

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

“The Only Lasting Truth Is Change”

An analysis of Earthseed spirituality: The *Parables* (1993-1998) by Octavia Butler

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Année académique 2019-2020

Master en langues et lettres modernes, orientation générale, finalité approfondie (anglais-français)

Acknowledgements

Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all.

—Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

This research was always more than “an enthusiasm of the moment”. I would like to thank my professor Véronique Bragard, that I met that day of July 2018 at the market, who accepted to work with me on this subject. She challenged my arguments, gave me guidance and feedback on my writings. I also need to thank my friends, in particular Alessandro Pinto, Dilay Karakadioglu and Karolina Roman who gave me support and advice during that time. They offered me their time to read my writings and discuss ideas with benevolence that I am grateful for. I am also thankful to those professors and assistants, both in Belgium and abroad, who kindly lent an ear to my arguments and questions. Lastly, I need to thank some members of my family who encouraged me to never give up despite my doubts. While I am finishing my studies, there is someone missing on my side. Change is a harsh reality, but adaptability is my strength. In every seed, in every word, in every star, he is there. And I was never alone.

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Introduction

We see in fiction what we refuse to see in the real world.

—Jim Miller, “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping:
Octavia Butler’s Dystopian/Utopian Vision”

It seems that we are facing multiple crises concerning our relationships towards our imagination, our environment and our spiritual dimension. While we sharpen our awareness towards our responsibilities to environmental issues, science fiction literature has played the role of a magnifying glass since the sixties, anticipating the consequences of our excesses. The genre not only takes inspiration from reality but also fashions imagination of the future. Some subgenres of science fiction offer us the possibility to face those anxieties linked to the anticipation of a ‘horrific’ future. However, regarding the crisis of imagination preventing us from breaking free from frightful scenarios, this genre may also imagine desirable futures, some that could inspire individuals to turn fiction into reality.

The *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and the *Parable of the Talents* (1998), science fiction novels written by the African American author Octavia Butler in the nineties, imagine a future America where environmental, societal and spiritual crises question human survival. The novels address three failures: the one of environmental preservation, non-resilient communities and the absence of engaging forms of spirituality. Historically, Butler (1947-2006) evolved in the post-World War II society where the concept of unlimited growth prevails, a Western world’s conception that is called into question since the Meadows Reports of the seventies. She thus lived in a period witnessing the improvement of individual comfort and well-being that quickly reveals its first cracks in the seventies, showing that such a system has damaged the planet. Despite various warnings, the myth of unlimited growth still rules over our 21st-century societies, and as the French philosopher Bourdieu states “growth becomes a poison for the habitability of the planet” (Bourdieu, 2000:8:34-8:42).

From the perspective of the nineties, Butler imagines the consequences of the ‘business as usual’ on her current society. In the fictional 2024 America, she explores how individuals, mainly marginalised ones, try to survive in a society on the edge of collapse. Faithful to the tradition of dystopian and utopian novels, Butler offers a *ustopian* narrative (Atwood’s term applied to novels having a fine combination of both dystopian and utopian

characteristics) stating the community's failure in a dying world. From those observations, Butler builds her story around her protagonist, Olamina, who creates spiritual rituals and a new spirituality, Earthseed, that happen to foster social cohesion. Along with environmental and societal crises, this form of spirituality is the central element to those novels and its development is what truly matters in the story.

Butler's *Parables*¹ share similarities with other dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels taking inspiration from our contemporary ecological crisis. However, contrary to post-apocalyptic novels, the *Parables* may overcome the narrative of fear in order to offer another approach to those crises. Instead of replaying the myth of competition between individuals in an apocalyptic world, the novels show how people collaborate to survive in a troubled society, where the basic needs cannot be satisfied for a large section of the population. Earthseed spirituality is a core element that allows the characters to find purpose and social cohesion but also changes relationships among individuals and towards their environment. In the tradition of science fiction literature, the *Parables* can be analysed as another genre that breaks free from the 'horrific' future narrative, since hope is a central dimension to both Earthseed and the story.

The present study attempts to analyse the *Parables* as 'collapse fictions', reinvesting worlds built on dystopias while subverting this genre to create another one. By doing so, I postulate that the novels offer another narrative having at its centre a form of spirituality that serves as a model to create another society, taking distance from the one of the collapsing world. Eventually, I argue that this new subgenre shows how individuals create an alternative community (Acorn), thanks to this new form of spirituality, while the former one does not collapse. Since I identify the importance of collaboration within the novels, the purpose of this dissertation is to understand how Earthseed, thanks to its capacity to foster social cohesion, can be at the basis of a new society evolving in a world on the edge of collapse.

This approach is new within the study of Butler's *Parables* since the novels have been analysed through four or five major themes: as utopian and dystopian novels, as a re-reading of the African American experience, as linked to Christianity and Black theology and, finally, as feminist novels. However, the question of genre needs to be reconsidered due to the necessity to define another subgenre in science-fiction, balancing utopian and dystopian

¹ By writing the *Parables*, I refer to the *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*.

characteristics in its story. Moreover, the religious and philosophical elements require a more detailed analysis since they are the basis of Earthseed creation. Connections to environmental issues, as presented in the books, have also been discussed by scholars but not in parallel with human relationships to their spiritual dimension. Acorn community itself has been analysed too, but again this analysis needs to be extended by examining how Earthseed serves as an organising tool in that community. Finally, only a few scholars extensively considered Earthseed's excesses that limit reading Earthseed as a spiritual system taking distance from the one of the collapsing society.

Chapter one explores the question of the genre of the novels and aims to define a new subgenre of science fiction, 'collapse fictions', based on the French theory of *collapsologie*. This subgenre can be applied to fictions that show cracks of a society, induced by systemic crises that are perceivable through environmental issues. Since the *Parables* share both dystopian and utopian elements, it is interesting to question their capacity to take distance from a tendency within science-fiction to picture nightmarish futures. If this subgenre aims to reimagine a new world, it also offers another kind of humans in relation to their environment. Since this change seems to happen thanks to Earthseed spirituality, the second chapter analyses the core concept of Change standing as the God of Earthseed. This second chapter examines Earthseed's values that appear as a patchwork of religious concepts (Buddhism, Taoism, Black Theology, Christianity and Yoruba religion), philosophical values (Existentialism and Ecofeminism) and scientific observations.

Lastly, chapter three examines how Earthseed can be seen as a tool for social cohesion in a community, such as presented in Acorn. A first section analyses the weight of the spiritual dimension in our understanding of the environmental crisis and questions if Earthseed offers the possibility to think another type of human's realisation, taking distance from the dream of endless consumption. Secondly, it is through the concept of mutual aid, as exposed in *L'Entraide, l'autre loi de la jungle* by Servigne and Chapelle, that Acorn is analysed as an independent community. What this study highlights is how Acorn community's organisation is based on Earthseed's concepts, allowing members of Acorn to reach a sense of collaboration. Those two sections explore the question of shifting narratives, from the one of competition to collaboration. The chapter ends on an analysis of Earthseed's limits perceivable through its dogmatism that seems to weaken the phenomenon of mutual aid. Ultimately, the myth of infinite expansion is also discussed in that last part as one

important element that enters in contradiction with an analysis of Earthseed as a ‘sustainable’ spirituality.

I. Chapter 1: Reading Butler's *Parables* as Contemporary Collapse Fictions

The inability to imagine a world in which things are different is evidence only of a poor imagination, not of the impossibility of change.

—Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for Realists*

A. The *Parables* in the Critical Field

Octavia Butler, an African American author (1947-2006), evolved within the field of science fiction and African American literature. She published a total of twelve novels exploring the issues of mixed races, genders and power that involved, in general, minorities and alternative communities. For instance, *Kindred* (1979), modelled on the slave narrative, portrays the time-travels of a Black woman to the antebellum South, while the *Patternist* series (1976-1984) and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989) deal with aliens, mutants, genetically modified humans and their coexistence. *Parable of the Sower* was written in 1993, followed by *Parable of the Talents* in 1998 for which Butler received the Science Fiction Writers of America's Nebula Award for Best Science Novel. Butler envisioned four other novels in the Parable series, namely *Parable of the Trickster*, *Parable of the Teacher*, *The Parable of Chaos* and *The Parable of Clay*, which would have had no characters in common. However, she left this series aside because, as she said, "it was too hard to write the first sequel" (Butler, 2001: 33). The *Parables*' events are extrapolated from environmental and societal landscapes' degradation of the United States of Butler's time. With these fictions, Butler questions the viability of the capitalist system and communities' resilience in a dysfunctional system and dying environment by imagining how a form of spirituality, Earthseed, can be at bottom of the organisation of a new community, Acorn.

The *Parable of the Sower* is set in the 2024 America and takes the form of a diary, written by the main protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina, a young African American girl aged of fifteen, living in Robledo's gated community. Located in southern California near Los Angeles, Robledo suffers from the consequences of environmental and social degradation that have increased over the past few years. Overexploitation of natural resources has led to the disruption of the environment, worsening periods of drought and climate catastrophes (fires,

tornadoes, and blizzards) deeply affecting all the other levels of the U.S. society, such as the economic, social and political structures. Robledo stands as one of the many examples of the American middle class' impoverishment and is structured around a large diversity of ethnicities and different levels of education. Olamina, whose father is the community's Baptist minister, grows up in an academic environment and, therefore, understands education (through reading and teaching) as an eminent vector of emancipation. Olamina's early observations describe the domino effect of multiple collapses: environmental damage, reinforced by the transfer of power from the democratic political system to multinational corporations, led to population's impoverishment (disappearance of the consumer culture creating a greater gap between classes). Olamina starts to reject her father's religion that consists of a deterministic view of the events and, as a result, encourages a passive attitude to its believers. While some members have already left the community for the promising 'company towns', where inhabitants depending on the company enjoy a safe environment in exchange for their work, Robledo suffers attacks from outsiders.

In 2027, the community is devastated by drug addicts who kill many of its inhabitants and burn down their houses. Olamina, whose entire family has been killed, leaves for the North with two survivors of her community and gathers people on the road: women, men, and children of various ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds. On the way, she promotes a new form of spirituality, Earthseed, developed in Robledo and meets Bankole who will become her husband. The group of fifteen people founds a new agrarian community named Acorn in northern California, where Bankole owns a large field. In the community, structured on Earthseed's values, Olamina becomes their spiritual leader and embodies hope of renaissance.

Earthseed is introduced both at the beginning of each chapter starting with a verse from *The Books of the Living* (Earthseed's reference text) and in Olamina's diary explaining its principles to Acorn's future members. Evolving around the main principle "God is change", Earthseed consists of a mix of religious principles (from Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism and Black Theology) and philosophical approaches (existentialist aspects and references to existential fears). The importance of the environment is seen through different values, such as ecofeminism developed along with the spirituality's ontological and ethical ideas.

Parable of the Talents (1998) opens in 2032 while Acorn has grown into a large group of sixty-four persons organised around families and community's prosperity, cadenced by

Earthseed gatherings. Olamina, who is pregnant with her daughter Larkin, is urged by her husband Bankole to leave Acorn to join Halstead, a safer and more modern little city, but she refuses to leave behind her first Earthseed community. While she prospects for trade agreements in nearby cities to expand Acorn's activities, Olamina finds her lost half-brother Marcus who had survived Robledo's attack. He rejects his half-sister's beliefs and becomes a minister of the Christian America (CA²) movement, a deeply conservative version of Christianity founded by the new president of the United States, Jarret. Regarded as cultists, Acorn's members are soon assaulted and ultimately enslaved by CA's extremists, who abduct their children to give them to 'proper', good Christian families. After a year of enslavement, they find freedom thanks to a violent storm that buries their captors' cabins. With the remaining Earthseeders (believers of Earthseed), Olamina decides to split up to actively search for their abducted children. Eventually, after months of research, she decides to concentrate on Earthseed's diffusion by doing a sort of canvassing. The book ends in 2090 when Earthseed has become one of the major spiritualities in America thanks to rich people's adhesion to the movement. After having built schools and colleges, financed scientific exploration and technological innovation under Earthseed's name, Olamina, aged 81, sees the first spacecraft leaving Earth to discover potential planets.

This book offers three other voices to the story, allowing the reader to have different points of view on Olamina's success. This includes passages from *Memories of Other Worlds* by Bankole and *Warrior* written by Marcus along with Larkin's reflections on her mother journals. Larkin, who grew up in a non-loving Christian American family, expresses harsh criticisms towards Olamina spiritual leadership. As Butler said in an interview, the multiplicity of voices "undermine[s] the single-minded guiding voice of Sower" (Butler, 2001:33).

1. Critical dystopias and utopian ambiguities in the *Parables*

In "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision" (1998), Miller argues that Butler's *Parables* are perfect examples of what is called 'critical dystopia', that means a "narrative which points to the socio-historic causes of the dystopian elements of our culture" (Miller, 1998:360). Therefore, by extrapolating the current trends of her time (for example, the deterioration of public health care, gated communities' increase, and the

² In the *Parables of the Talents*, the movement of Christian America is sometimes referred to its acronym 'CA'.

weakening of government for the benefit of companies), Butler offers a sort of dystopia ‘achieved’, resulting from the excesses of capitalism. According to Miller, it is by using those dystopian elements that Butler seeks to create new myths that, far from being a blueprint for a utopian world, are seen as “post-apocalyptic hoping informed by the lessons of the past” (336).

Stillman’s analysis (2003), which goes beyond Miller’s, observes how future dystopias result from current utopian dreams – the *Parable of the Sower* shows the failure of the American dream for individualism – and how protagonists develop new strategies in response to this dystopia. In his article, Stillman considers the different utopian possibilities that protagonists are creating or even replaying in the *Parables*: Robledo gated community is a safe place led by Olamina’s father; the Christian America religion pursues the utopia of this former “strong, unified and orderly” America (Stillman, 2003:20) while some Americans dream of moving North (to Canada or Siberia) because of the consequence of global warming on their environment. Nonetheless, Stillman questions utopian ambiguities laying in the central ‘utopian’ dream of Earthseed (appearing as demagogic by Larkin), which success is built on the sacrifice of Olamina’s close family. This ambiguity within utopian dreams echoes Phillips’ (2002) argument for the problematic relationship of modernity in building new utopias. In fact, according to Phillips, Butler’s work is a way to reinvent utopianism after the collapse of modern utopian projects [he cites the “bloody utopianism of Nazism” (Phillips, 2002:299)], since Butler’s novels are built on the impossibility for revolutionary transformation, replaced by the achievement of the emancipatory human agency that Earthseed promotes. Acorn community offers nothing new in terms of political economy (309) and Earthseed does not change the system (Stillman, 2003:32) but the community is more an experiment of communalism and pluralism of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Phillips, 2002:309).

Miller, Stillman and Phillips echo themselves by analysing utopian elements both created and resulted from dystopian societies. The problem with these dystopian analyses is that they target the dysfunctionalities of the society and, therefore, give less room for exploring progressist aspects of the ‘utopian’ pathway developed within the books.

2. Exploring the African American experience through Afrofuturism

The *Parables*, through the science fiction element of ‘otherness’, replicate elements of the African American history, such as the enslavement experience and the Bible’s

interpretation as an instrument of emancipation. This re-reading of historical events is used to overcome and reflect on the “spiralling of history” (Allen, 2009:1354) of the Black experience (elements suiting the concept of Afrofuturism). In an article commenting Black women writers and science fiction (2003), Hampton and Brooks highlight the focus on alienated and/or marginalised ‘other’ that is one common feature to science fiction texts and African American narratives. They remark that Butler, known as a writer using science fiction to translate cultural experiences, shows in her novels past and future times where issues of alienation and ‘otherness’ persist (visible ones such as race, sex or species; or non-visible ones such as gender or sexuality). The alienation that the *Parables*’ characters experience through the resurgence of a form of 21st-century slavery allows Butler to incorporate elements of African American history.

This future form of slavery that Olamina both experiences (the electronic collar-slavery) and encounters (the debt-slavery) is defined by Allen (2009) as a “boomerang” (R. Ellison’s term), meaning that elements from the past will eventually invade the future. The African American experience appears thus as inseparable from its slavery past and only Olamina, according to Allen, stands as an “antidote to history” (Allen, 2009:1358) thanks to her capacity to learn the lessons from the past to use them as emancipation tools for Earthseed’s conception. By writing about marginalised people’s liberation in a time set in the future, however replaying the African American history, Butler’s novels can be described as Afrofuturistic³, a “fusion of futurism, liberation, and African-American history” (Ruffin, 2005-2006:89) exploited by science fiction. Ruffin strengthens her analysis of Butler’s *Parables* as Afrofuturistic by drawing parallels between Earthseed and the Bible: like Earthseed’s text driving Olamina and her group to seek for emancipation in the land of Acorn, the Bible allowed enslaved African Americans to learn how to read and write thanks to some parts interpreted as a narrative of liberation (such as the Exodus narrative).

Therefore, alienation through future forms of slavery (Hampton and Brooks, 2003); “boomerang” of enslavement recalling the African American experience (Allen, 2009); and marginalised characters’ liberation thanks to Earthseed’s text are elements that can be defined as Afrofuturistic. Those three scholars offer analyses of the *Parables* within the field of

³ Afrofuturism is described as a “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture - and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – [...]” (Dery, 1994:736, cited by Ruffin, 2006:90).

history without forgetting the importance of the genre and the omnipresence of the Christian religion to the text, an element, nonetheless, relatively unexploited in the two first articles.

3. A Christian reading of the *Parables*

By its strong links to the African American history, the *Parables* and *Earthseed* are built on values from both Christianity and Black theology⁴, elements that have been already analysed by some scholars.

In particular, Tweedy (2014) points out that some white academics (such as Wanzo, Stillman, Tomkin and Cone) have ignored the influence of African American faith and spiritual dimension in Butler fictions and, therefore, have minimised *Earthseed*'s potentiality as a means of self-empowerment in the resistance to oppression. In fact, since the *Parables* replay the enslavement experience of African Americans, *Earthseed*'s text appears to share the same concept of social change of Black theology. Tweedy maintains that the *Parables* continue the tradition of Black theology's call for civic responsibility and social activism through to the core concept of *Earthseed* "God is Change". In fact, *Earthseed*'s God is a force of change that pushes individuals to embrace independence and to contribute to society by their actions. Nonetheless, he notes *Earthseed*'s paradox: its 'sacred' text, *The Books of the Living*, has connections with Christian tradition. Thus, there is a risk to see the transformation of *Earthseed* into a "zealous and self-righteous faith" (Tweedy, 2014:8), as feared by the character of Larkin in the *Parable of the Talents*.

One negative aspect attributed to Christianity is Christian fundamentalism, a traditional interpretation of the Bible that inspired a frightful vision developed in some women's dystopian fictions, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1996)⁵. Andréolle (2001) purposely decides to "reverse side of the same coin" (Andréolle, 2001:114) by examining the positive influence of Christian fundamentalism "on New World order as implemented in the original Puritan project" (114). She argues that Olamina's project to create a new religion, taking distance from the one of her father, reiterates the myth of

⁴ Black theology, also called black liberation theology, refers to the movement initiated by James Cones (1938) and taken up by a generation of thinkers. It focuses on the historic African American struggle for freedom in North America, which has been partly manifested through the black church. (*Encyclopedia of Religion*).

⁵ In *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1996), women are submitted to men for the good sake of reproduction. The traditional reading of the Christian Bible serves as a tool of oppression.

civilisation shared in the Manifest Destiny. In fact, by overthrowing Judeo-Christian values, Olamina mirrors the American myth: she stands as a leader who self-sacrifices (she indeed gives priority to Earthseed's diffusion) for the good of her form of spirituality and the people believing in her. Moreover, the Puritan's vision for cooperation developed in social systems and its "sense of earthly order and law" (114) are also represented in Earthseed. Andréolle describes Olamina as a "new Christ, the sower of the new seeds of Christianity" (120) since she rejects the values of intolerance and oppression justified in Christian fundamentalism. Andréolle also shortly mentions Butler's feminist vision, an analysis that has already been done by other scholars.

These two scholars make connections between Earthseed and Christian values and highlight the fact that Olamina goes beyond the Judeo-Christian ideology by reiterating historical events of America: the enslavement of African Americans and Manifest Destiny. She reuses those events to structure her story and changes the role played by Christian values with Earthseed ones. Therefore, the "boomerang" effect of history seems to be weakened by her new form of spirituality.

4. Feminist and ecological approaches: a door to ecofeminism?

The feminist approach of the *Parables* is mostly brought through utopian and Afrofuturistic approaches to the novels. In that regard, Miller (1998) explains that Butler places herself in a tradition of feminist utopian writing since science fiction narratives give the possibilities for "alternative and non-hierarchical definitions of gender and identity" (337). Moreover, Afrofuturism, deeply linked to science fiction, explores the African American liberation and women's emancipation from the patriarchist system.

Furthermore, environmental issues are also central to the *Parables* and Butler's novels. In an interview, she expresses her interest for "the general of human beings, for whatever reasons – religious and more likely monetary – to simply tear things down without concern for what might come after" (Butler, cited by Palwick, 1999:150). Nonetheless, as Palwick notices, Earthseed's aim for spatial exploration, requiring terrible energy-consuming technologies, is in contradiction to Earth's preservation (152) – a paradox that should be analysed more broadly. Surely, Butler's novels do not provide a guide for a more sustainable life since she seems more interested in exploring social cooperation and justice in a dying environment. Even if she pays attention to global warming (150), Butler concentrates noticeably on "the nexus of social justice and environmental degradation" (Mayer, 2003:176)

a major element that Mayer (2003) analyses in the *Parable of the Sower*. In fact, Mayer highlights the fact that the *Parables* show how the environmental and social spheres are largely intertwined in a patriarchal world (183). Mayer evokes the concept of ecofeminism⁶ to describe the unanthropomorphic God of Earthseed that is more a shapeless concept than “a big-daddy-God” (Butler, 1993:13). Nonetheless, she argues that “the concept of a female, earth-like or earth-centred Goddess can enforce essentialist notion and biological determinism” (Mayer, 2003:185), an essentialist vision of Earthseed that contradicts its existentialist features.

Her argument suggests the possibility for an ecofeminism reading of the *Parables*, strengthened by the feminist analysis of Butler’s novels and her concern for ecological issues. Nevertheless, the existentialist vision of Earthseed enters in conflict with the branch of ‘cultural ecofeminism’ that argues for an essentialist link between woman and nature. On the other hand, the ‘social ecofeminism’ establishes a connection between woman and nature by explaining that their use as an object by the patriarchal system is not because of their shared essence, but due to historical contingencies. ‘Social ecofeminism’ also points out that the South is exploited by the North the same way nature and women are by the male-centred system. Regarding the African American reading of the *Parables*, ‘social ecofeminism’ stands as a core concept to the novels.

5. Research question

Over the past fifteen years, the *Parables* have been analysed through four or five major approaches, as developed above, that can echo and supplement themselves. The dystopian reading has shown that the books are built on the failure of utopian dreams, resulting in a society on the edge of collapse but, in the same time, offering possibilities for new utopias, such as Acorn. Those dystopian elements are deeply connected to the African American history since they replay the enslavement experience, exploited in the novels as a past event that will eventually be repeated in the future (described as ‘boomeranging’ effect by Allen). The African American references, read as Afrofuturistic elements, also include the importance of the Bible as a vector of emancipation, a function also played by *The Books of the Living*. Indeed, Earthseed shares values with Christianity such as the call for action and

⁶ Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism which makes connection between women and nature. It emphasises that women and nature have both been treated as object by the male-centred society. (Miles, 2018).

self-empowerment as developed in Black theology (Tweedy, 2014), but it also overthrows the Judeo-Christian values (the ones inspiring the Christian fundamentalism's reading of the Bible) and pursues the original Puritan project as conveyed in the Manifest Destiny (Andréolle, 2001). Lastly, Butler's feminist approach (seen in the reassessment of gender roles in her novels), interest for social justice and ecological issues (Mayer, 2003) point out to a 'social ecofeminist' reading.

Nevertheless, the question of the genre should be reconsidered because of the importance of utopian elements in the *Parables*, as well as in the light of the current tendency in literary criticism to overtake the gloomy aspects of dystopian narratives. Therefore, the novels can be evaluated through the concept of 'collapse fiction' (inspired by the French term *collapsologie*) that embraces a systemic vision of collapsed societies and gives room to both utopian and dystopian elements in the *Parables*. Moreover, the systemic vision of *collapsologie* gives importance to the spiritual dimension as a key element to society's foundations. Earthseed has indeed been analysed, but only through its Christian elements while this form of spirituality borrows values and ideas from other systems of beliefs, such as Buddhism, African religions, and Taoism; and philosophies, such as existentialism and existential fears. Furthermore, because of its connections to ecological and gender issues, the *Parables* should also be considered within the 'social ecofeminist' theory. The major role that Earthseed plays for social cohesion in a society on the edge of collapse brings me to ask the following question: how can Earthseed spirituality be at the roots of a society on the edge of collapse?

B. Constructing a Discourse About Collapse

Our imagination is full of stories of endings, the end of literature with "La fin de la littérature?" by Maingueneau (2006), of civilisations with *Collapse* by Diamond (2005) or of our freedom in the novel *1984* by Orwell (1949). We can easily imagine our *finitude* and recently the one of our current world through the genre of dystopian fictions: *The Road* by McCarthy (2006) describes the roaming of a father and his son in a cold and dead world, while *Oryx and Crake* by Atwood (2003) imagines humans' replacement by another species, more 'eco-friendly'. These fictions may find their inspiration in a reality that is facing the eventuality of its own death, a possibility already tackled in the Meadows rapport in 1972 called *The Limits of Growth*, warning about the risks of unlimited growth on a planet with

finite resources. Despite an early awareness within the scientific field, warnings continue with, for instance, the creation of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) in 1988 regrouping 195 States members of the United Nations. Intending to build knowledge about climate change, the IPCC released, on the 8 of October 2018, a report titled “Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C” drawing attention to the necessity of limiting global warming to 1.5°C. They call to a “rapid and far-reaching transition in land, energy, industry, buildings, transports and cities” (IPCC, Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C). In response to the lack of important measures, the discourse about our necessity to change our behaviours towards our environment evolved and the term ‘collapse’ emerged, in theories and studies both about past failures of advanced societies, and it is connected to the hypothetical collapse of our current industrial society.

1. Studying collapse and its causes, Jared Diamond’s analysis

After having analysed the failure of different societies (such as the Maya, the Viking or the Norse population settled in Greenland), Jared Diamond, in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, lists five causes of a collapse. By collapse, Diamond means “a drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/ economic/ social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time” (Diamond, 2005:3). According to him, the first factor, society’s responses to its environmental problems, cannot contribute solely to a collapse but “always proves significant” (11). Therefore, he adds environmental damage, climate change, hostile neighbours and decrease of friendly trade partners to his list of factors that can be combined reasons to explain a collapse. Even if Diamond’s method tends “to understand societal collapses to which environmental problems contribute” (18), environmental damage cannot be claimed as the major factor in all collapses. As he exemplifies, “the collapse of the Soviet Union is a modern counterexample, and the destruction of Carthage by Rome in 146 B.C. is an ancient one” (15).

In his last chapter, Diamond wonders how societies can provoke their own failure and he offers four hypotheses to answer this question. First, a society may fail to anticipate future problems: its citizens may have never encountered such a scenario, have forgotten a past experience or reasoned by false analogies. Diamond opens this first section with the case of the introduction of indigenous species in Australia by British colonists in 1800s that caused the replacement of native Australian mammals by European foxes and rabbits. The second

hypothesis lays in the failure to perceive change due to three reasons: the problem is not perceived by current technologies or human perception, the problem is too distant to be noticeable or the problem is partially hidden by “creeping normalcy”, also called “landscape amnesia” (Diamond, 2005:426). To illustrate this last point, Diamond uses the case of global warming that suffers from noisy fluctuations and, therefore, “it has taken a long time to discern the average upwards trend of 0.01 degree per year within that noisy signal” (425). Thus, it is only after years that a society can observe a change. This phenomenon explains why inhabitants of a region may not perceive the warming of their habitat while a tourist, who returns to the place after a couple of years, can notice a change. The third explanation is that, even if a society perceives the problem, it fails the attempt to solve it for two reasons: either because of clashes of interests between two groups or commitment to disastrous values. Described as ‘the tragedy of the commons’, Diamond explains that, for instance, some elite would exploit resources for short-term gain “regardless of whether those actions hurt everybody else” (430) because their high position in society prevents them to suffer from the consequences of their actions. The other reason is linked to values, either religious, traditional or nationalist, which may lead some societies to refuse any change, yet conditioning their survival. Lastly, the fourth reason for collapse lays within unsuccessful solutions because of their non-existence, their expensive price or their inefficiency due to their late apparition.

The collapse of Olamina’s gated community (Robledo) in *Parable of the Sower* can be explained by its impossibility to adapt beliefs to a changing environment. The community, based on Christian values, pushes individuals to believe that “people [didn’t] change the climate in spite of what scientists say [...] only God could change the world in such an important way” (Butler, 1993:57). Therefore, facing climate disaster, “The neighbourhood [...] can’t do anything” (57) but prays God. While Olamina urges her family to leave the community because of outside threats, the inhabitants wait “for the good old days to come back” (57) but are killed by scavengers. As Diamond points out, “Perhaps a crux of success or failure as a society is to know which core values to hold on to, and which ones to discard and replace with new values when time change” (Diamond, 2006:433), a need for change that Olamina understands and, eventually, conditions her survival.

2. *Collapsologie*, a broader approach to the notion of collapse

Nevertheless, even if Diamond's studies stand as central in collapse theory, his research is evaluated as solely founded on "the archaeology, ecology and biogeography of former civilisations without approaching core questions to the current environment"⁷ (Servigne and Stevens, 2015:19). By criticising Diamond, Servigne and Stevens propose a new approach towards the idea of collapse through the neologism *collapsologie* in *Comment tout peut s'effondrer* (2015). Thanks to this new term, the authors wish to foster a dialogue between different domains from economic and environmental analyses to sociological and political involvements. With a certain self-mockery⁸, the authors name this new study from the Latin *collapsus* (that collapsed in one single bloc) and aim to develop a systemic analysis to have "an overview on a possible collapse, on its causes and its implications in psychological, sociological and political terms *for the current generation*"⁹ (19-20).

The core concept of their study is the problem of finite energy – the one produced mainly by fossil fuels – and its increasing need for our thermo-industrial society proper functioning (41-42). For instance, they explain that in 2015, the world used up seven barrels of oil for one extracted (44), showing that, in the long run, our way of living is currently depleting the regenerative capacity of our biomass. The consequences of this observation are related to each other: more than draining our natural resources, burning fossil fuels is modifying on an ongoing basis our climate, leading to an acceleration of climate disasters – such as water scarcity, violent storms or soil depletion (67). The perverse effect of our system can be described as follows: the combustion of fossil fuels powers our system but at the same time destroys the environment in which they are extracted. Therefore, Servigne and Stevens conclude on the interconnection of crises and their domino effect, illustrated through their analysis of the case of Ebola crisis (the crises are in brackets): "destruction of forests [biodiversity] favoured the spread of the virus [health], and the number of persons dead or unable to work as well as the containment measures slowed down the economic activity

⁷ "[...] se contente d'archéologie, d'écologie et de biogéographie des civilisations anciennes et n'aborde pas certaines questions essentielles de la situation actuelle" (my translation).

⁸ The point is that a sudden collapse is less likely to happen than disparate crises, which will weaken the entire system because of its lack of resilience.

⁹ "[...] une vue d'ensemble de ce à quoi pourrait ressembler un effondrement, de comment il pourrait se déclencher et de ce qu'il impliquerait en termes psychologiques, sociologiques et politiques *pour les générations futures*" (my translation).

[economy], seriously disrupting supply networks [infrastructures] and harvest [food]”¹⁰ (130). The authors insist on the significance of understanding the convergence of crises for the purpose of *envisioning* the collapse of our industrial society and understanding our unhealthy dependence on oil.

In the case of the *Parables*, Butler seems to connect crises together as well, even if she gives more importance to the ecological crisis of her fictional 2024 America. In fact, as mentioned above, ecological issues are initiating other crises. Moreover, the first book focuses more on the ecological crisis, giving the impression that the collapse is principally due to “the encroaching sea, the crumble earth” leading to a “crumble economy” and “desperate refugees” (Sower 119). Yet, in *Parable of the Talents*, Bankole’s diary set in 2032 gives more details by reflecting on this collapse named the “Pox” or “The Apocalypse” by journalists who situate this period from 2015 to 2030. Nonetheless, he strongly disagrees with this description that does not take into account his generation’s inaction – people born around 1970 – and interconnection of “climatic, economic, and sociological crises” (*Talents* 8). Through the word *collapsologie* and the importance to overcome the problematic term of “crisis” that “passes off the situation as ephemeral”¹¹ (Servigne and Stevens, 2015:180), Servigne and Stevens echo Bankole’s criticism towards a wrong denomination and the willful ignorance of systemic factors. Bankole, in his diary, reflects on his society:

The Pox has been much longer torment. It began before 2015, perhaps even before the turn of the millennium. It has not ended [...].

It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises. [...] I have watched education become more a privilege of the rich than the basic necessity that it must be if civilized society is to survive. I have watched as convenience, profit, and inertia excused greater and more dangerous environmental degradation. I have watched poverty, hunger, and disease become inevitable for more and more people.

(*Talents* 8)

¹⁰ “la destruction des forêts [biodiversité] a favorisé la propagation du virus [santé], mais le nombre de personnes mortes ou inaptes au travail et les mesures de confinement ont ralenti l’activité économique [économie] et gravement perturbé les réseaux d’approvisionnement [infrastructure] et les récoltes [alimentation]” (my translation).

¹¹ “[...] qui fait passer la situation pour éphémère” (my translation).

Thanks to Bankole, born in 1970, the novels offer another viewpoint by portraying a character who can extensively evaluate the changes in his environment (warmer weather, dying species of trees, and disruption of seasonal cycles). His comment mourns a past that ignored the premises of a collapse but also reflects a pessimist discourse, leading to his inability to imagine a good future. From his writing, her daughter Larkin understands that her father's only desire "seems to have been to protect my mother and later, to protect me", on the contrary to her mother who "was a somewhat reluctant optimist" (*Talents*, 62). Probably because of their respective age, Bankole and Olamina do not envision their future similarly: while the "greatness of the human species" belongs to the past for Bankole, for Olamina "Greatness [...] seemed to run just ahead of her" (63). Olamina's imagination is not nurtured by a 'glorious' past since she exclusively knows the Pox' time, which is one of the reasons for her absence of nostalgia. She usually calls for imagination, both in her discourse ["Nothing is going to save us. If we don't save ourselves, we're dead. Now use your imagination" (*Sower*, 59)] and in *Earthseed* verses:

[...]
 Learn from God,
 With forethought and intelligence,
 Imagination and industry,
 Shape God,
 [...]

(*Talents* 76)

3. *Collapsologie*'s absence in anglophone analyses and francophone criticism

First, since main thinkers are French speakers, the term *collapsologie* (in French *effondrement*) is largely discussed in the francophone field. We can cite Pablo Servigne, Raphaël Stevens, Yves Cochet (a French politician who co-founded the Institution Momentum, studying the risks of thermo-industrial civilisation's collapse) or Anthony Brault as well as other scholars who constructed specialised discourses such as Philippe Bihouix (advocating low technologies) or Dominique Bourg (ecological philosopher). Nevertheless, before this neologism was brought to a large audience, the study of societies' collapse interested authors and figures such as the British economist Malthus (1766-1834), the American biologist Rachel Carson with *Silent Spring* (1962), the 45th vice president of the United States Al Gore (1993-2001) or the French Canadian astrophysicist Hubert Reeves

(born in 1932), to name but a few. The interest in collapse is then wide in the critical discourse.

However, there are few literary analyses using *collapsologie* theory within the field of American or English literature as developed in the francophone criticism field. This lack of porosity between the francophone and the anglophone thought is blatant in Dana Phillips' analysis (2017) titled "Collapse, resilience, stability and sustainability in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy". In fact, even if she rightly understands the importance of the four concepts within "ecological theory and environmental history" (Phillips, 2017:139), she maintains that "an actual collapse of the most drastic sort [...] has never been documented, at least not in a wholly satisfactory fashion" (140). Even if she may refer to a collapse as described in MaddAddam trilogy (namely the extinction of human due to bioterrorism), she seems to ignore the work of Servigne and Stevens who studies the risks of collapse of the thermo-industrial society, as shown in Atwood's trilogy. In fact, she solely cites the work of Diamond for the popularisation of the word 'collapse'.

There is a wide range of criticisms towards the theory of *collapsologie* from minor ones such as "*collapsologie* defends the model of a green dictatorship" to serious ones such as "there is no scientific consensus about *collapsologie*". Major criticisms are discussed in "Regard Critique sur la Collapsologie" (1 September 2019) by the Youtube channel *Après l'Effondrement*, independently financed. Within the context of a study of genre, one of the relevant points forwarded by this video is the question of fatalistic vision that seems to be inherent to the discourse on *collapsologie*. In fact, the way to communicate about this concept can often sound apocalyptic by saying 'the end of the world' and not 'the end of *one* world', as it is argued in the literature ("Regard Critique sur la Collapsologie" 00:06:05 – 00:07:14). Servigne's discourse was thus perceived as quite negative, however, this was proved wrong with the publication of *L'Entraide, l'autre loi de la jungle* (written with Gauthier Chapelle in 2017) since the book challenges the myth of violence of an ending world.

C. Collapse Fiction: A New Genre?

1. The double-edge of imagining collapse

Aware of criticisms towards *collapsologie* and its toxic representations within our imagination, Servigne and Stevens explain that the images about collapse should be considered as double-edged. They note that the 'the end of the world' representation is

“continuously fed by Hollywood film industry” (Servigne and Stevens, 2015:216) showing, in case of a catastrophe, panicking crowds of violent people. In fact, this representation falls within the genre of post-apocalypse: in *I’m Legend* (1954) by Matheson or in *The Road* by McCarthy (2006), the surroundings reflect a dying world where some individuals try to survive with no perspective of future. More recently, the French series *L’Effondrement* (started in November 2019) written and created by Les Parasites shows individuals who try to survive while our current society is collapsing (the causes seem to be oil shortage). The atmosphere is extremely anxiety-provoking and violent, an approach intended by the authors who think that fear will trigger the audience reaction towards the threat of a collapse (Ughetto, interviewed by Anne-Sophie Novel, 2019). Those narratives expose the existence of our current “dominant cultural narrative” that is structured around “technologies, unlimited human ingenuity, competition and the law of the stronger as a unique principle of life [...]”¹² (Servigne and Stevens, 2015:217). Still, it seems that this current narrative of violence and competition start to be rejected for the benefit of social collaboration required in other systems’ elaboration.

Nonetheless, even if those stories share the fear of our society’s ending as we know it today, they also portray the *after* apocalypse and offer the possibility of a new beginning. Science fiction, as a genre, can be indeed “a tool for thought-experiments” (Servigne, 2018:9) but, in the dystopian and post-apocalypse subgenres, it suffers from a tendency to describe the harsh violence lying in the sudden end of the societal order. Therefore, what Servigne suggests is to use catastrophic changes as opportunities to “create new horizons” (9), an approach already observed in a few science fiction novels. For instance, the cycle of *Foundation* (1942-1993) by Asimov is constructed on the predictions of the Galactic Empire’s collapse thanks to the knowledge of psychohistory. The story is centred on the attempts from different characters to stem the damage of the Empire’s fall, while the current system is still leading. This example of a science fiction novel can be read either as an apocalyptic novel or as a ‘collapse’ novel, thanks to the promises of new beginnings that the narratives are giving *while the current system has not yet collapsed*.

Then, the challenge is to dismantle this pessimist narrative, justifying the myth of violence, through the practice of another storytelling. The authors call for new narratives

¹² “[...] de technologie, de l’ingéniosité humaine sans limites, de la compétition et de la loi du plus fort comme seul principe de vie [...]” (my translation).

thanks to a work on imagination in order “to not fall into cognitive dissonance and denial”¹³ of our present (Servigne and Stevens, 2015:218).

2. Call for new narratives

This ‘new narrative’ that Servigne and Stevens wish for can be called ‘collapse fiction’, a subgenre finding its place within science fiction. From theoretical essays to narratives on collapse, there is a tendency to take distance from a way of thinking our present world as decaying, as if its end would equal the end of the world as a *whole*. In fact, within the field of fictions of the end, the last few years have witnessed the emergence of a discourse that advocates the importance of imagining the rebirth of a post-collapsed world, away from the despair laying behind those narratives.

I consider the *Parables* as ‘collapse fictions’ because they cannot be classified either as apocalyptic novels, as defined by both definition of this genre and Engélibert’s description, or as ‘cli-fi’. Other appellations such as ecofiction or speculative fiction are such broadly defined that they can be applied to a variety of science fiction novels. It may sound anachronistic to analyse the *Parables*, written in the nineties, as ‘collapse fictions’, a subgenre linked to the 21st-century term *collapsologie*. Nevertheless, with the emergence of environmental issues both in political and social spheres at the beginning of the 21st-century, narratives and fictions started to draw from this imaginary. Then, it is relevant to wonder if the *Parables* can be analysed as an example of ‘collapse fiction’ by examining its particularities as a new subgenre, its differences with other subgenres of science fiction and its pertinence as new narratives welcomed in the literary criticism field.

3. How to situate collapse fiction within science fiction

As mentioned previously, subgenres as ecofiction and speculative fiction could both define the *Parables* due to their large definitions. In fact, the definition of ecofiction by Chelebourg, saying that it is “the products of the media coverage of environmental thesis”¹⁴ (Chelebourg, 2012: 10) seems to cover all subgenres linked closely or remotely to narratives sharing environmental issues. Speculative fiction is even broader because it recently shifts

¹³ “[...] de ne pas entrer en dissonance cognitive et en déni” (my translation).

¹⁴ “les produits de ce nouveau régime de médiatisation des thèses environnementalistes” (my translation).

from being a subgenre of science fiction to a field of cultural productions such as “stories narrated from the minority or alternative perspective [...] dismantling the tradition Western cultural bias in favor of literature imitating reality” (Oziewicz, 2017). The *Parables* falls under this classification because they give voices to minorities and “challeng[e] the predominantly male literary establishment and patriarchal social reality” (Oziewicz, 2017). Within subgenres, there is also the apocalypse fiction and the climate fiction or ‘cli-fi’¹⁵, such as the novel *The Fifth Season* by Jemisin (2015) characterised as fiction describing the “effects of a dramatic change in the Earth’s climate” (Irr, 2017). However, regarding the absence of total apocalypse and focus on social cohesion (and not exclusively on ecological issues) in the *Parables*, those novels cannot be classified as such either.

Consequently, within the studies of science fiction lies the need to extend the sub-categories of it by adding the notion of collapse. This can be explored by drawing attention to the differences between collapse and apocalypse in their definitions. In the Cambridge Dictionary, collapse is defined as “the sudden failure of a system, organization, business, etc.” and sees its emphasis on the notion of system and organisation. The word apocalypse (without its religious connotation) is defined as “an event resulting in a great destruction and violent change”, a definition stressing the idea of destruction and violence. Thus, the term apocalypse in narratives appears more anxiety-provoking, even if the one of collapse remains negatively connoted. In *Fabuler la fin du monde: la puissance critique des fictions d’apocalypse* (2019), Engélibert firstly refuses to label fictions of the end of the world as “post-apocalyptic” and prefers analysing those fictions as “critical fictions” because, even if “apocalyptic fictions make a clean state, wiping out the old world [...], they draw energy to live”¹⁶ (Engélibert, 2019:21) in the feeling of despair. It is from the portray of a decaying future that those fictions criticise the present world. Nonetheless, his examples of fictions of the end tend more towards the definition of ‘apocalyptic’ fictions since every single one offers the disappearance of the common reality: in *The Last Man* (1805) by Grainville, the narrator is the last man capable of having an offspring after a long period of sterility; in *The Last Man Standing* (2010) by Davide Longo, a writer discovers his native country facing a breakdown for unknown reasons; in the *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013) by Atwood the end is provoked by

¹⁵ The term ‘cli-fi’ first appeared with Adam Texler in *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, 2015 (Irr, 2017).

¹⁶ “les fictions de l’apocalypse font table rase, anéantissent le monde ancien”, “elles puisent leur énergie de vivre” (my translation).

a deadly epidemic wiping out humanity. What Engélibert points out as positive energy coming from the society's negation appeared mostly accurate in the case of those novels, the ones facing the brutal destruction of their reality and presenting a later stage of the collapse of the society and/or its total disappearance.

Secondly, he defines those fictions of the end as showing societies far from the notion of modernity, because they reject the techniques mastered and do not project themselves into a technological future (Engélibert, 2019:146). According to Engélibert, fictions of the end cross out the notion of modernity because it proved to be a deadlock for them. In the case of the *Parables*, the aspects of modernity do not disappear completely and even continue to evolve for two reasons: first, because the fictions are not showing the total collapse of the industrial American society but its weakening, and because the alternative community led by Olamina hopes for a future beyond Earth. Relics of modernity are seen in the use of computers and in the invention of "Dreamasks" (a technology that looks exactly as our 21st-century Virtual Reality headsets) and in the exploration of space by Earthseeders. Thus, by including the aspect of modernity, the *Parables* take distance from apocalypse fictions.

Regarding Engélibert's argument about fictions of the end and the definitions of both terms, I would like to draw a difference between the fictions of collapse and the ones of the end/ of the apocalypse. First, contrary to apocalyptic fictions, 'collapse fictions' do not depict a shattered world close to its total end, but a society which is slightly dying. Thus, since there is no clean state of the present order *but* that some cracks in the system are however perceivable, there is room for the emergence of a new society. The dimension of hope that Engélibert sees in the fictions of the end turns up to be *sooner* in time for 'collapse fictions': characters do not have to wait for a violent change to build an alternative society. Secondly, 'collapse fictions' do not reject the notions of modernity and, especially in the case of the *Parables*, a vision of a technological future is central to its story. Yet, naming fictions of the end as 'critical fictions' remains relevant and can be even transformed into the term 'alternative fictions', since the *Parables* are both a criticism of the 1990 America and an alternative to the latter.

D. The Need for Another Narrative

1. Unlashing imagination: new narratives and genres

Interestingly, the *Parables* is a work of imagination not solely depicting the collapse of a society, but also the birth of a new community based on spiritual values. If it can be argued that Butler's fictions appear today as central narratives meeting contemporary discourses and expectations, it is because her works can be read as a new narrative, greatly welcomed in the context of the beginning of the 21st-century. While absent during the years of the novels' publication, there is nowadays an expressed need for an "anthropological perspective which is clear and desirable for human beings"¹⁷ (Damasio, 2020:8) as Alain Damasio, a contemporary science fiction French writer, explained in the special edition of *Socialter* titled "Le Réveil des Imaginaires"¹⁸ (March 2020). Even within the field of science fiction itself some authors call for the evolution of the genre: it should be a genre focusing more on the description of desirable futures and less on the exaggeration of the dysfunction of our current societies. This idea is shared by new subgenres or collectives of writers in science fiction, such as the group Zanzibar (led by Damasio) that wants to "désincarcérer le futur"¹⁹, or such as the subgenre of 'solarpunk' led by Adam Flynn. In his manifesto written in 2012, Flynn defines 'solarpunk' as optimist, utopian and "concerned with the struggles en route to a better world" because "we need solutions, not only warnings" (Flynn, 2012).

This tendency for gloom and dark narratives within the genre may mirror a problem within the field of imagination, as Rob Hopkins explains in *From What Is to What If* (2019). Based on his experience as a leading actor of the Transition²⁰ and interviews with novelists and thinkers sharing the importance of imagination, Hopkins demonstrates the real difficulty to free our imagination from dystopian narratives. He argues that "these stories can become a wall that separates us from other possible future scenarios and the capacity to envision and enact a positive future" (Hopkins, 2019:110) and he adds, as McKay noted, that dystopian

¹⁷ "un horizon anthropologique clair et désirable pour l'être humain" (my translation).

¹⁸ "The Awakening of the Imaginary Worlds" (my translation).

¹⁹ In their manifesto, they share the idea that we imagine our future as an imminent car crash. Therefore, they want to "désincarcérer", to free the future from this representation (<http://www.zanzibar.zone/>).

²⁰ Transition is a movement of communities coming together to reimagine and rebuild our world (<https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/>).

narratives are exciting while “good future can sometimes be boring” (McKay, 2019, cited by Hopkins, 2019:110).

2. Ustopia, an answer to both utopia and dystopia?

Therefore, the challenge lies within the tensions between dystopian and utopian elements within the novel. Nevertheless, Alexandra Rowland, who theorised the idea of ‘hopepunk’ (sharing similarities to ‘solarpunk’), disagrees with McKay’s stance that imagining a positive future means to offer a dull narrative. On the contrary, she affirms that “What makes stories exciting is stakes” (Rowland, 2019, cited by Hopkins, 2019:115); thus, we can imagine narratives both having a rhythm in their narration, thanks to twists, and showing a desirable future. In a sense, those narratives should be a fine combination of utopian and dystopian characteristics bringing the neologism ‘ustopia’, theorised by Margaret Atwood. She argues that since utopia and dystopia “contain a latent version of the other” (Atwood, 2015:67), the term ‘ustopia’ is the embodiment of the two. Nevertheless, it is important to note that within the terms of ‘solarpunk’, ‘hopepunk’ or in the manifesto of the collective Zanzibar, there is no balance between the two tendencies but more a preference for the utopian discourse. This is perhaps because of the success of dystopian narratives in different mediums in recent years that contemporary authors share the desire to produce narratives having utopian inclination.

Another relevant example of a ‘collapse fiction’, having ustopian elements, can be the novel *Into the Forest* published by Jean Hegland in 1997. In fact, the novel is a fine combination of utopian and dystopian elements and describes the adaptation of two sisters after the collapse of American society, for whom the forest symbolises a new future. Far from being a dull narrative, it is their adjustment to a new world that gives rhythm to it: the two sisters need to learn how to collaborate to successfully adapt to a new way of living. As opposed to the *Parables*, this novel remains vague about the causes of the societal collapse to focus on the personal change that characters need to face *after* the collapse (Hegland, interviewed by Le Monde, 2019:18:30). With her novel, Hegland wonders “how do human beings change inside themselves and how do they work together?” (19:36-19:57). This echoes Rowland’s call for less dystopian narratives since “What makes stories exciting is stakes” and it is precisely the challenges the sisters are facing that make the novel a page-turner. It is clear that Butler and Hegland are both interested in the communities’ social cohesion (a large group for Butler and two individuals for Hegland) and less in the political and economical aspects.

Then, these two authors write narratives different from a dystopian tradition since, instead of exclusively showing competitive individuals, they give more importance to the collaboration between them.

3. *Collapsosophie*: spirituality and personal change in time of collapse

Thereby, does the term ‘collapse fiction’ answer this need for positive narratives? The term collapse itself is negatively connotated, except if we perceive the notions of rebirth or change that lie within it. In a collapse, since crises are systemic (as explained above), the rebirths and changes may be as well systemic and, thus, can affect the totality of what defines our human world, that means everything touching our interiority. As seen in *Into the Forest*, characters need to personally change to suit their new environment. This reflection drove Servigne to assemble the neologism *collapsosophie*, defined as the “wisdom of collapse” regarding the absence of moral, spiritual and ethical considerations in the theory of *collapsologie* (Servigne, 2018:11). More than imagining another society, there is a need for imagining another kind of human, in relation to his/her environment. He adds that, for a long time, we have considered that spiritual issues were belonging exclusively to the private sphere, while communities build themselves on collective rituals. Therefore, ‘collapse fictions’ can also be narratives tackling questions of spirituality, along with rethinking the society it describes. If ‘collapse fictions’ can be characterised as fictions both describing the slow collapse of a society and the birth of a new one, focusing on the external *and* internal changes of human beings, this genre is an answer to the need for new narratives.

Therefore, the *Parables* appear as a key example of ‘collapse fiction’ since it describes the emergence of an alternative community, Acorn, based on a new spirituality called Earthseed. More than anticipating the cracks of the capitalist system of the American society, Butler imagines a community where changes are firstly occurring because its members adhere to a different form of spirituality, modifying their interiority. Earthseed offers another way of thinking about the relationship between human beings and pushes them to reinvest their connections to Earth as a global system. Because the rising of Earthseed as a world leading spirituality, constructed on a mix of religious precepts, philosophical aspects and values, is the core narrative element of the *Parables*, these fictions question the interiority. Economical, political or technical aspects of the community’s functioning are barely developed, contrary to the description of community rituals and gatherings, as well as the growing influence of Earthseed. Far from fictions offering a practical restructuration of a society, the *Parables* are

still deeply rethinking the spiritual dimension of human beings in a collapsing world. Even if those narratives are not entirely depicting a desirable future as theorised by above, they pave the way to a new conception of human interiority based on social collaboration.

II. Chapter 2: Earthseed's Conceptual Ideas, Between Religions and Philosophy

In order to change an existing imagined order, we must first believe in an alternative imagined order.

—Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*

To understand how Earthseed can offer a new conception of human interiority, it is important to analyse what are the values of this spiritual approach and how it takes distance from other forms of religions. If the *Parables* can be seen as collapse fiction also imagining the rebirth of a human community, it is worth questioning which values drive this community and how they differ from the ones of the collapsing society. In order to answer these questions, this chapter focuses on an analysis of Earthseed's values as presented in the novels.

What drove Butler in the elaboration of Earthseed is the question of change. In an interview, Butler wonders “[...] what was the most powerful force I could think of? What one thing could we not stop no matter how hard we tried?” The answer she came up with is ‘change’ (Sower 336). Butler notices that “Throughout the universe, the ongoing reality is change” (336), a concept that she finds in science, philosophies and religions, especially Buddhism. In fact, Earthseed is built on several different religious values, ecofeminist elements and scientific observations that are held together by the concept of change. Throughout this analysis, Change²¹ is a core concept that connects Earthseed's values altogether and allows this system of thoughts to embrace its own capacity to change. The two first sections analyse how Olamina, coming from a Christian family, reuses and subverts Christianity in Earthseed in order to meet the importance of Change. Secondly, the next sections evaluate the large place of ecological issues through an analysis of Earthseed as an ecotheology and an ecofeminist organisation.

Nonetheless, this chapter does not cover all the values and concepts of each of the religions analysed. On the contrary, only borrowed elements structuring the form of spirituality are discussed. For instance, a connection between Earthseed and Hinduism could

²¹ When Change is used with a capital letter, it refers to the God of Earthseed.

be made, but their links are not explicitly mentioned by Butler while every religious and philosophical concept is indicated either in Butler's interviews or in the novels. Since Earthseed is founded on Christianity, every concept taken from another religion is put in parallel with Christian elements. The aim is to understand how Earthseed, as a form of spirituality, rethinks human beings and their relationships towards each other and the world.

A. Earthseed's Hybridisation: Christian Values and Religious Beliefs

It can be argued that Olamina reuses and subverts Christian values in the conception of Earthseed to fashion a form of spirituality that embodies the concept of change. More than supporting "God is Change", Earthseed itself is a malleable spirituality attracting a large panel of individuals, thanks to a combination of religions and open interpretations of Christian messages and its core concepts. In fact, by mirroring her different origins, Olamina mixes religious references by using Christian values (the tradition of parable and its teaching aspect) Buddhist reasoning (the concept of circularity), Taoist verses form (for its poetic aspect built on circularity), Black theology tradition ('call and response', social activism and sense of belonging to a community) and the African religion weather goddess (Oya).

1. "God is Change" and Buddhist inspiration

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.

(Sower 3)

The first words of the *Parable of the Sower* consist of the main verse of *The Books of the Living* showing the core concept of Earthseed: "God is Change". This passage establishes that the God of Earthseed is a concept and not an anthropomorphic figure as in Christianity. Moreover, the relationship between God and "You" (everything that is not God) is shown as circular, since everything "that you touch" and thus "you change" also "changes you", a

circularity that Olamina herself acknowledges (Sower 78). This co-dependence between “God” and “You” indicates that the two entities must exist in the same world and, therefore, that God is immanent. The use of immanence for a theological conception of God defines the latter “as existing in and throughout the created world” (“Immanence”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Online), such as in Olamina’s spirituality. Earthseed borrows three Buddhist’s elements: the concept of change, the circular movement of everything (at the centre of Buddhism) and God’s immanence and, by consequence, the immanence of its ‘teacher’.

Firstly, “God is Change” is inspired “from Buddhism’s insistence that nothing is permanent and all suffering results from our delusions of permanence [...]” (Sower 26). It means that everything changes, since everything is ephemeral. This change sets the pace to a constant circularity that is left to the ignorance of human beings, engendering their suffering. In fact, in Buddhism, existence is considered painful because happiness, experienced when our desires are fulfilled, is transitional since life is a constant balance between dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) and satisfaction (*sukkah*). However, an escape from this ignorance is possible thanks to Buddha’s doctrine, teaching that human life is impermanent (Nakamura and all, 2020). In fact, Buddha is this teaching figure who delivered this knowledge preserved in *Sutta Pitaka* and the *Vinaya Pitaka* (Nakamura and all, 2020). Interestingly, Earthseed verses deduct and teach its “only lasting truth” thanks to a circular discourse that concludes with the impermanence of everything because “God is Change”. Therefore, Earthseed verses convey a ‘truth’ brought by Olamina, who stands thus as a sort of Buddha teaching humans to break free from their ignorance. Therefore, she unveils the impermanence of the world by establishing God as Change.

Moreover, Earthseed and Buddhism’s idea of Change give great power to their believers. In fact, as Buddhism considers that “a person is in a process of continuous change” (Nakamura and all, 2020), God/Change is embodied in everything and everyone, meaning that opportunities to ignite change lie in everyone. Since “God is Change, and in the end, God prevails. But God exists to be shaped” (Sower 76), Olamina accepts change and takes this opportunity to adopt the role of a spiritual leader. Then, “all that [she] touch[es]/ [She] Chang[es]” because she shapes others’ reality by teaching Earthseed and, simultaneously, she is changed into a spiritual teaching leader since “all that [she] Chang[es]/ Changes [her]”. This power given by change is “a reminder to action” that can “scare most people” (Sower 221), as argued by some members of Acorn. It should be noted that it is the lack of change

that causes Robledo's destruction, where its inhabitants choose to remain in a false safe place rather than leaving for an unknown one. Change is then a force that enables new beginnings, and here, the one of Olamina and the immigrants met on the road. With "God is Change" that pushes its believers to embrace change who, consequently, reconnect to their environment, Earthseed echoes change as defined above in *collapsosophie*. Therefore, change is an inescapable force existing within humans and their environment. Earthseed pushes individuals to accept change as part of their reality, a capacity highly needed in a time of collapse.

2. Circular aphorisms and Taoist verses

Every chapter of the *Parables* opens on a verse from *The Books of the Living*, Earthseed's spiritual text:

- 1 To shape God
- 2 With wisdom and forethought
- 3 To benefit your world,
- 4 Your people,
- 5 Your life,
- 6 Consider consequences,
- 7 Minimize harm
- 8 Ask questions,
- 9 Seek answers,
- 10 Learn,
- 11 Teach.

(*Talents* 62)²²

As in the verse above, Earthseed verses consist of no more than a page and show poetic components, such as anaphora ("Your" and "To"), alliterations (of /w/ line 2, of /k/ lines 6, 8, 9, of /m/ line 7), and internal rhymes (of /ən/ with "Consider consequences" and "questions"). The second person singular, with the imperative form and the possessive adjective "your", is an apostrophe extensively used to address an interlocutor. Moreover, verbs of action, standing as a 'call to action' (the interlocutor is encouraged 'to do'), work in duo as circular actions. For instance, it is *because* you "Ask questions" that you "Seek answers", and *because* you "Seek answers" that you "Ask questions". This circularity, already analysed above, is a key

²² Numbers are added to facilitate a stylistic analysis.

element for Earthseed development and a reminder of Change as a circular concept. It is important to note that even Earthseed verses are built on cycles, recalling Earthseed's concept saying that "God is Change" and everything is "Forever uniting, growing, dissolving – forever Changing" (Sower 315).

These verses share similarities with aphorisms, which are concise sentences that express a general truth. By their poetic form and their resemblance to aphorisms, those verses share similarities with the ones of the classical texts of Taoism. In an interview at the end of *Sower*, Butler explains that she purposely uses as "physical model for my character's religions books [...] the *Tao de Ching*. It's a slender book of a few seemingly simple verses. I didn't want to copy any of the Taoist verses, but I immediately liked the form" (Sower 336). In fact, the verses in the *Tao de Ching* follow the same structure:

- 1 Tao itself
- 2 Can never be
- 3 Seen.
- 4 We can but witness it
- 5 Inwardly,
- 6 Its Origin,
- 7 Mother of the Myriad Things.
- 8 The Tao itself can never be
- 9 Named,
- 10 It cannot be Told.

(Lao-tzu, translated by Minford, 2018:41)

Even if Butler declares taking inspiration solely from the *Tao de Ching* form, Earthseed's God and Taoism's Tao (also called 'Dao' or 'Way') are both shapeless. In fact, the Dao is "beyond description or definition [...] the word *dao* is used only because one 'is forced' to refer to it" because the Dao is "'invisible', 'inaudible' and 'imperceptible'" (Pregadio, 2017). Then, Taoism preaches a sort of concept that is 'nameless' because only things can be named. The Dao is shapeless and for that reason, it may be similar to Earthseed's God, also "'invisible', 'inaudible' and 'imperceptible'". Nonetheless, the Dao is also unaltered since "being formless, the Dao is 'constant', does not undergo change" (Pregadio, 2017) while Earthseed's God "is infinitely malleable" (Sower 117). Olamina's God gives more agency to

its believers since they are called to “Shape God” (125) through their actions, while the Dao seems to be a truth that must be accepted as it is.

As Earthseed’s verses, the *Tao de Ching* is more than poetic because it “incorporates earlier oral tradition” (Pregadio, 2017) meaning that its verses should be read out loud. Shorts sentences built on circularity like the verses of Earthseed call for an oral understanding and, therefore, are easily remembered. When Olamina shows for the first time her ‘poetry’ to Harry, one of the survivors of Robledo’s attack, she thinks that “[...] brief verses that might take hold of him without him realizing it and live in his memory without his intending that they should. Bits of the Bible had done that to me, staying with me even after I stopped believing” (Sower 199). Earthseed’s verses can even be chanted by believers, since its poetic components and shorts phrases call to a rather flat tone. Those verses, having non-complex words, have a sort of soothing effect on the reader/ the listener almost like the effect that meditation has. By taking inspiration in Taoist aphorism to build Earthseed’s spiritual text, Olamina spreads values that “without [their] intending” will stay with her believers.

3. Black Theology: Collective African American prayer

Earthseed’s oral traditions recall Black theology’s ‘call and response’, a tradition that reinforces the importance of call for civic responsibility and social activism encouraged by this religion (Tweedy, 2014). As explained in chapter 1 (see page 13), Black theology refers to a movement focusing on the historic African American struggle for freedom in North America manifested through black church. Black theology itself subverts and reinvests Christian values to represent God as “an agent of social change [...] that desires the liberation of oppressed peoples” (Tweedy, 2014:2). By borrowing Black theology’s principles, Butler not only draws parallels between Olamina’s escape to the North and African American history, but she also shows “the importance of spirituality in the politics of liberation” (4).

As a key to African American preaching, the tradition of ‘call and response’ in Black theology consists of the audience’s participation in the “preaching and shaping of the sermon” (6) during religious service. As Tweedy argues, this interactive experience between believers and a preacher creates a mutual experience and sense of community that are at the core of Acorn. In the *Parables of the Talents*, this ‘call and response’ is happening either during funeral rituals or Gatherings, the latter consisting of a monthly meeting when people are

encouraged to “think about how the things we do help us to sustain purposeful religious community” (*Talents* 68). Both religious services open on a sermon relevant to the discussion that engages the audience, ending amongst others by the ‘call and response’ “God is Change” followed by “Other repeated in soft voices, ‘God is Change. Shape God’” (58). Almost naturally, these “Habits of repetition and response have grown up almost without prompting among us” (58) and this “comfort of ritual and routine [give them] the emotional satisfaction of belonging to a ‘team’” (63). In fact, the members of Acorn naturally start to engage with Earthseed verses thanks to this ‘call and response’ tradition, reinforcing their feeling of belonging to a group. Furthermore, as explained above, this habit of repetition is facilitated by the poetic aspects of the verses that are supposed to help the remembrance without noticing it, as Olamina observes for parts of the Bible.

More than creating a feeling of belonging, the ‘call and response’ ritual also gives a sense of agency to members who shape together their collective spirituality, a phenomenon that echoes social activism of Black theology. Tweedy notes that the absence of a central leader during the ceremonial worship service shows that Earthseed shares the same decentralised structure of the Black church. Moreover, he adds that each believer has the right to “express his or her spirituality through forms they are comfortable practicing” (Tweedy, 2014:6). In fact, during Gatherings, funeral rituals or religious services, members can quote various texts such as “Earthseed verses, the Bible, The Book of Common Prayer²³, the Bhagavad-Gita²⁴, John Donne” (*Talents* 58) and can even question and discuss each other’s beliefs. Regarding the centrality of change in Earthseed, members are incited to actively participate in the spiritual dimension and challenge their beliefs together. By giving voice to its believers, Earthseed appears as an inclusive spirituality valuing and encouraging heterogeneity. As explained in Chapter 1, the possibility to change beliefs conditions society’s survival to avoid what happened to Robledo community who fail to adapt its beliefs to its changing environment. Therefore, the members of Acorn reinforce their feeling of community that echoes the importance of change thanks to the ‘call and response’ and discussions. This shows that the community is never static in its religious values.

²³ The Book of Common Prayer is the prayer book used in the Anglican Communion and produced during the English Reformation (XVI century).

²⁴ The Bhagavad-Gita is one of the fundamental texts of Hinduism.

4. Olamina's connections to the African Weather Goddess Oya

In her novels, Butler tends to give African names to both her African and African American characters. An example of this can be seen in *Wild Seed* (1980) where the female protagonist Anyanwu keeps her Nigerian name once in America, while Olamina in the *Parables* writes her diaries and Earthseed's texts under her full name, Lauren Oya Olamina. Oya is one of the seven primary orishas (each one representing an aspect of nature) in the Yoruba religion that is practised in present-day Nigeria (Wright, 2009:514). By giving this name to Olamina, Butler connects Oya's attributes to Olamina and it can contribute to Olamina's deification despite her unwillingness.

In fact, Olamina is clearly at the centre of Earthseed's creation even if she maintains that "All the truths of Earthseed existed somewhere before I found them and put them together. [...]. I didn't make any of them up" (*Talents* 127). She presents herself as 'illuminated' by those truths and, for that reason, mirrors the figure of Jesus (their similarities are analysed below), but she also appears almost as a God for others. For instance, in *Acorn*, Olamina is called "Shaper" (126) and even if she asserts that "we don't worship anymore", Larkin (Olamina's daughter) fears that "THEY'LL MAKE A GOD of her" (1). As a matter of fact, the connections made between Oya and Olamina strengthen Larkin's fear for her biological mother's deification.

In the article "Facing Change" (2000), Caputi explores the resemblances between Oya and Olamina, the implications in the conceptualisation of Earthseed, and the consequences that Olamina's influence has on her believers. First, Oya is an "Elemental Goddess" (Caputi, 2000:176) since, as Larkin explains in the *Parable of the Talents*, "the original Oya was the goddess of the Niger River, a dynamic, dangerous entity. She was also the goddess of the wind, fire, and death, more bringers of great change" (*Talents* 48). For that reason, Oya is unpredictable "yet malleable and wildly dynamic" (48) as Earthseed's God. As Caputi points out, this weather divinity appears in the novel under the traits of the great fire in *Sower* and of the thunderstorm destroying the slaveholders' cabins in *Talents*. It seems that the God of Earthseed shares the same unpredictability and force of change as Oya.

Secondly, Caputi recalls Oya's ability to "tear[...] lies to pieces" (176), a characteristic coming from the name itself in Yoruba, since 'Oya' "is defined by the action 'she tore'" (Wright, 2000:514). According to Caputi, Olamina also tears lies to pieces since

she is a truth-teller, who decides to found her own religion and, by doing so, she “transgresses Christian patriarchal tradition” (Caputi, 2000:176-177). The fact that Olamina also subverts Christian values with other religions (as seen above) or writes over them (as explained in the next paragraph) supports Caputi’s argument.

Lastly, Oya is known in the Yoruba tradition for being a master of disguise in order to play different roles in her relationships with humans (Wright, 2000:515). Olamina herself takes different genders, enabling her to take various roles: daughter in Robledo, leader on the road and in Acorn, lover in her relationship with Bankole, mother for Larkin, and ultimately spiritual teacher of Earthseed. Caputi notes that, as Oya who “like many of the oldest deities in Africa and the Americas, [...] incorporates masculinity” (177), Olamina also plays on her androgynous body. She passes as male on the road twice, for safety reasons, and even experiences attraction from *and* for men and women. This gender fluidity that Oya and Olamina embodied echoes the concept of Change, fortifying the concept of over-changing reality that Earthseed claims. Therefore, because of similarities between Oya and Olamina, the latter appears easily deified, a possibility that is suggested at the end of *Talents* and in Larkin’s discourse. Without a third novel, we can only imagine that Olamina may stand as the central figure to Earthseed, and that their God would wear “my mother face” (*Talents* 48), as Larkin says.

Earthseed consists of a patchwork of different spiritual elements used to fashion a form of spirituality that gives, to its believers, the capacity for action in a changing environment. By using the Buddhist circular reasoning and concept of Change as an unanthropomorphic God, Olamina creates a God that is immanent to the created world. Earthseeders can thereby shape this God, as encouraged by Earthseed verses, and share this feeling of belonging to a community. This feeling is strengthened by Earthseed verses, shaped on Taoist ones’ that are made to be read out loud, maybe chanted, and are then easily remembered. The importance of orality in Earthseed also comes from Black theology tradition for ‘call and response’ that inspired Earthseed’s Gatherings. Therefore, since Earthseeders are both shaped and shapers of their malleable spirituality, their sense of community is reinforced and contributes to their social cohesion. Even Olamina’s deification through the African weather goddess Oya meets the importance of change as developed in Earthseed. Since Olamina shares Oya’s name and characteristics of this malleable weather goddess who changes her appearance, she embodies change herself. However, Olamina’s centrality to Earthseed seems contradictory to the rejection of worshipping. In fact, Olamina

remains a central figure to both the *Parables* and *Earthseed* and, even if she writes over Christian values, she still borrows a number of them, especially the figure of teacher-leader seen in Christian parables.

B. Christian Parables as Teaching Tools

To conceive *Earthseed*, Butler takes a lot of inspiration from Christianity, as seen above with Black theology that already reinterprets some Christian ideas. The titles of the novels directly refer to the parables of the Bible and the didactic dimension. Butler takes distance from several Christian ideas and reimplements some of them in *Earthseed*. First, she portrays Olamina as a ‘teacher-leader’ standing thereby at the centre of the narrative wave and *Earthseed* spirituality. Olamina’s centrality to *Earthseed* mirrors the figure of Jesus who is also the narrator of the New Testament and its central character. However, she purposely uses the framing tool of the parable to stress the importance of teaching and learning. Since *Earthseed* is a non-static form of spirituality, because “God is Change”, it seems logical that the belief itself can be questioned and challenged. On the contrary, it will be seen that Marcus, a believer of a derived form of Christianity cannot stand that value because of his dedication to a faith that is unchangeable.

1. Misuse of frightful narratives

Olamina’s father believes in the power of teaching others, especially through stories and parables that he can share during his sermons to the members of Robledo. Even if Olamina takes distance from her father’s religion, she remains influenced by his posture: as a teacher. Olamina comes from a family that values teaching (both her father and her stepmother are teachers) and states that “teaching is what I would choose to do” (Sower 124). Nonetheless, in Robledo, Olamina fell into the trap of using fear when she urges her friend Joanne to prepare herself to leave the community. Instead of feeling inspired by a better future, Joanne gets scared and reports to Olamina’s father her plan for moving North. He reminds her of the counterproductivity of fear:

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

(*Sower* 66)

Olamina learns from that lesson because, instead of using fear as a tool for change, she spreads Earthseed values by adopting the attitude of a teacher. In fact, she firstly explains and discusses Earthseed's ideas with Harry, one survivor of Robledo's attack, and Travis, someone met on the road. Despite their small mockeries – “Do you want to go on preaching or do you want to eat?” (220) – and criticisms – “Then [if people are desperate] they're supposed to do what? he demanded. ‘Read a poem?’” (221), Harry and Travis adhere to Earthseed, as Olamina says “I think Travis Charles Douglas is my first convert” (223). Her way of doing, exposing Earthseed's ideas in a casual discussion where people can disagree, is the same process used in Gatherings. Once in Acorn, inhabitants gather once a week to discuss and question Earthseed's values. This time of teaching and learning from others is central to the group cohesion and, thus, works as key elements in Earthseed itself.

Furthermore, Earthseed's verses also call its believers to overcome their fears, or more broadly, the status of victim in order to gain power on their reality – contrary to Olamina's father discourse:

[...]
Or a victim of God may,
Through shortsightedness and fear,
Remains God's victim,
God's plaything,
God's prey.

(*Sower* 32)

This verse opens the fourth chapter of *Sower* when catastrophes (murders, fires, suicides) start to increase in Robledo community. The passage illustrates the necessity to move away from a frightful narrative praising inaction to members of Robledo who remain “God's prey”. Their shortsightedness and fear of change, as conveyed by the religious message of their community, are what prevent them to change their posture of the victim. Then, Earthseed is a call to undo the narrative of fear while accepting change, in order to push individuals to look for a better future.

Moreover, getting rid of fearful narratives with the prospects of targeting change in people's behaviours echoes the problem of post-apocalyptic narratives. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 1, frightful narratives constitute an obstacle to the imagination of desirable futures. However, the *Parables* still depict great violence that can be anxiety-provoking for the readers, an element that questions the reason for Butler's use of fear. In fact, the two novels show the extreme violence that individuals are enduring in that troubled time, from torture to a form of neo-slavery. The violence of the *Parables* recalls the anxious atmosphere of climate fictions where climate disasters pace the daily life of characters, that find themselves exclusively struggling for their survival. However, in the *Parables*, characters find moments of stability; for instance, on the road where they share meals or once arrived in Acorn. The 'teacher-leader' posture of Olamina, neither frightening nor reassuring, also contributes to a rather balanced narrative. Then, it can be argued that fear is not central to the *Parables*, contrary to post-apocalyptic narrative and, more broadly, to climate fictions.

2. From the importance of learning

Butler stresses the importance of learning from each other and reevaluating beliefs by portraying radical forms of Christianity as counterexamples to Earthseed. Even if Olamina draws inspiration from Christian parables, Christianity is described as an authoritative and prejudiced religion that preaches non-action to its members through a passive faith. In the *Parables*, Earthseed already takes distance from such a passivity thanks to "God is Change" and 'call to response', as mentioned above, but Butler highlights Christianity problematic values by describing practical examples. For instance, in *Parable of the Sower*, Butler represents the inactivity preached by Olamina's Baptist father at Robledo as partly accountable for the inhabitants' inaction to the threat of the community's destruction. Despite Olamina's warnings, both her father and the inhabitants of Robledo refuse to acknowledge the change in their environment and its visible modifications (such as the increasing of climate disasters). In *Parable of the Talents*, Butler uses the character of Marcus, Olamina's lost half-brother, to demonstrate Christianity as a one-way religion, meant to solely teach others. In fact, after Marcus had been saved by Olamina, he stays in Acorn and decides to participate in one Gathering. However, he seems to share the idea that religion should be preached without discussion from the audience since he says "I'm not out to teach a class. I want to preach a sermon." (*Talents* 149) Without a surprise, after his sermon on the changelessness of God,

Marcus is challenged by other Earthseeders on his knowledge of Earthseed and the Bible. Ignorant of Earthseed's values, Marcus felt humiliated and resentful because of their questions.

What Butler implies in this passage is that Marcus lacks knowledge about Earthseed because "if he had done his homework [read *The Books of the Living*], [...] things would have been more interesting and involving for his audience" (152). Butler emphasises Marcus' wrongness by portraying him as a character who has too much pride to admit that he does not know how to do certain tasks in Acorn. Because of this behaviour, Marcus does not fit into the community since it is characterised as a place where people "learn how to learn" (148). He soon leaves the community to join the Church of Christian America (CA) that stands as a distorted form of Christianity rejecting cultural and religious differences. Led by the new President Jarret, CA is a third example of the failure for others' considerations, ending, as Tweedy notes, in the demonization of differences (Tweedy, 2014:7). It is interesting to observe that Earthseed, which "believe[s] difference is a source of strength that adds value to the community" (7), is the spiritual dimension at the roots of Acorn, purposely taking distance from the rest of society. Thanks to those counterexamples of religious aspects that are rejecting differences and the capacity to learn, Butler reinforces the idea that Earthseed is a key spirituality for this fictional world on the edge of collapse, while other faiths seem to be partly responsible for the world's dysfunction.

3. Olamina, character and storyteller of parables

On the road to Acorn community, Olamina takes the role of a teacher who turns to be more of a 'teacher-leader', as Ruffin (2005-2006:92) points it out. In fact, even if Earthseed does not have any human leader at the centre of its texts, Olamina stands as the one who is propagating Earthseed spirituality. Olamina's central role is reinforced by the use of parables as a narrative tool framing both the novels and Olamina's discourse. Consequently, she has a double role: she is the character of a parable told to the reader *as well as* a teacher telling a parable to her believers. By portraying Olamina as the character of the two Parables from Christian tradition and as a spiritual 'teacher-leader', Butler connects the parable's didactic dimension (also central to Jesus' teaching method) to her novels.

Firstly, the two *Parables* mainly focus on Olamina's story of Earthseed's expansion, either through her own diary in *Sower* or through Bankole and Larkin's diaries in *Talents*.

According to Ruffin, Butler's use of the allegorical discourse of the parable as "a cogent tool in framing this story of a female religious teacher-leader who, through writing and hard-won effort to spread her message, is able to propagate a 'theology of her own' (Pfeiffer 141)" (92). For readers, Olamina appears as the character of the parable they are reading *but* she is also the character in the two Parables serving as titles of the novels. Indeed, the last page of *Sower* is the rewriting of "The Parable of the Sower" by Saint Luke 8:5-8. This parable opens on Jesus who explains the story of a sower who scattered seeds from four different types of soil, while the three other grounds gave nothing, only the fourth ground allowed the seed to grow and to bear fruits. In the same way, *Talents* ends with the "The Parable of the Talents" by Matthew, 25:14-30. This parable tells the story of a master who, before leaving his house to travel, decides to give talents (which is a sum of money) to his servants. Once back, he asks what his servants have done with his talents and, while three of them put their talent to work in order to double its value, the fourth servant had buried his talent in the ground and is then punished by his master. It is easy to see the analogy that Butler is doing with Olamina as the central character of the two parables. In the first parable talking about persistence, Olamina is the one who led her people to a fertile ground where her form of spirituality and new community can grow. For those reasons, she can be compared to a 'good seed'. In the second parable focusing on resourcefulness (Ruffin, 2010:100), Olamina stands as one of the good servants who receives a talent and decides to use it. This talent is actually her teaching and persuasion ability, the qualities that Len notices in Olamina when they spread Earthseed's values as door-to-door missionaries. In fact, Olamina "seduce[s] people" (Butler, 1998:372) with her words, both written and said, and thus she looks almost as an apostle.

In this regard, Ruffin draws a comparison between the Gospel writer's recollections of Jesus of Nazareth and Butler's *Parables* because they both present themselves as teacher-leaders, delivering a message conveying the sacrifices they are facing to reach their goals. (Ruffin, 2005-2006:94). Nonetheless, unlike Jesus who spread his message orally, Olamina is more interested in the importance of scribal literacy and the act of writing (95). In fact, even if Olamina decides to do a sort of canvassing with Len to spread Earthseed's values, she always finds a way to give to people a written passage of *The Books of the Living*. For instance, when Olamina and Len stop at the house of Nia, a single woman, to give her a hand with her garden, Olamina offers to draw her. She purposely draws slowly to "g[i]ve me a chance to talk about Earthseed without seeming to proselytize" (*Talents* 367) and writes one Earthseed verse at the back of the drawing. Olamina and Len continue to visit houses to help with

restoration works and share Earthseed's ideas during dinner time with their hosts. Olamina starts to gain supporters who, from their part, start to share Earthseed's values and push her to "make *The First Book of the Living* available free on the nets" (391) in order to draw the attention of American universities. Eventually, Olamina becomes this spiritual leader at the head of colleges, universities and space program sharing Earthseed's values.

Initially the protagonist, Olamina becomes the central character of Earthseed's story when she sees her popularity growing. At that point, the two *Parables* appear more than diaries because first, they are also part of *The Books of the Living* and secondly, they narrate Earthseed's Genesis and Olamina's rising as a spiritual leader. Furthermore, by reusing the form of the parable as her father did during his Baptist sermons, Olamina understands its use as a way to "lead people 'in the right direction'" (93): first, she leads them physically to the future Acorn community and secondly, she will inspire them 'virtually' with *The Books of the Living*. For that reason, Earthseed and Olamina seem to be inseparable and none of them can exist without the other: Olamina never gives up on spreading Earthseed's values, while Earthseed cannot be approached without the figure of Olamina. Butler seems to have taken a lot of inspiration from the Christian tradition since this unity between the preacher and his preach recalls the one of Jesus and the Bible, and Olamina's idea of forming "missionary teachers" (360) closely resembles the Twelve Apostles of Jesus.

Lastly, Earthseed's verses can even be considered as short parables themselves. In fact, a parable is a literary genre for which readers or listeners are supposed to look for hidden meaning or allegorical sense (Ichiko, Maeno and Others, *Encyclopedia Britannica* Online). Moreover, rooted in an oral culture, this genre focuses less on using storytelling than on providing an analogy of specific human behaviour, and is used to teach spiritual values (Ichiko, Maeno and Others, *Encyclopedia Britannica* Online). As Ichiko, Maeno and others recall, believers hearing a parable are expected to share the same truth. Considering the former arguments, Olamina's story and the two novels offer an allegorical sense built on a communal truth, which is the importance of Change for human adaptability. However, every verse of Earthseed contains its own 'truth' or lesson about a specific behaviour, linked to the capacity for change. For instance, believers are pushed, amongst others, to partner (*Talents* 137), to adapt (*Sower* 29), to challenge their perspective (*Talents* 307) or to keep learning (*Sower* 279). Change is always a common aspect of those verses. The latter is shorter than a parable and does not focus on one character, but rather on a general behaviour common to

every human. Because the interpretation of Earthseed's verses can be multiple and needed to be read in parallel to other verses, their 'hidden' meaning can be understood differently, contrary to parables that are more specific. In fact, the "The Parable of the Talents" by Matthew 25:14-30, an analogy for resourcefulness, can be interpreted regardless of other Christian parables, contrary to Earthseed's verses:

Your teachers
Are all around you.
All that you perceive,
All that you experience,
All that is given to you
or taken from you,
All that you love or hate,
need or fear
Will teach you—
If you will learn.
God is your first
and your last teacher.
God is your harshest teacher:
subtle,
demanding.
Learn or die.

(Sower 279)

In this verse about the necessity to learn, God itself is a concept that can be understood in different ways. It can either be "all around you" such as reality, others, or personal experiences, or It can be one entity. Since Earthseed spiritual asserts in its verse one that "God is Change", God is a teacher that can be approached in every bit of reality. Therefore, the first interpretation is the one that makes sense in this system of thoughts. Earthseed's verses, working as short parable ending on a 'moral' – "Learn or die" –, need to be interpreted all together, contrary to Christian parables. Then, it can be argued that the use of the characteristics of the parable by Butler is slightly modified since she uses that form in a shorter way to share ideas, rather generic, that cannot be understood separately from the rest of Earthseed spirituality.

To conclude, Olamina reuses Christian parables in order to emphasise the importance of teaching and learning, that are central to Earthseed. By showing the failure of warning Joanne due to the use of fear, Olamina understands the importance of offering a faith that is

not evoking fear, even if Earthseed is not recomforting either. Earthseed is described as a spirituality that values difference and encourages a reassessment of its values by believers, while distorted forms of Christianity in the *Parables* work as counterexamples and, thus, reinforce the importance of challenging beliefs. Lastly, the use of the parable's form is dominant in the novels because of its didactic dimension, transferred to the novels and embodied by Olamina, standing as a 'teacher-leader'. The novels can be indeed analysed as parable themselves, having at central character Olamina, who is herself reusing Christian parables concluding on a moral. Thus, she shares similarities with Jesus who is central to the Bible since Olamina is central to Earthseed. The interdependence of Earthseed and Olamina recalls her deification thanks to Oya's similarities, meaning that even if the *Parables* offer another kind of faith, Christian elements are still essential.

C. An Ecofeminist Reading

Can Earthseed be considered as an ecofeminist form of spirituality? Several elements may support this hypothesis, such as the feminist readings (Mayer S. or Miller J.) of the *Parables* its ecological issues (as explained in Chapter 1) or connections between Earthseed and the Yoruba tradition. Moreover, the character of Olamina, described as both feminine and masculine in the role of 'teacher-leader' of her closed to Earth faith, strengthens the possibility for an ecofeminist reading. However, some of Earthseed's values, such as the dream for space exploration, are in contradiction with ecofeminist ones.

Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism examining how both nature and women are treated as objects by patriarchal society (Miles, 2018). During the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States, along with the anti-nuclear protest, academic and professional women discuss the connections between the exploitation of nature and women's oppression. They conclude with the historical association of women and nature, both "chaotic, irrational, and in need of control" (Miles), justifying their oppression by men who are characterised as rational and ordered. Reinforced by the duality of nature/culture (Hache, 2016:22) – culture is associated with men – the inferiority of nature justifies this hierarchical structure, allowing the exploitation of women and nature by the patriarchal system (Miles). However, as Hache argues, ecofeminism is rather a movement calling to a myriad of definitions than an academic discipline, since there is then several splintering, criticisms and disagreements within the

movement and different types of ecofeminisms. Despite this variety, ecofeminists share the same desire for resistance to several forms of domination for the interest of human emancipation and Earth survival (Carlassare, 1998:319). Regarding the multiplicity of disciplines within ecofeminism, this analysis focuses solely on the links between ecofeminism and religions, and more precisely spirituality, and questions the possibility of a social ecofeminist reading of Earthseed.

1. Social ecofeminism and existentialism

One of the main criticisms within ecofeminism is the question of women's essentialisation. In fact, social ecofeminism is opposed to cultural ecofeminism because the latter is accused of postulating that women and nature share the same essence (meaning that they have innate characteristics). Thereby, since they supposedly have the same essence, it is for that reason that women and nature are both oppressed by the patriarchal system. On the contrary, social ecofeminism justifies that same treatment because of historical contingencies: it *happens* that both nature and women are oppressed the same way. As Carlassare notes, social ecofeminists reject essentialism because “ideas such as nourishing woman, as a carer or closer to nature have been used to limit their activities [...]”²⁵ (324) and work as a justification for the different treatments of women and men in society. Then, the social ecofeminism's discourse appears more emancipatory since, in the absence of innate essence, everything can be changed or modelled.

Social ecofeminist is linked to existentialism that is a branch of philosophy considering that human beings model their lives thanks to their actions. This philosophy, in contradiction to essentialism, can be thus applied to Earthseed. In fact, its values clearly go to the direction of existentialism: the concept of ongoing change, Earthseed's verse call to action, the importance of re-evaluating beliefs and, especially, the emancipatory discourse within Earthseed. Since it encourages individuals to embrace their capacity to change, it cannot be seen as essentialist. Moreover, Olamina breaks any essentialist predispositions (a young African American woman) upon herself by creating her own form of spirituality, with the aim of bringing a faith capable to “break the old cycle” (*Talents* 359) of self-destruction.

²⁵ “les idées comme celles de la femme nourricière, soignante ou de la femme proche de la nature, ont été utilisées à des fins oppressives pour limiter leurs sphères d'activité (...)” (my translation).

This capacity for individual change, embodied by Olamina and her spirituality, is central to the *Parables* and echo emancipation and action as conveyed in the following verse:

Belief

Initiates and guides action –

Or it does nothing.

(Sower 47)

Shahnavaz (2018) in “Earthseed Planted: Ecofeminist Teachings in Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower” asserts that Earthseed serves as a representation of a world in which “ecofeminism reigns supreme” (Shahnavaz, 2018:40). According to her, since the world has been led to its loss by the white capitalist patriarchy, Earthseed appears to provide a feminine rebuilding throughout the character of Olamina. Shahnavaz draws a parallel between Olamina and Earth, both described as a Mother figure. She sees Olamina as this caring figure since she is defined by feminine so-called weaknesses due to her hyperempathy (she can feel other people sufferings as if it was hers), womanhood and colour, even if she does not embody all the stereotypical matriarchal characteristics. In fact, as seen before, Olamina also has some masculine traits because of her androgynous body and her role of a spiritual leader. Evolving in a world where the mistreatment of women and nature is a core element of the patriarchal system, Olamina inverts power dynamics with the conception of Earthseed, which conveys this idea that power lies within *All* and not only for the *Others*, namely white males (45). According to Shahnavaz, women, nature and non-white people, seen before as raw material by capitalist oppressors, are now defined as their own agent of Change through Earthseed spirituality.

Olamina’s feminine traits and description as a caring figure can be interpreted through an essentialist analysis. However, this analysis is in contradiction to Olamina’s masculine posture portraying her as both feminine and masculine. Moreover, Shahnavaz’ argument raises that, based in Karen Warren’s definition of ecofeminism, if women are more inclined to care it is due to their inferiority in society. This definition recalls the historical contingencies of oppression and, thereby, there is no essentialist justification for Olamina’s feminine traits. Then, according to Shahnavaz, Earthseed is an ecofeminist organisation, however, her analysis needs to be extended by examining the importance of spirituality in ecofeminism and Earthseed.

2. Earthseed spirituality and ecofeminism

Shahnavaz' analysis (2018), Hache's anthology of ecofeminist's articles (2016), and Starhawk's presence in specialised magazines (2019-2020) about alternatives societies are three examples of the reoccurrence of ecofeminism in the sustainable debate. In their ecofeminist discourses, they are both arguing about the necessity to recreate a link to nature and to reuse stories as a tool for change. Starhawk is an American theorist and writer, known for her ecofeminist discourse and essays, such as *The Spiral Dance* (1979), and she intertwines feminist ideas, rituals and spiritual dimension in her theory. Hache, as a French philosopher teaching at Nanterre University, is specialised in political ecology and explores in her works the notion of ecofeminist.

Through her reading of Starhawk's books, Hache recalls that ecofeminists understand the need for stories (Hache, 2016:18) since "culture is a body of stories we are ceaselessly rewriting" (18). According to her, ecofeminists want to reclaim their story, the one of women's oppression in order to achieve empowerment. Reclaiming their story and changing the power dynamic seem to involve, amongst others, the rediscovery of the Goddess myth (37) and the reinvestment of spirituality as a tool for change, as explored by Starhawk.

Reading P. Christ's ideas, Hache explains that the reconnection to women's power is linked to the rediscovery of the Goddess myth²⁶, partly destroyed by great monotheistic religions (37), mainly male-oriented. P. Christ adds that religions centred around a male God maintain women in a psychological dependency towards male authority and legitimate male power in institutions (P. Christ, 1979:86). Therefore, reclaiming the goddess myth is a way to acknowledge feminine power as legitimate and creative (89). In the case of Earthseed, the Goddess myth is uniquely perceivable through Olamina's similarities with Oya. Moreover, in the absence of a third novel, it is impossible to know if Olamina would have stood as a Goddess for Earthseed explorers, once settled in another planet. Nonetheless, Olamina's African American origins, as well as her connections to the Yoruba tradition, connects her spirituality to polytheist religions, since, historically, slaved Africans were forced to give up on their religions to accept Christianity in the United States. Even if Earthseed looks like a form of monotheism, its unanthropomorphic God is a way to have neither a male-oriented nor

²⁶ The Goddess myth and its symbolism is "the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power" (P. Christ, 1979:277 cited by P. Christ 2012:247).

a female-oriented faith. The fact that Earthseed God is not shaped by human characteristics does not favour one gender over the other. However, Olamina's centrality to Earthseed, her role as a leader, and her potential deification, as analysed above, question the actual absence of a human figure within Earthseed.

The replacement of an anthropomorphic God by a conceptualised one, Change, echoes Starhawk's idea of challenging "symbols and icons of the culture, including the religious symbols" (Starhawk, 2002:263) in our experience of gender. In fact, Starhawk affirms that, since "We construct the world through the stories we tell about it" (264), there is a way to "storyshift" them (264) in order to reach a new dream, thanks to spirituality. The type of spirituality that Starhawk embraces is one that reconnects humans to "something broader and deeper than our surface life" (262). Moreover, she calls her form of spirituality 'earth-based spirituality' or 'feminist spirituality' (264) because she believes that this "something broader" is the experience of Earth as a conscious being. Earthseed offers indeed another story since it subverts "religious symbols" with an immanent and conceptualised God. It also calls to embrace Change that refers to everything and, consequently, stands for reality and nature.

Furthermore, her non-dualistic vision also recalls Earthseed's discourse for a God that is the embodiment of the Buddhist circularity between satisfaction and dissatisfaction. In fact, Earthseed spirituality is neither comforting nor frightening instead, it insists on the importance of every aspect of reality and human's ability to shape the latter. Earthseed's Good is "neither good / nor evil, / neither loving / nor hating / God is Power. / God is Change." (Sower, 245). This resonates with Starhawk's idea who, in an interview for the magazine *Yggdrasil* (2020), explains that she wants to recall the harmony of "light and obscurity" (Starhawk, 2020:49) of our world through some rituals (celebration of cycles such as the one of the moon and seasons). She wants to overcome the conception of our world as divided between mind and nature, light and obscurity, since they are both in equilibrium. Again, this dualistic vision can be interpreted as another myth or story that needed to be changed, through another form of spirituality.

Practically, Earthseed shares similarities with Starhawk's form of spirituality, since it encourages her "to have [her] own relationships with the greater creative powers" and "teaches [her] not what we should believe but how we can learn to listen" (262). Frequently, Earthseed verses emphasise the power that individuals have on their reality/ God/ nature: "God exists to shape/ And to be shaped" (*Talents* 48); "To shape God, shape Self" (235).

Earthseed faith also encourages learning instead of having a blind belief in its values, as well as accepting antagonist concepts of our reality (“light and obscurity”), as argues by Starhawk. If this kind of spirituality is crucial, it is because it brings a certain “awareness that can lead us into a viable future” (262). In fact, more than women’s emancipation towards forms of oppression, ecofeminism seeks also Earth preservation, conditioning human survival. Starhawk’s spirituality and Earthseed are then offering another kind of story where humans beings are reconnected to Earth through their faith, which is determinant of their survival.

Earthseed can be *partially* considered as an ecofeminist organisation, contrary to the analysis of Shahnava. In fact, while she accurately notices Olamina’s characterisation and the power dynamics inversion, ecology does not have a central place within Earthseed. Moreover, even if Earthseed spirituality offers another narrative by changing religious symbols and calling individuals to action, as seen above, Earth preservation is not a priority. Since ecological issues are dominant in the ecofeminist discourse, Earthseed spirituality cannot be defined *entirely* as an ecofeminist organisation. However, changing its relations to human’s environment is a core concept in Earthseed, reason why it is relevant to still explore the place of ecology within this form of spirituality.

D. Reconciling Science and Religion

Earthseed not only borrows elements from religions and ecofeminism but also connects itself to ecology and scientific concepts. As seen above, Earthseed can be indeed partly analysed as a form of spirituality taking into account ecological issues and, for that reason, it shares similarities with ecotheology. Nevertheless, because environmental issues are not central to Earthseed, analysing its spiritual aspect as meeting all the characteristics of ecotheology seems complicated. However, critical thinking is another element that connects Earthseed to science, by the fact that the belief itself is based, according to Olamina, on pieces of evidence discussed by its believers. In fact, Olamina sees those pieces of ‘evidence’ as existing truths in reality. The latter can be seen as deified and/or personified while Earthseed refers to it as God or Change, reinforcing the idea that referring to a god is talking about reality/ nature.

Moreover, there are also connections between scientific laws and Earthseed. In fact, Olamina explains that “Some of the faces of [Earthseed] god are biological evolution, chaos

theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and, of course, the second law of thermodynamics” (*Talents* 46). Since this analysis mainly focuses on religions and spirituality, I will not analyse Earthseed connections to laws of physics and biology.

1. Earthseed, an ecotheology?

In “Animal Nature: Finding Ecotheology”, Ruffin (2010) describes Butler’s *Parables* as an ecotheology due to Earthseed links to African religions and African American reading of the Bible. Ecotheology, significant in the Christian circle, describes theological discourse that emphasises the Creation, “especially the world of nature, as an interrelated system” (Encyclopedia of Science and Religion). According to late-twentieth-century ecotheologists, four characteristics prevail in ecotheology (Encyclopedia of Science and Religion): first, God’s immanence; second, the relational and ecological understanding of God, humans, and the created world rather than a hierarchal one; third, the reinterpretation of human partnership with nature, rather than the human dominion; and lastly, a commitment to justice for all creatures. Except for the two last characteristics, Earthseed’s “God is Change” is indeed immanent to the created world and, since Change is embodied in every aspect of reality, there is no room for a hierarchical understanding of God. However, since Earthseed calls its believers to “Shape God. / [...] / Seize Change. / Use it. / Adapt and grow” (*Talents* 22) and that God symbolises reality and nature, humans seem to still have a dominant position over it. Even if Earthseed does not completely meet the characteristics of ecotheology, Ruffin still offers a relevant analysis of Earthseed as an ecotheology.

First, Ruffin connects Olamina’s concern for ecological issues to African American reading of the Bible as a text fostering social activism. In fact, as explained above with Black theology, African Americans already used Christian culture as a vector for progressive social change (Ruffin, 2010:91). Thereby, Ruffin asserts that this “tradition of interpreting the Bible for social change” (92) has been transferred to ecological concerns, meaning that religions appear as a tool serving environmental considerations. However, Ruffin notes that ecological activism in African American Christianity also originates from the influence of “Earth-based religious tradition in Africa” (92) on Christianity. As Sindima observes (cited by Ruffin, 2010:92), African religions conceive the world’s creation as defined by the interdependence of humans and nature, since one cannot exist without the other. In fact, regarding Earthseed’s

connections with Black theology tradition and Olamina's similarities with Oya, Ruffin's analysis of Earthseed as an ecotheology is appropriate.

Despite the absence of justice for all creatures in Earthseed and the presence human influence on their environment, Ruffin's analysis paves the way to the reconciliation of religion and science. In fact, by affirming the importance of ecological issues and nature in religion itself, ecotheology is a second step (after the ecofeminist reading) towards a faith that takes into account human survival in their environment, thanks to an understanding of human interdependence to their world. Moreover, what Ruffin ultimately affirms in her analysis is the role of faith as a way to promote radical ecological change (95). By wondering "how might a religion advance sustainability?" (95), she sees in Butler's *Parables* a religion that promotes "action necessary to rescue human beings from themselves" (95) by considering ecological issues, something already argued by Starhawk. However, it seems that human survival is prioritised over environmental conservation, and therefore, ecological issues are not considered for moral reasons but survival ones.

2. Earthseed's critical thinking

Another concept that Earthseed shares with science, despite its connections to physics, is the method on which Earthseed is elaborated. Contrary to Christianity and its derived forms in the *Parables*, Earthseed promotes "critical thinking instead of a faith" (Ruffin, 2010:97) since the spirituality must be "formulated on 'incontrovertible evidence', things seen, tested, and tested again" (103). This critical thinking is applied during Gatherings where members can question Earthseed's values, a practice opposed to the 'stupid faith' of Christian America or Marcus' vision of Christianity, as analysed above. It is precisely because Olamina questions, subverts and negotiates her "religious inheritance with her belief in the value of scientific inquiry" (98), that she subverts the latter to create spiritual guidance referring to a sense of wholeness: reconciling religion and science observations. Even if Olamina's father expresses the importance of the teacher posture towards his believers, however, he still shares a vision of Christianity that should not be called into question. On the contrary, Earthseed's text itself calls its believers to not take other's words without being critical:

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.
Worse! [...]

(*Talents* 306)

3. Personification or deification of reality

In a Ted Talk, Dowd, an evolutionary theologian, argues that God, reality and nature are actually referring to the same concept, except that they bear different names. According to him, the deification of reality/nature for any cultures, from Roman and Greek god or goddess to the Christian God, occurs thanks to personification. In fact, he asserts that human beings refer to reality through the personification of the latter and, therefore, talking about God, Gaia or Poseidon is, in fact, referring to reality (Dowd, 2014:0:18-0:34). Moreover, what ultimately matters for Dowd is to have a “right relationship to reality” (3:16) that means to “the air, the water, the soil, and the life of this planet (3:51). This is fundamental for Dowd because, by acknowledging that reality and God are the same entity, we change the initial I-It relationship to a “personal (I-Thou) relationship to reality” (4:31). In fact, he suggests that if we continue to relate to reality as an ‘It’, used to justify our exploitation over nature, “we will cause our own extinction” (4:52-55), as argued by Ruffin and Starhawk.

Interestingly, by saying “God is Change”, Olamina expresses the same idea than Dowd since she postulates that God, as Change “is inevitable. [...] is part of life, of existence, of the common wisdom” (Sower 26). Thereby, Change seems to be another personification of reality itself since Olamina says that “[...] God is another word for nature” (15). This is strengthened by Olamina’s argument that Earthseed has been revealed to her since she “didn’t make any of them up” (*Talents* 127) because “All the truths of Earthseed existed somewhere before I found them and put them together” (127). Those truths are coming from reality since they are “patterns of history, in science, philosophy, religion or literature” (127) as for Dowd who declares that “scientific, historic and cross-cultural evidence are modern-day scripture” (10:38-10:45). Therefore, Dowd and Olamina share the same conception of God since they both describe it as a reference to reality, highlighting the need to change human beings’

relationship towards reality/nature to prevent their extinction. However, Dowd does not offer practical solutions in order to be in a good relationship with God/ reality, apart from “honouring Past and Future” (3:33), which seems to refer to the importance of human survival. Olamina, who is also aware of environmental destruction by humans, has a clearer discourse: either we continue to “destroy ourselves or destroy the ability of our world to sustain us. Or we can make something more of ourselves. We can grow up. We can leave the nest” (*Talents* 358). In fact, for Olamina, human survival is only possible thanks to space exploration because she is persuaded that planet Earth is a damaged womb that humans need to leave.

4. Dreaming of space exploration

Regarding the importance of ecological issues in the *Parables*, the dream for space exploration can appear odd in Earthseed discourse. First, Butler subverts another element from the Christian tradition that is the concept of heaven. In fact, Ruffin argues that Butler “write[s] over Christian theological perspectives with Earthseed theology” (Ruffin, 2005-2006:92) by, for instance, changing the concept of the Christian heaven by the ‘destiny’ of Earthseed. To fulfil the destiny for Earthseeders consists of “making home for ourselves among the stars” (*Talents* 358) attainable by interstellar travel and space exploration. While Christian Heaven is an after dead promise, Earthseed Destiny is what guides Earthseeders throughout their life and gives them purpose:

Take comfort.
Each move toward the Destiny,
Each achievement of the Destiny,
Must mean new beginnings,
New worlds,
A rebirth of Earthseed.
Alone,
Each of us is mortal.
Yet through Earthseed,
Through the Destiny,
We join.
We are purposeful
Immortal
Life!

(*Talents* 237)

In this verse, the ideas of unity and purpose are clear as well as the concept of immortality. Such as the aim of space exploration, immortality is contradictory to an ecological reading of *Earthseed*. Olamina's idea of immortality is not one of the human beings but rather of the human species, immortality "through their children, their work, and their memories" (47). As explained above, she fears human tendency to put in danger their own species and environment, and she believes that "Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them" (358). In other words, according to Olamina, human survival relies on our capacity to inhabit other worlds. Ruffin argues that "The extra-terrestrial aims of *Earthseed* may appear anti-ecological to some, but ecology does not imply that Earth is the only possible home" (Ruffin, 2000:98). Despite Ruffin's argument, dreaming of space exploration is a way to give up on human responsibilities towards ecological issues. In an interview, Palwick comments on this paradox by saying to Butler that there is a "conflict between small, sustainable, communities like Acorn and the expensive, high-tech, dream of *Earthseed*, of colonizing the stars" (Palwick, 1999:151). Butler argues that these two goals are not necessarily in conflict, but because of our inability to "create a sustainable way of life" (Butler cited by Palwick, 152), we could see them in contradiction. She adds that she perceives technological progress as a threat to the environment, even if she imagines that other technologies may reverse that tendency (152). Butler's idea of space exploration, blurring with Olamina's, does not imply leaving Earth behind totally, but rather expanding habitable environment for humans or "we are more likely to go extinct" (156).

Ultimately, Butler appears to be more interested in the relationship that humans have among themselves and their environment than in environmental conservation. In fact, as explained by Olamina, "*Earthseed* is about preparing to fulfil the Destiny. It's about to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment [...]" (*Talents* 358-359). Even if *Earthseed* "God is Change" refers to reality and nature, and thereby is the entity respected in the faith, nature protection is more a question of human survival than Earth's preservation. However, it seems that resolving social cohesion thanks to spirituality is prior to climate change.

E. Concluding Thoughts

As seen in this chapter Earthseed spirituality offers, to readers and followers, to rethink human beings' interiority and their relationships towards each other and the world. It is clear that Earthseed borrows elements from other religions and writes over Christianity to appear as a form of spirituality that provides a sort of empowerment to its believers. Change, the God of Earthseed, is symbolised in every aspect of Earthseed. First, *The Book of the Living*, built on circular texts having a didactic dimension, is a call to action. Promoting critical thinking to its believers, the text is supposed to be discussed by them. Second, Olamina embodies change herself: she is a Shaper, a 'teacher-leader', and is shaped by her own spirituality. She has a changing gender since she is both female and male in her looks and roles. Finally, "God is Change" as an immanent God is reachable everywhere and can be found in everything and everyone. Therefore, believers can be close to this God since, as seen in the ecotheology analysis, God is Change refers to reality/ nature. If Earthseed's God is actually embodied in everything, including in environment and nature, believers feel connected to this "something broader" (Starhawk) that is Earth.

Earthseed brings awareness of a changing environment and gives then another story to human life where the spiritual dimension is central to their survival. In the context of collapse as described in the *Parables*, Earthseed arrives as a new belief capable of fostering human cohesion during environmental and social crises. Even if Earthseed does not preach a leading figure, Olamina stands as central to it and is the first one saved by her own beliefs, since propagating its values gives her a purpose. Since Earthseed borrows different religious ideas, this form of spirituality can appear as incoherent while, on the contrary, Olamina connects the values altogether. Earthseed is understood as a holistic spirituality that can be approached internally, through human's interiority, and externally, through reality/nature.

Regarding ecological issues within the novels, one might wonder if Earthseed could be read as a 'green' spirituality. Since Earthseed's verses can have different interpretations, this form of spirituality can be approached as a system of thoughts sharing environmental concerns. The analogy between Change and Nature, as well as the eco-theological reading point towards that direction. However, another reading seems to evaluate Earthseed's like a belief that favours human species over Earth as a whole. In fact, despite ecological concerns within the novels, human survival is more important than Earth's preservation. In fact, the

focus is on human's adaptability in a new troubled/ changing environment, an idea that is strengthened at the end of *Talents* with space exploration. Then, thanks to a new form of spirituality, it seems that the *Parables* explore how humans can collaborate in time of collapse, even if it is at the cost of their own environment. Now that Earthseed's values have been analysed as centred around Change and empowerment, it is relevant to question their use for social cohesion, as well as their limits.

III. Chapter 3: Earthseed, a Tool for Social Cohesion?

Ignorance makes all things clean.

Our knowledge weighs us down.

We want it gone

—Atwood, “White Cotton T-shirt”, *The Door*

After having analysed Earthseed’s values, this chapter examines how Olamina uses this form of spirituality as a tool fostering social cohesion in a community. It is important to recall that Chapter 2 analysed the *Parables* as narratives focusing more on human collaboration in a time of collapse than on human’s responses towards environmental issues. Regarding the spiritual crisis at the background of this disenchanted 2024 America, Earthseed offers another purpose to lost individuals who are struggling with their existential fear of mortality. Throughout the concept of mutual aid, Earthseed advertises for another story opposed to the one of endless competition.

Therefore, this last chapter analyses how Earthseed’s values are implemented in the life of individuals to strengthen their sense of community such as in the case of Acorn. The latter stands as a good example of community applying Earthseed to create a horizontal organisation that is reinforced by collective rituals and Gatherings. However, Earthseed has its own limits and cannot be regarded as a form of spirituality that breaks away from human’s desire for infinite expansion. This concept, perceivable through space exploration, is one of the main limits to a reading of Earthseed as a ‘green’ spirituality.

A. Recreating Meaning in a Disenchanted World

The background of the *Parables* depicts a world facing different crises: environmental, social and spiritual. For the purpose of this analysis, the spiritual crisis needed to be understood first, since it can be seen at the roots of the two other crises. If Earthseed has such an impact, it is because it offers a sort of new hope for purposeless individuals of the *Parables* who live in a disenchanted world. While fear of mortality is at its highest during this time of collapse, individuals find comfort in forms of spirituality that offer them purpose and a way to approach their existential fears.

1. A spiritual crisis

According to De Bouver, spirituality is “a way to broaden individual experience because spirituality takes roots in the conception of humans integrated into something beyond their perceptions (Life, the Universe, the Divine, God’s Kingdom, Nature...). And the fact to belong to an All bigger than oneself positions human beings into a network of relationships [...]”²⁷ (De Bouver, 2017:122-123). Dominique Bourg, a French philosopher, expands De Bouver’s definition by distinguishing two functions of the spiritual dimension: one refers to the relationship that society has with the outside (the world/nature), and the second one refers to how societies provide models for individuals’ self-actualisation (Bourg, 2018:15-16). In an interview, he explains that the way the spiritual dimension functions in our modern societies (of the 21st-century) favours our self-actualisation through the consumption of our environment (Bourg, 2018:3:20-3:38). He adds that this – false – unlimited consumption allows us to access a kind of infinity (3:41-3:46), a desire that takes its roots into our existential fear of mortality (this concept is explored in more details in point three of this section). Therefore, the ‘over-consumption’ of goods can be explained partly by the wrong relationship towards our spiritual dimension as promoted by our societies, since the consumerist society pushes individuals to overcome this immortality through the feeling of ownership.

Luyckx explains that Integral Ecology wants to move beyond the paradigm of modernity without denying the latter. This approach is trans-modern, meaning that it does not glorify a lost golden age (pre-modern) or praise relativism and deconstruction (post-modern). Integral Ecology is defined as a holistic approach since it understands our environmental crisis in a global way, along with social justice, gender inequalities without separating our ‘internal’ and ‘external’ ecology (Luyckx, 2020:2). The problems with the modern approach are its rationalism, anthropocentrism and androcentrism. As Luyckx notes, three different ecologist movements (scientific ecology, ecofeminism and deep ecology) highlight the problems of the modern approach: firstly, the scientific ecology recalls the notion of limits absent from the modern approach; secondly, ecofeminism shows a parallel between

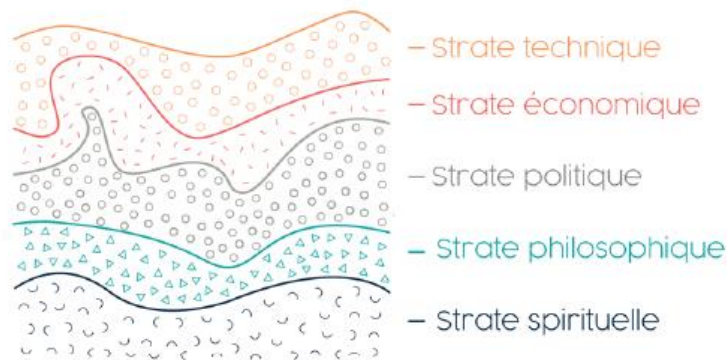
²⁷ “La spiritualité est, selon ma compréhension, une démarche qui élargit l’existence individuelle car elle s’enracine dans une conception de l’humain intégré dans quelque chose qui le dépasse (la Vie, l’Univers, le Divin, le Royaume de Dieu, la Nature...). Et le fait de faire partie d’un Tout plus grand que soi replace l’être humain dans un réseau de relations [...]” (my translation).

anthropocentrism, androcentrism and Western centrism sharing the same domination over aspects linked to femininity; and lastly, the deep ecology movement connects the denial of humans' connections to nature to the foundations of our ecological crisis (3).

In parallel to the different interpretations of Integral Ecology, Luyckx offers a new model built on the metaphor of geological layers (see Figure 1). Thanks to this approach that illustrates layers of society, Luyckx emphasises the idea that every level is relevant to address the concerns of the environmental crisis (8-9). Instead of creating a sort of competition between the 'real' causes of the environmental crisis, this model identifies the synergy between different layers.

Fig. 1

Integral Ecology's Geological Layers (9)



28

For every layer, Luyckx wants to move beyond a dualistic vision. For the technical layer, Luyckx insists on the necessity to be critical towards technology: we should not reject entirely technologies, but in the same time we should stop believing that technology is the only solution to the environmental crisis. The second layer, the economical one, questions the duo growth/ degrowth: while the myth of unlimited growth on a planet with finite resources proved to be wrong, there is now the need to define a circular economy, first as declining in its consuming capacity but not in the long-run. For the political layer, Luyckx calls to overcome the duality left-wing/ right-wing as well as the political approach either local or global, in order to not fall into an identarian closure. The fourth layer, the philosophical one, is centred on our vision of reality and our relationships towards nature. Luyckx offers to rethink our connections to nature without denying what separates us from it by understanding a hierarchy of beings, different from an anthropocentric vision. Integral Ecology, as

²⁸ From top to bottom: technical layer, economic layer, political layer, philosophical layer and spiritual layer (my translation).

interpreted by Luyckx, shows the need to understand ecological concerns in a global way, along with the other dimensions of human life, and especially with the spiritual layer at the bottom of her model. In fact, Luyckx' model adds the importance of human's interiority to the sustainable debate, as defined by the three overlapping circles. While this model only understands the intersectionality of the environmental, economic and societal dimensions, Integral Ecology adds the importance of philosophical and spiritual dimensions.

Lastly, because this chapter focuses on Earthseed as a form of spirituality, I examine in more details the spiritual layer. Luyckx explains that the ecological crisis is also a spirituality crisis linked to our materialistic culture, an argument that echoes Bourg's ideas (15). Like Bourg, she argues that it is now consumption and competition that are used to respond to our existential questions (15), a way of proceeding that sustains the capitalist system and is not viable in a limited world. She adds that a rediscovery of the world sacrality is a core issue of Integral Ecology. Thereby, the spiritual dimension stands as essential to understand the current crisis and is a door to an inner transformation for individuals who need to develop a sort of resilience in a troubled world (16). Through this analysis, Earthseed spirituality can be seen as an answer for the *Parables*' characters living in a world on the edge of collapse. Nevertheless, Luyckx explains that, at every level, there is the need to extend beyond a dualist vision. At the spiritual level, there are two oppositions: the one of transcendence/immanence and the one of pluralism/spiritualism. The first opposition should be overcome through the concept of pantheism that reconciles the strong link that an immanent approach has to nature, and the unity that shares a transcendental approach (17). The second opposition should understand the spiritual layer as neither secular nor strictly religious, but rather as integration a variety of forms of spirituality.

Earthseed is in contradiction since it postulates an immanent God and his pluralism is not global. In fact, even if Earthseed itself is built on different values and religions, there is still a latent dogmatism (such a limit is explored in the last section of this chapter). Bourg's ideas and Luyckx' analysis both highlight the necessity of rethinking how the spiritual dimension is promoted in our society, something that Butler presents in her *Parables*. In the disenchanted 2024 America, Earthseed offers another type of human's realisation somewhat taking distance from the dream of endless consumption. Despite the latent dogmatism of Earthseed, it is relevant to analyse first how this form of spirituality gives a new purpose to individuals.

2. The need for a purpose

Purpose

Unifies us:

It focuses our dreams,

Guides our plans,

Strengthens our efforts.

Purpose

Defines us,

Shapes us,

And offers us,

Greatness.

(*Talents* 362)

The concept of purpose drives the characters of the *Parables*, and Olamina is the first who follows a new purpose in both finding new land in the North and propagating her form of spirituality. For every person she encounters on the road to every family who decides to join Acorn, Olamina and Earthseed give purpose to those lost individuals. In the period of systemic crises, characters are depicted as in despair for something else than the pursuit of their own “survival” (363). While discussing with Len, Olamina explains that people follow her because “she seemed to be going somewhere, seemed to know where she was going. People elected Jarret because he seemed to know where he was going too” (363). Earthseed is of course not the only sets of values filling the need for ‘purpose’ since this 2035 America is ruled by the religious zealot Jarret.

However, it can be argued that since the consumer society is collapsing in the *Parables*, it is not possible for the majority, mainly marginalised people, to pursue the type of spirituality embodied in society: the one of unlimited consumption, as described by Bourg. For the remaining rich Americans, such as Len’s parents, they find comfort into the consumption of goods (such as the Dreammask virtual reality), and it is not surprising that they voted for Jarret who promises to “make America great again” (20) by continuing the ‘business as usual’. The phenomenon of Dreammask, an expensive technology, is a way of escaping reality, a habit that can be addictive. Instead of shaping another society in their reality, people as Len’s mother find comfort in other fantasy worlds:

In that room she [Len's mother] could go anywhere, be anyone, be with anyone. It was like a womb with an imagination. She could visit fourteenth-century China, present-day Argentina, Greenland in any imagined distant future, or one of the distant worlds circling Alpha Centauri. [...] If her real friends didn't indulge her as much as she wanted them to, she just created more obliging version of them. [...]

(*Talents* 345)

People escaping into v-rooms of Dreamasks are then also suffering from the degradation of their society and environment, except that they found another solution to avoid their reality. It cannot be argued that people as Len's mother are aware of their addiction to virtual worlds, but Len's discourse is rather critical towards her mother's behaviour. Jarret's discourse, where the degradation of their American society is caused by outside enemies, does not force them to readjust their perspective. On the contrary, they can continue finding comfort into their virtual worlds while ignoring the collapse of the real one.

Therefore, for poor people who cannot afford this technology or the ones who cannot find themselves into Jarret's values, Earthseed answers their need for a goal that embodies the hope for a better future. Without being a comforting form of spirituality, Earthseed answers the need of individuals hoping to reach "Greatness". Contrary to Dreamask that offers only an illusion of other worlds, Earthseed offers a new system of beliefs, bringing hope, that can be applied in communities. As Jos argued in his article "Fear and the Spiritual Realism of Octavia Butler's Earthseed": "Hope is necessary to life as light and air. [...] it is politically indispensable that the future be 'inviting'" (Tinder, 1999:13 cited by Jos, 2012:426).

The idea of hope recalls the genre of 'hopepunk' as defended by Rowland in Chapter 1 who wants to encounter other types of science fiction novels, some that display desirable futures. Butler offers us Olamina's story, who herself offers *another story* thanks to Earthseed: one of the individuals who unite their efforts to reach "Greatness", as written in the verse above. The unity that Earthseed promotes shifts narratives and places to the centre of the text importance of collaboration.

3. The Hobbesian State of War and existential fear of mortality

The great violence described in the *Parables* once social structures have collapsed recalls Hobbes' theory of the State of Nature and War. In fact, Hobbes argues that a life in a state of nature, without any government, leads to a state of war (Lloyd and Sreedhar, 2019). In

absence of authority to this conflict between individuals, the state of nature can lead to a war of ‘all against all’ reason why Hobbes defends the idea that people should transfer a part of their liberty into the hands of sovereign authority (Lloyd and Sreedhar, 2019). However, it is not only the fear of violence that pushes individuals to accept a ruling figure, because existential fear, meaning awareness about our mortality, also plays a role in Hobbes’ theory. In fact, in his analysis about the use fear in the *Parables*, Jos highlights the fact that the awareness about our mortality, based on this fear of violent death, is an obstacle to our contentment (Ahrendorf, 200:592 cited by Jos, 2012:412). Then, as developed in the *Leviathan* by Hobbes, the only solution is a “secular monarchy [...] distracting ourselves from our mortality by pursuing the things that we desire” (411), an idea that reminds Bourg’s argument for infinite consumption. Contrary to Hobbes who rejects religion, Jos examines how a religious government appears as an answer to this existential fear as expressed in the *Parables*. According to Jos, Christian America, led by President Jarret, stands as a terrible movement, since it exploits “fear engendered by economic collapse, environmental catastrophe, and public disorder, by promising a return to a mythical time when all believed in the same God” (411). CA is perceived by Americans as a way to escape existential fear, but it also justifies its own culture of fear and violence undergone by, for instance, Earthseeders, since other beliefs are an obstacle to Jarret’s return to this mythical time (which proved to be unsustainable as explained above).

Interestingly, Olamina’s spirituality offers another *myth* than the one of both Hobbes and the CA movement, since she promotes a different type of relationship towards fear. First, as argued by Jos, “‘God is Change’ is an invitation to respond to fear with creativity, productivity, and compassion” (416). In fact, it is not that Earthseed denies the fear of mortality and violence, but its values give other tools to acknowledge and work with those fears. The idea of Chaos, sharing similarities with Hobbes’ State of War, is not to be feared but is rather to be understood since it is one of God’s faces that needed to be shaped:

Chaos
Is God’s most dangerous face –
Amorphous, roiling, hungry.
Shape Chaos –
Shape God.
Act.

After 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.

(Sower 23)

Again, Chaos is a form of Change and, as for any manifestations of Earthseed's God, Chaos is malleable by its believers. The chaotic society of the *Parables* is changeable, and this idea takes distance from the established State of War, since change can be initiated by the people themselves and not by higher up persons, such as Jarret. However, Earthseed remains a demanding spirituality because, to initiate change, believers of Earthseed are called "to grow up, to put aside the fear and rage of the adolescent and enter into adulthood [...]" (417). Earthseed encourages individuals to move beyond a system of values, the one promoted by Jarret and compared to the "adolescent" phase, that proved to be damaging for the environment.

The shift in values, from the ones of the *Parables'* collapsing world to Earthseed's, can be compared to a shift in myths or stories. In fact, Hobbes' State of War can be regarded as a myth justifying, for instance, Jarret's intolerance of difference and destruction of other faiths. As seen in Chapter 2, Earthseed is born from the association of various ideas and religious concepts allowing people to engage differently with others and their environment. For that reason, this spiritual model offers another narrative. In *L'entraide, l'autre loi de la jungle* (2017), Servigne and Chapelle consider the concept of the 'war against all' or the law of the jungle as part of a myth, repeated many times to enter in reality as a natural state (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:18-19). They explain the concept of mutual aid²⁹, that has been erased by the one of competition and argue that organisms in cooperation have more chance to survive to harsh conditions (20). Their book explores the idea of mutual aid, first in nature and then in human interactions, but particularly, they argue for a change in our imagination. As developed in Chapter 1, narratives need to change and, considering Servigne and Chapelle's argument, they could implement in their story the need for collaboration, as in the

²⁹ I decided to translate the French *entraide* by 'mutual aid' and not by the term 'care'. Firstly Servigne and Chapelle do not refer to the francophone usage of the term *care* and, secondly, the English term is linked to the theory of care that implies a philosophical approach that Servigne and Chapelle do not have.

Parables. As Jos argues, “the core message of all great spiritual tradition is ‘Be not afraid’” (Jos, 2012:422), then perhaps Earthseed can be seen as a spiritual model that helps individual to deal with their existential fears thanks to collaboration.

B. Replacing State by Communities

Acorn community is based on Earthseed spirituality that works as its foundations. As explored in Chapter 2, the life of Acorn’s members is marked by Earthseed’s values expressed through rituals that strengthen relationships among the inhabitants. Surprisingly, there is no ‘ruling state’ in that community and, still, the novels depict Acorn as a place where people found a balance: each adult tries to find for what he/she is good for while children attend a sort of school based on democratic education³⁰. Even if the *Parables* do not describe in detail how the community functions, there is some relevant information that echoes Servigne and Chapelle conception of mutual aid in community cohesion. As they explain, religious principles can sometimes function as cultural norms bonding individuals from a group (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:229).

1. A horizontal organisation

First, the absence of state for a more horizontal organisation is noticeable in Acorn’s organisation. As Servigne and Chapelle argue, Hobbes’ theory of a selfish and competitive human nature colonised our imagination to make us believe that only the State, thanks to its absolute power, can save individuals from the terrible State of Nature and War (63). Even if they explain further on that institutions can also foster and maintain systems based on mutual aid, they still express a reservation: once the institution is created, it tries to maintain its power and rapidly forgets its first aim, meaning the protection of a group of individuals (143). A larger institution has, therefore, more risk to favour its own survival at the expense of the group, thereby prevented to adapt to a changing environment. This scenario shares a lot of similarities with the problems of our 21st-century democracies and is actually the background

³⁰ This phenomenon in Acorn is not described in detail. However, a short passage (*Talents* 148) explains that education in Acorn is based on children’s affinities for a subject. Then, they decide to explore a certain field, individually or with another child, helped by a with a mentor (an adult). Education does not come from ‘above’, but from the children themselves since “The kids begin to teach themselves and one another” (*Talents* 148).

of the *Parables*. This system tries to maintain itself at any costs, thanks to the dogmatic President Jarret, companies-cities as Olivar, and a form of neo-slavery. In these three examples, it is again the myth of competition that prevails, embedding the idea that, in a collapsing world, people are competing for resources even if it is at the cost of others' survival. Therefore, Acorn, thanks to its horizontal organisation based on mutual aid as well as its absence of clear ruler (that can still be questioned), paves the way to reimagine society.

Agustí, in her analysis of Acorn community, argues that Butler inserts in her community "gender and racial difference, thus creat[es] a community of equals" (Agustí, 2005:352). However, Agustí notes that it is not by changing the society's infrastructure that Butler imagines a more democratic system, it is "by modifying its cultural relationships" (352). Agustí's analysis focuses mainly on gender since she asserts that Olamina, because of her androgynous body, completely redefines manhood in Acorn, leading to an "equal distribution of goods and work" (357). Indeed, as analysed above with the ecofeminist reading in Chapter 2, the members of Acorn do not seem to suffer from gender stereotypes. In practical terms, both the men and women of Acorn specialise in activities regardless of their gender: for instance, Allie is a carpenter while Grayson Mora takes care of his daughter "just as a female member of the group did" (357). It can be argued that Acorn is based on a sort of horizontal organisation, where members are equal despite their gender, status, work or past. As observed by Olamina, members of Acorn stay in the community "to feed their kids and to live in a community that didn't look down on them for being poor or enslave when they are vulnerable" (*Talent* 360). The competition law does not seem to rule over the community, on the contrary, as Olamina says, "the incorporation of difference can only make the community stronger" (357).

2. "Only in partnership can we live" (*Talents* 135)

The second element that echoes Servigne and Chapelle's theory of mutual aid is the importance of partnership, as written in *The Books of The Living*: "Partner one another. Partner diverse communities. Partner life. Partner any world that is your home. Partner God. Only in partnership we can thrive, grow, Change. *Only in partnership can we live.*" (*Talents* 135, emphasis added). What Earthseed calls for is a collaboration with God, that leads to collaborate with everyone and everything, a dimension that Earthseed insists on in order to

favour species survival. According to Servigne and Chapelle, three elements support social cohesion in a group: the feeling of safety, equality and trust.

First, the feeling of safety in a community grows if the group's values are explained correctly and integrated by individuals who, once they feel comfortable with them, feel enough security to open themselves to other members (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:147-150). When Marcus joins Acorn and decides to make a sermon that is contradictory to Earthseed's values, Olamina explains to him that "you could have been expelled for preaching another belief system" (*Talents* 158). More than questioning the dogmatism of Earthseed (examined in the last section of this chapter), Olamina's claim reaffirms Acorn's values but also prioritises the group's cohesion. In fact, if Olamina does not stand on Marcus' side, it is because, as she says, "I couldn't let him begin to divide Acorn" (152).

The second element, the feeling of equality, is linked to the individuals' wealth in a group. The monetary aspect is not really mentioned in Acorn, except that only members who decide to join, even if they do not believe in Earthseed, can have a "share of the profit from the sale of the crops" (74) after a year only. However, if they refuse to become Earthseeders, they do not have the right to vote in the community. This rule questions Acorn equality, showing that Earthseed remains at the roots of the community since members are not treated equally if they 'refuse' to believe.

The third concept is the feeling of trust, helped by good communication between members who agree on common rules, having the certainty that no one will mock their values or report what is said (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:161-162). This aspect helps members, changed, to move in the same direction, something that competition prevents (164-165). It is interesting to note that members of a group are changed in the community, a phenomenon that Agustí perceives in Acorn community because "change takes place within the individual" (Agustí, 2005:355). Moreover, Gathering also functions as a time for members to communicate, to share their aims or fears, and to decide to "tak[e] in any necessary changes, and tak[e] advantage of any opportunities" (*Talents* 66). For instance, expanding Acorn's business is an opportunity discussed during a Gathering where members weight the benefits and risks (66-72), a discussion ending on a 'Gathering Day meal' and artistic events³¹ (play

³¹ Some members of Acorn also have hobbies such as writing stories or plays, acting on stage or doing some music. The daily life in Acorn is rarely explained, and if the reader comes across

and music). Gathering seems also to consolidate relationships between members and social cohesion.

When those three elements are present in a community, Servigne and Chapelle argue that a strong feeling of membership grows and the group cohesion is strengthened (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:170). If humans can open themselves to others and benefit some much, Servigne and Chapelle judge that mutual aid should be extended to other beings in order to attain a sense of “*wholeness*” (184). Hache, in the introduction of *Reclaim*, echoes their argument when she asserts that approaching reality/ nature as a whole that needs care is a question of survival for humans (Hache, 2016:50). Then, the concept of mutual aid, as cement for a community, should also be applied to what is seen as ‘non-human’. It is already what Earthseed offers, as analysed in Chapter 2, with a God that can be approached and respected in every aspect of reality.

However, the size of the community is also discussed in their book since a bigger group has more risk to see its inequalities rise (155), a concern that Olamina has in mind: ““They should be small communities,” she said. “No more than a few hundred people, never more than a thousand. A community whose population grew to more than a thousand should split and ‘parent’ a new community”” (Talents 171). It seems that Olamina, Servigne and Chapelle share the same intuition since, in *L’Entraide*, the two authors explain that it is smaller nations that are more prosperous and creative (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:213). Based on their readings, they argue that the size of a community should never exceed a point when members cannot influence each other (213). Then, to keep the dynamism of mutual aid, groups of individuals should limit their size.

3. Gathering around a common enemy

Another strong mechanism that brings a group together is the perspective of a common enemy that can be either other ‘hostile’ groups or an inhospitable environment. First, Servigne and Chapelle explain that the easiest way to consolidate a group is to target a common enemy, a phenomenon describes in the *Parables*. In fact, CA, as the opposite faith to Earthseed, uses the rhetoric described by Servigne and Chapelle based on an imaginary of ‘us

some information, it is always because the event is linked to Earthseed. In this case, those artistic events happen after one Gathering.

and them’ that take its roots in myths, use of words, stories, ideologies (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:203). The enemy is then described as a threat to the other group survival and it legitimates the use of violence. This mechanism is used by Jarret, the leader of the CA movement, when he is running for president:

Why have we allowed ourselves to be seduced and betrayed by allies of Satan, these heathen purveyors of false and unchristian doctrine? These people . . . these pagans are not only wrong. They’re dangerous. They’re as destructive as bullets, as contagious as plagues, as poisonous as snakes to the society they infest. They kill us, Christian American brothers and sisters. They kill us! They rouse the righteous anger of God against us for our misguided generosity to them. They are lovers of Satan, seducers of our children, rapists of our women, drug sellers, usurers, thieves and murders! [...] What must we do to regain our stolen nation?

(Talents 88-89)

Jarret uses a rhetoric of ‘us and them’ and describes the ‘them’ as a group of rapists, drugs sellers and thieves that are held responsible for the misery in which the United States is. In his discourse, there is no mention of resource overexploitation or social inequalities because Jarret is a defender of the ‘business as usual’ (as explained in Chapter 2) since he wants to ‘make American great again’. Earthseeders are part of the ‘them’ he points at, helped by a Christian vocabulary since other cults are described as poisonous snakes, plagues, lovers of Satan that brought God’s anger on Earth. This rhetoric is a justification to Acorn’s attack by CA extremists, since Earthseeders constitute a threat to the existence of their group.

The same reflection concerns Acorn community, since its inhabitants take distance from Jarret’s society by living in this remote place. By doing so, those people leave the ‘established’ system to join a community that is partly out from American society³². Acorn community fears Jarret and its believers but it seems that there is no speech demonising him, since some members vote for him, convinced by his speech. Earthseeders do collaborate, but instead of facing a common enemy as Jarret does, they face an unanthropomorphic one: climate disaster. In fact, Servigne and Chapelle explain that a second mechanism that bonds the group is a hostile environment, because “joining forces seems essential since living alone

³² However, since members of Acorn continue to trade with other tiny cities, they are not completely isolated. Their implication in a local economy and their goal of growing their business question their so-called rejection of the former American society.

becomes impossible”³³ (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:204), which stands more as a necessity than a choice. Earthseeders, living in Acorn and outside of it, accept this form of spirituality because it gives them a purpose, particularly because it makes sense in their current damaged environment. Again, Earthseed’s purpose is not focused on environment preservation but rather than human’s survival and cohesion.

4. Collective rituals

The importance of rituals for Earthseeders had been already analysed in the previous chapters and sections as a time to discuss their beliefs and to communicate about the community organisation. However, Gatherings also consist of “weddings, funerals, welcoming, or holiday celebrations [...]. They’re problem-solving sessions, times of focusing, and reshaping ourselves” (*Talents* 66). In a society where holy is used to separate, discriminate and justify violence by the CA movement, those rituals try to connect individuals, firstly together, and secondly to something beyond them. As Hache asserts “religion is an answer to fundamental psychological needs since it offers symbols and rituals that allow people to face crises situations of human life” (Hache, 2016:85)³⁴.

Gatherings consisting of funeral help the group to deal with their loss, by structuring the ritual around the idea of immortality and rebirth. Immortality, in Earthseed, is different from the concept of immortality as in Christianity, where the soul lives for eternity in Heaven. For Earthseeders, immortality is found through the concept of circularity as present in nature and is reachable during their life and not exclusively once dead. In fact, nature and circularity play an important role in Earthseed beliefs since members are supposed to plant a seed of acorn or oak seedlings for every dead or lost relative. When Dan Noyer and his two sisters join the community, after being saved by Olamina and others, they plant seedlings to remember their dead parents and two lost sisters, Nina and Paula. Some members of the community quote other texts until Olamina continues by referring to Earthseed:

³³ “S’unir paraît indispensable, car il devient impossible de vivre seul” (my translation).

³⁴ “La religion répond aux besoins psychiques profonds en fournissant des symboles et des rituels qui permettent aux gens de faire face à des situations de crises de la vie humaine” (my translation).

*“We give our dead
To the orchards
And the groves.
We give our dead
To life.”*

(Talents 58)

Circularity, as developed above, stands as a comforting thought because the seedlings symbolise their loved ones and the promise of life. However, it is only during funerals that nature has such a central place in Acorn organisation, and in other verses references to nature is not that common. If the circularity of nature is quoted, it is probably because the concept of Change is at its core:

*“Death
Is a great Change —
Is life’s greatest Change.
We honor our beloved dead.
As we mix their essence with the earth,
We remember them,
And within us,
They live.”*

(Talents 58)

For Earthseeders, death does not mean the end of someone’s life since his or her ‘being’ (for instance, his or her ashes) will survive in memories and the plant by being mix to the ground. However, it does not mean that the person will reincarnate, but only that he or she remains in memories thanks to his or her actions. As explored in Chapter 2 with the dream of space exploration, immortality is also what gives purpose to Earthseed believers and is the ultimate goal of the form of spirituality. However, immortality lies already in every member by their own existence and their possibility to reconnect to where they are from, Earth.

Therefore, Acorn is described as a community that collaborates without any clear ruling state. Instead of replaying the myth of competition, the community shares values based on mutual aid thanks to their horizontal organisation. Strengthened by the necessity to collaborate to survive a common enemy, the value of partnership is a core message within Earthseed’s text and is reinforced by mutual aid as developed in Acorn. Thanks to collective rituals, such as Gatherings, the members of Acorn consolidate their bonds and their feeling of

belonging to a community. However, in order to maintain this partnership, the feeling of safety, equality and trust dominate, leading to a sort of dogmatism even if it means to exclude those who do not believe in Earthseed. Moreover, even if the concept of circularity is a way to comfort Earthseeders towards death, it also favours the desire for immortality. As Servigne and Chapelle specify: “it is important to not systematically understand mutual aid as morally good act!”³⁵ (293). Then, as for any system of thoughts, Earthseed also has some limits and flaws.

C. Earthseed’s Limits

Even if Earthseed can be a system of thoughts helping mutual aid, it also has some limits. First, the phenomenon of mutual aid has its own limitations because of its fragility and the risk of losing someone individuality for the group survival. Secondly, some elements of Earthseed can be analysed as dogmatic. Lastly, the concept of Destiny as advertised by Earthseed is rather paradoxical regarding the environmental and societal observations of the novels. At the end of *Talents*, the reader can be surprised to understand that Olamina’s solution to finite resources of her planet is space exploration.

1. Limits to mutual aid

The first limit of Earthseed can be perceived in the phenomenon of mutual aid. In fact, Servigne and Chapelle warn about the drawbacks of excessive mutual aid that can push a group to be violent, as explained above for the CA movement. They explain that the feeling of belonging to a community can cause the negation of oneself (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017:185). Individuality disappears because people embrace the community, and the priority is now the defence of the group and its members (194). The tendency to favour individuals of the same group (sharing the same ethnicity, race or language) is called “parochial altruism” (193). It is worth questioning if members of Acorn and, later, Earthseeders fall into the same trap.

Olamina favours the group dimension, and more broadly her form of spirituality, at the expense of her own individuality and family unit. When her husband Bankole pushes her to

³⁵ “Il est important de ne pas systématiquement voir l’entraide comme un acte moralement bon !” (my translation).

leave Acorn to join Halstead (a safer little town), “For [Olamina’s] sake and the baby’s as well as his own”, (*Talents* 132) Olamina refuses to leave “Acorn and Earthseed—they’re both too good to let go of” (146). In fact, she believes that “Halstead is like Robledo with a better wall” (145) and that, without her presence in Acorn, “the seed [of Earthseed] here might die” (177). Even if Halstead could have been destroyed like Robledo, Olamina seems to prioritise the group survival. Although Olamina’s close family also depends on Acorn existence, the community is destroyed by CA extremists who abduct the children, including Larkin. In fact, because of Jarret’s election and its war against cults, Acorn runs the risk to be wiped out. Once Larkin discovers her mother’s past, her resent expressed in her diary is one of the critical voices to Earthseed: “If there are sins in Earthseed, shortsightedness, lack of forethought, is the worst of them. [...] She sacrificed us for an idea” (138). Butler highlights the flaws of Earthseed through Larkin’s discourse.

In fact, once Olamina frees herself from the CA extremists, she decides to look for her daughter. After several failed attempts, Olamina decides to give up searching, thinking that Larkin may be dead or cannot be found. Instead, she concentrates on spreading Earthseed’s values. Her behaviour can be indeed regarded as a total dedication to her form of spirituality, that Larkin calls “her first ‘child’, and in some ways her only ‘child’” (294). Years later, new believers of Earthseed or children of former Acorn’s members agree to join the first spacecraft aimed to colonise other planets. If Earthseeders are now a group at a national scale, they share this ‘parochial altruism’ structured around their system of beliefs. Both Olamina and Earthseeders give up on their individuality to embrace their group and its goals, a behaviour that can be judged on the fringe of obsession.

Another limit to mutual aid is its fragility since this collaboration can be destroyed easily under the pressure of catastrophes. Servigne and Chapelle note that mutual aid disappears when people stop believing in the advantages that the group can bring (196). When Jarret is about to be elected, some members fear for the survival of Acorn community and the feeling of trust decreases. For instance, those members fear of the risk linked to the expansion of Acorn business since it can give the community more visibility. Mutual aid vanishes almost completely when the members of Acorn are enslaved by CA extremists. Over a year, their daily life is divided between manual labour and education to Christian American faith. Separated from men, some of the women from the former community start to explore lesbian relationships (Allie and Mary) until two other girls report them to the slaveholders. Since Christian American believers consider lesbianism and homosexuality as sins, Allie and Mary

are lashed electronically until one of the two dies. The girls who report them, the Faircloth sisters, are rewarded and receive their own room, apart from the other slaves. The fact that they are actually former Acorn's members shows that mutual aid vanishes once the group is destroyed, for the benefit of the group in power.

2. Is Earthseed a dogmatic belief?

Earthseed can be partly analysed as a dogmatic system of thoughts, even if my analysis regards it as a model of spirituality. In fact, in order to approach Earthseed critically, it is relevant to question the part of dogmatism in it. Dogma is: "A religious doctrine that is to be received on authority—whether of a Divine revelation, a Church Council, Holy Scripture, or a great and honoured religious teacher—and not, at least in the first instance, because it may be proved true in the light of reason" (Pike, 1951:28-29 cited by Mitchell, 1986:495). Olamina, in her diaries and discussions with others, is convinced that she delivers a "collection of truths" (*Talents* 126) through Earthseed. Regarding the importance of critical thinking in Earthseed, as analysed in Chapter 2, this system is then "proved true in the light of the reason". Moreover, Earthseed is described as a form of spirituality and not as a "religious doctrine" and, therefore, it seems that there is no justification for a dogmatic reading. However, several elements connect Earthseed to dogma.

First, its values take roots into a variety of religious concepts that "has been received on authority". This authority is actually Olamina, who stands as "honoured religious teacher", but only from the perspectives of outsiders. In fact, it is important to remember that, as readers, we follow mainly Olamina's story told from *her* perspective, while other voices, such as Marcus' and Larkin's, appear from time to time in the story. Olamina, through her discourse, denies her status within Earthseed, while Marcus and Larkin see Olamina as a manipulative spiritual leader. They have certainly bias against Earthseed, since Marcus is a believer of CA while Larkin has been raised in a Christian American family, but their voices should be taken into account critically. According to Larkin, if Earthseed "very demanding but offering so little comfort" (*Talent* 47) inspires loyalty, it is thanks to Olamina's seductive power. As discussed above, Olamina is indeed inseparable from Earthseed and participates to its popularity to purposeless individuals and, as Larkin argues, to "vulnerable needy people" (63). Since Olamina plays a crucial role in Earthseed growing importance, this form of spirituality can be partly seen as dogmatic.

Furthermore, dogma is also defined as “not just a belief, but an explicit, public declaration of a belief that has a binding force on a community of believers” (Pike, 1951:28-29 cited by Mitchell, 1986:496). As analysed above, Earthseed is indeed a “binding force” for Acorn community based on spirituality’s values. Later on, Earthseed has the same role since individuals, as Earthseeders, collaborate to launch the first spacecraft in 2090. However, Mitchell notes that “dogmas, like laws, are made to be obeyed, to serve the ends of social stability and human well-being; they are not made in order to be debated” (496). Since Earthseed’s values can be challenged by its believers, at least in Acorn community, this element weakens the part of dogmatism in Earthseed.

Still, once Earthseed is a national spirituality, it remains uncertain if this way of proceeding is still practised. Moreover, the dogmatism of Earthseed is strengthened by elements developed at the end of *Talents*. First, when Larkin finds out that Olamina is her biological mother, she tries to meet her. Nevertheless, in 2090, 45 years after Acorn’s destruction, Olamina is now at the head of Earthseed that became a leading movement. Because of Olamina’s importance, as a Shaper, she cannot be easily approached due to a certain hierarchy that has been created around her. To meet her, Larkin needs to “attend one of her Gatherings or phone her headquarters in Eureka, California, and arrange an appointment” (397). Olamina’s role towards the end of *Talents* reinforces the idea that she can be at the head of a rather dogmatic spirituality.

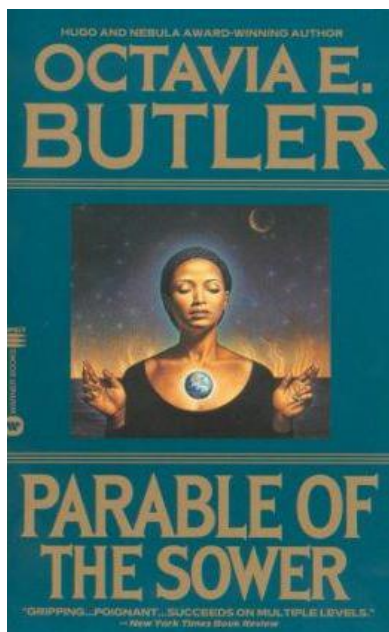


Fig.2

The cover of the 1995 edition³⁶ of the *Parable of the Sower* reinforces this analysis. The image presents Olamina in her prayer posture, eyes closed, while a little earth is floating, between her open hands. Her head is also surrounded by a halo. On the background, a fire at the horizon as well as several stars and the moon can be perceived. Those two last characteristics remind the ultimate goal of Earthseed that is seeking for immortality thanks to space exploration. Olamina’s posture shares similarities with one representation of Jesus, his right hand raised in a blessing, his head also

³⁶ Cover illustration credited by Palencar for the First Warner Books Printing, February 1995.

surrounded by a halo while, at the middle of his chest, there is the Christian cross. The little earth is clearly a representation of Earthseed and Olamina appears as the central figure of Earthseed. Such a representation for one of the first cover of the *Parable for the Sower* is rather problematic considering the part of dogmatism that can be analysed in Earthseed.

Then, Earthseed can be described as partly dogmatic, especially once it reaches a national influence. The centrality of Olamina, because of her title as Shaper, the difficulty to get in touch with her, and the representation as an illuminated figure, reinforces the idea that she ‘received’ Earthseed spirituality, even if she maintains that it is a collection of truths present to reality. Again, the possibility for Earthseed to be dogmatic increases towards the end of *Talents*. Moreover, Earthseeders’ departure for other worlds may accelerate the tendency to glorify Olamina more than the spiritual text itself.

3. The myth of infinite expansion

In Chapter 2, Earthseed has been partly analysed as a ‘green spirituality’ sharing ecological concerns. However, the desire for infinite expansion that is embodied in the spiritual text is one of the main limits to such an analysis. In fact, if the former American society is collapsing, it is partly because of its wilful ignorance towards the finite resources of its environment. Earthseed has been analysed as a form of spirituality taking into account Nature, since its God can be considered as a personification of Nature. However, instead of decreasing pressure on natural resources, Earthseed text drives individuals to explore other worlds. There is no mention to take into consideration the planet’s finite resources, but instead to find other resources thanks to the exploration of other worlds.

First, it is curious to notice how Acorn community wants to expand its business to nearby cities. While some members want to deliver their crops to a large number of cities, Olamina sees this as an opportunity to “grow a business as well as a community and movement” (*Talents* 68). At that moment, Olamina’s aim extends the idea of building other communities as Acorn, based on Earthseed spirituality, because she also wants to “open our own stores, restaurants, and hotels. I definitely want to begin Gathering Houses that are also schools in Eureka, Arcata, and some of the larger nearby towns” (*Talents* 71). According to Larkin, her biological mother is driven by this obsession, broadening Earthseed’s impact, that she considers as dangerous. In fact, Earthseed’s influence in 2090 is questionable since it finances schools and sends “promising young students to universities that helped them to

fulfill their own potential” (404), individuals who can later work to help Earthseed for its purpose of space exploration.

As discussed above, the real immortality that Earthseed advertises for is reachable through the idea of Destiny. Therefore, Earthseeders’ efforts are geared towards fulfilling the Destiny, since building a community that shares the same purpose is a key element to the spirituality’s aim. According to Olamina, human life on Earth is only a stage, the one of adolescence, while going out of space means to enter adulthood:

The Destiny is important for the lessons it forces us to learn while we’re here on Earth, for the people it encourages to become. It’s important for the unity and purpose that it gives us here on Earth. And in the future, it offers us a kind of species adulthood and species immortality when we scatter to the stars.

(*Talents* 156)

Then, if Earthseed is a form of spirituality teaching unity and purpose to its believers, it is in order to create a community of individuals that share the same goal: finding immortality for human species thanks to exploration of other worlds. This element in the book seems paradoxical regarding the African American reading of the *Parables*, since this goal shares similarities with the colonisation³⁷ of the United States. The analogy is made towards the end of *Talents* when Olamina explains that the first starship, led by Earthseeders, is named “*Christopher Columbus*” (406). Even if she objects to the name, she explains that “It’s not about snatching up slaves and gold and presenting them to some European monarch. [...]. The name is nothing” (406). Despite her argument, we can easily imagine Earthseeders reproducing mechanisms of colonisation on planets they discover, under the name of their form of spirituality. Moreover, Earthseed could also be reinterpreted once its main spiritual leader would be ‘gone’. Butler explains that, initially, her third and fourth novels were focusing on “the changes that the religion undergoes [since] The founder is dead, and these people have moved onto the next step. If you look at any religion that lasts, it changes greatly. People go off in different directions, and sometimes murder each other over different interpretations of how things are” (Butler, cited by Palwick, 1999:158). She is conscious that instrumental use of faith and contradictories interpretations, such as what does the CA

³⁷ The word ‘colonisation’ is never used in *Sower* or *Talents*. Only the name of the first spacecraft can question Earthseeder’s goal, allowing this comparison.

movement with Christian faith, can also concern Earthseed and its evolution. In that respect, her fictional spirituality is already reinterpreted by some readers³⁸.

Interestingly, it seems that Butler also approaches her fictional spirituality with a critical view. More than assuming the evolution Earthseed, she asserts herself that Olamina “didn’t have to be always right, but she had to be reasonable” (*Sower* 335) since Olamina seems to have her blind spots as well. Even if she seems to spread Earthseed’s values in order to give aim to purposeless people, her form of spirituality is also a way for her to be immortal, as she declares it when she sees the spacecraft taking off: “This is my immortality” (*Talents* 406). The idea of infinite expansion of both human species and Earthseed’s influence in the novels are contradictory to Olamina’s discourse towards her current society. Then, instead of offering a sustainable system of thoughts, she seems to replay the human’s desire for immortality.

D. Earthseed’s True Strength

To conclude, Earthseed definitely works as a tool for social cohesion. As analysed first in Acorn community, Earthseed is used as a way to gather individuals around a common aim, first to build a resilient community, and ultimately to fulfil the Destiny. This system of thoughts offers a new purpose different from the one of endless consumption, which is one of the causes of the crises described in the novels. Human’s realisation is not reachable through goods consumption, but through an ‘immortality’ that could be attainable by shifting the narrative of competition for the one of collaboration. Fear of mortality needs, therefore, to be approached as one face of Change, a stage that should be overcome to enter ‘adulthood’. This stage, as described by Earthseed’s text, is the next step of human evolution, crucial for the survival of the species.

³⁸ In fact, a community of readers created a blog (see <https://godischange.org/earthseed-community/>) where the values Earthseed are reproduced. Some articles from the blog assert that Earthseed is now a ‘real’ religion, and also inspired other movements such as the Solseed Movement and the Terasem Faith. They use that platform to exchange about Earthseed, its rituals, God is Change but also about environmental and social justice, and other themes developed in the novels. Surely, other fictions inspired real religious movements, such as Robert Heinlein’s *Strangers in a Strange Land*, which was the base of the Neo-Pagan Church of All Words founded by Zim Zell and Lance Christie in 1967. This supports the idea that narrative can play a social role for individuals and, therefore, changing narrative in literature can have a certain influence on individual’s imagination, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Then, this change in narrative is first exemplified by Acorn based on a horizontal organisation, encouraging partnership and mutual aid, feelings that are reinforced thanks to collective rituals centred on the concept of circularity and Earth. There is not ruling figure anymore since the community, without exceeding a certain number of members, is capable to manage itself. Nonetheless, Earthseed's limits question its capacity to be a 'sustainable' spirituality. Once the Earthseed reaches a national level, the horizontal organisation seems to have disappeared while the desire for space exploration prevails. Olamina, as a ruling figure, seems to have spread Earthseed in order to unify individuals who pursue her aim for space exploration.

In the absence of third and fourth novels, it is difficult to approach Earthseed as an ecological form of spirituality or as another faith aiming to convert as many people as possible. Again, with the idea of space exploration, the *Parables* fall into the trap of those leading narratives believing in the creation of ultra-powerful technologies able to save humans from their own destruction (Servigne and Chappelle, 2017:305). However, it is important to remember that Butler does not offer a 'perfect' narrative since she asserts that her main character has her own bias. In fact, Olamina may be too dogmatic and her form of spirituality may also be interpreted to serve aims that are against the values of Earthseed.

Considering those arguments, what does Earthseed offer in terms of novelty? It shows, through fiction, that a form of spirituality is a key element to change groups and social dynamics. As Servigne says in an interview (Servigne, interviewed by Le Monde, 2019:10:50-10:58), considering the lack of places where the state and its institutions are absent, people have difficulties to imagine that they can live without these structures. Even if the results of Earthseed's influence are contradictory to environment preservation, its values work as a tool for human collaboration in a shared environment.

IV. Conclusion

The use of imaginative fiction is to deepen your understanding of your world, and your fellow men, and your own feelings, and your destiny.

—Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Le Guin's quotation perfectly captures the spirit that drives this dissertation. As a science fiction author, Le Guin herself discussed the genre's strengths and weaknesses, but she was also concerned about the field of imagination. Initially, Butler's *Parables* were only some science fiction novels on my list, but they turned out to be more than another reading: they are the embodiment of my fears and hopes for change in our world. Her fictions help me to deepen my thoughts and possibilities about our world. If her novels are rediscovered today, it is because they keep resonating with the present and they can be approached with a more contemporary vision, haunted by the environmental crisis.

My analysis started with some observations within the genre of science fiction since the latter needs to move onto the imagination of desirable and believable futures. In recent years, there has been a growing interest towards post-apocalyptic and dystopian narratives and, even if they answer a need to transfer our fears of the future into fictions, authors and scholars call to a renewal of those fictions. Based on the theory of *collapsologie* conceptualised by Servigne and Stevens, I defined the subgenre as 'collapse fictions' where characters feel the need to take distance from their collapsing society to create an alternative one. Since those crises are intertwined, Butler points to the necessity to redefine humans' relationship to their environment and, more importantly, to themselves. Chapter one concluded on that observation: Butler's *Parables* seem to be a relevant example of collapse fictions and they highlight the importance of the spiritual dimension in order to foster human collaboration.

The objective of this dissertation was to analyse how Earthseed spirituality, invented by the main protagonist Olamina, serves as an organising tool in a society on the edge of collapse. Because of Earthseed's capacity to foster social cohesion in the community of

Acorn, the aim was to understand what are the concepts, ideas and behaviours that Earthseed advertises for.

Through the *Parables*, Butler offers a new spiritual model born from a society facing multiple crises: environmental, societal and spiritual. Considering Luyckx' five layers geological approach, I have re-read Butler's novels as adding layers to the sustainable debate: instead of solely taking into account the economical, environmental and societal dimensions, her work stresses the importance of the spiritual dimension. Moreover, this change of spiritual model turns to be another way to approach the environmental crisis at the basis of the society described in the *Parables*. The crux of Earthseed is situated in its new relationship towards nature that is defined by its God. By arguing that "God is Change", Olamina changes human interactions to their inner and outer world and forces individuals to accept change as an inescapable dimension.

Since Earthseed spirituality is the core element of the *Parables*, chapter two analysed its values and explored how Earthseed offers a new conception of human interiority. Considering that Change is the God of Earthseed spirituality, this concept was explored throughout this chapter. The first part focused on Earthseed's connections to Buddhism, Taoism, Black Theology and African religion, and analyses how it reuses and subverts Christian elements that are its founding principles. Secondly, because the titles of the novels refer to the Bible's parables, the use of such a form was analysed through its didactic dimension. Teaching and learning are two concepts preached by Earthseed for their ability to change individuals, and they were explored through Olamina who can be approached as a teacher-leader. The importance of the parable seems twofold since the books themselves stand as parables for the reader while Olamina is the one telling a parable to her believers, through Earthseed. Thirdly, regarding the presence of ecological and gender issues in the story, the novels were read in the light of the social ecofeminist thought. The last section also questioned if Earthseed can be considered as an ecotheology because of its ecological considerations, the importance of critical thinking within the belief and the personification of its God, that can be approached in any aspect of reality. However, the importance of ecological issues was discussed in that last section because of the contradictory dream of space exploration that drives Earthseed believers. Change is what truly leads this form of spirituality, embodied in every aspect of Earthseed, and works as a sort of empowerment to those individuals living in a collapsing world.

Even if Earthseed stands as a sort of patchwork of various religious concepts and philosophical ideas, its strength is to offer a holistic vision to the world, where God can be approached in any aspect of reality. Thanks to that vision, Earthseed's values are used to foster social cohesion, first between members of Acorn, then between Earthseeders. Mutual aid is an essential dynamic in a time of collapse and answers the necessity to acknowledge Earth as a changing reality, to which humans need to adapt. It shifts the spiritual relationship that humans have by placing the focus first on the interiority, contrary to the one advertising a spiritual connection through goods consumption that proved to be a dead-end in the case of the *Parables*' society. This study has shown that, instead of 'consuming' their outside world, Butler calls humans to find purpose by changing their relationship to themselves and their environment. The belief in the spiritual system initiates several rituals and behaviours along with the community that foster mutual aid.

The limits of the spiritual model discussed in the last chapter can be approached in two distinct ways. Earthseed works indeed as a tool for social cohesion, but its use by believers can be in conflict with Olamina's initial approach: instead of using it to help a community to organise itself differently in a time of collapse, Earthseed can serve as a tool to gather individuals to reach the same goal, such as space exploration. The Destiny (the space exploration of the second novel) can be interpreted first as a dream for ongoing progress and a desire for other worlds, held together by the idea of the immortality of both human species and Earthseed spirituality. Through that first interpretation, there is no change in the human spiritual dimension since this reading is based on the consumption of the outside world. A second reading to Earthseed's limits and dream of space exploration is possible if Butler's novels are interpreted as self-critical. In fact, Butler is conscious of the instrumental use of faith and the last part of *Talents* can be seen as criticism towards that possibility: once believers adhere to Earthseed, the latter is now subject to change through a re-reading. Therefore, Earthseed's limits can be evaluated as only a *possibility* that believers revisit it to serve other purposes. By being unclear about that possibility at the end of *Talents*, Butler can be read as rather self-critical towards Earthseed and other systems of beliefs. They can be changed, and again, change appears as an inescapable reality.

Changing human relationships towards themselves and their environment remains the key element of the *Parables*. Earthseed is the results of that change and may as well undergo

changes. Eventually, in time of collapse, this concept embodies the hope of rebirth even if change remains an unstable force that scares characters of the *Parables*. Once they approach it differently thanks to Earthseed, they recreate sense in their collapsing world through collaboration. It is thanks to an interdisciplinary study mixing literature, religious aspects, philosophies and theoretical works, themselves borrowing to different fields (sociology, philosophy, economy and history), that this dissertation has evaluated the dimension of change as a fundamental concept in the novels.

To conclude, the genre of science fiction seems to offer, once again, a magnifying glass to our reality. A way to extend that research would be to analyse other science fiction novels that are written by authors who are aware of the need for change in the genre, such as Alain Damasio. The spiritual dimension may not always be central (as for Damasio who is more into political science fiction), however, change in human's interiority may be approached by other dimensions. Moreover, this analysis can even be extended to novels that describe fictional alternative societies in a time of the societal collapse, despite their genre.

The blurring of the science fiction genre that happened around 2010 could also be questioned in parallel to this dissertation. Considering the rising importance of science fiction novels around themes such as artificial intelligence, space travel to Mars, the ecological and migratory crises, as well as the rediscovery of Afrofuturism and dystopias, Butler's novels could be seen as pioneer fictions since she adds the spiritual dimension to her novels. Authors linked to that blurring, such as N.K. Jemisin with *The Fifth Season* (2016) or the cycle *Terra Incognita* by Ada Palmer (2016) could be analysed through the ideas of change within the genre. Those authors explore themes such as gender issues, multiculturalism, and social structure. In fact, Jemisin's novel can be considered as science fantasy and offers a hierarchical society where characters have different power. Palmer, in her novel, uses a gender-neutral language and explores the new relationship that her characters have to their spiritual dimension. It seems that they hybrid the genre with societal concerns, as Butler did, opening the genre to something more than science-fictional.

Butler can be considered as initiating something new and she can be linked to that group of female writers. It seems that those fictions take a new direction along with spiritual feminist concerns, moving away from material solutions to our environmental crisis. If "The

only lasting truth is Change” (*Sower* 3), “Change is [also] long term project”³⁹ (2020:47) as Starhawk noticed. Science fiction novels continue to evolve along with societies and theories, and it is relevant to evaluate it as a great tool in the field of imagination.

³⁹ “[...] le changement est un projet sur le long-terme” (my translation).

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