

California Dreaming: Utopian and Dystopian Calls to Action

by

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In 1993, two feminist fictions set in 21st Century California were published by California-based authors; the dystopian *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler (*Parable* from now on) and the utopian *The Fifth Sacred Thing* by Starhawk (*Fifth* from now on). In this chapter I speculate about some of the factors which may have contributed to Butler and Starhawk imagining remarkably similar futures, but viewing and representing them through distinctively different dystopian and utopian lenses. I do this in three main ways: I outline the historical and biographical contexts of the novels' production; I pay particular attention to the ways in which each novel captures the reader's attention in its opening chapters; I compare the novels' treatment of three key themes. These interlocking themes are making change, theorizing power, and the use of violence. Implicit in my comparison of the two novels is my desire that readers of one should also read the other for the additional mutual illumination. In the limited space I have, I can only outline my argument and offer some

suggestions for reading the texts in conversation with each other.

Breakdown of the United States

While the novels are set between thirty and fifty-five years in the future, the societies and situations they portray are estranged analogues of the situation in the US when they were written, albeit extrapolated to extremes. Both imagine the breakdown of democracy in the US; the collapse of institutions and infrastructures; extreme polarisation of wealth and poverty; extreme climate change, and resulting water shortages. However Butler's African-American protagonist, born in a suburb of Los Angeles loses everything and attempts to rebuild a community made up of others similarly disenfranchised who she meets on her lengthy journey to Northern California, whereas Starhawk's protagonists, based in San Francisco, have been able to create an enclave of relative security because their community acted together to expel the coalition of fascists, corporatists and militarists – “the Stewards” – that hold sway in the rest of the former US. *Fifth* opens when the threat is renewed and the community response is to develop strategies of non-violent resistance. However, they also send a representative to the Southlands

(LA) to build alliances with its inhabitants who are suffering very similar conditions to the inhabitants of *Parable's* LA.

Geographic specificity

Butler and Starhawk are both geographically specific about the setting of their stories. *Parable* opens in a small (fictional) town called Robledo on the outskirts of Los Angeles, while *The Fifth Sacred Thing* opens in the Mission District of San Francisco. *Parable's* protagonist reports that in the early 1990s Robledo was a “rich, green, unwalled little city that [her father] had been eager to abandon when he was a young man” (BUTLER 2012 (1993), 10), but they now (2024 -2027) live there in a cul-de-sac with a wall around it to protect them from robbers, rapist and drugged-up firestarters; a small (formerly) middle-class enclave of people who have clung on to some resources., supplementing their meagre incomes – few have jobs – with food grown in their gardens.

In contrast, *Fifth's* San Francisco is virtually an urban pastoral. Pavements have been dug up and replaced with planting, aerial gondolas provide transport for those not walking or cycling, and there is no street crime because

resources and labor are equally distributed. There is struggle here, but the community's focus is on the fact that no-one goes hungry or thirsty and no-one is homeless. SF's break from *The Stewards* happened in 2028, so the authors' imagined timelines for the breakdown of US democracy and the forces they imagine bearing on it are remarkably similar

It is hard for contemporary readers not to read these novels as prescient, particularly in the context of the Trump presidency's escalation of social injustice and damage to the environment, but consulting Butler's archive of cuttings on 'Disaster', 'The Environment', 'Economy' and 'Social Conditions' from the *LA Times* (at the Huntington Library) makes it clear that then US president Ronald Reagan and his administration were pursuing a remarkably similar regime of anti-social and anti-ecological legislation and repeal of legislation as the Trump presidency.

California Girls!

One might imagine that the difference in the novel's narrative textures might emerge from the different psychogeographies of Southern and Northern California, and that the author's different experiences in relation to

white privilege and white supremacy might be salient. Starhawk is the white middle-class daughter of a college professor, albeit her grandparents on both sides were Jewish immigrants, while Butler was African American and the daughter of a domestic worker. Further, in the potted autobiography that always accompanies her writings, Octavia Butler characterised herself as “a pessimist if I’m not careful” while in a recent public talk, Starhawk said, “by temperament I tend to be optimistic”. While these are no doubt vast oversimplifications of complex emotional biographies, the statements do capture something important about the way that they address their audiences. Some readers might find Butler’s unflinching and explicit descriptions of murderous violence and societal breakdown harder to take than Starhawk’s depiction of protagonists who have been schooled from their early years in conflict resolution and non-violent communication. Some might need the detailed portrayal of a community that has rebuilt centring. social, racial and environmental justice that is set out in *Fifth* to galvanise us, more than we do *Parable’s* focus on social, racial and environmental injustices and the damage these do, both in general and

particularly to the protagonist, her family and the community that she gathers.

Of course, *Fifth* does include portrayals of brutal injustice, notably in scenes set in LA, renamed City of Angels by the white supremacist oligarchy in power, while *Parable's* utopian impulse is embodied in Lauren's community-building and the religion she devises to bind them together, but the overall sensibility evoked by the novels does seem to be widely understood as utopian in the case of *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and dystopian in the case of *Parable of the Sower*. I would note however that the utopian impulse in *Parable* has clearly inspired a whole network of scholars and creatives, including, to take just one example among many, adrienne maree brown whose *Emergent Strategy* (2017) draws lessons for activists from Lauren's work on Earthseed.

Butler and Starhawk were of an age to be sisters, born in 1947 and 1951 respectively. Both lived and were educated in Southern California, although Starhawk did not move there until she was nine, and settled in San Francisco in her early twenties. Butler was brought up in a working class African American household in Pasadena, California, by her mother and grandmother following her father's

death when she was a toddler. Starhawk's father died when she was five, and she was brought up by her mother who was a professor of social work at UCLA. Both resided in religiously observant households; Butler's family were strict Baptists, and Starhawk's practiced Judaism.

Butler graduated from Pasadena City College with an Associate in Arts (AA) degree in History (a two year program) while Starhawk graduated from UCLA with a Bachelor of Arts degree (BA) in fine art (a four year program). Although Butler enrolled in California State University on completion of her AA, and studied there intermittently for the next decade, rather than completing a BA degree she repeatedly dropped out to focus on her fiction. Nonetheless, she studied African literature and African decolonial history as well as taking writing classes both there and at UCLA Extension (Canavan 38). In addition she was an avid researcher in the Los Angeles Public Library.

Starhawk began graduate studies at UCLA in screenwriting, dropping out when she won the Samuel Goldwyn Creative Writing Award to pursue a career in writing fiction. She used her prize fund to travel the US, spending time in New York attempting to get her prize-

winning novel manuscript published, before returning to California where she has lived ever since – in San Francisco since 1975 – combining writing and activism, along the way completing a Masters degree in Psychology at Antioch University West (a progressive private university based in San Francisco).

While Butler was well-known for her shyness and §avoidance of social situations, living a solitary life, once she moved out of her mother’s home, Starhawk is a well-known leader in non-violent activism and feminist spirituality, travelling extensively to teach and train and has lived in communal households since the 1970s. Although both identified as feminists, Starhawk has been an activist since her teens and has been very successful in movement building, so it is tempting to infer that her more hopeful take on collective action is underpinned by this experience, one not shared by Butler.

Historical Context

The novels were published the year after the 1992 LA Riots or LA Uprising, the terminology used depending on whether the namer accepts a dominant mass media frame or a more critical social justice frame. Widespread protest,

violence, looting and arson followed the acquittal of LAPD officers whose beating of Rodney King was caught on amateur video, and aired on CNN, decades in advance of the ubiquity of smartphones. At the time, George H W Bush was the president of the US following Ronald Reagan's two terms. After twelve years of Republican presidents, Clinton's inauguration in 1993 did little to stem the tide of neoliberalism.

In 1989, Starhawk accounted for her own increasingly active political engagement with the following analysis of the US :

Over the last decade ... the gap between rich and poor widened ... our nuclear arsenals were rebuilt ... the homeless began to die in the streets and the jobless to crowd the bread lines, ... the United States moved into covert and overt wars in Latin America, and the AIDS virus spread while legislators sat on funds for education and treatment, ... the environment deteriorated, the national debt quadrupled, and the hole in the ozone layer grew ominously. (STARHAWK 1999 (1989, 1979), 18)

At the same time as Starhawk was writing this, Butler was avidly building an archive of press cuttings, primarily from the LA Times dealing with all of these issues and making her own impassioned annotations, forecasting the harms likely to come from legislators' disdain for environmental protection. Shelley Streeby notes:

“‘They spend their tomorrows today’ is a critique Butler leveled repeatedly at neoliberals who sacrifice the future for short-term gains and economic growth in the present, prioritizing immediate profits over water, the climate and the earth.” (STREEBY, 2018: 70)

Keen observation appears prescient

In this context of over a decade of growing social, environmental and racial injustice, it is striking that Butler's novel begins thirty years on with further apocalyptic breakdown, while Starhawk sets her novel a quarter of a century further on with protagonists who can look back on twenty years of regeneration. Drawing on his research with Octavia Butler's archive of notes and research, Gerry Canavan suggests that the young

Lauren in *Parable* is a version of Butler's imagined best self. Against much resistance, Lauren attempts to engage the community in which she has been brought up in collective preparation for survival. The kind of flourishing community that Starhawk imagines for her protagonists in *Fifth* seems to be beyond her. Talking to her best friend, Joanna, Lauren says:

“We can get ready. That's what we've got to do now. Get ready for what's going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterward. Get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more than just get batted around by crazy people, desperate people, thugs, and leaders who don't know what they're doing!” (BUTLER 2012: 55)

But Joanna can only imagine continuing as they have so far - perhaps more shootings or break-ins, but not the total annihilation of their protected community that Lauren envisages. Lauren is convinced that the adults in her community are in denial about the quality and the scale of the changes they are experiencing. So she has been studying books on survival in the wilderness, on guns and

shooting, on handling medical emergencies and various skills of 'basic living'. (p.65) She also thinks that her community should prepare and hide emergency packs and set rendezvous points in case they are separated. (65-6)

When her conversation with Joanne gets back to Lauren's father he says:

“You're fifteen...You don't really understand what's going on here. The problems we have now have been building since long before you were born.” (BUTLER 2012: p.70).

Like Butler, however, Lauren does understand. She is both a keen observer of the behaviour of the people in her community and a keen student of history. Where she differs from those around her is in her capacity to project the consequences of what she learns and observes into the future rather than imagining things will carry on as they have always done.

In his introduction to the edited collection *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising* Robert Gooding-Williams critiques the aura of the extraordinary that

surrounds news events — “transient curiosities that have accidentally supervened on the circumstances of day-to-day life” — and points to the importance of “the uneventful” which such dramatic new events disappear from view: “more exactly, that complex network of conditions — social, economic, political, and ideological, that enable, influence, and shape the character of events, before they become news events” (GOODING-WILLIAMS 1993:2). The dystopian future that Butler depicts in *Parable* can be understood as being emergent from the same “uneventful” network of conditions and therefore a diagnosis of the history of the present at least as much as a thought experiment about the future.

The urban conflagrations that eventually destroy Lauren’s home in 2027 take place thirty-five years after a major social conflagration in the real world. The 1992 LA Uprising / Riots themselves evoked comparisons with the Watts Riots / Uprising that had taken place in LA almost three decades previously in 1965. In both incidents racially biased policing and the racially segregated character of LA neighbourhoods were implicated in the disturbances. The novel’s internal chronology has Lauren’s father living in LA,

twenty miles from LA, from 1991 until 2010 - “L.A. was better then — less lethal”. According to her father his return to Robledo was prompted by his parents’ murders and his inheritance of their home which had been robbed and vandalized. At that moment there was still no neighborhood wall so it appears as if there has been a significant deterioration in the social order in both LA and Robledo since Lauren’s birth. Even though murder, looting and arson are nothing new, their incidence and frequency has increased markedly, so Lauren’s focus on preparing for total disaster seems warranted. As she later remarks:

“I thought something would happen someday. I didn’t know how bad it would be or when it would come. But everything was getting worse: the climate, the economy, crime, drugs, you know. I didn’t believe we would be allowed to sit behind our walls, looking clean and fat and rich to the hungry, thirsty, homeless, jobless, filthy people outside.” (BUTLER 2012: 187)

Positive Obsession

Parable takes the form of a journal with entries dated from July 20, 2024 until October 1, 2027. However the

journal is framed with aphorisms or verses taken from *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* by Lauren Oya Olamina, a text that we infer has been completed after October 2027. *Parable's* opening aphorism is a definition of prodigy as “adaptability and persistent, positive obsession”. Lauren’s positive obsession is the religion that has been developing since she was twelve years old:

“The particular God-is-Change belief system that seems right to me will be called Earthseed ... I’ve never felt that I was making any of this up ... I’ve never felt that it was anything other than real: discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation.” (BUTLER 2012: 77)

As a fifteen-year-old, Lauren decides to collect the verses she has written into a single notebook so that:

“someday when people are able to pay more attention to what I say than to how old I am, I’ll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense.” (BUTLER 2012: 79)

One of the earliest events in *Parable* is Lauren's baptism with a group of other young people from her neighbourhood. Lauren participates even though she has rejected her father's idea of God. Just four weeks after her baptism and following the rape, robbery and suicide of one of her neighbors - who self-identified as a devout Christian - she believes that she has finally settled on her statement of belief after "twenty-five or thirty lumpy, incoherent rewrites" in the past year. The statement of belief reads as follows:

God is Power —
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
Indifferent,
And yet, God is Pliable —
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.

God exists to be shaped.

God is change. (BUTLER 2012, 25)

Lauren has a sense of mission. She believes that Earthseed is “something that I think my dying, denying, backward-looking people need”, because they’re not dealing with the inevitability of change. But she doesn't yet know how to pass it on. However she is convinced :

“in time, I'll have to do something about it. in spite of what my father will say or do to me, in spite of the poisonous rottenness outside the wall where I might be exiled, I'll have to do something about it.

That reality scares me to death.” (BUTLER 2012: 26)

Making Change

In comparison, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* opens much more positively on the day that a multicultural ritual is performed to celebrate ‘The Uprising’, the city’s successful rebellion against the Stewards who had cancelled elections and declared martial law. The ritual celebrates the one act of courage which sparked the rebellion – the dramatic disruption of vehicle traffic by four old women who tore up a main thoroughfare with pickaxes, replaced it with

compost and planted seeds. This action inspired mass civil unrest, with barricading of roads and the redistribution of stockpiled food and led to supporters of the Stewards fleeing the city while those left behind focussed on water protection and food growing.

This future is envisioned through three interrelated focal characters, all practitioners of earth-based spirituality, and each taking on significant roles in the city's response to the Stewards' invading army. Maya, an elderly woman in her late nineties, is a published author who first came to San Francisco in the Summer of Love; Bird, her grandson, is a musician and renunciate of violent resistance; and Madrone, a healer, is the daughter of two of Maya's former lovers. The novel's opening is not entirely triumphal, however. The focus on collective action and celebration is intertwined with mourning friends, neighbours and lovers lost in the rebellion and more recently to viruses that may be biological warfare. But the storytelling and call and response of the collective ritual enrol the reader into an imagined community of resistance.

Starhawk's representation of these focal characters shows them struggling with the principles of non-violence which they espouse, and yet maintaining and acting upon

them, even when their lives are threatened by outsiders who do not share these principles. Their utopian subjectivity is characterized by a recognition of their vulnerability both to harms imposed by others as well as the risk that they will act in ways that reproduce those harms.

In their practice of earth-based spirituality they recognise the Goddess as immanent not transcendent. Like Lauren, they don't believe in a deity who responds to personal prayer, and they understand the Goddess as chaotic and destructive as well as nurturing, but they also believe that they can shape change through magic - - the art of changing consciousness at will. It is striking that Lauren chose to retain the name of God, when she is so unpersuaded of the patriarchal version of God her father worships; perhaps renaming Power and Change as Goddess rather than God would make Goddess seem too much of a Superwoman and not the impersonal force that Lauren is attempting to account for.

It is interesting to compare the work of creating a new religion that Lauren is undertaking with the work that feminist theologians undertook in the final quarter of the twentieth century. In 1979, Starhawk's first book, *The Spiral*

Dance made a significant contribution to feminist spirituality and the protagonists of *Fifth* inhabit a future San Francisco in which Starhawk's expressed hope for a flourishing of many religious traditions reimagined through feminist spirituality has become their historical context. As she noted:

Religion has always been a prime source of community, and a vital function of feminist spirituality is to create new networks of involvement. Community also implies broader issues of how equitably power, wealth, and opportunities are shared among different groups, and the issues of who cares for children, the aged, the sick, and the disabled. When the divine becomes immanent in the world, these are all areas of spiritual concern. (STARHAWK 1999 (1979: 225)

The central tenet of Earthseed in *Parable* that God is Change, but that humans can shape God. is a call to activism. It requires people to be alert, prepared and ready to respond to changing conditions, but also to have a goal. Practitioners of earth-based spirituality in *Fifth*, like Maya, Madrone and Bird also believe in shaping change. They believe that action can shape emergent possibilities for the

better or worse, and they design and participate in collective rituals to commemorate that principle. The annual celebration of the Uprising is one such commemoration - the mantra 'Remember that one act can change the world' is a call to collective action that values the symbolic value of celebrating one event in an ongoing practice of making change.

Theorizing Power

Lauren's Earthseed aphorisms theorize power in two key ways. The first is the way that humans struggle for dominance over each other, which she sees as destructive and the inevitable response to any change which unsettles the status quo. The second, is a chain of association between Change, Power and God. She sees change as the greatest force or power that there is, and Earthseed is the system of belief which she hopes will enable her to enrol others in her vision of shaping change. Both Lauren and Butler herself lack trust in the capacity of humans to resist domination without some additional force – such as religion – or a visionary project – such as settling other planets – to incite human solidarity.

The protagonists of *Fifth* are well aware of the power that military machines can wield, but as the tale of the Uprising makes clear they are also well aware of the power of withholding or withdrawing consent from those who would impose power-over. In her non-fiction, Starhawk is well-known for her theorization of power, which she divides into three types: power-over; power-from-within and power-with. The power-over that the Stewards wield can be countered by a combination of the other two types of power. The radical equality practiced and experienced by the inhabitants of *Fifth's* San Francisco means that they all have access to their personal power in that they have agency that is unconstrained by inequality. They are brought up with ritual practices that enable them to draw on that power for working magic. They also have social technologies such as town meetings where they can exercise power-with by working towards consensus with each other.

Starhawk and *Fifth's* protagonists share with Butler and Lauren an analysis of power and domination as something that has been widespread over the earth for millennia, but they believe that it is not inevitable. Lily, head of the Defense Council and Maya speak eloquently of the example

that their city has set of people living with each other healing themselves and the earth. They speak of the importance of refusing to allow power-over to set the terms of what's possible.

The Uses of Violence

In the light of such different philosophies of power, the protagonists' take on violence also varies enormously between the two texts under consideration. *Fifth* starts at a point where the inhabitants of San Francisco have had twenty years to remake their world and it is evident that many of the participants in that remaking had been activists for decades prior to that. *Parable's* Lauren is in her mid-teens, while *Fifth's* Maya is in her late nineties, so their experience is markedly different in both quantity and quality; Maya has had the benefit of living at a time when the US appeared to be place of abundance and possibility at least for white Americans, while Lauren was born into a time of greatly increased environmental degradation and highly polarised access to any of the resources require for survival let along flourishing. Her neighbourhood closed ranks to protect its inhabitants from the violence of the larger city, but did not share a political vision. Bird and

Madrone – both mixed race – are closer in age to Lauren (they are older in lived years, but comparing the timelines of the novels they were born roughly a decade later) and although the text makes it clear that they have also experienced the diminishment of democracy and despoliation of their environment – as well as the loss of parents to political violence – they have been brought up in households committed to both activism and pleasure, defining abundance rather differently than does a consumer-oriented society.

In *Fifth*, both Madrone and Maya recognise their impulses to do violence, but make conscious choices not to act on these impulses. We learn that prior to his imprisonment in the Southlands Bird killed a guard at the nuclear plant that he helped to take offline, but he regrets it deeply and has renounced the use of violence. In *Parable*, Lauren’s relationship to violence is complex. Any physical harm that she does to others causes herself pain, but she is committed to survival. The first time she kills somebody she does so “in reflexive terror”, but she has prepared to defend herself by learning how to shoot and by carrying a gun. The second time that she kills, however, she follows another impulsive response with a calculated choice to cut the

throat of an assailant who she has injured but not initially killed outright. She makes the decision both to free herself from potential suffering if he regains consciousness and to ensure he poses no further threat.

Starhawk has spoken frequently about the fact that she wrote *The Fifth Sacred Thing* to explore the issue of non-violence and how a society espousing non-violence would respond to attacks from a violent aggressor. *Parable* on the other hand represents its protagonist and her allies recognising that violence is essential for self-protection and focuses on social fragmentation.

In terms of violence and the response to violence, the different ways that the novels' protagonists deploy empathy deserves attention. Lauren suffers from hyperempathy syndrome — “what the doctors call an ‘organic delusional syndrome’” and she experiences the pain or pleasure of people around her as if they were her own. That is, she doesn't feel what they feel, she feels what she imagines / believes that she would feel were she in their place. The syndrome is the outcome of a drug to enhance intellectual functioning that her mother took while she was pregnant and Lauren experiences it as largely debilitating although it does enhance sexual pleasure. Lauren's father has stressed

the importance of concealing the condition from those outside her family because it increases her vulnerability and in physical fights with other children — or when responding to her younger brother’s exploitation of her condition — her strategy has been to cause maximum damage as quickly as possible because if she feels the pain she inflicts on them, she wants it to be the end of the fight rather than continuing in an encounter where she feels both her own pain and (her perception of) their pain¹

In contrast, in *Fifth* the most sustained point-of-view exploration of empathy comes late in the novel when the Defense Council has asked Madrone to use her healing powers on Ohnine, one of the invading army who is traumatised having shot a father and three of his children who are ‘haunting’ him following Ohnine’s execution of their wife/mother before balking at shooting a five-year old. Haunting is a form of resistance in which relatives of someone murdered by the invading army dress in white and surround their killer to tell them stories about their loved one in a bid to activate the killer’s empathy and to

¹ Neuroscientists have reported on what they call vision-touch or mirror touch synesthesia since 2005, when it was presented as a new syndrome which seems to share significant similarities with Lauren’s disorder.

invite them to change sides. Madrone is initially extremely resistant to even making the attempt to heal him – finding his actions monstrous - until under probing she acknowledges that she has had to hurt somebody to save a friend’s life and that it was only luck that he didn’t die. Sitting with the soldier for hours trying to find compassion she instead she feels rage and reaches out to scorch him, but realises when she clasps his hand that they do have their fleshy existence in common. She is then able to begin the process of healing. Although in *Parable* Lauren wishes she could give her hyperempathy syndrome to others – “A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all” (BUTLER. 2012: 115) – she does not have the support of a community invested in offering hospitality and healing to its antagonists that Madrone has. Earthseed is her attempt to create such a community. Both Starhawk and Butler recognise the struggle that will be required to extend healing to the oppressed and disenfranchised, but they position their protagonists at radically different points in the journey towards social justice and collective compassion.

I hope in this brief chapter I have begun to gesture at the benefit to the reader of reading these novels in

conversation with each other to explore the interlocking issues of power, change and violence, all key to imagining and working towards a more just future. When composing these texts Butler and Starhawk were both preoccupied with exploring the historical roots of contemporary domination and imagining responses that might lead to a better future. As readers hoping for better futures, we can overlay their maps on each other, tracing where their paths intersect and diverge, taking inspiration for our own journeys.

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