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The Ever-Present Dystopia, the Non-Present Utopia, and the Thirdspace: The Role of Contrasting Coteries in 20th-Century Dystopian Literature and Parable of the Sower

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Introduction

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* is a standout work of dystopian science fiction that features commentaries on governmental failings, race and gender discrimination, and class divides that are all highlighted by an apocalyptic and oppressive crumbling society. Butler uses a dystopic setting, characteristics, and tropes to embellish her world and social commentaries including the use of the dystopic and thirdspace coteries structure: two personal communities within which the central character interacts that hold very specific roles and characteristics across most works of dystopian literature. This structure allows dystopian literature to establish their distinctive world and tone as well as the specific relationship between these coteries and the central character of the novel, all of which is central to the real-world societal commentary generated by these texts. However, in *Parable of the Sower,* Butler both establishes and breaks from this traditional dystopian structure to create a work that counters conventional dystopian themes.

In this paper, I will first go over the traditional two coterie structure of dystopian works by detailing the reoccurring characteristics of the dystopian coterie and thirdspace coterie as well as how they typically operate within 20th-century dystopian fiction, particularly regarding their relationship to each other and the central character. I will then discuss the operation of this structure within *Parable of the Sower* by examining how the novel follows the established structure in the first half of the novel, disrupts the coterie form in the central turning point of the novel, and then restructures and redefines the coterie roles in the second half of the novel. Finally, I will discuss how this restructuring generates themes, messages, and societal critiques that are both in conversation with and counter those of traditional dystopian literature.

The Three Coterie Structure

One of the most notable qualities of dystopian literature is the unnerving oppressive and often totalitarian social and political structures that are featured and critiqued throughout the story. These societies make works within this sub-genre impactful because a reflection and critique of our own society and culture lies beyond the exaggerated situation. Although varying in their messages, societies within dystopian works possess many recurring qualities that helps to enhance their impact and societal critique; one of these qualities is the feature of not just the oppressive totalitarian regime, but rather two different societies in direct conflict and contrast with each other. One of these communities is directly connected to the dystopian society that is being critiqued throughout the course of the novel and the other is a society that promises a break from the dystopian space. Across dystopian literature, these two societies consistently are represented by certain traits related to their relationship to each other and to the central character of the novel.

The dystopian coterie is generally the most prominently featured coterie within 20th-century literature. It is also the space that is most often discussed by readers due to the way this space reflects and critiques our own society, or, as Kerry Mallan says, "dystopian fiction's dark origins in the real-world anxieties, trauma and suffering" (16). This coterie inhabits the many reoccurring themes of dystopias that readers and scholars love to discuss. One of these themes is described by Mallan as a "a harsh world where there is little help or resistance" (20). Alastair Whyte discusses two themes of dystopias, beginning with a "utopian ideal, mirroring the colossal failures of totalitarian collectivism" as well as a "reflection of colonial imperialism" (84, 85). Finally, Paul Moffett states, "To count as dystopia, it must be an expression of fear" (50). All of these are prominent themes in dystopian literature, appearing repeatedly in the form of the dystopian coterie which shares many features, especially in terms of the coterie's relationship to

the central character, across most works of dystopian fiction. At the start of most dystopian novels, this is the home of the central character. They are an active member of the dystopic community: learning from leaders of the coterie, building close relationships with other members, and working in a role that perpetuates the success and continuation of the oppressive socio-political norm. In some of the stories the central character begins already feeling dissatisfaction or hatred for the coterie and society at large – if they do not start with these feelings, they spend the novel developing them as they are disillusioned to the oppression of the regime. It is this disillusionment that leads them to beginning a relationship with the opposite coterie.

In one of the most well-known works of dystopian literature, George Orwell's *1984*, the dystopic coterie is represented through the members of the party living in London, specifically those who work for the Ministry of Truth. This is just a small subsection of the larger society of Oceana. However, our observation is limited to just this space since it is the home of our central character, Winston. Although, it is made extremely clear throughout the novel that Winston has extreme hatred for the party; one of his first actions in the novel is to write "DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER" repeatedly in his journal, a prominent display of his distaste for the dystopic society (18). He is also a participating member of the coterie. He is shown to attend community events and has relationships with multiple people within the party such as Syme and Parsons, his comrades in the Ministry of Truth. Yet, most notably, Winston works in the office of truth where he rewrites history, a job that actively perpetuates the goals and ambitions of the party, and a job that he relishes: "Winston's greatest pleasure in life was in his work" (43). He is also shown to talk to and learn from the inner party member, O'Brian; this mentor-mentee relationship is what ultimately leads to him giving himself over fully to the party: "Each new suggestion of O'Brian's

had filled up a patch of emptiness and become absolute truth" (258). *1984* is a standout work of dystopian literature and one of the strongest examples of dystopian coterie structure, yet it is far from being the only texts that utilizes this convention.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* provides another landmark example of the dystopic coterie in the form of the household. This is both the home and workplace of our central character Offred. Offred, as a handmaid, has an important albeit oppressive role within the household's function, one that she has spent years training to fulfill and is very knowledgeable in the larger society's expectations for women in her role; she is told by Aunt Lydia, "Yours is a position of honor" (13). When not actively taking up her position, Offred interacts with other members of the household and goes into the nearby town to meet other handmaids. She will also meet with the commander, the leader of the household, who meets with her to play Scrabble and gives her magazines saying, "Who else could I show it to?" (158). She also repeatedly remembers her mentor-mentee relationship with Aunt Lydia, letting the memory of her teachings dictate how she behaves: "It is not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they are feeling…. Try to feel for them" (46). As she moves about the dystopic space, she is always careful to never speak against her coterie – the commander and handmaids– her community – the household – or the society at large – Gilead, stating, "I can't take the risk" (19). Early on during her walks with Ofglen, Offred notes, "During these walks she has never said anything that was not strictly orthodox, but then, neither have I" (19). Yet, despite her connections and role within the coterie, Offred is very critical of society as a whole. This is most often represented through her memories of how life was before the rise of Gilead. She recalls the moment the state shifted and she lost power in the society, and she reflects, "Unworthy, unjust, untrue. But that is what happened" (182). The household is one

of many in the society, but Atwood's focus on just this singular community and Offred's place within this space provides the reader with a specific and personal representation of the oppressive socio-political norms seen throughout the society. Although the dystopic coterie is the main focal point of most dystopia literature, including the examples above, the dystopian coterie is never the only space present in these works. There is always a coterie and society that is present to accompany and encourage the central character dissatisfaction and hatred of this dystopia – a place that offers a potential escape from the totalitarian and oppressive status quo.

In opposition to the dystopian coterie is the utopic space. The term "utopia" was originally coined by Thomas More in 1516 when writing his novella *Utopia*. The term, as explained by the British Library, is derived from "the Greek ou-topos meaning 'no place' or 'nowhere'. It was a pun - the almost identical Greek word eu-topos means 'a good place'. So, at the very heart of the word is a vital question: can a perfect world ever be realized" (British Library). Within More's novella, Utopia was the name of the specific place/society being described in the story. However, the term now has a more general definition. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary a utopia is "an imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, esp. in respect of social structure, laws, and politics" (Oxford English Dictionary). In dystopian literature, the utopia is the place the central character aims to join. It is an ideal coterie that stands in opposition to the dystopic coterie. Jalondra A. Davis argues that "utopias construct temporal, spatial, or metaphysical alternatives that can defamiliarize and potentially disrupt the violence of the 'real world'" (8). However, as More's original translation of "no place" suggests, a true utopia does not exist within the works of dystopian novels. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred reminisces about the society before Gilead and hears of the organization Mayday, but during the novel she does not find a space that is fully

separated from the oppression of her coterie or society. In *1984*, Winston looks for ways to contact the underground rebel ground, the brotherhood, but his attempts only lead to him being pushed farther into the oppression of the dystopic coterie. The utopia does not exist; there is no place of perfect opposition to the dystopic coterie within these works. Still, the attempt to reach that opposition does exist and it is given a space and characteristics. Although not a true utopia, within dystopian literature there is always a coterie that counters the dystopia. This is what is known as the thidspace.

A thirdspace is, as Neil Campbell describes it, a "blurred, contested zone" which defies the binary of "myth and reality, true and false, utopia and dystopia" (60). The thirdspace is often used when describing societies and cultures that do not strictly fit into the category of utopia or dystopia, or spaces whose presence in reality is questionable, existing between binaries: "a thirdspace; neither within nor without; it was an experience of being between the two, a between formed only in the simultaneous presence of the two" (Campbell 69). When brought into dystopian literature coterie structure, the thirdspace often appears as a place that contrasts the dystopian coterie. It aims to achieve the goals of "[defamiliarizing] and potentially [disrupting] the violence of the 'real world'" that Davis described. However, this space cannot be fully defined as a utopia (8). It is instead a space in the process of transitioning from dystopia to utopia. Yet, dystopian novels also embody the thirdspace quality of not being able to be clearly defined as either real or unreal; or as Michel Foucault explains, "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space" (4). Similar to the dystopian coterie, there are certain features and trajectories related to the thirdspace coterie's position in the novel that remains consistent across dystopian literature. The thirdspace is an organization that the central character is either invited into or creates during the novel. The coterie generally has utopic visions for their future, yet they

are still very early in the process of achieving that vision. However, these goals will often be in complete contrast or even involving destroying the dystopian space, since the thirdspace is created as a consequence of the dystopic regime. Because of this relationship, the first mention of the thirdspace will usually be through leaders of the dystopian space denouncing and lambasting the thirdspace as warning to members of the dystopic coterie. Although many of the dystopian spaces' warnings about the thirdspace are false, this coterie will often turn out to be a false sense of hope because either the organization is too small to make a difference, or is revealed to have similar or worse oppressive and totalitarian qualities than the dystopian space, or the existence of the coteries is left questionable or confirmed to be nonexistent by the end of the novel.

Repeatedly throughout *1984* there are references to the brotherhood. This is an organization created presumably with the goal of destroying the party. Although the organization is discussed quite frequently by members of the party, particularly during hate week when the condemn and denounce the organization, there are always questions regarding whether or not is truly real Winston is invited to join the organization by O'Brian, giving him a hope that the party can be taken down. O'Brian toasts, "To the confusion of the thought police? To the death of Big Brother? To humanity? To the future?" (176). However, by the end of the novel, O'Brian is revealed to be a loyal member of the inner party there to discover Winston's disloyalty and retrain him: "It was O'Brian who was directing everything…. He was the tormentor, he was the protector, he was the inquisitor, he was the friend" (234-244). Furthermore, the truth of whether an organization like the brotherhood actually exists or has ever existed is left questionable. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the thirdspace is the rebel organization Mayday, a group that is supposedly determined to dismantle the society of Gilead. However, from Offred's perspective,

the organization is only discussed in vague terms by three people, bringing into question whether the organization is large enough to make a difference or if it even exists at all. Even at the end, as Offred is supposedly being rescued by Mayday, she reflects that the whole organization could just be a plot by the government to discover disloyal members. The reader never discovers the truth, leaving Mayday forever in a state of both real and unreal. Both of these spaces offer a movement toward a utopic society, yet they are unable to provide the central character or the reader with a true utopia; the trajectory of these organizations, if they are actually real, is heading away from the dystopia but are held back by size and lack of definition to make any difference. So, both organizations are left in state of not being dystopia, yet not quite utopia as well as hovering between the lines of real and unreal: a thirdspace.

When discussing dystopian literature, focus is often placed on societies: large-scale, broad-reaching communities that encompass more than the central character could comprehend. This discussion lends itself well to the tone of entrapment and hopelessness that are often the predominant tone in the novel. However, I have chosen to refer to each of these spaces as coteries. Despite the implied larger spatial and societal context for these novels, we always observe the society through perspective an individual character and their experiences within small subsections, coteries, of the conflicting societies. We do not observe the country of Oceania; we are looking at Winston's life as a party member living in London and the relationships he builds there. This smaller perspective draws attention to the character's personal relationships within the coterie. As I mentioned in the discussion of the dystopian space, the central character is a member of each of these coteries; Winston is a worker in the Ministry of Truth and Offred is the handmaid in the commander's household. They have a personal connection to the space and the people within the coterie, both lower members, such as Parsons

and Nick and leaders such as O'Brian and the Commander. These relationships make the character attached to both the dystopian and the thirdspace, which enhances the complexity and nuance of the readers relationships to the space. These relationships remind the reader that these spaces, particularly the dystopian space, are not just abstract concepts of societies, but are filled with people who still believe in and support the societal ideals, many of whom the central character and by extension the reader has grown attached to. The personal connection makes it harder to completely abandon or destroy the coterie because those acts can endanger the characters that are left behind in the dystopian space. Additionally, the central character can develop relationships with leaders of coteries that can influence and manipulate the central character's views and opinions in favor of the coterie. These relationships are very important to the complexity, presentation, and influence of both the dystopian space and the thirdspace, and it is also this personal variable that allows these works to more closely reflect the complexities surrounding critiquing our own society and culture.

Operation of Two Coterie Structure in First Half of Parable of the Sower

In the first half of *Parable of the Sower* the traditional dystopian setup establishes the gated neighborhood as a conventional dystopian coterie. As a small subsection of the apocalyptic state, this neighborhood is surrounded by violence, extreme class divides, and intellectual oppression all justified by the need to survive. The neighborhood is an enclosed coterie, physically barred from the rest of the world by a wall and locked gate, specifically meant to keep out members of the economically devastated and violence ridden city, Robledo. This barrier is essential to the survival of the neighborhood, a fact which is emphasized within the coterie as we are told very early on in the book: "Crazy to live without a wall to protect you. Even in Robledo,

most of the street poor – squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general – are dangerous" (10). The class separation is labeled as a necessity for survival since the poor are "dangerous." The coterie takes extra measures to promote the class divide including posting armed guards at night to shoot any outsiders that manage to break in. This precaution is justified within the book by the ever-present violence against the community that result in injuries and deaths, most shockingly the death of three-year-old Amy Dunn. All members of the community, including older children, are trained how to use firearms so that when they are older they will be able to carry guns with them whenever leaving the neighborhood or when on watch. Lauren notes, "All kids who attend school at our house get gun handling instruction. Once they've passed that and turned fifteen, two or three of the neighborhood adults begin taking them to the hills for target practice" (39). Learning to use guns is a deeply ingrained tradition in the coterie and even seen as a "rite of passage" by the younger generation (39). The coterie's practices with firearms are a perpetuation of the violence within the society at large and, since much of the violence described is between the gated community and the poor/homeless of Robeldo, a perpetuation of the strict class divides common within the society. Another traditional characteristic of the dystopian coterie that the gated neighborhood embodies is its relationship to the central character, specifically that this is the home of Lauren Olamina.

As the daughter of the leader and priest of the neighborhood as well as the stepdaughter of the schoolteacher, Lauren holds a central position within the coterie. Her familial ties render a close attachment to the neighborhood and her position as an occasional substitute teacher places her in a position of respect. She has grown up with everyone in the coterie; she cares about them and wants them to survive and thrive. However, even from the beginning of the novel she is beginning about to have doubts about the coterie's system of life and sustainability, observing,

"In L.A. some walled communities bigger and stronger than this one just aren't there anymore. Nothing left but ruins, rats, and squatters. What happened to them can happen to us" (55-56). Her doubts are repressed by the coterie. When she encourages her friend to think of alternative survival methods for the coterie – she notes, "Nothing is going to save us. If we don't save ourselves, we're dead. Now use your imagination" (59) – her thoughts are dismissed by the community as a girl "talking about running away because she's afraid" (62). Her own father tells her, "I know you think you're right, but you're not doing anyone any good. You're just panicking people" (63). A classic move within dystopian literature, the dystopic coterie is utilizing their personal connection with Lauren to repress and combat her dissatisfaction with the status quo. Lauren takes in this advice and even allows herself, despite her own opinions, to perpetuate the status quo through a sermon she performs in place of her father: "We have God and we have each other. We have our island community, fragile, and yet a fortress….We persist. This is our place, no matter what" (135). Lauren is determined to alter the flaws of the coterie, yet the expectation and guidance of her personal connections keep her from speaking against the status quo and instead leads her to spread the same belief and practices that she is attempting to reject.

However, this is not the only form of oppression Laruen experiences in terms of how she breaks from the norm of the dystopic state. Because of Lauren's rare mental disability hyperempathy, she has been trained to lie and hide aspects of herself so that others cannot take advantage of her. She is told that she is vulnerable because of her differences and as a result attempts to hide behind a facade a normalcy. She is guided to blend in with what is deemed normal by the coterie in order to survive. In reference to this blending she says, "Sometimes people say I look grim or angry. Better to have them think that than know…just how easy it is to

hurt me" (13). Additionally, as a woman she faces pressure to follow the path that is "what the neighborhood expects of [her] – of anyone [her] age. Grow up a little more, get married, have babies" (87). Multiple people will ask her if she plans on marrying her love interest Curtis Talcott, and this is a continual reminder of how she is supposed to follow the status quo. In order to survive within the society, Lauren is advised or pressured to defy or hide aspects of herself and her desires in order to fit with the status quo. Finally, the Christian upbringing of the town repress Lauren's own religious practices. From the very beginning of the novel, we see that Lauren has lost her faith in the Christian God that is worshipped in the coterie: "At least three years ago," she explains, "my father's God stopped being my God. His Church stopped being my church. And yet, because I'm a coward, I let myself be initiated into that church" (7). In response to her feelings, she begins to develop her own religion called Earthseed, which becomes increasingly more important to her as the book goes on. However, she keeps her religion a secret for fear of how the coterie and its leader, her father, will react. So, instead she stays silent and actively participates in the religious practices that are accepted by the community. Whether it is because of her disability, because she is a woman, or because of her religious beliefs, Lauren is continually restricted from her position in the coterie and forced to fall in line with the status quo.

Lauren is aware and frustrated by the way she is restricted by the norms of the gated community and, although she does participate in the status quo that she dislikes, she does make plans and preparations to leave eventually. However, she always places the timeline to follow through with the plan firmly in the future. She gives excuses such as "Cory and my brothers are going to need help….When my father was here, I planned to go next year when I'm eighteen. Now…I don't know" (141). As with many dystopian coteries, the central character is held back

from exiting the coterie because of their personal connections and relationship to the coterie. In Laurens case, her loyalty and love for her family keep her from leaving. She lets questions of her responsibility to her family interrupt her plans to leave: "What are my responsibilities? What will happen to my brothers if I leave them to Cory? They're her sons, and she'll move the earth to take care of them, keep them fed and clothed and housed. But can she do it alone" (140). Her loyalty to her family leads her to participate and perpetuate the status quo of the coterie.

Despite the seemingly static state of the gated neighborhood, there are other coteries presented to Lauren: the thirdspaces. She does not visit these locations in the first half of the novel, but their presence and potential break from the status quo of the dystopic coterie is present and discussed repeatedly by Lauren and other characters. However, unlike most dystopian literature, there are actually two different thirdspaces within which Lauren has connections. The first of which is the city of Olivar. This community is presented as a break from the unsustainable life of the gated community that appeared after "a company called Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company – KSF – [took] over the running of a small costal city called Olivar" (118). There is a general invitation sent out to any member of the larger dystopic society to apply to join the thirdspace coterie: "At the end of the program it was announced that KSF was looking for registered nurses, credentialed teachers, and a few other skilled professionals who would be willing to move to Olivar and work for room and board" (120). Since both her father and stepmother are teachers with PhDs, this invitation is open to Lauren's family. Yet, Lauren is also is presented with a personal connection to Olivar in the form of the Garfield family, including her former best friend Joanne Garfield, who apply to move to the city and are accepted. Through having another member of the community move, the prospect that Lauren or her family could end up joining Olivar, and thus joining the thirdspace, appear more feasible.

There are advantages to joining Olivar that can make the coterie appear quite utopic. A trade off of "smaller salaries than their socio-economic group is used to in exchange for security, a guaranteed food supply, [and] jobs" (119). Its promise is a utopic order that could eventually take over the dystopian society. Yet, there are several distressing rumors and speculations about the city that suggest that Olivar's social order being even more oppressive and dystopic than the current society. People in the gated community say that Olivar is using an "old company-town trick – get people into debt, hang on to them, and work them harder;" they also say that the "guards KSF is bringing in" will be free to bother the "new, bare-bones, work-for-room-and-board employees" and leave the rich alone, creating violent divides across class lines (121,122). It is important to keep in mind that critique of Olivar is primarily coming from members of gated neighborhood, such as Harry Balter who "thinks Olivar's a trap" and Lauren's father who describes the town as "half antebellum revival and half science fiction. I don't trust it" (127, 122). As the established dystopic coterie, the members of the gate neighborhood are likely to distrust and denounce a thirdspace since it threatens their status quo. Lauren neither visits Olivar nor hears any reports from her connections in the city because "it costs extra to call Olivar" (139), so the truth of what life is like in the city remains undefined. It fulfills the classic position of the thirdspace as both reality and fiction, dystopian and utopian simultaneously.

The other option outside of the gated-community is to join the unconfined wasteland outside the gates. Heavily criticized by the dystopic coterie, this space is defined as violent, oppressive, and a place where it is impossible to survive. However, afterwards her brother Keith leaves the neighborhood. After living outside for over half a year, Keith tells Lauren about his life outside and how he is able to survive, specifically how he was able to trade supplies for his ability to read and write: "They're all older than me, but not one of them can read or write

anything. They stole all of this great stuff and they couldn't even use it" (105). Lauren is given a personal connection within this space who provides her with information on how to survive and how she can utilize her skills with reading and writing, making living outside appear as a more viable option. The outside world is far less defined than other spaces and coteries within the novel; nevertheless, it is this undefinable nature that brings in its utopic quality. Unlike either Olivar or the neighborhood, the outside world offers the idea of freedom through lowered expectations, loss of traditional structures and, perhaps most relevant to Lauren, freedom of religion. The land outside the neighborhood is a place where she can develop and spread her own ideologies, unconfined by the Christian push of the dystopic coterie. But this space is also known to be extremely dangerous. It is violent, especially for women. Lauren observes, "A woman, young and naked and filthy stumbled past us....She was dazed or drunk or something. Maybe she had been raped so much she went crazy. I'd heard stories of that happening" (9). Unlike Olivar, which rests in theoretical utopia/dystopia balance, the outside world is well defined as being both a dystopia due to its danger and utopia due to its sense of freedom. This represents a difficult tradeoff of safety for a small degree of freedom – a trade-off that the dystopic coterie warns against. Lauren notes, "[my father] wanted to scare us…. He wanted us to understand just how dangerous the outside is" (113). Both thirdspaces offer a break from the dystopic coterie, but it is uncertain which would be the preferable option due to the clearly known detriments and benefits of each space as well as the potentially exaggerated and false information spread by the gated community. Without a clear direction, Lauren is left indecisive during the first half of the novel, opting by default to remain with her family in the gated community.

The first half of the book offers clearly defined and traditional dystopic coterie and thirdspace coterie relationships. As with many dystopian novels, Butler makes it clear that there

are no good choices: the dystopian space is oppressive and unsustainable, but the alternative thirdspaces have just as many cons as pros. So, Lauren is left in a static space, lingering within the dystopic coterie without any better options. However, after establishing this traditional dystopian structure, several events occur that disbalance the system. The coterie begins to fall apart; as Lauren observes, "We are coming apart. The community, the families, individual family members….We're a rope, breaking, a single strand at a time" (116). Keith is killed, which breaks one of Lauren's connection to a thirdspace. Lauren's father disappears which destabilizes the entire coterie without their leader. The neighborhood as a whole is burned down which marks the loss of the dystopic coterie entirely. Lauren says, "When I escaped from the neighborhood, it was burning. The houses, the trees, the people: Burning" (154). Since the dystopian coterie is generally the most defined and stable space within dystopian novel, the destruction of the gated neighborhood completely disrupts the established structure of *Parable of the Sower*. With the traditional dystopian trajectory thrown out of order, Butler is open to both restructure the position of dystopian and thirdspace coteries as well as redefine the significance these spaces hold within her novel.

Reshaped Structures in the Second Half of *Parable of the Sower*

In the second half of *Parable of the Sower*, the geographical confines of the dystopic coterie disappear. Instead, the coterie embodies concepts and behavioral patterns that appear repeatedly as the characters move through the world. The image is commonly centralized by the image of burning communities and drug addiction. Repeatedly throughout the rest of the novel the image of the burning appears. When Lauren, Zahra, and Harry first start traveling Lauren observes, "There's a big fire to the east of us….We kept looking at it, then looking away. Other

people dying, losing their families, their homes" (196). As they walk north and gained more followers Lauren notices "one house down the road smoked from several of its windows. Already people from the highway had begun to drift down toward it" (227). The image follows them even when they reach their final destination: "There was no house. There were no buildings. There was almost nothing….A tombstone amid the bones and ash" (314). This image constantly haunts Lauren and her companions, reminding the characters and readers of the initial demonstration of this dystopia: the destruction of the gated community. This dystopic space is ever present, moving with Lauren, yet it is far less defined or featured in comparison to other dystopic coteries in dystopian literature. The novel provides the reader with anchoring points for this vast dystopian space as each side-character that joins Lauren recounts their experiences in their own personal dystopic coteries. Emery Tanaka Solis, Tori Solis, Greyson Mora, and Doe Mora tell of their experiences in a slave labor farm where they were "obligated to work off debt either as quasi-indentured people or convicts" and that takes advantage of mental disabilities, which Emery explains to Lauren, "Sometimes they pay more for people who have it. Especially kids" (288, 305). Travis and Natividad Douglas, a mixed couple with a six-month-old son, discuss how as servants the master of the house harassed Natividad as "he would try to watch when she fed the baby. Couldn't let her alone" (219). Allison and Jillian Gilchrist tell of how they are "running away from a life of prostitution. Their pimp was their father" (237). Each character has a personal experience that builds up the oppression and violence of the larger dystopic world. Yet, they are distanced from these experiences, both physically and because of the way the dystopian society at large is overshadowed in the novel by the growing thirdspace coterie of Earthseed. The traditional structure is still present but subverted in this half of the novel to draw attention away from the dystopian space and place importance on the thirdspace.

Contrary to normal dystopian patterns, the thirdspace is very well defined and visualized in the second of half of the novel as the Earthseed community/religion. From the destruction of the gated neighborhood through the end of the novel, the reader's focus is directed toward observing the development of this new coterie. This allows the reader to observe a progression, the early development of the thirdspace, that is not often observed in dystopian literature. This focus is made more prominent by the central character being the founder and leader of the coterie. Since it does not hold the same undefinable quality of traditional thirdspace coteries, the uncertainty of the coterie is instead determined by large long-term goals in contrast with what the coterie is actually able to achieve: a community that will "contribute to the fulfillment of the Destiny" which is described as "a real heaven, not mythology or philosophy. A heaven that will be theirs to shape" or in other words "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars" (261, 85). The thirdspace offers promises and dreams of dismantling the status quo of the larger dystopic society and creating a new, utopic world; however, the coterie is just in its beginnings. Earthseed embodies the thirdspace quality of being both real and unreal through the uncertainty of its long-term success. Its utopic visions are challenged by its members continuously debating each other on principles of the community and forming religion; Lauren notes that Zahra, one of her earliest converts, "asked questions or pointed out when she saw inconsistencies" (223). Nevertheless, it is this challenging that allows the ideals of the community to become stronger. Lauren even begins to imagine how the questions of future members of the community will help Earthseed grow. She reflects on this by proclaiming, "The questions little children ask drive you insane because they never stop. But they make you think. For now, though, I had to deal with Travis's questions" (221). With each challenge and answer the ideals of the community become more defined and are more positioned in the context of reality: "Earthseed is being born right

here on Highway 101" (223). As a result, the definition of the community begins to drift farther from the contrasting and undefinable position of thirdspace and closer to forming an actual utopian coterie. However, whether it will actually be able to become a true utopia is left unclear since by the end of the novel the Earthseed's future and chance of success is left uncertain. Lauren states, "We can build a community here… This is a ridiculous place to build a community. It's isolated, miles from everywhere with no decent road leading here, but for us, for now, it's perfect" (319). But at the end, Earthseed members still say, "I don't think we have a hope in hell of succeeding here" (328). This is a reference to both the land they have found and the world and society in which they live.

Flipping the Norm

In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler begins by setting up a conventional structure with a dystopic coterie focal point, the gated neighborhood, and an accompanying but less present thirdspace, Olivar and the outside. Butler restructures which spaces represent the various coteries as well as how these coteries operate in the novel by placing the most attention and importance on the thirdspace, the Earthseed community. Through establishing and then breaking the structural norm enough so that the *Parable of the Sower* is still recognizable as a dystopian novel yet also obviously different from convention dystopias, Butler places her work in conversation and contrast with other dystopian literature. The structure of her story, as well as its other dystopian elements, allow *Parable of the Sower* to be clearly recognized as a dystopian text. However, through the restructuring she alters what is most highly valued in the novel in opposition to other dystopian novels. Orwell's *1984* through constant surveillance and propaganda as well as the Ministry of Love's ability to change Winston's opinion so that "he

loved Big Brother" (298) places unyielding importance on the dystopian coterie as well as emphasizes themes of hopelessness and entrapment within the book. Similarly, in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* the uncertainty of Mayday's existence and the power of Gilead leaves Offred no other choice than giving herself "over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped" evokes similar dystopian centric themes (295). Yet, Butler counters these traditional dystopian ideas by diminishing the importance of the dystopian coterie in favor of the thirdspace coterie. As we watch the Earthseed community develop in number of members as well establishing its ideologies and future plans the thirdspace coterie becomes concrete, especially in comparison to the dystopian coterie, which becomes merely the image of burning and past memories without a defined space or following. Allowing the thirdspace to thoroughly overshadow the dystopian coterie is a deliberate break from the traditional coterie structure where the dystopian coterie is the most represented and defined space. This rearranging of importance and focus also allows Butler to replace the typical dystopian theme of hopelessness with the possibility for change.

One of the fundamental proclamations of Earthseed is

> All that you touch
> You Change.
>
> All that you Change
> Changes you.
>
> The only Lasting truth
> Is Change.
>
> God
> Is Change. (3)

The creation and building of Earthseed is fundamentally based in messages about forging your own future and changing the problems with the world through people's actions, which directly counters themes of entrapment and uncertainty of the world ever changing that dominates

dystopian literature. This switch in perspective is made possible by the focus and importance that is placed on the thirdspace coterie, Earthseed. However, by keeping the dystopic coterie and tropes a significant countering force throughout the novel, Butler acknowledges the power of the dystopian trap. The dystopic space is ever-present and consuming, taking over even the Earthseed's hope for a peaceful home at the end of the road by leading to the husk of Bankole's, one of the members of Earthseed, burned down home. The power of the dystopic coterie allows Butler to underline that the change promised by Earthseed will be difficult and requires initiative, and the world will not help them along the way. Although placed in context of a post-apocalyptic dystopian world, the messages that Butler establishes through this restructuring can be applied to our own world and society.

Dystopian novels are always a reflection on our own socio-political reality, and the coterie structures are a way of creating these commentaries. With a focus on a dystopic coterie and an uncertain thirdspace, most dystopian novels highlight seemingly unmanageable issues of corruption, oppression, and violence within our own society, culture, and politics. They also warn against putting too much faith in uncertain sources of hope for breaking the status quo, since they could either not be able to accomplish anything or end up being worse than the system set in place. However, Butler works within the traditional dystopian forms and shifts it just enough so that it remains recognizable to create her own societal commentary in direct conversation with other works of dystopian fiction. She encourages us to see and critique the problems with our own society, as many dystopian novels also encourage the reader to do, but then takes it a step further to push an answer for the critique. She suggests that with enough initiative and work we may be able to make a difference in the world. The change will be difficult; whether it is even possible will always be uncertain, and the larger society will always

be working against us. Any hope for the future must be created in our own hands. By the end of *Parable of the Sower*, Butler takes us through the successes of Earthseed, leaving the reader in a place of uncertainty of whether the future is utopic or dystopic. She leaves the novel in a thirdspace with no clear answers or path forward for the characters or the reader. We are left with the same question as the members of the Earthseed community: Do we let the problems with our socio-political state continue or do we take the harder and more uncertain route and try to change the status quo?

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