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## Rebecca Wanzo

### Apocalyptic Empathy: A *Parable* of Postmodern Sentimentality

But what can any individual do? Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do, —they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race.

—Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Hyperempathy syndrome is a delusional disorder, after all. There's no telepathy, no magic, no deep spiritual awareness. There's just the neurochemically induced delusion that I feel the pain and pleasure that I see others experiencing. Pleasure is rare, pain is plentiful, and delusional or not, it hurts like hell.

—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*

Echoes of the sentimental tradition in U.S. literature can be found in Octavia Butler's work, even though the word "sentimental" is not typically associated with the science fiction genre or with this author. Sentimental texts in the U.S. uncritically treat the representation of suffering bodies as a means for accomplishing political and social change. Identification with "pain" is thus an organizing principle of citizenship in such texts; empathy and sympathy are treated as central to the concept of universal humanity. However, the power relations between those who have the power to sympathize and those who are perpetually the object of the sympathetic gaze are rarely truly threatened by treating sympathy as key to social justice. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stands as prototypical in the U.S. sentimental tradition as a novel that allegedly inspired many to the

cause of abolition and perhaps even influenced the inception of the Civil War. Her entreaty to her readers “to see to it that they feel right” and thus be “benefactor to the human race” is nevertheless undercut in a text that privileges traditional narratives of family, race, and gender (385). But the imperative to “feel right” has nevertheless been a compelling object of study for literary critics and has haunted realist, modern, and postmodern literature that has embraced alienated characters and often disdained the representation of affect without irony. The accusation of being “sentimental” is typically considered an insult to many writers who understand themselves as literary. However, the condemnation of the “sentimental” is often a simplistic way of addressing a literary tradition that though rightly critiqued for privileging comfort narratives and returning to conservative values in many romantic plots, is also concerned with liberation from oppression, self-transformation, and the relationship between feelings and politics. While Butler does not *neatly* fit into the sentimental category, her interest in these same themes links her to the tradition.

Her novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are examples of what Lauren Berlant calls “postsentimental narratives.” These texts “are lacerated by ambivalence” and “remain saturated by the ideal of a ‘one people’ that can absorb all difference and struggle into a sponge of true feeling.” These texts “struggle constantly with their own attachment to the promise of unconflictedness and intimacy with which the U.S. sentimental tradition gifts its politically exhausted and cynically extended citizens” (655). In other words, postsentimental texts reflect an investment in the utopian possibilities of feeling right, or more specifically, of feeling pain, but authors of such texts are also deeply conflicted about the perils of depending on feeling in working towards political progress. Butler’s heroine Lauren Olamina is the voice of the postsentimental in the *Parable* books: cynical and politically exhausted in an apocalyptic age, she physically embodies the political possibilities of feeling another’s pain. Olamina also embraces the idea that a sentimental text can contribute to the project of social justice even as she remains attentive to the limits of feeling and literature as the ends of activism.

In this essay I argue that *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are postmodern, sentimental fables that interrogate the relationship between feelings and politics. The books are postmodern texts because they depict people who understand themselves as existing in both an ideological and material postmodern state of affairs: a postrevolutionary period of consciousness surrounding political movements dealing with racial and sexual discrimination, colonialism, class oppression, religious fundamentalism, and ecological dangers, as well as the end of many modern innovations in tech-

nology that are dismantled in apocalyptic circumstances. These are stories about postmodern affect, about both “natural” and conditioned feeling in a world of political instability and uncertainty, when identity and identification constantly and necessarily shift. Octavia Butler works within two different literary traditions inflected by U.S. sentimentality—apocalyptic science fiction and New Age non-fiction—to critique the current political and religious world order, and to explore what postmodern affect and progressive consumption might look like as U.S. citizens work towards fulfilling the dream of political progress.

This essay is divided into two sections. The first looks at the narrative arc of the *Parable* texts as science fiction revisions of sentimentality’s privileging of the role of feelings in political progress. Lauren Olamina materially represents a liberal’s bleeding heart—empathy causes her physical pain. In the not too distant future, she is raised in a California town torn apart by environmental violence and suffers from hyperempathy syndrome, a disorder caused by her mother’s drug addiction. As a teenager she writes, “if hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint” (102), people would be unable to cause such interpersonal suffering and social destruction. “[I]f everyone could feel everyone else’s pain,” she asks, “who would torture?” (102). Olamina argues for the possibility that empathy can serve a political and moral good; as a “sharer” of other people’s emotions, she recognizes the ethical possibilities of feeling pain. But Octavia Butler’s texts present an atypical slant on sentimental logic, for while Olamina presents the premise that empathy—specifically feeling *bad*—can serve a political and social good, she never argues that her hyperempathy syndrome can ensure political *progress*. To accomplish her political goals, Olamina displaces the centrality of feelings in politics and develops a liberation theology that revolves around “change” instead of empathy or feeling.

In the second portion of this essay I look at Olamina’s theological text, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. Through Olamina’s New Age text, Butler explores the possible responses to two important intellectual questions that have been important in recent scholarship: Can consumption of popular texts produce political results, and what role does feeling play in activism and overcoming system of domination? A possible solution to the state of domination that Butler fictively renders is successful sentimental consumption, which in her texts is effective because it works in concert with a community political project. Olamina produces a sentimental, New Age text, *Earthseed*, which serves as a spiritual guidebook for politics, but is only useful in relationship to the community and grassroots political movement that forms in addition to consumption of her text. In her radical intervention in the logic of most New Age texts, Butler de-centers feelings and the

individual and focuses on community politics. While Olamina suffers from hyperempathy, it becomes necessary for her to distance herself from feeling in order to survive and get political work done. Empathy contributes to the conditions that make Olamina a political visionary, but her political manifesto never claims that mere feeling will produce liberation for anyone.

### **From Feeling Right to Hyperempathy: The Apocalyptic Sentimentality of Science Fiction**

Butler describes *Parable of the Sower* as an “if this goes on story,” because she argues that terrified gated communities, corporate enslavement of laborers, breakdown of socio-economic and legal systems, increasingly dangerous designer drugs, a fascist government run by the religious right, and environmental devastation can all happen and that versions of it are “going on” now. Like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Parable of the Sower* is a dystopia aimed at critiquing contemporary social problems, particularly in examining how destruction of the environment and religious conservatism could result in a fascist state leaving women and people of color particularly vulnerable. Like many science fiction novels, *Sower* and its sequel are about the apocalypse. Gerald Heard calls the genre “the apocalyptic literature of our particular and culminating epoch of crisis” (255). Apocalyptic literature often takes the form of dystopia, and the *Parable* books are “critical dystopias.” Raffaella Baccolini defines critical dystopias as “open-ended dystopias that maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing and reconstructing alternatives” (13). “The Pox” that Olamina endures is dystopian, but she constructs a utopian community and conceives of alternative worlds as a solution to dystopian circumstances.

Affect plays a central role in many dystopian and utopian narratives. Many science fiction authors are preoccupied with the idea of feelings, and they have speculated on the ways in which feelings might function differently in the future. These are sentimental science fiction novels—novels that focus on the impossibility of proper affect in relationship to suffering bodies and mourn the loss of feeling. Frederic Jameson argues that the “waning of affect” is one of the key features in representations in postmodern culture (10-15). Science fiction authors constantly gesture to the idea of waning or inaccessible affect and speculate that emotions will look different in the future and be harder to access. To discuss postmodern affect, Jameson uses Philip K. Dick’s work, which sets the stage for the anxieties of later science fiction writers concerned about the (im)possibility of feeling in the future. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is one of the foundational texts in this tradition of science fiction. Characters must

use “mood organs” in order to feel and are concerned that androids might be able to demonstrate affect as well as human beings. The text opens with the protagonist’s wife explaining why she sets her mood organ for despair. She senses the “absence of life,” but finds herself unable to react to it. She knows that this absence of feeling used to be pathologized and categorized as the “absence of appropriate affect” (5). The absence of affect is a sickness, and the novel mourns the erasure of feeling from future landscapes.

Dick’s classic is what I consider the sentimental science fiction novel—it focuses on the pain associated with missing affect. As texts that focus on the future or alternatives to the present, they speculate about events and emotions we have yet to experience. Sentimentality in most other texts turns on nostalgia for a mythical past and thus the possibility of a future where better feelings and a better world prevails. As Ann Douglas has argued, if sentimental texts represent a world order to which we have already capitulated (12), sentimental science fiction mourns the inevitable capitulation. It often posits the inescapable failure of feeling to create a just world. Science fiction authors have turned away from utopian to dystopian fiction, and even as they gesture to the utopian possibilities that survivors of dystopian futures offer—the texts typically return to the impossibility of social justice even as they dream of attaining it.

Octavia Butler has explicitly argued that she does not see feeling the other’s pain as the solution to creating a socially just world (Butler NPR). Using the example of contact sports, she argues that “the threat of shared pain” does not “necessarily make people behave better towards each other.” In Butler’s imaginary future, feeling can make people more attentive to the impact of pain and harm, but is no cure for all of society’s ills. In the *Parable* books, other people have hyperempathy syndrome, but it is only Lauren Olamina who has a calling to save the world through radical change. Many of the other people who are afflicted by hyperempathy actively avoid others so that they can avoid pain. Key to Butler’s discussion of hyperempathy is the fact that it is solely an imagined response—a delusional disorder. Butler marks the “delusion” as having the same impact as the real. “Delusional pain hurts just as much as pain from actual trauma,” Butler argues. “So what if it’s all in your head?” She gives credence to the idea of imagined feeling producing real effects, which is important in considering the work that sympathy or empathy can inspire.

Pain is clearly the feeling that might do the most work in Butler’s imaginary setting. Butler’s fictive renderings of an apocalyptic future provide a way of demonstrating how the body in pain can inspire a considerable response from the spectator. As sentimental authors before her have no-

ticed, Butler acknowledges that representations of pain and suffering could be an impetus for just actions. Despite her belief that hyperempathy could alleviate or eliminate violent acts such as torture, Olamina does not see her affliction as producing more enlightened human beings.

Her hyperempathy can actually incapacitate her when she flees or fights human predators. Initially, the key question as relates to the relationship between feeling and politics in the *Parable* novels may seem to be whether Olamina's hyperempathy syndrome is integral to her political prophecy or an obstacle to it. In the *Parable* books, "feeling right" is difficult after the apocalypse. There is often no time to mourn, and showing emotion or suffering makes people a target for others. Given these conditions, her post-apocalyptic novels ask, how *should* one feel after the apocalypse? How *can* one feel? If feeling motivates actions—Butler thinks feelings such as "fear, suspicion, hatred, need, and greed" particularly motivate (Butler NPR)—how does one motivate "feeling right" and political vision after the failure of revolutions?

The *Parable* texts teach the necessity of relegating feeling to the outskirts of personal choices in apocalyptic circumstances, even as Butler treats hyperempathy as integral to Lauren Olamina's development as a person. On trial throughout the texts is not only feeling in itself but "right feeling" and of its makeup. Olamina's anti-individualism, her persistence in seeing her family as a part of her commitment to the entire human race or a subsidiary of it, and the ways in which she removes a language of feeling from her political directives makes feeling a prerequisite for her politics—even as she does not see empathy as the key to curing all of society's problems. Butler's resistance to making feeling a cure-all marks this text as postsentimental, and in other ways the texts echo sentimental texts of the past with contemporary twists.

### **"If escape were possible..."**

Another way in which the texts are reminiscent of sentimental texts of the past is the concern with escape and liberation. The *Parable* books gesture towards the slave narrative, a genre attentive to the tropes of sentimentality, and which always featured an escape and an interrogation of what liberation would mean for the person of African descent in a nation that would deny blacks full equality. Most importantly, in the novels Butler also explores the idea of escape and escapism through consumption, a significant—and often critiqued—aspect of the sentimental tradition. In the *Parable* novels, escape and liberation are complicated overlapping ideas. Characters are constantly physically escaping in the texts, but the bodily escapes are often accompanied or followed by a mental escape. Escapism, as geog-

rapher Yi-Fu Tuan has noted, typically has a “negative meaning” and “suggests an inability to face facts in the real world” (5). Escapist literature, ideas, and places exist in the *Parable* books, but Butler constantly explores the political possibilities of escapism since those possibilities typically accompany physical escape. The characters hope that escape will lead to liberation—a more sustained emancipation that results in greater political power and freedom. The *Parable* books are collectively the biography of Lauren Oya Olamina, but also an account of her journey to liberation and her attempts to liberate others.

That these texts position escape as the persistently desired object is another way in which they echo nineteenth-century texts. While Butler has resisted scholars’ claims that her novels are always about slavery, the *Parable* books are nonetheless speculative neo-slave fictions that constantly repeat a cycle of imprisonment and escape, resisting the idea that any escape in this world can be permanent. The beginning of *Parable of the Sower* gives an account of Olamina’s early imprisonment in a gated community in California—a containment in which she is loved and privileged, but constantly threatened by the violent encroachment of the world outside her walls (Burke 115-122). She lives in a world where it’s “crazy to live without a wall to protect you” (PS9). Her neighborhood is a prison from which she does not want to escape, but she knows that the walls will crumble and departing may be inevitable. Olamina’s imprisonment corresponds to the ideological imprisonment she endures as she pretends to believe in Christianity. Neither walls nor a Christian God produces salvation for her community, and most of Olamina’s family and neighbors are killed by invaders who had been gradually eroding the limited security that existed in their struggling, middle-class community. The invaders break through the gate, burn the houses, rape the women and female children, and kill everyone they see. Olamina had anticipated her need for flight, and like the chattel slaves who managed to escape in the nineteenth century, she has a plan and supplies to take with her as she heads north. On her perilous trek she gathers orphans and other adults who are dispossessed, and *Sower* ends as she founds Acorn, a utopian community based on the principles of Earthseed.

This liberation is, however, incomplete. Reminiscent of nineteenth-century slave narratives that end with an incomplete liberation because escape from chattel slavery does not result in full citizenship, the story of Olamina’s liberation is haunted by continued bodily threats and limited political power for the newly-liberated. Olamina and her community’s freedom is limited by a vulnerability produced by a world order in which they are threatened by other displaced people and by a Christian fundamentalist government that sees them as deviant outsiders. After a number of rela-



tively peaceful years, Acorn is destroyed by a paramilitary branch of a politically dominant group called Christian Americans. Olamina's husband and many others are executed. Olamina's daughter Larkin is taken from her, adopted by a Christian-American family, renamed "Asha," and hidden from her "heathen" and "cult leader" mother for decades. Olamina endures a period she explicitly identifies as slavery as the survivors from Acorn are enslaved on the land that Olamina and her husband owned.

Butler's discussion of slavery throughout these texts is a critique of contemporary labor abuse which disproportionately affects poor, immigrant people of color. Slavery produced by the economic exploitation that has arisen in the wake of globalism is envisioned in these texts to be supported by Christian fundamentalism and government subsidies. During Olamina's enslavement, she is forced to work, controlled by a pain collar, repeatedly whipped, and raped. The Christian-American group does not allow reading and writing, and burns all their papers. Butler continues to create parallels between Olamina's bondage and the chattel slavery of almost two centuries before, and she depicts Olamina hiding her writing materials because her "writing is a way" for her to "remind" herself that she is "human" (*PT* 223). Enslavement works to erase identity and humanity, and at "Camp Christian"—which she calls a "university of pain"—she sometimes suffers so much she forgets her own identity. This forgetfulness is a way of escaping, but after a thunderstorm destroys the collars that control them, Olamina and her followers finally overcome their captors and physically escape the camp.

In contrast to the plethora of other narratives of black fiction such as William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* which depict long-lost relatives joyously reuniting to form the family that state violence or more localized abuse have damaged and disrupted, Olamina never finds her daughter. When her daughter as an adult finds her, the damage to their relationship is irreparable. Escape in the slave narrative is not only about achieving citizenship but about creating the possibility of family long denied. By depriving the reader of the family reconciliation romance Butler emphasizes the ways that slavery is a trauma marking both future and past relationships. It is a trauma from which complete escape is impossible. Olamina eventually takes up her Earthseed mission again and orchestrates a final escape. Her followers leave Earth to "take root among the stars," and Olamina's ashes are destined to leave the earth as her final liberation from this world.

### **"Only actions...Will save you"**

The liberatory project in the *Parable* books is defined by Olamina's

*Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, which reads as a New Age text. It contains all of the attendant commonsensical wisdom, and is marketed by the heroine as the one, true path to salvation. Octavia Butler took the New Age theology she creates in the text seriously enough to consider the *Parable* novels as New Age texts. She even tried (unsuccessfully) to convince her publishers that a New Age audience would be as interested in the *Parable* books as would a science fiction audience (Rowell 66). Butler is attentive to the New Age genre. Thus, she takes seriously her character's creation, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, as a text which would have elements that would appeal to a New Age audience, and looks at it as a movement that Olamina eventually struggles to disseminate through populist consumption. Butler revises the escape modeled by conventional New Age texts even as she is attentive to many of the tropes of the genre. New Age texts are sentimental texts that focus primarily on the primacy of the suffering "I" who can only change his own suffering and not affect the suffering of the rest of the world. In displacing the suffering "I" in New Age texts, Butler argues for the political potential of New Age literature (and thus sentimental comfort narratives) in response to crisis.

*Parable of the Sower* (1993) and its sequel (1998) were released during the multi-million sales increase in the 1990s of books roughly grouped under categories such as New Age, Mind Body Spirit, Spirituality, Occult, Self Help, and Western variations of Eastern traditions (Goode 32-34). The amorphousness of their categorization on the shelves speaks to the various traditions that are used by New Age authors: Buddhism, Christianity, popular psychology, and the spiritual traditions of indigenous cultures from Celtic to Native American. Some of the most successful New Age texts include books not only on Tarot Cards and Astrology, but on meditation, prayer, and commonsensical instructions for living.

Despite the diversity of traditions informing the genre, many New Age authors consistently focus on self-knowledge or self-transformation as the personal cure for all of society's problems. They proceed from the proposition that changing the self is the only aspect of living that is within your control. The New Age text typically instructs one how to change one's feelings about oneself. This emphasis on feeling makes the New Age text part of a sentimental tradition—all you must do is change how you feel about yourself and the world, and you will see both yourself and the world differently. A change in vision is a real change.

New Age texts respond to a post-cultural revolutionary era. After civil rights efforts, the sexual revolution, greater awareness of class inequities, and a questioning of all forms of authority, the promised better society has still not materialized. In an early New Age text published in 1970, *Notes*

to *Myself: My Struggle to Become a Person*, Hugh Prather explains that people of his generation “were trying to understand our own individual function in the larger world” and refrain from marching “in step with the old ways of the generation with which we had grown up” (3). Prather’s prose is indicative of much of New Age content. His language emphasizes the “I” and not an Other; he focuses on a sense of impermanence that is signified by his inability to make a “mark;” he is concerned with what he can do to feel better in the present; and all these observations are a result not of action but of reflection and his seeing the world differently. His clichés appear fairly innocuous. The New Age text demands cliché—the cliché signifies that which the reader already knows, but has hidden from herself because of superfluous things in the world that do not matter. It teaches the reader to find the supposed real self, live in the moment, and by changing her vision, recognize the impermanence of life. ■

*Earthseed: The Books of the Living* reads as one of the New Age books that rapidly gained popularity in the 1990s and the post-millennium. The essentials of the text and religion are that human beings can shape Change. Change is inevitable, and they must “learn to shape God with forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the Destiny” (PS 234). Many New Age authors speak to this impermanence. Prather writes that while his “notes sometimes sound like axioms,” he questions “the helpfulness of self-evident truths, even his own.” He sometimes believed he was “presenting the truth” but he knows that nothing he has written has “retained a constant value” (155).

Butler’s character Olamina also challenges the idea of truth narratives even as she cogently reaffirms the truth narrative that gives her religion power. By stating that God is Change, Olamina destabilizes everything, including perceived truths. “The only lasting truth is Change,” thus everything is impermanent and unsettled but the cornerstone of her faith, which is the idea of impermanence (PS 70). Catherine L. Albanese has argued that the classical metaphysical tradition and the contemporary New Age tradition depend upon a notion of “flow,” that the meaning of New Age spirituality “must be grasped in metaphors, descriptions, and cultural practices that, literally, go with the flow” (306). The notions of flow and impermanence play a role in *Earthseed*, as does an end-times aura that informs most New Age philosophy.

The radicalism in the novel is a response to the environmental, social, and political breakdown in the world, problems that New Agers often address. David S. Toolan describes New Agers as those who “share with many other middle-class people a sense that the American Dream has

broken down... that modern life is hollow and lacks depth” (370). New Agers “sniff death in the air.” But as opposed to conservatives who turn nostalgic and “harken back to the libertarian free market and the virtuous old days of the Protestant ethic,” New Agers are “bullish millennialists,” who, Toolan says,

welcome the death of the old as the necessary, if painful prelude to a major cultural realignment. They see themselves as bearers of a paradigm shift in medicine, psychology, science, politics, business, and education and thus as the messianic vanguard of a cultural reawakening that will lead, not just to a mending of society but to its remaking. Something big is about to be born, they claim, out of our social crisis. (371)

This clearly describes the ethos informing Butler’s vision of Olamina’s faith; as *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* states, “stability disintegrates/as it must.” Her religion is “the dawning adulthood of the human species. It offers the only true immortality. It enables the seeds of the earth to become the seeds of new life, new communities on new earths” (PS 325).

Toolan’s description of New Agers sounds quite similar to Christian fundamentalist rhetoric, but Olamina has clearly made a major break from Christianity. Heaven is out there but is also constructed by human beings, and there is a romance in the idea of many modern changes that is missing from Christian fundamentalism. Olamina’s version of the New Age sense of nostalgia for a primal state where people were more in touch with their “real” selves is a reliance on agrarian culture as not only central to survival but to spiritual development (Dubey 103-29). She consistently refers to Earthseed as being “planted” in the world. Butler, however, pits that reliance on history against the Christian American’s reliance on selective history that romanticizes a mythical Christian U.S. past in which the country was on track. Christian fundamentalists often argue for the recreation of a mythical moment in the past, but Olamina writes that such nostalgia is impractical: “Past is past/What was/Cannot come again./To survive,/Know the past./Let it touch you./Then let/The past/Go” (PT 376). Christian fundamentalists both romanticize history and see the apocalypse as a part of a path preordained by God, while Butler, writing as a New Ager, sees the apocalypse as an aspect of self-making.

The emphasis on the self—manifested in the merger between God and person and emphasis on “I” and “you”—is perhaps the most politically problematic aspect of New Age literature. In *Notes to Myself*, Prather commented that one of the pitfalls of “self-actualization” is that the “preoccupation” with “actualization” can easily lead to “egocentricity.” He there-

fore endeavored to think beyond himself. But there is no doubt that the New Age text focuses on the “I” and the “you” whom the author addresses. New Age literature is primarily about the body in pain and about inducing proper feeling to respond to that pain. In contrast to the nineteenth-century tradition of sentimental works that focus on inducing sympathy for the suffering and pain depicted, the New Age text tries to elicit self-sufficiency when confronted with suffering, and asks the reader to recast the suffering in self and world and to re-envision it as something else. The other in the New Age texts is the reader, who is an other to his real self because of his suffering. Suffering is central, primarily because the act of displacing the suffering is what propels the logic of the text. In *Excuse Me, Your Life is Waiting: The Astonishing Power of Feelings*, Lynn Grabhorn argues that people suffer because of the “myth” of the “human condition” that there are “circumstances beyond our control.” She then argues that people only need to stop “downer feelings” if they want their lives to proceed in a way they wish (4). The body in pain is explicitly both sentimental subject and object. But the suffering object is outside the text, and the New Age text is about how the suffering sentimental object gains distance from herself. It is about self-reflection—so the sufferer’s sentimental gaze falls upon his own suffering.

The penchant for cliché and the focus on suffering generic to New Age literature contributes to the absence of aesthetic sophistication. *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, a populist, popular text for ordinary people, shares many of these qualities. It is not avant garde, it is not complex. It does not encourage a multiplicity of interpretations. Yet despite the many characteristics that it has in common with contemporary New Age works, it makes a radical departure from New Age text as it distances itself from the “I.” To inspire action, Olamina self-consciously chooses to embrace generic commodification of her theology.

There are few New Age texts like *Earthseed* in our literary universe, as most of those texts are about individual therapy, and not about community transformation. Writers such as popular African-American author Iyanla Vanzant treat therapy as the end of political work, believing that once the self is taken care of the world will be too. The self-help, New Age cultural productions we are most familiar with are largely sentimental texts that focus on the suffering body in order to produce therapeutic results for the reader, and allegedly political results for the world. The suffering body in these works is simultaneously the universal sufferer and the pain-stricken reader, for whom the revelation involves acknowledging the relationship between his suffering and that of the rest of the world. Recognizing that all he can do is attend to his own suffering, he comes to recognize that improv-

ing himself and his own spiritual practice will affect the rest of the world.

Butler's fictive New Age text, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, echoes some of this logic, as Self, God, and Change are the same thing. Olamina moves beyond sentimental logic, however, as she focuses on how the world works, and on the actions that the individual can take after exploring emotion. *Earthseed* is about "community," so Butler's language emphasizes "we" and not "I." The suffering body, albeit inspiring the text, is nonetheless as outside of *Earthseed's* language as it is of other New Age literature. A member of *Earthseed* is only authentic if he acts on his beliefs, because "Belief will not save you." "Only actions," Olamina argues, "Guided and shaped/By belief and knowledge/Will save you. Belief/Initiates and guides action—/Or it does nothing" (PT 349). By arguing that only actions will save you, Olamina displaces self-reflection and self-transformation as the foundation of the New Age texts. "Purpose" is the unifying principle, not breaking away from the spiritual seeker's suffering. This radical intervention into conventional New Age work explicitly speaks to the intervention that can be made into sentimental politics.

Butler also speaks to an intellectual discomfort with consumption by explicitly arguing that only strategic commodification will result in successful dissemination of radical ideas. Olamina struggles with the means by which she can circulate *Earthseed*, until a companion finally explains to her that she must use marketing tools she slightly disparages in order to compel people to her project. Her companion, Len, argues that Olamina must "focus on what people want and tell them how your system will help them get it" (PT 359). Len tells Olamina to "preach" the way her Christian American enemy Jarret does—he begins with the proposition that he is on God's side and this positions everyone who opposes him against God. Len suggests that Olamina should "preach" with a similar certainty that would amount to her strongly asserting that her faith was the only path to salvation. Butler's heroine is uncomfortable with this approach, as she only chose religion as the format to disseminate *Earthseed* because she knew it would "take something as essentially human and as essentially irrational as religion to keep (people) focused and keep it going—for generations[,] if it takes generations" (PT 360). Butler allows her heroine to recognize that the religion framework—despite Olamina's belief in her own spiritual politics—can be a useful marketing strategy.

Olamina rejects "preaching," "telling folksy stories," emphasizing a profit motive, and self-consciously using her charismatic personae to sell *Earthseed* and dismiss other ideologies. She does not want to become a demagogue. Nonetheless, she is eventually compelled by Len's argument that her resistance to using the tools of commodification "leaves the field to

people who are demagogues—to the Jarrets of the world. And there have always been Jarrets. Probably there always will be” (PT 361). From then on, with the pragmatism of all of Butler’s heroines, Olamina uses the tools of the sentimental New Age to create change.

With this metanarrative structure provided by the New Age text within the *Parable* novels, Butler shows how a sentimental text can address real pain, appeal to both the oppressed and the privileged, and be transformed to emphasize action as well as suffering. *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* speaks to the general despair but decenters the pain of the individual to provide a speculative blueprint for the ways in which sentimental texts can be tools in political work. Butler recognizes that people are searching for “solutions” to witnessing and experiencing suffering and that cliché and populist responses are some of the most compelling answers. Amidst the cliché and populist discourses is the sentimental, with its emphasis on suffering and individual therapeutic transformation as the key to eradicating pain caused by oppression. In *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Butler ultimately presents the moral that the project of producing populist texts for mass consumption cannot be left to those with unproductive or dangerous dreams, and abandoned by those who truly desire revolution.

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