

"earthseed":
reinscribing the body
in octavia butler's
parable of the sower



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In an interview conducted by Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating, Octavia Butler was prompted to discuss the importance of bodily inscription in writing, to which she replies that the body is "all we really know that we have...all we really know that we have is the flesh." (Mehaffy and Keating, 59) Butler's concern in salvaging the "flesh" through writing is a persistent theme in her novel, *Parable of the Sower*. It chronicles protagonist Lauren Olamina, as she leads a community of individuals up the Pacific Coast while writing and teaching a religion based on the acceptance of change and difference as God. Lauren authors *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, through short, philosophical passages that are dispersed throughout the novel; "I wrote, fleshing out my journal notes," (Butler, 216) narrates Laura, as her writing encompasses both the female mind and body. *Earthseed*, the fictitious religion introduced by Butler, encapsulates a discourse that is innately female; this concept of "fleshing" and the epistolary style that Butler utilizes are simultaneously compatible with Helene Cixous' manifesto for *écriture féminine*, "The Laugh of the Medusa", an exhortation to a "feminine mode" of writing. The narrative embodiments of Butler's fiction advocate a spiritual reclamation of "flesh" as a primary site and signifier of knowledge and communication, both personal, as Lauren's journals suggest, and collective, as her doctrine function to socially congregate her followers; both material and narrated. Butler acknowledges the exploitative narrative uses of what she labels, "body knowledge," which does not necessarily or literally entail renouncing the flesh, but, rather, reinventing and reassembling it within an ethics for survival. *Parable of the Sower* is in essence an analogy drawn between the cultivation of *Earthseed*, which Lauren applies fastidiously to her experience, and the grand narratives of <https://assignbuster.com/earthseed-reinscribing-the-body-in-octavia-butlers-parable-of-the-sower/>

Christianity and Capitalism, which are rigorously applied to our own. Each is a manner of giving form and significance to existence in the same way as narrative itself tends towards a similar 'fictitious' ordering of experience. Butler positions herself in this analogy through the act of 'writing' herself into the SF literary economy and giving agency to the underrated female voice in that economy. Thus, Butler alludes to a conceivable reality but at the same time contests the validity of the forms we use to give shape to it. Helene Cixous aimed at rendering literal the figures of femininity in the theory of *écriture* and exploring the consequences of that lateralization. She did not simply privilege the "female" half of an existing binary opposition between "male" and "female"; like other theorists of *écriture*, she questioned the very adequacy of logics to name the complexity of cultural realities. Her essay opens didactically, as she instructs female writers to inscribe themselves into text: Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (Cixous, 1942) The act of a woman "writing" herself is applicable in both a fictional sense and an authorial sense; while Butler utilizes her novel as a platform for female activity and empowerment, Lauren, in a metafictional sense, designates her own writing as a platform for her religious teaching. One of her doctrinal passages narrates: "We are Earthseed. We are flesh—self aware, questing, problem-solving flesh.... We are Earthlife maturing, Earthlife preparing to fall away from the parent world." (Butler, 151) Lauren entitles her creed as "

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING", which accentuates the corporality <https://assignbuster.com/earthseed-reinscribing-the-body-in-octavia-butlers-parable-of-the-sower/>

associated with the teachings of Earthseed. The passage encapsulates the “essence” of Earthseed; the pronoun, “we”, represents the communal aspect of a reinscription of the body into religious doctrine. When Butler’s passage is read in conjunction with Cixous’ proposition, similarities arise: firstly, Butler and Cixous are inherently concerned with community and collective thinking, secondly, both consider the oppressive context in which they are writing. Cixous acknowledges the patriarchal dominating force that has plagued her literary space, as she is “driven violently away from the body”; whereas, Lauren constitutes Earthseed as a deviation from the “parent world” that has ravaged her own community. The concept of *écriture* describes everything about writing that can neither be subsumed into an idea nor made to correspond exactly to empirical reality. It encompasses the “textuality” of all discourses, and Helene Cixous can be credited as responsible for discourse inherently unique to women. Cixous does not privilege the “female” half of an existing binary opposition between “male” and “female”; much like her contemporary theorists of *écriture*, she questions the adequacy of said opposition to label the complexity of cultural realities. Cixous mitigates this opposition in the following excerpt: I maintain unequivocally that there is a such thing as marked writing: that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy...(Cixous, 1945) It becomes evident that an inconsistency lies at the core of Cixous’ work: her insistence on the two incompatible logics within *écriture* feminine. Primarily, Cixous claims that *écriture* feminine is characterized by the explicitly female body parts that had been repressed by traditional discourse, and must be expressed by the <https://assignbuster.com/earthseed-reinscribing-the-body-in-octavia-butlers-parable-of-the-sower/>

woman writer. However, she also promotes the use of *écriture féminine* for both men and women. It is perhaps more appropriate to interpret Cixous' "body", as that of any transgressive or desiring individual; it is conceivably her interpretation of the body itself, that has been repressed. The "body" may not even be a physical body, but rather figurative bodies that possess power or cannot possess power. Traditionally, power, authority, and law have conjectured the male body; but, in consideration that no actual body is represented, both men and women would have access to comment on the body. By writing as if the female body could be asserted, Cixous' *écriture féminine* frees it from invisibility and, simultaneously, does not make it into a new model for the universal human being. The new opposition is not between male and female, but between a logic of the One and a logic of heterogeneity and multiplicity. Considering Cixous' contemplation of "oneness" and "multiplicity", Lauren's *Earthseed* can be analyzed through this dichotomy. In regards to community, Lauren writes the narrative of *Earthseed* as follows: "Civilization is to groups what intelligence is to individuals. It is a means of combining the intelligence of many to achieve ongoing group adaptation." (Butler, 101) *Earthseed* hinges on the necessity for collective support; communal participation, as in most doctrines, is necessary for the maintenance and survival of the discipline. Lauren, by inscribing corporeality into her dogma, enables the spiritual process to be applicable to any body. Her narrative explicates: *Earthseed*. I am *Earthseed*. Anyone can be. Someday. I think there will be a lot of us. And I think we'll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place...I've never felt that it was anything other than real: discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation. (Butler, 78) *Earthseed* is inherently

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malleable, though not vulnerable to manipulation. Lauren is resistant to the patriarchy that prevails in her community, to which she refers as "a dying place." Lauren's language is not demanding or didactic, rather, as Cixous theorizes, "Her, (women in general) language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible." (Cixous 1955) These ramifications on language resonate with Cixous, as Lauren characterizes her religious discourse as a means for "discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation." Followers of Earthseed, according to Lauren, are already implicated as both agents and objects in the spiritual hierarchy that saturates her community. Regarding the function of religion in the secular literary space, Butler, in the interview, comments on the function of Earthseed: "Lauren uses religion as a tool. So I use that tool as something that she can use to help people who follow her..." (Mehaffy and Keating, 62) Butler utilizes, to her advantage, the metafictional conventions of SF; Butler situates Lauren as a vehicle to deliver the material of Earthseed, in order to showcase her own spiritual and literary agenda. Gregory Jerome Hampton, in his publication, *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens and Vampires*, examines the significance of religious doctrine and the "body," in Butler's fiction, wherein he states: Religion is a tool intended to critique the real world in the unbounded laboratories of our imaginations...By mixing SF with religious themes, Butler's fiction encourages readers to question social values that mark marginalized bodies. (Hampton, 84) In the context of Lauren's religious writings, and by extension, Butler's contribution to SF, it is apparent that the novel *Lauren*, as both the architect and advocate for Earthseed, must rhetorically advertise her doctrine in a way that persuades her followers of thinking beyond the "parent world". The <https://assignbuster.com/earthseed-reinscribing-the-body-in-octavia-butlers-parable-of-the-sower/>

epistolary style that structures Butler's novel enables the narrative to embody both Lauren's thought processes and the doctrinal material, rendering them accessible only to the reader. It is assumed that minor characters are not given the same insight, which provokes such dialogues as the one that occurs between Lauren and Harry. Harry is skeptical of Lauren's religious fabrication, but more significantly, of her own identity: Then let me read something. Let me know something about the you that hides. I feel as though...as though you're a lie. I don't know you. Show me something of you that's real. (Butler, 195) Harry, in requesting to read Lauren's journal, assumes that Lauren's identity "hides", or is encoded in her writing. Identity, or "truth" as Harry suggests through classifying Lauren as a "lie", is revealed in the embodiment of writing; Cixous asserts this inscription of "truth" when she argues "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display." (Cixous, 1946) Butler herself, in the interview, affirms the correlation between inscription, body, and perceivable identity: One's body can only be known through language or some other medium of representation. The body, is a thing, in other words, which only language and narrative can bring to life and make known to ourselves or to others. (Mehaffy and Keating, 59) Essentially, literary composition alleviates the display of "strangeness, or uncanniness" that outsiders, such as Harry, perceive. Lauren's physical body and presence cannot be properly or accurately comprehended as "real", and sequentially, identity remains obscured; narrative embodies that which is "real", and for Lauren, it is quintessential in preserving and advancing Earthseed. The "libidinal economy" that Cixous positions in opposition to female writing refers to the <https://assignbuster.com/earthseed-reinscribing-the-body-in-octavia-butlers-parable-of-the-sower/>

system of exchanges having to do with sexual desire, which it is predominantly characterized as inherently masculine, to the extent that it is active, not passive; consequently, only one desire can function at a time. This type of economy can be applied to various social systems, such as the literary economy in which Butler is writing, or the clerical economy that pervades Lauren's gated community in Los Angeles. Cixous elucidates the privileging of masculinity in such economies: Sexual opposition, which has always worked for man's profit to the point of reducing writing, too, to his laws, is only a historico-cultural limit. There is, there will be more and more rapidly pervasive now, a fiction that produces irreducible effects of femininity. (Cixous, 1949) Lauren operates under similar circumstances before departing north, as her community, particularly females, experience oppression under Richard Moss' religious movement: Richard Moss has put together his own religion—a combination of the Old Testament and historical West African practices. He claims that God wants men to be patriarchs, rulers and protectors of women, and fathers of as many children as possible. (Butler, 36) Moss possesses authority in the "libidinal economy" precisely because he is a male; his religion is dependent on the "dying", "parent world" concepts that Lauren innately opposes, and subsists in the "historico-cultural limit" of West African practices. Likewise, Lauren opposes conventional presidency that permeates her depleting society; she complains that, "Donner's just a kind of human bannister...like a symbol of the past for us to hold onto as we're pushed into the future. He's nothing. No substance." (Butler, 56) Male influence and agency, though unethical and socially unproductive, take precedence in the political systems that structure the novel. Lauren's opposition is provoked in two ways; firstly, her religious

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discovery is futuristic, flexible and progressive, and secondly, because the masculine corporeality is absent. The male body does not require representation in a patriarchal space because it is innately superior, whereas, the female body relies on narrative embodiment for representation and tangible recognition. Earthseed, initially, features a "genderless" God; rather, a God that symbolizes change, discovery and self-reflexivity. Lauren claims "Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures." (Butler, 219) Whether conscious or not, she disregards the gender construction that frequently accompanies religious figures and focuses on an applicable version of God that any follower can relate to. In conversing with fellow travellers, Zahra and Natividad, Lauren is disconcerted with the question regarding a "gendered" God: Zahra and Natividad got into an argument about whether I was talking about a male god or a female god. When I pointed out that Change had no sex at all and wasn't a person, they were confused, but not dismissive. (Butler, 220) Lauren regards "Change" as sexless because it is dependent on a "body", whether female or male, to flourish. Change is motivated by a concept Butler introduces as "body-knowledge"; the supposition that social and political relations can potentially undergo a de-hierarchization, or re-hierarchization based on genetics. Butler accounts for this conception in her interview: What's made of genetics—body knowledge—is what's important. What's made of biology is what the people who are in power are going to figure out why this is a good reason for them to stay in power. (Mehaffy and Keating, 58) Butler theorizes on "body-knowledge" because it encapsulates the current status of social and political structures, both in the SF literary economy and the economy of the novel, and this realization enables female

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writers to speech. Butler also contends with “ the science that makes sociological connections”; she questions: “ Consider the fact that women are better with verbal skills: why isn’t the popular perception, then, that they would make better diplomats?”(Mehaffy and Keating, 58) The contention arises because “ body-knowledge” is essentially a paradox; it oppresses the inferior gender, or population, while the realization of the oppression enables them to recognize their bodies and experience movement through the hierarchy. Hampton, in reference to the religious content of the novel, also comments on the necessity for corporeality: What’s made of genetics—body knowledge—is what’s important. What’s made of biology is what the people who are in power are going to figure out why this is a good reason for them to stay in power.(Mehaffy and Keating, 58)Lauren’s interpretation of God, possessing no shape and every shape, no gender and every gender, is not the rigid and strictly dogmatic God that authorizes other religions. God, for Lauren, is like “ body-knowledge” for Butler; both give manner and form to an ordering of experience, particularly repressive experience. In the dystopian situation, every “ body” is oppressed and seeks an instrument or tool for fermenting identity and agency; Earthseed and SF are the narratives by which Lauren and Butler render a legitimate “ voice” in their corresponding “ libidinal economies”. The narrative embodiments of Butler’s fiction sanction a spiritual reclamation of “ flesh” as a fundamental site and signifier of knowledge and communication, both personal, as Lauren’s epistolary style suggests, and collective, as her doctrine function to socially congregate her followers; both material and narrated. Butler acknowledges the exploitative narrative uses of what she labels, “ body knowledge,” which does not necessarily or literally entail renouncing the flesh, but, rather,

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reinventing and reassembling it within an ethics for survival. Earthseed, the fictional, theological verse that Lauren Olamina commits to writing over the course of Butler's novel, is an appropriate candidate for the ideas that Cixous introduces in her essay. The theory is compatible with Earthseed in terms of intention and text content; Lauren is a woman who "fleshes" her emotions into her journal and into passages of Earthseed, producing a document that is innately "feminine" and engages in inherently female ideologies. Parable of the Sower is in essence, an analogy drawn between the cultivation of Earthseed, which Lauren applies fastidiously to her experience, and the grand narratives of Christianity and Capitalism, which are rigorously applied to our own. Each is a manner of giving form and significance to existence in the same way as narrative itself tends towards a similar 'fictitious' ordering of experience. Butler positions herself in this analogy through the act of 'writing' herself into the literary economy and giving agency to the underrated female voice in that economy. Thus, Butler alludes to a conceivable reality but at the same time contests the validity of the forms we use to give shape to it.

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