologues and radical idealists. The novel demonstrates the development of sustainable practices in a world where the effects of climate change have already begun to have severe impacts. It shows us what a naturalized religion might look like, and how secular religion or spirituality can provide shared purpose, meaning, and community in an increasingly secular age.

Butler’s “disaster lit” novel also models how to build a society based on science, reason, and humanism (including tolerance for other views and cultures), necessary virtues in a pluralistic, democratic society. As such, Butler has described *Parable of the Talents* as a “novel of solutions” (“Reading Group Guide” 411). Unquestionably, one of the ways we should approach (and take lessons from) this postapocalyptic novel, is as an imaginative work of possible solutions.

As cautionary tale, *Parable of the Talents* offers a dark vision of our collective future. However, the novel also inspires cautious optimism and hope—though rejecting both conservative nostalgia and progressive utopianism. By warning us, through visceral and dramatic storytelling, of the social, political, and economic trends that pose the greatest threat to a free and flourishing society, the novel inspires hope for a better future—as well as good reason to believe that just such a future is possible. Whether we achieve that better future—or instead fulfill the dystopian destiny depicted in the novel—depends on us. As suggested by the biblical “Parable of the Talents” that the novel’s title alludes to, our future happiness and human flourishing depend on whether we invest wisely in our collective future, or squander our talents and freedoms. What will our actual future look like? That, alas, is up to us.

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