

AFRICAN-AMERICAN UTOPIAN LITERATURE: A TRADITION
LARGELY LOST AND FORGOTTEN, YET PERTINENT IN THE PURSUIT
OF REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to contribute to recent scholarship by demonstrating that an African-American utopian tradition persists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly in the works of African-American women writers. If liberation remains a fundamental theme in African-American literature – a definitive stance espoused by W. E. B. Du Bois and a host of other prominent African-American scholars, but also upheld by this dissertation – then such a consistently recurring goal has only been marginally completed, at best, in the United States. Despite proclamations of a universally attainable American Dream, African Americans remain disenfranchised by prison, education, and court systems as well as other integral institutions found within the United States.

With this dilemma in mind and given the potentially subversive power of literature, this dissertation argues that the African-American utopian tradition in particular functions as a useful critical lens through which one can examine the often-elusive goal of revolutionary change. This lens raises the pertinent questions that one must answer in order to strive towards one's utopia, and also exposes the systemic and thus conventional parameters latent in the too-familiar antithetical dystopias about which so many African-American narratives admonish their audiences to confront or, if they are lucky enough, avoid altogether. By focusing on a thematic continuum represented by the utopian small towns found in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), this dissertation

encapsulates a utopian tradition that inscribes race, gender, and sexuality, onto the African-American literary tradition.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my beloved parents, Bayo and Shade; my dear sister, Bola; and my precious wife, Tolu. You all continue to inspire me to reach heights that I otherwise could not even imagine. Thank you truly for all the kinds of support you have given me throughout my life.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

What exactly is “utopia”? More importantly and for the purposes of this dissertation, what, if any, relevance may this concept have regarding African-American literature? This dissertation addresses this question by analyzing five novels of well-known African-American women writers who envision potential utopian communities. This analysis demonstrates how these works interact with utopian tropes in order to undertake a postmodern quest of challenging the metanarratives that lie at the root of discord within African-American communities.

For this reason, this dissertation centers on the works of the following African-American women authors: in particular, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988), Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997). What is most strikingly evident about the utopian nature of these novels is that each of them features towns predominantly or completely inhabited by African Americans, representing the inter- and intra-conflict that plague many African Americans and their communities. Although previous works of African-American literature, such as Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), have portrayed urban landscapes inhabited by African-Americans, the isolation and thus narrative focus afforded to more rural or suburban African-American communities and the feminist insights provided by women authors distinguishes the novels above as particularly rich. The interaction of the characters reflects the idea that the African-American women slave narratives progresses through a self that is both female and communal, as proposed by Valerie Smith in *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (1987), a book in which she in part explores

how African-American men's slave narratives tend to center on the individual man whereas those of African-American women reflect a self that is both female and communal. This dissertation extends this feminist reflection to Hurston, Naylor, Morrison, and Butler, proposing that this aspect of communality is most appropriate as a central theme in utopian literature, as the concept of utopia is predicated on the desire for a "perfect" community.

In conclusion, I argue that each of my four listed authors' body of work takes on the innovative task of politicizing a uniquely American, yet hitherto largely uncritical utopian tradition by inscribing the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality onto this tradition. Focusing on recent scholarship, this dissertation thus seeks to acknowledge an underrepresented innovation and, more important to my thesis, draws insights on how such works function as subversive literature, challenging conventional modes of thought that may prove especially inimical to African Americans.

What then of the very question, "what exactly is a "utopia"? The first definition given for *utopia* (lowercase *u*) in the *Oxford English Dictionary* designates the term as an "imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, esp. in respect of social structure, laws, and politics" ("Utopia," def. 2.a). Although generally accurate, this standard definition is misleading and detrimental because the emphasis on perfection may lead one to dismiss the idea of utopia altogether as an intangible fantasy far removed from reality and firmly ensconced in the imaginations of the naïve. This simplification, as well as utopia's historical connection to science fiction in popular culture, may very well be an impetus for a general dismissal of utopia as a serious topic of study in academia, perhaps especially in literary studies.

Nevertheless, the last third of the twentieth century ushered in a perspective shift, especially with the arrival of Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1986). In this seminal book, Moylan makes the argument that since the 1950s and 1960s, American utopian literature has surpassed a mere interpretation of "utopia" as a perfect place to imagine and has instead introduced a more nuanced emphasis in the advent of the "critical utopia":

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the ordinary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. (10-11)

This exploration of "social change" and "more recognizable and dynamic alternatives" makes such utopian literature all the more suitable for African-American authors to explore an intricate and valuable criticism of American culture. Moylan's placement of the critical utopia's conception during the American counterculture movement is relevant for the purposes of this study's focus on the plight of African Americans because, as preeminent utopian studies scholar Lyman Tower Sargent correctly surmises, the critical utopia is intrinsically intertwined with "equality for minorities and women, the growth of feminism...and the civil rights and antiwar movements" (245); the cover of the Peter Lang AP edition of Moylan's book itself best encapsulates this point with its depiction of the (in)famous photograph of African-American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos giving Black Power salutes during the playing of the U.S. national anthem after they had won medals in the 1968 Olympics. The subsequent, scathing hostility towards their protest further revealed a United States that was persistently antagonistic to African

Americans and, more so, ignorant of their particular struggles, a world that was more dystopian than it was utopian. Even after many decades later, this same dystopian world, however, remains quite familiar today: For instance, American football player Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the playing of the national anthem in protest against police brutality echoes Smith and Carlos' physical act of dissent and subsequent backlash that included death threats (Thomas 30).

This kind of pervasive injustice persists whether in the distant past or in present times, in a sense condensing time itself by belying a sense of the great progress promised and delivered by the Civil Rights Movement and exposing instead what remains a debilitating present-day stagnation. Such stagnation is more than enough evident material for African-American writers of fiction to construct and explore their own critical dystopia, the complementary inverse of critical utopia. Within African-American literature's storied legacy, Frederick Douglass, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Martin Luther King Jr., and Samuel Delany are just a handful of African-American writers who, in what I define as the essential undertaking of the critical utopian tradition within African-American literature, have imagined worlds that have illuminated imperfections, rather than perfections, worlds that can lead one to insightful explorations of ways to address the often hidden roots of such imperfections in order to better effect revolutionary rather than merely reformatory change.

Upon first glance, a connection between African-American literature and the proverbial ideal place or condition that utopia represents might seem rather dubious, given the lack of explicit association between these two subjects as well as the former's popular, yet largely exclusive association with science fiction. Even more recently

published examinations of utopian literature, including Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), conspicuously omit the presence of African-American authors. However, other recent works of scholarship, such as Alex Zamalin's innovative *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea From Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (2019), have introduced the cultural and critical significance of African-American utopian literature to a wider audience (another goal of this dissertation) and have explored a long-established utopian tradition, one which has existed within African-American literature, predating even Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (roughly translated as "Empire within an Empire"), an unfortunately long-forgotten 1899 utopian novel that centers on the formation of a state within the United States that is entirely governed by African Americans.

This dissertation attempts to contribute to such scholarship by arguing that an African-American utopian tradition persists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and also maintains tremendous pertinence. If liberation (whether physical, social, political, economic, psychological, etc.) remains a fundamental theme in African-American literature – a definitive stance espoused by W. E. B. Du Bois and a host of other prominent African-American scholars, but also upheld by this dissertation – then such a consistently recurring goal has only been marginally completed, at best, in the United States. African Americans' attainment of liberty remains stubbornly unfulfilled in a nation that, despite being the "land of the free," continues to witness African Americans disenfranchised by prison, education, and court systems as well as other integral institutions found in American culture.

Therefore, these culturally entrapping systems and their underlying metanarratives, which are taken for granted as natural and thus legitimate despite their illusionary nature, warrant utmost criticism if one seeks liberation because such systems are self-perpetuating and lie at the root of disenfranchisement; any other misdirected criticism only, at best, results in a re-inscription of the same hegemonic system. With this dilemma in mind and given the potentially subversive power of literature, the thesis of this dissertation argues that the African-American utopian tradition in particular functions as a useful critical lens through which one can examine the often-elusive goal of revolutionary change. This lens raises the pertinent questions that one must answer in order to strive towards one's utopia, but also exposes the systemic and thus conventional parameters latent in the too-familiar antithetical dystopias that so many African-American narratives admonish their audiences to confront or, if they are lucky enough, avoid altogether.

In specifically focusing on African-American women fiction writers, this project seeks to fill a general dearth regarding the critical discourse of African-American utopian literature. Recent work from the most prominent African-American academic journals, such as *The African-American Review*, *Callaloo*, *Black Renaissance Noire*, *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, have published a wealth of feminist scholarship that has addressed various pressing issues from state-sanctioned violence and the biopolitics of race to reproductive justice and "misogynoir," a germane portmanteau coined by Moya Bailey to condemn misogynistic attitudes against African-American women in American culture; these issues constitute the very building blocks that construct the reality of an American dystopia that my chosen works of African-American utopian literature critique.

Scholarship on each of the main novels of study is astute and relatively plentiful; however, perhaps due to Butler's extensive work in science fiction and to the suggestive title of Morrison's *Paradise*, only Butler's novels and Morrison's novel have been recently and thoroughly analyzed as works that address utopian, as well as dystopian, themes. A myriad of other subjects such as history, spiritualism, and community have instead dominated a largely paradigmatic scholarship on Hurston's and Naylor's novels investigated here, but also the largely orthodox scholarship of Butler's and Morrison's novels as well. Nevertheless, these subjects also figure as utopian and dystopian elements that the novels employ in their thematic criticism of American culture.

Furthermore, I characterize these novels as ones that are the progeny of works of early African-American women writers such as Francis E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) and Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* (1902). Similar to these two novels, Hurston's novel is innovative in its genre-transcending way of illuminating the plight of African-American women. Published within a ten-year time period in which postmodern literature continued to flourish, the other four novels follow Hurston's lead. For these reasons, I distinguish my five listed novels as ones that produce a postmodern ethos in the sense that each attacks long-standing conventions in American culture that prove harmful to African Americans. Therefore, this dissertation aims not only to contribute to what should be an obvious dialogue that is instead painfully overlooked, yet nevertheless worthwhile, and to incorporate other primary and critical works in order to highlight a tradition of African-American utopian literature in a time when such scholarship is more needed than ever.

Although recent scholarship on African-American utopian literature is burgeoning, especially with the advent of Afrofuturism, glaring gaps and missed potential for more innovative critique exist within the current literature. With this shortcoming in mind, this dissertation aims to highlight and guide discussion of African-American utopian literature to one centered on bringing attention to explorations of communal efficiency and empowerment for African Americans. Although obvious and powerful representations of this discourse, the five novels of investigation have never been discussed together; neither have they been discussed within an African-American utopian tradition in order to expose how harmful traditional ways of thinking about race, sex, gender, religion, and nation can prove harmful to African-American communities despite at the same time professing utopian sentiments of perfection. Possessing the invaluable power to examine convention, this contribution to current scholarship has the potential to effect practical change in the social, political, and economic systems within the United States for African Americans and other disenfranchised peoples alike.

Lastly, what follows is a brief description of the intended chapters. The focus of Chapter 1: "Myths and Metanarratives" is on the complementary relationship that African-American utopian literature has with postmodernism. Chapter 2: "Metamorphic Margins" contextualizes the theoretical framework in the previous chapter by applying ideas regarding marginalization to utopian literature as a way to complicate and thus resist metanarratives or, more broadly, conventional, yet perilous thoughts and actions. Chapter 3: "Religion" primarily investigates *Mama Day* and the *Parable* series to demonstrate the ways one can subvert traditional religion to achieve personal and communal liberation. Chapter 4: "Home" highlights *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and

Paradise in order to explore the idea of tangible and intangible utopian communities for African Americans. Continuing the examination of *Paradise*, but also the *Parable* series as focal texts, Chapter 5: “Nation” extends the last chapter by shifting from an analysis of utopianism in African-American literature within a local context to that of a national one.

CHAPTER 2: MYTHS AND METANARRATIVES

The focus of this chapter is on the complementary relationship that African-American utopian literature has with postmodernism. More specifically, if one considers Jean-François Lyotard's characterization of postmodernism as an attack on metanarratives in his highly influential *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), then this relationship begins to unfold more clearly. Moreover, the fact that the emergence of the critical utopia coincides with the beginning of a time when postmodern literature would begin to flourish is not accidental; both events characterize a shift towards a more nuanced, if not disillusioned, perspective on hegemonic thought, often in relation to marginalized groups. Thus, an examination of the function of utopian features in relevant African-American literature is significant for two main reasons. Such an exploration reveals a closer, historical connection to a postmodern ethos, and in doing so, also illuminates African-American utopian literature that is as unique as it is unfamiliar to a tradition of American social criticism, which is relatively broader and more familiar.

Arising fully formed in the middle of the twentieth century, postmodern literature in the United States emerged from a crisis of existential inadequacy. The social, political, and economic turmoil of, especially, the 1960s in particular evidenced the failure of the government, the unfulfillment of the American Dream, and an inability of various disadvantaged groups to ground their identity, if not existence, within a milieu that was anything but ideal. These times made it clear that the present tools at disposal were in fact inadequate and that new modes of thinking were needed to achieve a modicum of

progress. For this reason, literature closed the gap between art and politics; in other words, literature reflected the complexities of postmodernity by actively engaging with and challenging the norms of the times, of which writers exposed as badly in need of revision.

Following the critical tradition of the realism and naturalism of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, as well as the political works from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, postmodern literature ushered in a prolific apex of some of the most self-conscious and varied challenges to a present orthodoxy. Regarding African-American literature, despite the failures of the explosively productive Harlem Renaissance, one maxim that persisted and flourished in the postmodern era was Du Bois's famous declaration in "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926):

[A]ll Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy.
(3)

Du Bois rightfully recognizes the futility, if not blasphemy, of attempting to divorce art from politics. Two decades later, proto-postmodern critic Bertolt Brecht would likewise argue in "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1948) that all art must be political, attacking the existing elitist order. If anything, without art, politics invites tyrannical oppression. For instance, the iconoclastic Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley's declaration that "[p]oets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators" (2) is a testament to the longstanding tradition of the binary juxtaposition of art and politics, with the former functioning as a check and balance to the latter.

Frederic Jameson is perhaps the most distinguished postmodern theorist who first extensively addressed literary utopianism in his writings. In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Jameson acts as a sort of a historian who peruses popular works of American speculative fiction, arguing that the ideal of utopia is worth pursuing not because of some naïve notion of blind hope but because utopian thinking's ability to produce radically new ways of perceiving aspects of life that can usher one into a more desirable future. In this way, the utopianism present in these works of science fiction function as historical documents of revolutionary thought that can inform those in the present to better their future.

Far from a modern concept, utopia, which for the purposes of this study also inherently comprises the complementary dystopia, is undoubtedly ancient. This fact is true in a figurative sense, but also in a literal sense, given Plato's formulation of an ideal state in the fourth century BCE philosophical treatise *The Republic*. Despite both its ancient and much more recent applications, utopia gained significant literary recognition with the advent of Thomas More's 1516 satirical book *Utopia*, a seminal text that uses a fictionalized utopian setting to expose More's native England as an inhospitable and rather barbaric dystopian environment. Given its popular name in the title of this text several centuries ago, utopia has survived continuously in the United States in various cultural forms, including the aptly named but short-lived 2020 television series *Utopia*, itself an American adaptation of an original British television series of the same name. This British-American connection is fitting, as it was the Englishman John Winthrop who once declared to his fellow Puritans that the Massachusetts Bay Colony would serve as an

ideal “city on a hill,” one of several phrases that presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan would later use to promote American exceptionalism.

This so-called “American exceptionalism” lies at the root of this critical study. Defined as the idea that the United States has excised the oligarchic authoritarianism that had characterized its mother continent Europe and has instead evolved itself into a paradise ultimately and uniquely centered on “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (US 1776) for its citizens, American exceptionalism remains in many ways an unchallenged given. What is the cost of this complacency? Despite the majestic rhetoric of these words of the *Declaration of Independence*, the establishment and perpetuation of the enslavement of African-Americans and related subsequent struggles, post-emancipation belie such rhetoric as empty. More importantly, however, this longstanding rhetoric is as myth-building as it is empty, and the very idea of American exceptionalism functions as a utopian metanarrative that helps undergird systemic injustice by, for instance, establishing historically predominant cultural norms as absolute truths if not as federal law.

Much in line with the postmodern task of deconstructing metanarratives, several works of African-American literature have devoted substantial energy in providing incisive criticism of this kind of American exceptionalism. Although many African-American critics, such as Cornel West and Houston A. Baker, Jr., have approached postmodernism with reasonable suspicion due to its apparent exclusionary nature, several of them have nonetheless proposed it as a potentially viable way of challenging a status quo that demands acquiescence. For instance, in her wary defense of postmodernism in “Postmodern Blackness,” bell hooks alludes to a universal human characteristic that,

despite being ubiquitous, has special relevance to those disadvantaged and outnumbered peoples who do not tend to thrive under a given hegemony:

“Yearning” is the word that best describes a common psychological state shared by many of us, cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice. Specifically in relation to the postmodernist deconstruction of “master” narratives, the yearning that wells in the hearts and minds of those whom such narratives have silenced is the longing for critical voice.

I argue that this yearning can reflect a utopian desire that functions as social criticism. As a prevalent characteristic of human nature, this yearning reveals more about a people’s hopes and fears than one might surmise.

What makes this utopian desire pertinent to this dissertation is that, despite its general universality, it characterizes a distinctive kind shared by African Americans and molded by their origin within the United States. Preserving the idea that all Americans are equal while rejecting the often-paired effacing and evasive idea that the experiences of all Americans are essentially the same (e.g., that African Americans simply should aspire to be only Americans), this dissertation studiously presents African-American utopian (and, as always, its complement, dystopian) literature as insightful evidence that the African-American plight in the United States is just as unique as it is old. Whether faced with the threat of slavery during the founding of the United States or the threat of police brutality in the 21st century, African Americans have gained exclusive, first-hand account of how a homeland can betray a select populace. The differences between the utopian literature produced by White Americans and African Americans remain a testament to the reality of this distinct first-hand account. For example, race is marginalized, if not widely absent, in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), one of the most renowned works of American dystopian literature. In fact, Bradbury resists such inclusion, arguing instead for the autonomy of the author amidst the threat of censorship;

for instance, in a 1996 interview with *Playboy*, he provided a clear response to African-American readers who wanted him to include more African-American characters in his works:

“[B]ug off!” To hell with anybody who wants to tell me what to write. Their society breaks down into subsections of minorities who then, in effect, burn books by banning them. All this political correctness that’s rampant on campuses is b.s. (367)

Perhaps this trend is a Western phenomenon, as this same kind of racial absence is also found in perhaps two of the most renowned works of British dystopian literature, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Nevertheless, if one were to know little-to-nothing of the history of the United States, then after reading *Fahrenheit 451*, one might better understand the looming threat of American authoritarianism, but what of American oppression of marginalized groups such as African Americans? As is the custom, many works of utopian literature written by White Americans erase important subjects such as race and thereby erase a painful yet important component of the experiences of African Americans.

One might then ask the following question, why is there such a strong compulsion to avoid the subject of race in the United States? Although the complete answer to this question supersedes the subject of this study, I argue that a major part of this answer nevertheless remains fully ensconced in utopianism. A broad discussion of race, one that is honest at the very least, is a clear and direct threat to the utopian metanarrative that the United States is worthy of the exceptionalism that has been so unthinkingly attributed to it. The present-day, highly volatile controversy surrounding the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in American education, especially primary and secondary education, is a testament to this aversion of race. Arising from the same mid-20th century social,

political, and economic landscape from which the critical utopia was borne, CRT provided a long overdue challenge to the injustices subtly perpetuated by American institutions. For example, after the gains of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, for what it was worth, laws that were once accepted as color-blind were now exposed as ineffective, at best, or harmful, at worst. This utopian notion of colorblindness, that race is not a contributing factor in life, is not without its standardizing markers of apotheosis; for example, immortalized as a small yet prominent figure located just left of the entrance to the United States Supreme Court Building, the ancient Roman goddess of justice stands blindfolded (Office of the Curator, Supreme Court of the United States), an essential piece to the iconographic puzzle that comprises all of the cultural capital needed to signify the unquestionable axiom that the American judicial system is governed by impartiality.

The fact that this symbol of justice itself is a female figure and a piece of architecture exposes, for example, an altogether different kind of representation that is as ironic as it is disenchanting when one considers the denial of American women's reproductive rights and the continual discrimination of African-Americans in the housing market even after the 1964 and 1968 Civil Rights Acts, including the Fair Housing Act of 1968, as well as the 2010 Affordable Care Act. In addition, the present attempts to abolish CRT within the education system belies any notion of colorblindness. Even though faith in this notion approaches the kind of belief one may associate with Santa Claus, others have taken on the daunting task of challenging such an American standard. For instance, inspired by *Ray*, the 2004 biographical film about famed blind singer Ray Charles, noted sociologist Osagie K. Obasogie pioneered a 2010 study that explored the

extent to which blind Americans experience race and racism. Interviewing 59 adults who were born blind, Obasogie found that they were just as race-conscious, if not more, than their visually-abled counterparts. This discovery led him to a conclusion that would have been expected if not for the metanarrative of a color-blind America:

These findings suggest that the visual salience with which people experience race operates in the absence of any requirement to actually see the visual cues that come to define racial boundaries . . . so strong that even blind people, in a conceptual sense, “see” race and organize their lives around visual understandings of racial difference. (610)

In other words, race and, therefore, racism is the byproduct of circumstances that supersede biological factors. The relevant quality that makes this revelation postmodern is that it contributes to a significant break with traditional thought that says, for example, that the concept of race is rooted in and limited by empirical principles that can be logically studied and thus logically resisted and, within the context of the United States, conquered. If postmodern thought has revealed any worthwhile lessons, an important one is the power that other factors hold such as social, legal, and political ones. After all, if even blind persons cannot escape the confines of racism today, who is to say that an entire country built on racial slavery can? In challenging Enlightenment-liberal thinking and stretching the beyond the limits of Modernism, postmodernists such as many of the Critical Race Theorists of the second half of the twentieth century have helped combat the metanarrative of a colorblind United States, especially regarding the American legal system. One realizes the necessity of such a challenge when Obasogie refers to the impact that misguided notions of race have had on his blind subjects: “The blind people were tired of being stereotyped as living in racial utopia. No one thought they had to deal with issues of race, which they found offensive” (qtd in Nealy, Michelle J., et al. 19).

Discussing the reductive biological terms is worth taking note of for a variety of reasons relevant to the present discussion. Historically, such limited thinking has produced disastrous results in the United States. For instance, one of the main justifications for American slavery was that the institution of slavery naturally suited African Americans, in the way an aquatic environment suited sea animals. By this logic, a free slave would amount to nothing more than a fish out of water. Extending beyond the historical implications of this particular discourse, preeminent scholar Dorothy E. Roberts also has written much regarding how this historical precedent persists into modern times; two prominent examples in her review such scholarship come to mind: (1) the normative stereotypes placed on American Latinas that permitted their coerced sterilizations during the 1970s; (2) the medically-accepted association between African-American men's fervent civil rights activism and violent schizophrenia during the 1960s. On a much deeper level, both examples point to a vision of an American utopia that cannot coexist with a presence of difference nor resistance to oppression; evidence of any significant disparity can only serve to destroy the illusion of a progressive, if not perfect, United States. In the first example, Latinas' reproductive capabilities are in need of control; otherwise, their children will overpopulate the nation and destroy it by "browning" the population. For this reason, modern legislation attempts to deny healthcare for Latina immigrants and their children. The second example likewise extends into the 21st century: serious discussions of racial inequality often deteriorates into accusations of mere racial instigation, very much reminiscent of the eight White Alabama clergymen whose rebuke of Martin Luther King, Jr., led the latter to write "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

To be clear, regarding those who seek to obfuscate even the discussion of race, there is no doubt that they see race in American life just as anyone else; however, the fundamental problem is that because of myths and metanarratives closely associated with a widely accepted American ethos, such people easily perceive race in a very superficial and fixed manner, preventing them from empathizing with, for example, disadvantaged people of color who may have entirely different experiences living in the United States. For this reason, far from being exempt, even medical institutions play an active role in this obfuscation, all for the sake of preserving American exceptionalism. Fortunately, Roberts cites other scholars who offer diverse challenges to this utopian orthodoxy:

As science historian Evelyn Hammonds (2006) notes, “The appeal of a story that links race to medical and scientific progress is in the way in which it naturalizes the social order in a racially stratified society such as ours.” Gutiérrez and Metzl show that the supposedly objective medical categories involved in racial repression are actually socially constructed....“Cloaking our observations under the seemingly objective rubric of biological science,” writes Metzl, “renders these ideological functions all the more difficult to discern or critique.” (238)

The normalization of race as a static concept endemic to a United States that looms over the horizon of perfection is indeed an appealing story to those who seek to propagate such a metanarrative. Given recent critiques of this metanarrative, the only question that remains is whether ignorance or malice precipitates such propagation. In any case, whenever metanarratives verge on ascending to the heights of scientifically approved consensus, effective critique is more difficult but all the more necessary.

Nevertheless, Roberts points out the extensive pervasiveness of such metanarratives and the ever-present roles they play in the United States: “at the very moment that science, government, and business are promoting race-based genomics, the idea that we are living in a ‘postracial’ America is gaining traction, despite enduring inequities in health, wealth, education, and incarceration” (243). Therefore, the issue of a colorblind United States also points to another closely related ideal that attempts to rationalize race in order to uphold a version of the United States that is more mythical than honest. Undoubtedly spurred on by the successful 2008 presidential election and subsequent 2012 successful re-election of Barack Obama, the idea that the United States has entered a post-racial epoch has gained relatively considerable approval. American media outlets especially helped propagate this sentiment, that Americans can or have risen above race and can now, much in keeping with the Enlightenment idea of utopian progress, can ascend to greater heights afforded to them by natural evolution and science. NPR Senior News Analyst Daniel Schorr’s thoughts on then-Senator Obama’s early political success encapsulates this notion: “The post-racial era, as embodied by Obama, is the era where civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history and Americans begin to make race-free judgments on who should lead them.” In other words, Obama’s tenure as the first African-American president, a feat that many Americans of all creeds once considered virtually impossible, has concluded the final chapter of a long book that was written by the first African-American civil rights advocates and spearheaded by the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century. Finally, the race question has been answered, and racism has been conquered. The success of many African-American athletes such as LeBron James and celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey

is more than enough self-evident proof. For example, just take a look at Obama's former city, Chicago: the mayor, treasurer, county states' attorney, county chief justice, fire department commissioner, superintendent of police, and many other public officials are all African-American.

However, given the city's rising crime rates and economic inequality, which disproportionately affect people of color, parts of Chicago collectively resemble more of an inhospitable environment and less of the American paragon reserved for such a post-racial nation. For these reasons, proponents of American exceptionalism parade the apparent racial progress of Chicago but at the cost of not acknowledging the city's socioeconomic problems, which must remain hidden or, at the very least, separated and isolated. American exceptionalism must thrive on compartmentalization and a great deal of delusion, leaving no room for convergence or disillusionment. Nevertheless, the same tradition of separation of art and politics that Shelley, Du Bois, and Brecht sought to challenge in the 20th century persists in the 21st century; poet Matthew Shenoda identifies the dichotomous nature of metanarratives as a source of narrow-mindedness that prevents alternative ways of thinking that eschews the reductive conclusions commonly associated with American exceptionalism: for instance, in support of the usefulness, if not necessity, of fluidity, he candidly argues,

So as an artist, I am unable, in part, to really grasp the idea of dichotomy between crafts and aesthetic on one hand and race/ethnicity, geography, language, and a thing called “politics” on the other. Such a binary seems to me, if I am honest, utterly stupid. Sure, I can spend time intellectualizing it, but in the end I find it only to be a smokescreen we have created to live in avoidance. There is something deeply peculiar to me about US culture(s), and that is this overbearing desire to avoid the past, to separate one's self and one's larger cultural context from what has come before, what Gore Vidal called “the United States of amnesia.” If I were a psychologist I would have much to work with here. Many have argued that this is perhaps a trauma of the psyche, an avoidance born out of the profoundly troubled past that this country was built upon, but it feels to me more like dishonesty. The trauma comes when we face our greatest horrors and not only face them, but when we stand before them in an effort to resurrect ourselves beyond them. This comes from a very difficult work that we, as US citizens and really as humans, often avoid, a direct confrontation with our past transgressions. So, for me, since I insist upon a level of honesty as a principle of art, it is difficult to embody such a dichotomy. (qtd. in Jones and Leonard 133)

Shenoda’s commentary is highly relevant. This culture of avoidance is prevalent throughout the United States, but this evasion is due to the stringent, naturalized rigidity inherent in American exceptionalism. For instance, very nationalistic or patriotic White Americans aim to sanitize the systemic issues present in various American institutions such as education, law, prison, and many more. Undoubtedly, White Americans also refuse to take responsibility for the sins of their forefathers, commonly compartmentalizing the contrary claims of the irrelevance of American slavery because of its abolition over a century ago and of the relevance of other historical American tragedies ranging from the Battle of the Alamo to the September 11 attacks; the former claim is unacceptable because it disrupts a utopian metanarrative about the United States whereas the latter is acceptable because it helps construct such a metanarrative. Likewise, African Americans also fall victim to this culture of evasion, because in order to fully realize the persistent nature of systemic racism in the United States today, one must also confess the shortcomings of, say, the Civil Rights Movement of the latter half of the 20th

century. Even Martin Luther King, Jr., as with Barack Obama after him, serves as a symbol of an unprecedented amount of American progress that has not yet materialized. Moreover, Shenoda is correct in locating the problem of trauma not in avoiding the past but in confronting it in the present, ostensibly in order to engender a better future. For these reasons, a utopian metanarrative explains not only the fervent fear and aversion toward, for example, CRT but also explains the same attitude toward Nikole Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project, itself a journalistic challenge that subverts the aversion of race by placing the institution of slavery at the center of the United States' ethos. Like providing exposure therapy to a traumatized patient, Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project exposes Americans to inconvenient truths that may conjure feelings of anguish. For these same reasons, one often finds the very pointed slogan "Black Lives Matter" muffled by the very effacing counter-slogan "All Lives Matter."

Since metanarratives depend on rigid dichotomies, the antidote to these metanarratives lie in inclusive convergence that allows for a multitude of voices, especially those that are dissenting, marginalized, or both. Such heterodoxy provides the only way to tear down seemingly indestructible columns of intransigence and render seemingly impenetrable barriers porous. In her critique of the "new racism" (i.e., the racism that persists after the abolition of American slavery and Jim Crow laws) that remains rooted in American institutions, Kathryn Gines argues for just this kind of postmodern thought if one seeks to successfully challenge systemic racism on a macro level instead of ineffectively meddling with it on a micro level.

Speaking on sociologist Patricia Hill Collins's perspective as an African-American feminist, Gines argues for the importance of intersectionality:

What is most powerful about Collins's analysis of the new racism is her intersectional approach. Rather than treating race and racism as categories of identity and oppression that operate on a singular axis, she constantly emphasizes how class, gender, and sexuality inform the ways in which racial identities and oppressions are formulated and experienced. (79)

A definitive postmodern innovation, intersectionality serves as a long-awaited remedial tool in the fight against systemic racism perpetuated by metanarratives such as American exceptionalism. Race does not and, for all intents and purposes, cannot function on a singular basis, because different facets of identity perpetually inform race. As an African-American feminist with a sociological methodology, Collins understands the severe limitations of a one-dimensional approach to systemic racism. Moreover, she remains a key figure in the development of CRT, itself an epistemological nexus that helps resist rigid dichotomies and singular analyses, since “the ‘single-axis’ framework of discrimination analysis not only ignores the way in which identities intersect in people’s lives, but also erases the experiences of some people” (Roberts 241). One must, however, exercise caution; Gines rightfully further argues that several diverse groups exist within the African-American community, though she makes the distinction between “African-American” and “Black” (81), but taken to even the slightest extreme, this distinction can easily deteriorate into the same initial rigid antagonisms. One must always remember that intersectionality centers on convergence, not necessarily mere separation, which very well might be an instinctual or conditioned urge.

CHAPTER 3: METAMORPHIC MARGINS

This chapter contextualizes the theoretical framework in the previous chapter by applying ideas regarding marginalization to utopian literature as a way to complicate and thus resist metanarratives or, more broadly, conventional, yet perilous thoughts and actions. The usually negative connotation associated with marginalization reflects the dismissive attitude that merely characterizes utopian literature as nonliterary genre fiction; marginalization also figures prominently in the historical disadvantages that have regulated African-American populations to the borders of society. Nevertheless, marginalization can be subverted to evoke a sense of affirmation, a kind of affirmation that, unlike that of metanarratives, is inclusive and pluralistic and thus ultimately democratic. Such ideas of marginalization promote alternative ways of thinking and behaving when a place of margin is acknowledged and the normative idea that has caused such marginalization is actively resisted from said place of margin. This metamorphism of thought and action presents itself in utopian literature in a variety of ways.

The quintessential empathetic quality in utopian literature, and, therefore, its appeal to humankind explains why such literature and its derivative forms remain so popular despite the threat of marginalization. André M. Carrington explains this point clearly:

[M]arginality and popularity can coincide as names for multiple facets of the same cultural phenomenon. This is especially true for works of genre fiction, which are both deeply invested in market imperatives that buttress the existing social order....The meaning of the term popular in popular culture, [Stuart] Hall reminds us, evokes “its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people.” (14)

In essence, utopian literature's popularity derives from its ability to express the dissatisfaction of neglected communities, supplying a much-needed demand that is as comprehensive as it is urgent. No better is this cultural expression featured than in the production of African-American art, which Carrington correctly identifies as liberatory since "Black subjects have come to emblemize the generative quality of marginality in the popular imagination" (13). These reasons and more also explain how utopian literature, despite its marginalization as fringe literature, has also permeated many different media, namely literary genres. In his study of dystopian literature, for instance, theorist M. Keith Booker argues that such literature is not a genre per se, but rather a "particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit" (3). Moreover, in relation to dystopian literature, Booker further identifies an essential literary technique employed in such literature:

I consider the principal literary strategy of dystopian literature to be defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on imaginatively distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable. (4)

He later goes on to associate defamiliarization to the similar kind identified by Russian formalists, to the alienation effect of Bertolt Brecht, to Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement, and ultimately to the genre of science fiction (4), with its conventional examination of archetypal topics such as science, extraterrestrials, exploration, and heroism – all of which Octavia Butler, for instance, has addressed in her literature. This point also accomplishes, yet another postmodern objective: the association of what is considered to be highbrow literature, such as epic theatre, with what is considered to be lowbrow literature, such as science fiction. With the reach of dystopian literature, and by extension utopian literature, in such a wide range of literary motifs and

movements, one can see how the concept of utopia, such as in More's satirical *Utopia*, transcends genre. Like the jazzy, soulful, pop-infused musician Prince, when it comes to genre, utopian literature is as elusive as ever. Interestingly enough, this essential quality that defines utopian literature as unique also allows it to be pervasive and thus relatively inclusive in regard to a wide range of literary categories.

As previously mentioned, it is true that utopian and dystopian literature specifically and critically examine the utopian yearning that is universal to all peoples; however, throughout many works of African-American literature, especially those of Richard Wright, John Williams, Toni Morrison, and numerous others, this yearning often specifically addresses the problems and solutions regarding injustices suffered by African Americans, whether the brutality of slavery, Jim Crow, or especially contemporary times of social, economic, and political upheaval. This point of seeking the advancement of African Americans especially applies to African-American writers' investment in African-American literary theory. James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) pioneered for the time a rare discussion of African-American literary criticism with his "viewpoint of creating and analyzing African American literature with its 'symbols from within' and its 'peculiar racial flavor'" (Ervin 3). Since then, critical thought on African-American literature has sprouted into a fruitful though thorny vine. For instance, given African-American literature's unique role in the struggle for liberation, in the early twentieth century the far-reaching debate between African-American theorists over whether African-American literature should prioritize art or propaganda was particularly hostile. Two works of criticism best represent this conflicting dichotomy: Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art" and Langston Hughes's "The

Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” both published in 1926, but each similar and different in various ways. Du Bois argued that protest literature possessed artistic merit and that African-American writers should be, if not must be, free to write such literature. Likewise, Hughes argued that African-Americans were capable of proficient writing, did not need the approval of Whites, but were plagued with overcoming racism that figured as harrowing as a mountain. Nevertheless, despite their advocacy of the agency of African-American writers, Du Bois’s and Hughes’s artistic tastes did not always align and sometimes were markedly polar; Still, this demand for African-American literary agency would eventually span many conflicts among African American writers, including Du Bois’s disapproval of Hughes (as well as of Claude McKay, Marcus Garvey, and Jean Toomer, for example) as well as artistic disagreement between Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, who was later censured by James Baldwin, who was scolded by Eldridge Cleaver.

Moving well past the now-hackneyed criticism of the debate over art and propaganda and settling within the utopian postmodernism of the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, African-American literary criticism has evolved into a deeply incisive and versatile mode of thought that has especially taken account of how diverse American identity and life is. One African-American scholar leading the way in this regard is bell hooks, who, in her attempt to explore a tangible American utopia for African-Americans, posits a wholesale and proactive transformation of American society. Her *Feminist Theory: from margin to center* (1984) was pivotal in its argument that far from merely being a detriment, the marginalization of African-American women afforded them the opportunity to gain insight into American culture in a way that those not

regulated to the margins of society could not (or would not) do. hooks writes of her personal experiences:

Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from both the outside in and the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. (ix)

hooks analyzes the complexities of a marginalized identity, but posits these complexities as conducive in grasping a clearer vision of reality – and all of its hidden foibles – in order to acknowledge and resist that which is vacuously and corrosively mythical yet hegemonic.

Coming full circle, this postmodern theory that ascribes an elucidating perspective to marginalization is interestingly quite similar to Du Bois's timeless concept of double-consciousness in that both acknowledge the complexity of the marginalized, but hooks goes further to solve the "Negro problem," by accepting this complexity as a unique advantage over more privileged persons. This dynamic is all the more relevant when one considers the African-American women writers who lie at the center of this dissertation. If one considers the claim in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that "[d]e [African-American] woman is de mule uh de world" (26), then the oppressed state of African-American women offers them a unique perspective on society and culture, regarding utopian issues related to race, religion, gender, and host of other salient topics; for this reason, as prominent African-American women authors whose works feature utopian themes, Hurston, Butler, Morrison, and Naylor figure as the center of this dissertation.

These points then might beg for a clearer answer to the central question of this chapter: how does this concept of marginalization relate to utopian literature and its complementary derivatives? As indicated in the above paragraphs, the answer lies in

utopian literature's unique and uncanny ability to present alternative realities. Since these alternative realities still bear a strong resemblance to current realities in which marginalized people suffer, the differences and similarities that are inevitably illuminated upon comparison essentially force the reader into new modes of thinking that can offer potential solutions or warnings worthy of consideration regarding the alleviation of suffering. In addition, just as the slave in Hegel's master-slave dialectic is afforded insights that the master is not privy to due to his privileged position, marginalized people's unique insights are uncovered and underscored in African-American utopian literature, but are also accessible to the very people who may overlook or deny these particular perspectives. Thus, one can imagine a utopian narrative written from the perspective of a young, African-American delinquent and set in a fictional United States in which various crime-related issues within inner-city communities are covered and investigated with the same level of seriousness as other predominant issues; this type of narrative invites the reader to take a second look at racial discrepancy in American media representation and to second guess stereotypes that demonize young, African-American men, a common mindset that, for example, may have led to the tragic shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012.

But other than its relevance to a general, yet critical desire to an ideal condition or place, how does utopian literature's permeance of genre apply to African-American works in particular? One can discover and confirm a pattern of similar kinds of utopian themes and techniques mentioned above in a diverse range of literary genres in African-American literature. Thus, during the Antebellum era, Martin Delany writes *Blake; or, The Huts of America* (1862), a realist novel about a fictional slave rebellion, in order to

challenge the racial stereotypes perpetuated by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Moreover, other texts include earlier works, such as Nancy Prince's autobiography *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1850) and Pauline Hopkins's "proto-speculative," fictional *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* (1902). In addition, there are more recent works such as Octavia Butler's dystopian narratives or Gloria Naylor's magic realist novels, and Toni Morrison echoes utopian impulses that extend far beyond the title of her renowned novel, *Paradise*. With Prince, Hopkins, Butler, and Morrison in particular, one can also see how this utopian tradition found root in and grew in the works of African-American women writers. Still, even generally, far from being works of popular literature not worth studying, these works possess a rich amount of aesthetic and intellectual value, especially in the social criticism they espouse. It is this essential value in the context of utopian discourse that this dissertation seeks to rediscover and augment within its investigation of African-American literature.

The proliferation of African-American woman authors who have explored utopianism has ushered a sharp turn within the broader tradition of American feminist utopian literature. For the greater part of the first half of the twentieth century, such literature largely has produced content based on homogenous, traditional gender norms. For instance, Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten exemplify Judith Merrill's short story "That Only a Mother" (1948), commenting that the work suffers from an "uncritical presentation of racism and of women limited by their feminine roles" (10). Donawerth and Kolmerten are correct in identifying Octavia Butler as an accurate example of latter

woman authors whose postmodern utopias “grapple with...the imperfectability of utopian—even feminist—desire” (11). In other words, such woman authors of utopian literature now prioritize the theme of difference and imperfection in order to critically evaluate dominant, yet potentially harmful ways of thinking. Moreover, such authors extract invaluable significance in employing utopian literature specifically to manage the difference that comes with heterogeneity but to do so in the united pursuit of liberation from the conformity that often accompanies homogeneity. Donawerth and Kolmerten note how these authors use the aforementioned utopian trope of defamiliarization to achieve such goals:

For feminists...“literature of estrangement” is an especially useful category, because it draws together the several genres that women have used to talk about a better place, and because it exposes the ways in which a text’s workings embody its politics. (3)

By inscribing difference and transcending genre, these works of utopian literature possess more depth than prior works and establish their authors as more multi-faceted than what the American literary canon may say.

Therefore, given its designation as a marginal genre and its converse postmodern renaissance as a “critical spirit,” utopian literature possesses exceptional value as a mode of experimentation that dissolves arbitrary boundaries and illuminates what is typically confined beyond these boundaries. As Moylan puts it,

[U]topia opposes the affirmative culture maintained by dominant ideology. Utopia negates the contradictions in a social system by forging visions of what is not yet realized either in theory or practice. In generating such figures of hope, utopia contributes to the open space of opposition. (1)

This space of opposition is where marginalization develops into an innovative strength rather than a typical weakness. Resisting any form of regulation associated with genre,

the ethos of utopia opens up a myriad of artistic possibilities for any given author, regardless of how persistent pressures to conform exist within their milieu.

The aforementioned *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* is a quintessential example in this regard. Hopkins's novel plays with genre in order to capture the critical spirit of utopia. For instance, Melissa Asher Daniels prudently identifies Hopkin's amalgamation of realism and romance:

Exploiting the tension between the two genres, the novel attempts to envision a world beyond the racially inflected contours of the United States. Far from abandoning racial thinking or the plight of black Americans, the novel revises the racial fictions—the one-drop rule, polygenesis, and myths of innate savagery—that relegated blacks to sub-human status. To subvert these fictions and imagine an alternative topography for turn-of-the-century African Americans, Hopkins destabilizes race by overturning genre. (159)

By neither conforming to romance nor realism, Hopkins avoids the constraining pitfalls typical in each genre; her novel is neither a stereotypically fanciful representation of American racism nor a stereotypically strident manifestation of Black nationalism. Instead, she uses the critical energy of utopia to unite these oppositional genres – one stemming from Romanticism while the other stemming from Modernism – to attack predominant myths about race in America. In other words, if one must use the word “genre,” “it is the genre of utopian writing that enables...Hopkins to refute contemporary scientific claims” (Reid 93).

In addition to appropriating marginalization in order to challenge conventions of literary form, utopian literature also critically engages with conventions of literary content, especially when it comes to setting. Thus, the scope of utopian literature is far-reaching and, much like the hope offered by the concept of utopia itself, full of boundless potential. *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* remains an exemplary work in this regard.

One feature that makes Hopkins's novel so groundbreaking is the decentering and demystification of the United States. In fact, by the end of the novel, the idea of Africa, neither romanticized nor demonized, looms from the margins to take center stage. As Mandy Reid argues, "Hopkins employs elements of Ethiopianism in order to draw attention to the utopian 'early greatness of the African race' and the dystopian experiences in modern-day America" (94). In much the same way, many Harlem Renaissance writers shifted narrative focus to Harlem and, by extension, African-American culture and history, Hopkins similarly shifts narrative focus to Meroe and Telassar, the latter a hidden utopian city in Ethiopia that Reuel Briggs, the novel's protagonist, ultimately governs as king. More than a century later, *Black Panther* (2018) made its debut; centered on one of the earliest, if not the first, American comics superhero of African descent, the film heavily featured Wakanda, a hidden African utopia much akin to Hopkins's Telassar. Thus, the film succeeded in introducing a new generation of Americans to postmodern utopian tropes centered on African-American culture and history. Moreover, Ryan Coogler, an African-American film maker, directed the film, and judging by the fact that it stands as the highest-grossing film directed by an African American, the film stands as a testament to just how much utopianism resonates with African Americans despite the specter of marginalization.

This decentering and demystification of the United States has even broader implications when one considers the United States as a proper synecdoche of the Western world. Extending beyond the national borders of the United States or any other nation for that matter, Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" succeeds as a subversive term since it denotes the unification of all disparate peoples of African descent who suffered under the Atlantic

slave trade. In an interview with Tommie Shelby, Gilroy attacks nationalism, colonialism, and the related metanarrative that says that “America is the land of the future” (125):

Maybe there are certain features of African life that represent the future for us now. Even in places like [the United States]. The characteristics of inequality, the privatization of experience—certain motifs of colonial government become routine. A lot of people live in a gated community; they want to separate themselves off. These are not just the tactics but the actual empirical mechanisms of how heavily stratified colonial orders operate routinely: the division of space, the organization of space....So, in a way, we can take America out of that position of representing the future, and see Africa itself as representing it....So we have to think about America and Africa in a way that unsettles some of those teleological assumptions. (125)

Gilroy makes two important distinctions. First, he removes the phenomenal quality commonly assigned to the United States. American exceptionalism gives way to American mundaneness in a manner that dismantles the idea of an international hierarchy that places the United States firmly at the top, in the center, and even in the future. Yet, Gilroy also reconfigures the United States not as a utopia but more so as a dystopian product of colonialism in much the way many African nations are as well. In this way, the same inequality and stratification of space that plague African nations also plague the United States. In this sense, the vertical scale of all nations flattens in favor a horizontal inclusion of these nations.

Moreover, utopian literature also appropriates marginalization in terms of characterization. For an excellent example, one only needs to return to Hopkins’s Reuel Briggs. Daniels asserts:

By placing a poor black medical student, who happens to be passing for white, at the *center* [emphasis mine] of the neurasthenic phenomenon, she signifies on the illness's "pathological script" in terms of both race and class. We might even say that she makes an important revision to the medical narrative that should be viewed as a type of realist intervention in its own right, as it recuperates African American subjectivity from the *margins* [emphasis mine] of psychical research. Put another way, Hopkins challenges the cultural stereotype that black people do not suffer from depression because they have "sunny-natured antetypes." (163)

Hopkins prioritizes Reuel Briggs, a type of character that American literature stereotypically marginalizes for the sake of oppressive metanarratives, in this case racially and scientifically motivated ideas that dehumanize African Americans. For these reasons, in keeping with the fluidity of genre associated with utopian literature, Hopkins's novel also figures as a scientific treatise, providing a much-needed rebuttal: given the latter's eventual discredit as pseudoscience, time ironically has proven her work of fiction more scientifically accurate than some of the scientific racialism of the time. Nevertheless, Daniels's affirmation that Reuel Briggs is a young professional of mixed race "subsisting on the margins of Harvard society" (161) directs one to another contiguous, yet salient point about utopian literature's relationship with marginalization and characterization. Reuel Briggs is a stark embodiment of the New Black Aesthetic (NBA), a term coined by Trey Ellis that characterizes a contemporary cultural movement centered on young, middle-class African-American intellectuals of mixed race. According to Ellis, the NBA comprises a "minority's minority mushrooming with the current black bourgeoisie boom" but nevertheless "misunderstood by both the black worlds and the white" (234). Because of his mixed race, Reuel Briggs, like the NBA, represents a minority within a minority doomed to a life stuck in margins defined by others who disregard, misunderstand, and stereotype. However, far from appearing as a reductive stereotype such as the tragic mulatto, Hopkins rescues Reuel Briggs from such

a fate, humanizes him, and places him at the center of her narrative. Such resistance to colorism and intra-racial conflict points to a broader, historical affirmation of how notable African-American writers have defined and redefined Blackness in diverse and inclusive ways. Langston Hughes, who was born into a well-off family, and W.E.B. Du Bois, who very well may have subsisted on the margins of Harvard society in the same manner as Reuel Briggs, are just two of a multitude of eminent African-American literary figures of mixed race.

Therefore, the use of marginalization in order to resist oppressive metanarratives possesses explosive energy inside and outside of African-American utopian literature. Regarding such literature, Joy Sanchez-Taylor discusses the uses of postmodern tropes and alternative rather than “traditional narratives of a singular, forward-moving modern nation” (33). She highlights Samuel Delany’s novel *Dhalgren* (1975), identifying Kid, the protagonist whose marginal notebook writings help compose the content of the novel:

Kid cannot recognize the main text in his notebook because his place in U.S. historical narrative has been erased. His self-conscious narrative, full of revisions...show his desire to both represent his experiences and re-imagine them, creating a liminal narrative that brings marginalized writings to the center. (66)

Here, Delany represents the trope of marginalization in a much more literal, and given its self-referential nature, and postmodern manner, to provide his readers with an actively contested dominant narrative. Similar to what Sanchez-Taylor does with Kid, Carrington exemplifies Storm, perhaps the most popular African-American comic books superheroine, by presenting her as a figure of Black Womanhood that can represent alternative identities and help address the question of “how to move from marginality to empowerment” (92).

Moreover, Jayna Brown is just one of many recent scholars who have identified the modification of marginalized African-American woman characters in other media besides literature, noting how the dystopian films *Children of Men* (2002) and *28 Days Later* (2006) both feature African-American women at the center of their narratives to critically examine crises related to British identity and citizenship (122). From *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self to Black Panther*, the tradition of African-American utopianism clearly is as far-reaching as it is enduring. Even when artists choose to not critically engage with marginal characters, others compensate by taking on the task. As Carrington notes, “[w]hereas, the marginal roles afforded to characters of color, particularly women of color, limit their possibilities in canon, the emphasis on minor characters in fan fiction demonstrates how marginalization can yield creativity” (212). In addition to its far-reaching and enduring quality, African-American utopianism also lends itself to a great degree of democratization.

CHAPTER 4: RELIGION

In addition to Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, the focus of this chapter also primarily investigates Octavia Butler's *Parable* series: her *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel *Parable of the Talents*. Mostly set in a dystopian, apocalyptic California in the 21st century, the series centers on a young, African-American woman, Lauren Olamina, and her attempts to establish a new spiritual community called Earthseed, amidst the brutal religious, environmental, and economic circumstances through which she and her fellow companions navigate. Given that the titles of both novels allude to parables told by Jesus, many scholars have written on the role that religion plays in the series, especially regarding Earthseed. This chapter, in part, emphasizes how the theme of religion contributes to such scholarship; more specifically, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the *Parable* series uses a nontraditionally, and thus marginally, religious perspective in order to expose hegemonic notions of religion within the United States as mythical as well as harmful, but entirely escapable.

Today, many Americans describe their country as a Christian nation, owing to a widespread belief that the United States was essentially founded on principles espoused by Christianity, especially Protestantism. This fact becomes more apparent when one considers that roughly 70% of Americans describe themselves as Christians ("Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics"). Despite the common American belief in the separation between church and state, the concurrence of these two institutions renders this belief more mythical than evident. One only needs to think of the many churches that upheld laws pertaining to slavery long before its abolition. In

addition, all American presidents, except Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Johnson – all who undoubtedly were affiliated with Christianity – have formally identified as Christian (“The Religious Affiliation of U.S. Presidents”), and there has never been an American president who has formally identified as Jewish, Muslim, or any other non-Christian adherent. Furthermore, every president since James Madison has fulfilled the tradition of attending a service at the historic St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington D.C. (“History”). Far beyond the influence of the Christian right, the scope of Christianity is certainly not limited to politics, but also pervades other various sectors of American life. Whether functioning as the historical impetus for the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, or Jim Crow violence, Christianity has often lied at the root of strife and exclusion. The same applies to the United States today, as many charge Christianity as a source of oppression that tramples on the rights of women regarding abortion, the LGBTQIA community regarding sexuality and gender identity, and immigrants regarding citizenship; therefore, American Christianity has been intrinsically intertwined with sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. It is this longstanding association of religion and oppression that Butler investigates in her *Parable* series.

What is most interesting is that Butler does not simply outright condemn religion, let alone Christianity, and resign herself to an anti-theistic atheism; her method is far more nuanced. Instead, Lauren challenges the potential oppressive nature of Christianity in order to create a radically new religion that does not repeat the same errors of in American history. In doing so, she allows herself to escape the pitfalls that Nietzsche associates with organized religion and, as Morris points out, to use religion as a unifying, transcendental force in much the way Habermas sees religion as playing a positive role in

society (285). Very early in *Parable of the Sower*, she nourishes a growing resistance to the brand of Christianity that her father, a Baptist pastor, espouses. This resistance stems from a perception that her father's religion is complacent and wholly ineffective, given that the tenuous walls that protect their gated community eventually give way to the murderous chaos that surrounds them. David Morris provides keen insight into this particular dynamic:

The remnants of civil rights movement organizing—embodied in Olamina's father, Laurence, a Baptist preacher who organizes in a combination of Southern black Christianity and West Coast, Black Panther-style self-defense—provide a leadership rendered irrelevant when the community is destroyed. (281)

We are once again reminded of a common dystopian root: the destructive failures of the past. This time, the critiques center on the historically African-American churches that helped spearhead the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the more militant religious groups, such as the Nation of Islam, that, in part, served as a catalyst for the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Both religious movements are ultimately rendered as lifeless as Lauren's father presumably becomes after their community is raided and burned to the ground.

Despite her community's commitment to faith in God as well as to self-defense, with its methodical use of firearms, Lauren correctly foresees its ruin and instead develops Earthseed, a religion simply centered on the idea that God is change:

Dad is right, but he doesn't go far enough. God is Change, and in the end, God prevails. But God exists to be shaped. It isn't enough for us to just survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. If that's the shape we give to God, then someday we must become too weak—too poor, too hungry, too sick—to defend ourselves. Then we'll be wiped out. (*Parable of the Sower* ch. 6)

Earthseed neither relies on communal sacrifice nor individualistic self-reliance; instead, it relies on a commitment to perpetual, willful adaption – something that, by its very nature, is potentially accessible to all. In place of the walls that her father erects, Lauren successfully traverses the dangerous Californian landscape, building bridges along the way by accepting, sometimes even to her potential detriment, a diverse array of individuals and groups. Religion is no longer associated with strict dogma, wars of conquest, hierarchal systems, overbearing proselytizing, and parochialism. This difference becomes strikingly apparent in *Parable of the Talents*, in which a White, Christian fundamentalist group, aptly named “Christian America,” attacks and enslaves the members of Lauren’s Earthseed community. Nevertheless, the community’s ability to adapt eventually leads to its liberation and triumph on a level that exponentially surpasses their pre-slavery days. Now on the journey to fulfill her Destiny project – the inhabitation of other planets beside Earth in order to further propagate Earthseed, Lauren takes the dystopian and makes it utopian by effecting a mutual relationship with her environment that is not built on failed tradition, but revolutionary innovation:

We can fulfill the Destiny, make homes for ourselves among the stars, and become some combination of what we want to become and whatever our new environments challenge us to become. Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them. (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* ch. 20)

Due to its fearless exploration of a subject as deeply rooted to the human condition and as potentially controversial as religion, Butler’s novels strike at an unpleasant facet of human life: pain, suffering, and death – all essential aspects of a dystopian world. In general, philosophy seeks to remedy these maladies and posit an ideal manner to live in order to effect, at the very least, a hospitable world. Nevertheless, what role, if any, does or should religion play in this resolution? In his book *Critique of*

Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1844), German sociologist Karl Marx famously characterized religion as a coping mechanism of the oppressed, and 38 years later, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously prophesied an age of nihilism in his work *The Gay Science* (1882) when he claimed that God had died. Clearly, religion plays a vital role in utopianism because it encompasses the very belief system that those in a given society use to construct their world.

This idea is especially important with regard to African Americans, given the important role, whether positive or negative, religion has played and continues to play in African-American society, culture, and history; thus, the same applies to African-American literature and in unique ways in Butler's novels. In his examination of religion's role in the *Parable* series, Clarence W. Tweedy III begins with an apt epigraph, taken from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963), that echoes Nietzsche's aforementioned prophetic existential crisis 81 years after he first mentioned it. Speaking in a tumultuous 1960s United States that would see the assassination of multiple major American politicians and American civil rights activists – some who were his personal friends, and the threat of a world-ending nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, Baldwin paints the world of a failed utopia:

But, in the end, it is the threat of universal extinction hanging over all the world today that changes, totally and forever, the nature of reality and brings into devastating question the true meaning of man's history. We human beings now have the power to exterminate ourselves; this seems to be the entire sum of our achievement. We have taken this journey and arrived at this place in God's name. This, then, is the best that God (the white God) can do. If that is so, then it is time to replace Him -replace Him with what? And this void, this despair, this torment is felt everywhere in the West, from the streets of Stockholm to the churches of New Orleans and the sidewalks of Harlem. (55)

This characterization of a racialized dystopia is a vivid depiction of the fate of Lauren's gated community in Robledo, California. Populated with a relatively small yet strong suburban community of mostly African Americans, the Christian religion offers the residents a meaningful hierarchal structure in the form of traditions, beliefs, and roles – with Lauren's father as the de facto leader. In essence, Butler constructs an African-American utopia founded on American Christianity and all of its associated metanarratives, especially including the Protestant work ethic that Max Weber famously studied in his groundbreaking book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Furthermore, this American ethos centralizes and merges American Protestantism and capitalism, promoting related metanarratives such as James Truslow Adams's "American Dream" and Horatio Alger's "rags to riches."

Nevertheless, Butler comes to the same conclusion as Baldwin: the incompatibility between, if not the doomed concoction of, African Americans and American Christianity. This incompatibility is not only borne in African-American utopian literature such as Butler's *Parable* series; American history has also evidenced such discordance long before the 18th century African-American poet Phillis Wheatley wrote, "Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (7-8), pleading with White American Christians who cited the Bible in their justification of slavery. Despite the essential role that Christianity would play in African-American culture, White American churches' approval, whether tacit or explicit, of slavery rendered this role eminently ambivalent.

It therefore comes as no surprise that after musing at length about her misgivings about religion, Lauren rebukes her Baptist background: “my fathers God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church” (*Parable of Sower* ch. 2). The story of the ultimate failure of her father’s Christianity coupled with the literal destruction of Lauren’s utopian community serves as a definitive microcosm of the suffering African Americans have experienced and continue to experience due to religion or in spite of religion. One wonders whether Butler, who herself was raised in a Baptist household but later considered herself a “former Baptist” (“Interview with Octavia Butler”) counted herself among the multitude of these dissatisfied African Americans.

This failure then begs for the longstanding question that Baldwin, Nietzsche, and others have asked: what should religion be placed with? Lauren’s conclusive answer is Earthseed, an alternative and thus marginal religion that subverts and displaces traditional American Christianity. The beginning of *Parable of the Sower* almost immediately reveals the essential principle of Earthseed: “The only lasting truth Is Change. God is Change” (ch. 1). Never static, Lauren’s carefully crafted religion is continuously adaptive, accepting, and tolerant. In fact, this principle of change figures as a blatant, if not blasphemous, challenge to American Christianity; if American Christianity is founded on the messianic figure of Jesus Christ, of whom the Christian Bible characterizes as “the *same* yesterday, today, and forever” (*The Bible*, Hebrews 13:8; emphasis added), then Earthseed functions as a calculated foil to American Christianity, a primary subject of Butler’s critique. Therefore, Earthseed avoids the pitfalls commonly attributed to American Christianity, especially that of excluding a wide array of disparate peoples, such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community who are now ostracized much

in same manner in which members of the African-American community were during the times of Phillis Wheatley.

Although Tweedy is prudent in reproaching critics of Butler who have “overlooked valuable insights that Butler’s fiction provides about the use of religion” (2), Tweedy himself, like many other critics, unfortunately undercuts his conclusion that accurately portrays *Earthseed* as a subversive religious thought experiment. He commits this error by positing a faulty premise, the idea that *Earthseed* is the progeny of Christianity: “*Earthseed*'s doctrines of change...signify a return to the religion of Christ through the use of myths and symbolism that is at the heart of African Americans’ resistance to oppression” (9). Tweedy essentially argues that *Earthseed* seeks to purify American Christianity, but this purification only mirrors that of the Puritans, who sought to purify English Christianity in establishing their particular religious values as fundamental yet harmful American values. However, *Earthseed*’s essential principle of change is evidence of the severing of any ties to its would-be mother religion; moreover, *Earthseed* seeks to use its marginal position as a newfound, radical religion in order to not merely purify but to deconstruct and overtake American Christianity. After a couple of arguments with other members about whether to leave the Acorn community in favor of seemingly safer destinations, Lauren defiantly chooses to stay in order to continue to cultivate her new religion, preaching to the others that with time *Earthseed* will not only liberate them from the evils of humankind but will liberate all of humanity: “It’s [*Earthseed*’s] a beginning. It’s [*Earthseed*’s] a way of trying to build tomorrow instead of cycling back into some form of yesterday” (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* ch. 8). As seen with the Anglicans who sought to reform Catholicism and the Puritans who themselves

sought to purify Anglicanism, the aforementioned myths and symbols of American Christianity that do indeed lie at the heart of the oppression of African Americans, as well as other peoples, will only be rewritten after mere purification or reformation. What is needed instead is a revolutionary endeavor, which characterizes Earthseed's ultimate goal as a definitive way to end the cyclical system of religious oppression.

In its representation as revolutionary, unconventional, and thus unencumbered by the burdens of Western religious tradition, Earthseed features many unique distinctions that set it apart from the ethos that American Christianity espouses. For instance, Earthseed members do not adhere to a supernatural deity that literally lords over its people, who themselves are stratified in particular ranks, such as “deaconess,” “pastor,” and “overseer.” Instead, Lauren admonishes Earthseed members to “not worship God....We shape God....We adapt and endure, For we are Earthseed And God is Change” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* ch. 3). Larkin, Lauren's daughter, further explains the lamentation of this social stratification:

The selections I've offered from my mother's journal make it clear that in spite of her near nineteenth-century existence she paid attention to the wider world....racial, ethnic, religious, and class tolerance mattered. We human beings seem always to have found it comforting to have someone to took [*sic*] down on—a bottom level of fellow creatures who are very vulnerable, but who can somehow be blamed and punished for all or any troubles. We need this lowest class as much as we need equals to team with and to compete against and superiors to look to for direction and help. My mother was always noticing and mentioning things like that. Sometimes she managed to work her observations into Earthseed verses. (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* ch. 5)

Earthseed liberates its members from the burdens of hierarchy and places each of them on equal footing, even as “partner of God” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* ch. 4). The ramifications of this egalitarianism that has alluded African Americans and Americans alike cannot be overstated. For instance, orientation towards utopia can only realistically

take place after the demystification of religious-inspired categories such as the following regarding social rank and gender roles: Wives must “submit to [their] own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” (*The Bible*, Colossians 3:18); Men “shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination” (*The Bible*, Leviticus 18:22); And everyone must “be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God” (*The Bible*, Romans 13:1). Earthseed members are now free from the sexist, homophobic, and tyrannical, respectively, notions attributed to American Christianity, which are in turn elevated to divine and unquestionable proportions. Earthseed is founded on inclusion and thrives on change. In this manner, Earthseed members are no longer at the mercy of longstanding religious mechanisms such as the one used by American slaveholders that admonished slaves to “obey in all things [their] masters...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (*The Bible*, Romans 13:1). In an ironic but not surprising turn of events, it is not Christ that resurrects after the proliferation of Christian America, a fundamentalist religious sect that Tweedy describes as one that “resurrects American exceptionalism” (5); Instead, Christian America resurrects American exceptionalism *and* slavery, and Lauren, her Earthseed members, and many others deemed to be anathematic to the American Christian metanarrative are the ones to suffer in brutal captivity.

Nevertheless, several critics, including Tweedy (8), have argued that Lauren emerges as a Christ figure and rises above her members as a deity to be worshipped, thereby ostensibly belying any notion of egalitarianism.

For instance, Donna Spalding Andréolle argues that “Lauren is a new Christ, the sower of the new seeds of Christianity, after the Armageddon which destroys the wicked civilization that has abandoned the founding beliefs of the nation” (120). Again, Andréolle understands the need of a revolutionary solution but fails to identify the aforementioned founding beliefs as the initial problem. If such a destruction of an American Christian metanarrative is Butler’s aim, this revolutionary task cannot come to fruition from within the same system that perpetuates oppression but must strike from within the margins, where imagination is most unrestrained and innovation is most fertile. Nevertheless, these critics certainly are prudent to contemplate the idea that Lauren is a Christ figure. After all, in reference to her mother’s central role in *Earthseed*, Larkin indeed says,

THEY’LL MAKE A GOD of her. I think that would please her, if she could know about it. In spite of all her protests and denials, she’s always needed devoted, obedient followers—disciples—who would listen to her and believe everything she told them. And she needed large events to manipulate. All gods seem to need these things. (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* prologue)

However, very shortly thereafter, Larkin admits her ambivalent feelings towards her mother, which include hatred and distrust (prologue), more than enough biases to mischaracterize her mother and *Earthseed*.

Moreover, in addition to admitting Lauren’s resistance to glorification, Larkin also grudgingly echoes the absence of a Christian heaven in her mother’s religion:

In *Earthseed*, there is no promised afterlife. *Earthseed*’s heaven is literal, physical—other worlds circling other stars...Its promise is not of mansions to live in, milk and honey to drink, or eternal oblivion in some vast whole of nirvana. Its promise is of hard work and brand-new possibilities, problems, challenges, and changes. Apparently, that can be surprisingly seductive to some people. My mother was a surprisingly seductive person. (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* ch. 3)

The Christian heaven is as essential to American Christianity as Christ is; after all, the culmination of American Christianity results in Christ establishing a utopia for Christians in heaven, but without this heaven, Lauren cannot be the Christ figure who resurrects and sends her supposed followers to Paradise. Instead, even Larkin recognizes the glaring differences between Lauren and Christ and Earthseed and American Christianity, directly alluding to the “milk and honey” associated with the Christian God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. In contrast to the longstanding Christian hope for a similar deliverance that African Americans have relied on since the founding of the United States, Lauren rejects this sort of waiting on God that was famously satirized in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953), which exposed such waiting as a farcical, pointless endeavor. Instead she relies on a marriage of independence and community in order to effect proactive, continual change. Despite the record of failure exposed in the Christian hope that African Americans have long espoused, Lauren nonetheless realizes that this absence of hope is startling, if not revolutionary, and thus intimidating to those steeped in tradition: “[t]he problem with Earthseed has always been that it isn’t a very comforting belief system” (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* ch. 14). Lauren seeks to break the cycle of hope and disappointment but understands that hopeful resignation, even one full of suffering, is more palatable than revolutions that trek new and unaccustomed terrains.

Like Butler, Gloria Naylor would also provide a nuanced critique of American Christianity five years before the publication of *Parable of the Sower*. In *Mama Day*, Naylor deconstructs and challenges hegemonic Christianity in the United States but in a slightly different manner that more so focuses on dystopian features that lead to the oppression of African-American women. Many literary critics of the novel rightfully

characterize the mysticism, spiritualism, and generally mysteriousness as literary devices that drive the novel's story, most notably illuminating the story's correlation to Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Centering on the tumultuous romantic relationship between Cocoa Day and George Andrews, much of the story takes place in the fictional Willow Springs, a utopic island that has a supernatural influence over George and Cocoa; moreover, Willow Springs is inhabited and overseen by African Americans but remains free from the Western influence and oppression that has plagued the United States. This utopian setting is strongly contrasted with the dystopian New York City in which George thrives whereas the homesick Cocoa struggles. During a date with Cocoa, even George has to admit that in the city, "[m]ost people are confined to ghettos by economic circumstances" (65). Suffering emotionally and financially in New York City, Cocoa figures as one of many of these confined people; for these reasons, she cannot wait for her usual visit to her ancestral Willow Springs.

Given the differences between these settings, the inhabitants of Willow Springs are much more in tune with their African traditions and ancestors. A few critical works, such as David Cowart's article "Matriarchal Mythopoesis: Naylor's *Mama Day*," have rightfully placed this fulfillment of cultural and self-knowledge within the context of subverting American Christian ideals, but he does not do so within a larger utopian/dystopian context. What is missing from much of such critical work is the characterization of these utopian and dystopian elements in crafting a narrative that provides alternative ways of thinking that directly challenge the core ideals of hegemonic thought that undergird an American culture that is often harmful to African Americans, especially African-American women. Thus, in place of an oppressive Western,

patriarchal religious system that pervades the United States, Willow Springs instead features an African, matriarchal religious system represented most prominently by the quasi-mythical, “goddess” (Naylor 218) figure of Sapphira Wade, who is Cocoa’s great ancestor and founder of Willow Springs. Contrastingly, George, who remains antagonistic towards Willow Springs, comes to represent the Western, patriarchal religious system. Through a series of revelatory and supernatural events, Willow Springs exposes George and everything he represents as oppressive, and in the end, George succumbs to the specter of Sapphira, effecting Cocoa’s liberation and recovery from a deadly illness brought about by a jealous rival.

What makes *Mama Day* particularly subversive is its prevalent use of symbolism in order to depict a warring religious-inspired tension between American orthodoxy and African heterodoxy. Although a few critics, such as Rosellen Brown, pan the novel for its extensive use of allegory, the figurative value of *Mama Day* remains an essential strength when one identifies its central theme of exposing harmful religious myths that lie at the core of American culture and of revitalizing displaced yet relevant narratives that can only roam within the margins of acceptable forms of belief in the United States. For this reason, *Mama Day* is every bit of complex as a chaotic yet nonetheless meaningful battlefield in which a military force unexpectedly triumphs over a powerful enemy. The novel employs Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, the varied use of language that express “points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (Bakhtin 291). The fact that the novel opens with multiple versions of how Sapphira Wade obtains the deed to Willow Springs and ends with Cocoa’s enlightened conclusion after the events of

the novel that “there are just too many sides to the whole story” (311) is testament to the multitude of voices embedded in the novel. Nowhere is this dynamic more true than in the novel than its deconstruction of American Christianity.

At the center of this deconstruction is Naylor’s critique of patriarchy, a mainstay of American Christianity. Even more so than the *Parable* series, *Mama Day* is replete with allusions to Christianity, especially the Christian Bible. Like Butler, Naylor challenges the hierarchies perpetuated by this patriarchy and perfunctorily ingrained in American society. Despite the apparent unique nature of American exceptionalism, the United States, like almost anywhere else in the world, is nonetheless founded on the same stratified gendered social system that places men at the helm. In other words, American history has been a continual metanarrative that says that “the head of woman *is* man” (*The Bible*, 1 Corinthians 11:3). Based on this axiom, men essentially rule over women just as God rules over men and women rule over children. *Mama Day*, however, asks the question: given the often rotten fruits that patriarchal societies produce, what sort of harvest do matriarchal societies engender in return?

Similar to Lauren in the *Parable* series, Sapphira is a primary spiritual progenitor. However, in stark contrast to Lauren, Sapphira is divine-like. This literary mechanism allows Naylor to follow through on a subversive thought experiment based on the question, “what if God were a woman?” For instance, George’s characterization of Sapphira as a “goddess” (218) stems from Naylor’s clearest allusion to the deification of Sapphira, an illustration of Cocoa’s family tree. Fully fleshing out her utopian experiment as historical fiction and thus more realistic than mere mythical, Naylor provides a genealogical document that begins with Sapphira, the sole ancestor, and ends with Cocoa,

one of her descendants. Sapphira gives birth to seven sons, but it is Jonah who survives and extends the bloodline. Like his father before him, John-Paul survives his seven brothers and extends the bloodline even further, eventually siring Mama Day and her sister Abigail, Cocoa's grandmother. However, the Biblical allusion that deifies Sapphira is the asterisk next to Jonah's name and corresponding footnote that says: "'God rested on the seventh day and so would she.' Hence, the family's last name" (1). The family tree explains the origin of the Days' name, but in a clever display of wordplay, Naylor also draws parallels between the Christian God and Sapphira, elevating Sapphira as the God(dess) of Willow Springs. Moreover, if Sapphira is God, then Willow Springs is the utopian Eden, which even George momentarily admits to Cocoa when he tries to convince them to "play Adam and Even...and take advantage of paradise" (221). Clearly, Sapphira is the creator of a wondrous world and, coupled with her purported supernatural powers (Naylor 3) and reverence, a timeless figure whose presence is felt throughout the entire novel despite taking place long after her apparent passing.

Moreover, her name, which rests alone at the top of the family tree, looms over the second generation of Days; which consist of Elijah, Elisha, Joel, Daniel, Joshua, Amos, and Jonah; and the third generation; which consist of Matthew, Mark, Luke, Timothy, James, John, and John-Paul. The names of the second-generation Days are clear references to key figures of the Old Testament whereas the names of the third-generation Days allude to prominent individuals from the New Testament. However, all these names, which are male and Biblically inspired, immediately give way to the latter generations of which Cocoa belongs, and these names, like Sapphira's, are predominantly female and exist outside of Biblical tradition. Cocoa and Miranda, especially given her

nickname Mama Day, therefore represent a new New Testament and return to the matriarchal tradition that Sapphira cultivated. By the end of the novel, Cocoa experiences a rebirth, understanding and reaffirming her ancestral roots after a wayward experience in a patriarchal, stifling New York City.

Sapphira's matriarchal Eden also actively resists notions of cultural hegemony but does so through acts of (mother) nature. Many critics have explored the parallels between *Mama Day* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and nowhere is this parallel most evident than in the hurricane that appears in each novel, driving the final act in each respective work. For instance, Meisenhelder states,

Naylor has acknowledged her indebtedness to Hurston's description of the hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the one in *Mama Day* is similarly depicted as a black female force of liberation. In richly evocative ways, Naylor associates the storm with the foremother, Sapphira Wade, who functions in the novel as the prototype of Naylor's ideal black woman. She not only asserted both her autonomous ethnic and gender identity by defying her position as a slave and freeing herself from her white master; but through her heroic actions in securing the land for her descendants, she also made possible their freedom and cultural independence. (1445)

Like the Biblical Great Flood and Hurston's storm that ravages Belle Glade, the hurricane in Willow Springs is devastating, showing that Sapphira will indeed pour out her wrath in order to protect the Edenic Willow Springs. Even more so, the hurricane protects her great-great grandmother Cocoa by destroying the only bridge that connects Willow Springs to the quintessentially American mainland, ensuring that she does not leave until she reaffirms her roots; after all, one must attain self-knowledge in order to be free, and after suffering an identity crisis in New York, Willow Springs becomes her rehabilitative respite.

The hurricane also spurs on the events that bring about the tragic death of George, but it is a fate ultimately of his own doing. Meisenhelder, for instance, attributes his death

to the “rigid masculinities” (1446) that he embodies, but her analysis of Tea Cake’s toxic masculinity is far more convincing than George’s indirect, even sometimes timid, transgressions. Instead, George’s fault lies in his stubborn rejection of Willow Springs and the deleterious cultural influence on Cocoa that threatens to cut her from her ancestral goddess. Mama Day laments his lack of acceptance, desperately wanting him to serve as a new bridge that would bring her closer to Willow Springs instead of away from Eden:

a single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over....The Days were all rooted to the other place, but that boy had his own place within him. (284 285)

Unable to reach George, Mama Day understands the fate that he has chosen for himself. Like Pharaoh, George hardens his heart, which prevents him from genuinely accepting Sapphira and thus Cocoa, so like the mainland bridge, he must also be destroyed. Others are destroyed as well, for the wellbeing of Willow Springs. For instance, Meisenhelder indicates,

the storm also cleanses Willow Springs of various forms of enslavement-anything, in fact, that threatens black cultural health and autonomy. While the death of Bernice's child is one of the most emotionally wrenching scenes in the novel, Naylor suggests that what is purged is actually a model of motherhood that stifles children and enslaves mothers. (1446)

One readily understands this tragic sacrifice when Bernice exhaustively spoils “Little Caesar” throughout the novel, prompting the narrative voice of Willow Springs to say, “When you raise a god instead of a child, you’re bound to be serving him for the rest of your days” (162). Bernice commits the triple sin of elevating her child above Sapphira, sparing the rod and thus hating her child (*The Bible*, Proverbs 13:24), and perpetuating a tradition of motherhood that defines women exclusively by their roles as mothers. Like

George, she must pay for these offenses in ways that restore Willow Springs as an Edenic homeland.

The fact that Sapphira is “[p]ure African” (Naylor 2) cannot be ignored either. Naylor just does not ask her reader to ask, “what if God was a woman,” but to further ask, “what if God was a Black woman?” These questions directly challenge the domineering American idea of a White Christian God or White Jesus and White spirituality. Moreover, since the likes of Charles Chestnutt and Hurston, Naylor provides a rare positive portrayal of African religion and spirituality, a stark contrast to the often-negative stereotypes related especially to hoodoo, voodoo, and other similar African religious customs. In this regard, Mama Day emerges as a heroic conjure woman, healing and tending to the inhabitants of Willow Spring. At the very least, her success puts her on par with traditional, Western doctors, such as Dr. Smithfield, but clearly sets her apart from Dr. Buzzard, one of the aforementioned Western stereotypes of conjurers that Naylor seeks to satirize. Naylor’s reclamation of the African conjurer mirrors that of Robert Hayden’s in his poem “O Daedalus, Fly Away Home” (1962), in which he speaks of “an African juju man / weaving a wish and a weariness together / to make two wings” to fly home (6-8). Like Naylor, Hayden breaks the systemic cycle of perpetuating negative stereotypes about African theology and (re-)introduces positive characterizations to combat potential seeds of prejudice and ignorance that underlie many forms of xenophobia and bigotry in the United States. As evidenced by the title of his poem, Hayden also produces an amalgamation of classical Western literature in the form of Greek mythology, on one hand, and African theology, on the other. Naylor creates a similar concoction. Scholarship on the many allusions to Shakespeare’s works, especially

The Tempest, are too voluminous to fall within the scope of this dissertation; nevertheless, Naylor makes the conclusive point that even canonical Western works, such as those of Shakespeare, are not above deconstruction and in fact are desperately in need of it.

CHAPTER 5: HOME

This chapter examines Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* to explore the idea of tangible and intangible utopian communities for African Americans. The relevance of this topic comes into timely focus when one, for instance, considers how gentrification continues to expel disadvantaged groups from their physical homes, ushering in the kind of generational trauma that comes with being forcibly uprooted from homes that had seemed so meaningful and permanent. Since the abduction of Africans from their respective homelands and the perpetual dissolution of their descendants' families, the motif of a broken home has long been a major subject of interest within African-American culture. At its darkest, for instance, soul musician Gil Scott-Heron most accurately expresses this sentiment with the title of his 1971 hit "Home is Where the Hatred Is." The song underscores drug addiction and other social maladies that exemplify dystopian troubles that befall African-American communities.

As with music performed by African-American musicians, works of literature written by African-American authors also explore dystopian impulses to show just how African-American utopian desire has historically and presently proved disappointing despite myths that allude to the contrary. Unfortunately, only a relatively few number of scholars have specifically paid attention to works of African-American literature in this manner. This dearth in literary criticism is particularly regrettable, given that so many African-American authors have dedicated their works to the motif of home. Although Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), Robert Hayden's *O Daedalus, Fly Away Home*

(1943), Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012), and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) are just a handful of such works that make explicit references to home, such references need not be so conspicuous and, more often, generally are not. For instance, McKay's *Home to Harlem* highlights the historically, though recently gentrified, African-American neighborhood of Harlem as a potential, metropolitan haven or, depending on the author, dilapidated slum. Works such as Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Carl Van Vechten's controversial *Nigger Heaven* (1926) – each narrative set in Harlem – are two of the greatest examples that take on the dystopian approach of representing their respective Harlem communities as slums. In addition, George S. Schulyer's *Black no more; being an account of the strange and wonderful workings of science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933-1940* (1931) represents an even earlier dystopian exploration of Harlem. The incisive, satirical novel centers on a plot in which a scientific invention allows African-Americans to transform themselves into White Americans. Given this plot device, subject matter, and title, the novel is also notable for being an early work of Afrofuturism. First coined by Mark Deny in "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose" (1993), this relatively new and broad cultural movement encompasses the interplay between African-American culture and art and science and technology. Ripe with both utopian and dystopian themes, Afrofuturistic works range from those of Samuel Delany and Jean-Michel Basquiat to Parliament-Funkadelic and Sun Ra.

Moreover, works by African-American women writers, such as Hurston's and Morrison's, possess valuable insight into the challenges that African-American utopianism faces. In order to bring these challenges to light, this chapter analyzes the

respective failed African-American utopias in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Paradise*; and given the insurmountable influence one's community can effect on its members, the assertion in *Paradise* that "[h]ome is not a little thing" (212) bears tremendous implications. More specifically, this chapter explores how despite appearing as hopeful paradises in their own right in the same tradition of American exceptionalism, communities founded and entirely inhabited by African-Americans merely reinscribe oppressive hegemonies once they challenge such hegemonies in ways that do not confront the intersectional foundation of racial oppression within the United States. Nevertheless, another significant, related lesson one can learn from these novels is the importance of how communities can actively function as sites of empowerment and productiveness. This idea is especially the case when regarding the kind of close-knit rural or suburban enclaves found in these novels. As said by Larkin in reference to her mother's plans to expand her small Acorn community,

In small communities, she believed, people are more accountable to one another. Serious misbehavior is harder to get away with, harder even to begin when everyone who sees you knows who you are, where you live, who your family is, and whether you have any business doing what you're doing. (Butler, *Parable of the Talents* ch. 10)

Given its characteristics, heterotopia also figures as a central concept in this analysis. Originally conceived by Michel Foucault in 1966 and expanded upon in "Of Other Spaces" (1986), heterotopias are essentially sites that are characterized not by perfection, but by affirmation of difference. Foucault writes:

There are also...places that do exist...which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted...Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (24)

Foucault further cites zoos, prisons, and hospitals as examples of heterotopias because each represents marginal enclaves that mirror and belie the larger spaces that they help constitute. Therefore, heterotopia, much like Moylan's critical utopia, further scrutinizes the common and oversimplified conception of utopia as merely a representation of or a desire for perfection. Heterotopias thus perform a dual process by exposing any notion of a perfected place, such as the "exceptional America," as far less than perfect and by emphasizing within this "perfected place" an otherness that would otherwise appear hidden or glossed over. Moreover, as Foucault would have it, far from appearing as blemishes upon an otherwise immaculate horizon, heterotopias function as productive sites of resistance whereby false myths are challenged and difference is celebrated. Samuel Delany's aptly named *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) remains one of the few works of African-American literature that best represents such a heterotopia: for instance, the pluralistic, multicultural setting of Tethys, one of Neptune's moons, is characterized by a proliferation of freedom that spans race, sex, gender, and more – in stark contrast to the rather authoritarian atmosphere that pervades the standard decorum on Earth. As with Delany, themes that comprise heterotopia, utopia, and dystopia figure prominently in Hurston's work as well.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the central utopian setting is Eatonville, Florida, a small town run by African-Americans. Presented as a successful enclave beyond the reach of Jim Crow's heel, Eatonville appears as a refuge for the African-American characters, but also as an optimistic opportunity in which the characters can thrive. Disillusionment, however, quickly sets in as Janie Crawford, the main character, undergoes a series of abuses all at the tyrannical hands of Joe ("Jody") Starks, her

husband and mayor of Eatonville, and the townsfolk who comply with her husband. As a result of such oppression that mirrors the kind African-Americans themselves suffered at the hands of Whites, Janie's voice is silenced, and her movement is confined to the town store's porch. Dale Pattison presents the idea that the porch is a crucial moment in the novel where Janie resists and eventually grows into a liberated, independent woman:

[c]onsistent with Foucault's concept of the heterotopia as a space of resistance....For Janie, the porch ultimately provides a space outside of and counterpoised to the structures of race and gender that oppress her through much of the novel. In this regard, the porch functions as Hurston's most productive and focused subversive space. (12)

In this sense, the porch functions throughout the novel as a heterotopic site that Janie appropriates in order to effectively address her oppression and to challenge it. Contesting a common metanarrative that exalts a false sense of exclusionary homogeneity as a defining prerequisite for the existence of a harmonious community, Hurston reveals how deeply rooted racial oppression is in the United States, and how it is intrinsically linked to other forms of oppression such as sexism.

After all, Eatonville does appear as a harmonious community, a hospitable home for African Americans during the Jim Crow era, but the progression of the novel exposes this sense of unity as a façade. This revelation reminds readers of the old adage that if it's too good to be true, then it probably isn't. In other words, one must persistently pursue a vigilant approach, lest they fall into the potential dangers of short-sighted complacency. It remains painfully evident that slavery devastated African-American families, homes, and communities, but it did not completely sever them; for this reason, the challenge to reclaim them has been a longstanding and worthwhile journey, but one must resist the temptation to acquiesce and romanticize unfit homes. Settling for less may in fact produce a worse fate than, at least temporarily, doing without. Although Hurston

certainly was not the first to address these themes, she remains an important predecessor in relation to the many African-American (woman) writers who would follow in her footsteps. Many critics, such as Susan Meisenhelder and Lindsey Tucker, have discussed Hurston's expansive influence on a host of African-American works of literature, utopian or otherwise. The main objective in much of Hurston's works remains the journey of reclamation but the successful procurement of this aspiration without the perpetuation of the same conditions that led to the misfortune of loss in the first place.

Much more than the other four novels that remain the primary subjects of this study, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is particularly relevant because it represents a time that comprises the advent of the Great Migration. After the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the vast movement of millions of African-Americans from the Jim Crow South to the apparently more progressive northern, western, and midwestern areas of the United States reshaped the American landscape. In fact, despite the relative absence of the Great Migration within the national consciousness, this transformation of American demographics was so monumental that critics such as Madhu Dubey have referred to this period of time as "a moment of intense urban crisis and conflict" (103). Surely enough, the Jim Crow era accounts for one of the most turbulent periods of American history regarding racial tensions. For instance, even though most lynching of African-Americans occurred in the South, they also occurred as far north as Michigan and New York and even as far west as California and Oregon ("Lynching in America"). Despite the myth that these midwestern, northern, and western towns and cities were havens, many African American migrants found themselves suffering the same fate that they did in the South.

Thus, Hurston reveals that this nationwide search for a hospitable African-American home need not end somewhere away from the South. Instead, Hurston, like Janie does by the end of the novel, retraces steps and returns home, seeking to reclaim what was lost. As Dubey puts it, “if black community is perceived to be irreparably fractured in the contemporary city, the folk domain of the rural south operates as a site where integral black communities can be restored” (104). Given the failed promises and new obstacles engendered by the Great Migration, the hope of imagining hospitable homes in the South; especially given its important cultures, traditions, etc.; is an endeavor too valuable to abandon. The recent migration, or return, of African Americans to the South in what has been called the “New Migration” may be a testament to the idea that escaping to greener pastures is less likely and more difficult than one may think. To be clear, Hurston does not simply designate her Southern setting as an Eden-like African-American utopia. In fact, the massive hurricane that ravages Florida during the climax of the novel is more akin to the Flood in the Christian Bible that destroyed a civilization that was so inhospitable that God deemed it beyond redeemable. In the novel, the South is neither romanticized as a perfect abode nor demonized as a dwelling of the damned; instead, the Southern setting functions as a marginal site of communal empowerment in which to resist harmful metanarratives that typically go unquestioned.

Nevertheless, utopian themes remain a major component of Janie’s growth into a liberated woman who has resisted complying with a false sense of peace and has instead successfully cultivated a healthy relationship between her individuality and her community. Even though the bulk of scholarship regarding *Their Eyes Were Watching God* correctly identifies Janie’s growth as an event fundamental to the novel, it neglects

this utopian insight and therefore misses a key element of Hurston's multi-faceted critique of metanarratives and the danger they pose to individuals and communities alike. As the novel reveals, Eatonville's defining characteristic of being an all-Black town is a sorely, if not tragically, insufficient quality if one hopes to produce a hospitable home for African Americans; much more work is needed.

Joe Stark's tyrannical oversight of Eatonville clearly demonstrates this point. In one of the most striking examples of the reiteration of harmful, false norms, Joe essentially transforms Eatonville into a scene that more resembles a slave plantation, with him as the slave owner/master and the rest of the townsfolk, including his wife, as the slaves. After he buys the land to develop the town and emerges as the *de facto* mayor, the narrator provides a telling description of him:

He had a bow-down command in his face.... Take for instance that new house of his. It had two stories with porches, with bannisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the "big house." (71-72)

Joe's domineering personality, denigration of the townsfolk, and desperate hunger for power over others reflects his place of residence, which towers over others' like a mansion would over slaves' quarters on a plantation.

In addition, Joe's resemblance to rich White folks (54) and many other similar comparisons made throughout the novel demonstrates that despite being African-American, Joe nonetheless perpetuates the historical White oppression of his own people. Later, Mr. and Mrs. Turner, including her desire to "lighten up de race" (175), also echo Joe's ironic cycle of oppression, proving that White oppression can indeed have a Black face. While sharing Hicks's suspicions of Joe, Coker provides even further insight:

Us colored folks is too envious of one 'nother. Dat's how come us don't git no further than us do. Us talks about de white man keepin' us down! Shucks! He don't have tuh. Us keeps our own selves down. (65)

In an all-Black town that promises paradise, one should never resort to complacency, lest they risk undermining their own commitment to peace.

Moreover, Janie compares Joe to George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and “uh king uh something” (84) when he buys Matt’s pitiful mule in order to free it from labor. However, the liberation of this mule and the mule’s transformation into the town’s mascot, however, is just another shrewd myth-building tactic that Joe undertakes in exerting control over the townsfolk, who marvel at his apparent generosity. Despite George Washington’s public reputation as the courageous commander of the American Revolutionary Army and the first President of the United States, he nonetheless owned slaves and did not abolish slavery. Likewise, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, a tactic as shrewd as Joe’s exploitation of Matt’s mule, did more to prevent antislavery France and antislavery Britain from joining the Confederacy in the American Civil War than it did to liberate the slaves, who virtually all were still under the legal authority of the Confederate States. More so, Lincoln’s primary importance consisted of preserving the Union, rather than liberating slaves, let alone abolishing slavery. Here, Hurston invites the reader to take a more critical look at seemingly heroic and famed leaders, whether they be presidents, mayors, or kings, and especially the communities over which they preside; this invitation is all the more necessary the more established and beloved such leaders and their communities are.

Joe’s tyrannical reiteration most vividly appears in his treatment of Janie. Regulating the foreground, he banishes her to the background and controls every aspect of her life, regarding her hair, her speech, and especially her mobility. However, as previously mentioned, Janie repurposes the heterotopic porch, which exists on the

margins of her store and the town, and actively challenges Joe. On the porch, Janie finds the courage to speak freely and to not submit to the authority of Joe and other men who dominate the town. For example, this resistance is evident when Janie admonishes the men of the town for despising Mrs. Robbins, merely referred to by the first name of her husband (“Mrs. Tony”), for apparently embarrassing her husband, some of them even determinedly declaring that they would have killed her for doing so:

Janie did what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation. “Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was ’bout y’all turning out so smart after Him makin’ yuh different; and how surprised y’all is goin’ tuh be if you ever find out you don’t know half as much ’bout us as you think you do. It’s so easy to make yo’self out God Almighty when you ain’t got nothin’ tuh strain against but women and chickens.” (105)

Even with Joe in her presence, Janie directly attacks the men’s sense of unwarranted superiority and empathetically comes to the defense of a fellow woman victim.

Interestingly enough, Janie’s attack centers on the men’s ignorance and insecurity, exposing themselves as victims as well. Pattison correctly diagnoses this issue:

Their failure to embrace the porch as a potentially productive discursive space and their subsequent movement toward masculinity as a means of empowerment reveal how oppressive race relations have permeated the social mindset of many African American males; they channel their frustrations by locating power in masculinity, thereby reinforcing binary oppositions. (14)

The kind of toxic masculinity that pervades White American society at large finds its way into Black American society, even one that closes itself off from the former society in an attempt to rid itself of said affliction.

Janie eventually uses her marginal position to successfully subvert the patriarchal systems that attempts to oppress her due to her race and gender. Her relationship with Tea Cake emerges as a stark example of this subversion. Although very cautious at first, Janie

flirts on the porch with Tea Cake, a man younger and poorer than she, and as she bucks against standard norms of gender relations, she “[feels] like a child breaking the rules” (133). This rule-breaking is what helps liberate her to such an extent that the artificial responsibilities and unwarranted burdens that she suffers as an adult woman disappear and bring her back to her coveted childhood, a time even before her grandmother forces her to into an undesirable and ultimately unsuccessful marriage to Logan Killicks. With this newfound understanding, Janie can only admonish her grandmother:

Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. (120)

The horizon is an effective representation of an empowering margin, because although it represents a boundary, like Hurston indicates, it is an infinite boundary not limited by predetermined notions or unquestioned customs.

Unlike her grandmother, Janie utilizes marginal space to the fullest. Janie’s deconstruction of gender norms throughout the novel is borne in her marriage to a younger man, capacity to not be defined by motherhood, and learning to shoot and hunt. With this act of resistance, Janie successfully moves “beyond the binary thinking that reinforces dominant discourses of race and gender in the South” (Pattison 14). When Logan wants her to work with him on his farm, she resists but acquiesces, and when Joe’s health fails, she grudgingly steps into the role as his caretaker. In contrast, Janie readily plants and harvests beans alongside with Tea Cake in the Everglades and willingly takes care of him when he gets sick. The difference between her successful marriage with Tea Cake and her other failed marriages is that no longer constrained, she is free to act in the

way she desires and to do so within a healthy relationship that cultivates her agency and growth.

As in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Paradise* also features a town founded and inhabited by African-Americans; whereas the mythical hope of utopian liberation characterizes Eatonville, this same hope characterizes Ruby, a town in *Paradise*. Ruby, itself an off-shoot of a previously failed African-American utopian community called Haven, which was founded after the “Disallowing,” when a large group of darker-skinned African Americans were denied entry in the aptly-named Fairly, a town of lighter-skinned African Americans. Ruby nonetheless seems ideal enough, having no jail or cemetery; however, as scholars such as Richard L. Schur correctly point out, “[i]n *Paradise*, Morrison portrays how African Americans have houses, but not homes” (277). The Ruby community is also marked by ironic colorism and callous rigidity, most of it religious and patriarchal and therefore inevitably hypocritical. Characterizing Freud’s narcissism of minor differences – a phenomenon wherein hostility arises from minute dissimilarities between two homogenous groups, the lighter-skinned and darker-skinned townspeople repeat the prejudice that they suffered at the hands of racist Whites. Moreover, like Janie, the women must suffer at the hands of a pervasively oppressive patriarchal culture. The narrative ultimately reaches a violent boiling point when men from Ruby murder a disparate group of women squatting at the ecumenical Convent, an abandoned but repurposed mansion that, like its group of vagabonds, has become demonized. Thus, Morrison constructs an interesting parallel between the two enclaves: the hegemonic Ruby and the heterotopic Convent. The fate of the Convent reflects a wide

breadth of scholarship that correctly describes *Paradise* as a tragic reiteration of oppression.

Nevertheless, whereas *Their Eyes Were Watching God* gives the reader a glimpse into a successful heterotopia emerging from an unsuccessful utopia, *Paradise*, which had the original title of “War,” gives its reader a glimpse of the utter destruction that utopian desire can inevitably wreak on victims, perpetrators, and innocent bystanders alike. Albeit in different ways, in *Paradise* Morrison accomplishes the same objective she does in *Beloved* (1987), the first of a trilogy of novels that *Paradise* concludes, “she articulates the devastating consequences of a community's trying to ‘pass on,’ or deny, its collective history before coming to terms with it” (Romero 424).

Therefore, Morrison demonstrates the apparent irony inherent in utopianism, that an implicit specter of violence, sometimes unbridled and shocking, is inevitable. The novel initially achieves this effect by beginning in media res with the massacre at the Convent: “They shoot the white girl first” (3). One by one, the Ruby men murder all the women at the Convent, which itself is “[s]haped like a live cartridge” (71), all in the name of the utopianism their town represents. As Evans points out in her exploration of thematic, utopian narratives, “[t]heme requires either compliance or violence” (384). Nevertheless, one can trace this utopianism to American history and culture. Although Ruby is a manifestation of Haven, Haven is also a manifestation of its larger setting, the United States. The same American historical and cultural maladies, such as violence against women, survive throughout the different iterations of the same ideal setting. Like the misogynistic men in Eatonville, the men of Ruby are just as guilty in their normative

belief in and practice of an overbearing dominance over women, as well as a xenophobic attitude towards outsiders, even including fellow African Americans.

As for the many targets of Ruby's xenophobia, Reverend Misner, the young and rebellious newcomer to Ruby, represents a direct challenge to the Ruby hegemony that the Morgan twin brothers Deacon ("Deek") and Steward usher in and maintain. In one of his many charged exhortations that pepper the novel, he rallies against the direction that Ruby blindly pushes towards:

What was it about this town, these people, that enraged him? . . . All of them maintained an icy suspicion of outsiders...Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates. (160-161)

Morrison demonstrates how an entire town can imprison itself with its own ethos. How can a town function as a hospitable home when its future is obliterated by its past? Ruby is nothing more than a reactionary copy of Haven, its shadow in which Ruby must forever remain. The town does not seek to grow but instead seeks to merely mimic. This sense of stagnant duplication especially pervades even the town's racial makeup, despite being all-Black:

The town of Ruby reverses and reiterates the race valuations interpreted in the Disallowing by positioning the darkest-skinned members of their community on the top, and outlawing (or at least marginalizing) any variance. This master narrative is taught to children. (Evans 384)

Like one side of the same coin, the descendants of Haven merely invert the fundamental discrimination that they suffered. It comes as no surprise that many of the Ruby young adults, including Reverend Misner, rebel against their older counterparts; the former

desire the freedom to create their own futures instead of conforming to a script that has been written by others.

Although Ruby figures as a town destined for an abject implosive failure, there exists a kernel of hope. For instance, initially a “necessary service in Ruby” (120), the Ace Flood’s store falls from grace when the townspeople’s patronage falters as they look for cheaper and more welcoming places to shop. Cynthia Dobbs provides an insightful interpretation of the store: “Ace’s inability to respond to . . . changes threatens the viability of this space. The blueprint for a design ‘built to last’ becomes a straight-jacket” (118). Like the town itself, the store finds itself a victim of the past, only to have a dismal future. Matters only drastically change when Ace’s daughter Anna reconfigures the store: she diversifies and modernizes the store, offers complimentary drinks, and “[caters] to the appetites of the young who liked to gather” (Morrison, *Paradise*, 120). Anna, herself somewhat of an outsider due to her relatively young age and mixed heritage, represents the younger generation of Ruby residents who seek change and no longer want Ruby to exist as a doomed anachronism.

Dobbs provides further insight regarding the importance of Anna’s store:

Most important, Anna’s inventory caters to the next generation of the town, while her design ensures a space not merely for shopping, but for communing. The table and chairs she puts out for the elderly and rural visitors guarantee that all community members’ mercantile and social needs are met. . . . What is crucial here is that Anna’s economic profits derive from her sensitivity to her community’s changing desires and requirements and her ability to reshape the original Old Father’s designs for the store to meet the heterogeneous needs of her town. (119)

Dobbs’s analysis is accurate, but the utopian nature of Anna’s store reveals a fuller picture of Morrison’s message, one that reminds the reader of Hurston’s overarching literary influence, whether indirect or direct. Like Janie’s store (porch) in *Their Eyes*

Were Watching God, Anna's store in *Paradise* functions as a crucial heterotopia since it is a site that, through its oppositional and subversive relationship with the rest of the town, exposes Ruby for its failure to fulfill its arrogant claim to utopia. The fact that Anna, a woman, usurps her "Old Father" also is no accident. In a town as patriarchal as Ruby, the successful ascendance of a woman gives credence to the hope for female empowerment within Ruby but also hope for the town itself. Most importantly, Anna's store offers a blueprint that will not imprison the townspeople but will instead open their minds to a range of possibilities that can accommodate their very different lives and empower them to prosper, whether financially or personally. For these reasons, Reverend Misner, as well as Anna, freely choose to stay in Ruby despite knowing the town's hidden yet monstrous nature perhaps more than anyone else in the novel:

Soon Ruby will be like any other country town: the young thinking of elsewhere; the old full of regret. The sermons will be eloquent but fewer and fewer will pay attention or connect them to everyday life. How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? Who will protect them from their leaders? Suddenly Richard Misner knew he would stay. Not only because Anna wanted to, or because Deek Morgan had sought him out for a confession of sorts, but also because there was no better battle to fight, no better place to be than among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people. (306)

Far from an African-American utopia, Ruby descends further into dystopia; however, Morrison echoes the sentiment that the community can save the town and that the town is indeed worth saving. Morrison steers very carefully away from the old definition of a utopia as a perfect place and instead opts for a home that is willing to accept flaws and work towards redemption.

Nevertheless, the preeminent heterotopia that appears in the novel is the Convent. Like Anna's store, its connection to the Convent subtly introduced by its willingness to

sell “peppers the Convent grew” (120), the Convent exists 17 miles away on the parameters of its local setting but emerges as an even stronger foil to Ruby. Whereas the patriarchal Morgan brothers lord over Ruby, the matriarchal Consolata (“Connie”) tolerantly navigates the wellbeing of a few, disparate women. Despite the women’s different circumstances and the Ruby men’s repulsion of their supposed “female malice” (3), the Convent develops into a home defined by acceptance, provision, and safety. One can trace this exact kind of home to the one Morrison envisions in her essay “Home,” a predecessor of *Paradise* three years before its publication. In the essay, she describes her hope:

a kind of out of doors safety where “a sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. . . . And if a light shone from a window up a ways and the cry of a colicky baby caught her attention, she might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby. The two of them might take turns massaging the infant stomach, rocking, or trying to get a little soda water down. When the baby quieted they could sit together for a spell, gossiping, chucking low so as not to wake anybody else.” (9)

The novel generally begins with a restatement of this passage in order to ironically describe the town of Ruby; however, regarding the Convent, other very similar scenes occur in and conclude the novel even after the Convent women are murdered. In one instance, the narrator assures the reader that the Ruby men’s claims that the women are malicious are falsities, if not projections, and that if one were to visit the Convent and its inhabitants, they would marvel at its hospitable nature: “[H]ow calmly themselves they seemed. . . . Then she might realize what was missing: unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted. Or hunted either, she might have added. But there she would have been wrong” (266). The Convent is a self-sustaining safe place that offers communal healing, transformations, and long sought-after peace. Tapping into the

womanist tradition portrayed in such works as Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Morrison envisions a matriarchal garden (of Eden) continually nurtured by an empathetic community one can naturally call home. The fact that this community succumbs to the violence of Ruby only serves to underscore the looming threat of wayward utopianism and the necessity to resist such peril.

CHAPTER 6: NATION

This chapter comes full circle with its censuring the founding of the United States, evocating the disappointing outcomes of the all-Black towns in Hurston's, Butler's, and Morrison's novels. More specifically, the focus of this chapter extends that of the last chapter by shifting from an analysis of utopianism in African-American literature within a local context to that of a national context. In continuing the use of *Paradise*, but also, to a smaller extent, the *Parable* series as focal texts, this chapter attempts to address the following questions: What is the relationship between African-Americans as a people and the United States as a nation? Given historic, progressive racial achievements in the United States best epitomized by Barack Obama's successful presidential candidacy in 2008 and subsequent re-election in 2012, how credible is the common claim that the United States has entered an epoch of post-racial jubilee? This chapter argues that these texts help elucidate that far from being full-fledged citizens, African-Americans have instead endured life as strangers in a foreign land. Moreover, by depicting the often futile and ironically destructive consequences of utopian thought in disturbingly and surrealistically thought-provoking ways, these texts reveal the ethos of the American Dream to be nothing more than a dangerous and often exploitable myth with remarkably disappointing results.

To more fully address this chapter's topical focus on the relationship between African-Americans, their status as American citizens, and the experiences, whether favorable or pernicious, borne from this status, a discussion of the concept of the modern nation state is necessary. More than any utopian thinker, Phillip Wegner drives home the

connection between utopian thought and nationhood. In his 2002 groundbreaking text, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*, Wegner makes the persuasive argument that it was utopian literature that gave rise to the advent of the nation state. He makes the point that it was not a mere coincidence that utopian discourse going back to More's *Utopia* flourished and reached a zenith just at the time when newly and fully formed nations were being created. Works like *Utopia* had imagined and negotiated ideal places for hundreds of years, but such worlds would eventually actualize these places as sovereign nations. In this vein, Wegner makes the further point that utopian narratives, far from being limited by the confines of art, ushered in modernity.

The same kind of utopian impression can also be said for the United States, especially given modernism's close relationship to the Age of Enlightenment. It was the works of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Voltaire who inspired American founding fathers such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, both who, regardless of personal ambivalences, propagated slavery, the latter having opposed the abolition of slavery even despite holding the distinction of being the only founding-father president to never own a slave. In their utopian aspirations, the founding fathers propagated a fundamentally racist and hegemonic superstructure that undergirded a warm welcoming to White Americans (wherein "White" was synonymous to "American" and "citizen"), or anyone who could pass for such, and a rude awakening for African-Americans, who had little-to-no chance of prospering.

For this reason, African-American writers had no choice except to expose the United States for what it was: a nation that broke its promise of utopian liberty, or worse,

a nation that was intentionally and originally inhospitable for African Americans. For example, in “300 Years of *1984*” (1988), Ishmael Reed argues that the United States has been a dystopia for African Americans since its founding. The dystopian implications in Reed’s title, an explicit reference to George Orwell’s groundbreaking dystopian novel *1984* (1949), is further emphasized by the fact that the original title was “A White Man’s Utopia Is a Black Man’s Dystopia” before the original was discarded for its potentially racist implications. Nevertheless, Reed’s point is clear: therein lies a segregation of White Americans and African Americans, where utopia is more naturally accessible to White Americans, but less naturally accessible, or rather inaccessible, to African Americans.

This chapter upholds Reed’s apparently pessimistic, but rather, more accurately, pragmatic and disillusioned claim that as a nation, for African-Americans, the United States has figured more dystopian than utopian. More specifically, this chapter upholds this claim by arguing that *Paradise* reflects a dissenting assessment of African-American utopian progress in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as only marginally successful at best. One is reminded of Frederick Douglass’s “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (1852). In this famous speech, Douglass highlights the identity crisis of the African-American slave (and by extension, African Americans who were not slaves), exposing her nation’s hypocrisy of being a liberal, yet slaveholding nation. Yet Douglass’s appeal to return to the utopian ideals espoused by the United States Constitution fails to take account that the content of this founding document legitimized slavery, even if indirectly, by counting African-American slaves as three-fifths human. The same longing for a “true” restoration of a nation hospitable for African-Americans persists through the Harlem Renaissance, epitomized by Langston Hughes’s “Let

America Be America Again” (1935), to the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century, exemplified by Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” (1963). Moreover, this same longing exists in the twenty-first century, best characterized by President Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” (2008). That this last appeal echoes a strive towards perfection illustrates a prevailing utopian sentiment and also evidences one that is perpetually unrealized.

It is within this context that *Paradise* makes African-Americans’ failed hope in America painfully clear. In her 2001 article “The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” Katrine Dalsgård is right to point out how *Paradise* embodies the ironic harm that the idea of American utopianism afflicts on African-Americans: “[t]aking place in July of 1976, the time of the American bicentennial and thus presumably a time of national celebration, the community’s massacre of the women at the Convent figures as a tragic inversion of American ideals” (241). Whether written into the Declaration of Independence in 1776 or eloquently spoken by a charismatic orator in 2008, these American ideals are characterized by *Paradise* as utopian metanarratives always out of reach and thus not worth seeking, especially given the respective disastrous consequences. In “This Side of Paradise,” an interview with *Amazon.com*’s Marcus James, Morrison herself makes this point clear, as she talks about her motivation in writing *Paradise*: “I was interested in the kind of violent conflict that could happen as a result of efforts to establish a Paradise.” Despite its hopeful religiosity and determination, the Ruby community, in an attempt to attain and maintain a state of apparent nirvana, destroys itself as well as another community, the Convent.

To return to the broadest level of Morrison's critique, her novel ultimately aims to deconstruct American exceptionalism. Essential to this enterprise is the argument that Ruby is a microcosm of the United States. For instance, Channette Romero promotes this idea and provides an excellent point of how closely the narrative intertwines with history of the United States, from its chronological parallels to the founding of the United States to the numerous references of significant events that have been legitimized into official American history. Moreover, Romero states that "[m]aimed and murdered black bodies are...necessary casualties in constructing an exceptional, superior nation" (421) in order to argue that Morrison attempts to redeem these Black bodies. Though this argument is well-founded, it exists within a larger argument that American exceptionalism is a dangerous metanarrative that is not quite exceptional itself but can be adopted easily, whether consciously or not, by others. Like the Native Americans that the country sacrificed in the name of Manifest Destiny, the women of the Convent share a similar fate in order to preserve the exceptional nature of Ruby. Moreover, using Deborah McDowell as her guide, Dobbs correctly traces this exceptionalism to the Black nationalism of the United States in the 1970s and the 1980s (117). This point is particularly salient when one thinks of the African-American women, gay, and lesbian writers who were victims of the hypermasculine nature of some seminal African-American writers, including Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, and Kwame Ture. After all, although the older and more traditional Ruby men take lead in the murder of the Convent women, the younger and more rebellious Ruby men, who are the former's rivals, assume an equally active role in the murders. One is left to ponder: if African Americans successfully ushered in and

inhabited an African-American nation, just how much would it differ from their former nation?

Without any critical examination of the metanarratives that underpin present forms of oppression, the answer very well may be not much different at all, and one major reason for this tragic outcome lies in the power of national symbols. For Ruby, the Oven clearly emerges as the central national icon for Ruby. A relic from Haven, the Oven functions as a nostalgic and myth-building monument of the purity of Ruby, Haven's worthy descendent:

Zechariah [Deacon and Steward's grandfather] corralled some of the men into building a cook oven. They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman's kitchen or nursed a white child. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the rape of women who worked in white kitchens was if not a certainty a distinct possibility—neither of which they could bear to contemplate. (99)

For the men, the Oven essentially is an important signifier of the exclusive nature of the Ruby women's dark skin and chastity, which is a crucial detail, given the juxtaposition between the Ruby women and each of the Convent women who, according to Ruby patriarch Deacon, represents an "obscene breed of female" (279); in fact, Deacon despises their "streetwalkers' clothes and whores' appetites; mocking and desecrating...their efforts to build a town where the vision could flourish. He would never forgive them...." (279). The Oven constructs this strictly dichotomous Madonna-whore complex, wherein the latter's destruction necessitates the former's existence, again evoking the violence inherent in utopianism.

The use of "desecrating" also elevates the Oven on a divine plane, as if it were the Biblical Ark of the Covenant, a sacred relic essential to the good fortune of ancient Israel. Ironically enough, the pure Ruby women must also suffer, but in silence:

The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed, moved and reassembled it. But privately they resented the truck space given over to it....Oh, how the men loved putting it back together; how proud it had made them, how devoted. A good thing, she thought, as far as it went, but it went too far. (103)

The Ruby women, much more than their male counterparts, have the foresight to see the harmful and oppressive nature of the Oven but must bear its weight to maintain the façade of Ruby as paradise. Such sentiments provide a clearer, more informed explanation for the increasingly emotionally charged controversies surrounding national symbols in the United States in the 21st century. Most obvious are the fears and violence regarding memorial statues and the American and Confederate flags, which continues to increasingly polarize a diverse range of Americans, leading to protests and bans. These controversies continue as different Americans seek to resist or modify the patriotism, nationalism, chauvinism, and other ideals that the American flag represents. In the same manner, the younger generations in Ruby also seek to do the same with the Oven, and the controversy is just as zealously charged.

The most palpable depiction of this conflict occurs when the younger generation and older generation fight over the partially intelligible inscription that appears on the Oven, which reads “The Furrow of His Brow”; the former, who are more proactive, believe that its full inscription says, “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” whereas the latter, who are more reactive, contend that it instead declares, “Beware the Furrow of His Brow.” Exerting their patriarchal supremacy, the older generation have their way:

As could have been predicted, Steward had the last word—or at least the words they all remembered as last because they broke the meeting up. “Listen here,” he said, his voice thick and shapely with Blue Boy. “If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake.” (87)

With a never-ending threat of violence looming over Ruby, the town suffers a tenuous respite from brutality. Although various critics such as Evans have argued that the Oven is an empty monument, this icon instead serves a vital role in perpetuating a metanarrative for Ruby in much the way the American flag does for the United States and violence over the meanings of these icons persist. Nevertheless, as the LGBT pride and African-American flags, Juneteenth, Indigenous People's Day, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (the African-American National Anthem), and progressive amendments to the United States Constitution have shown, orthodox national iconography can and must be challenged in a variety of ways in order to push towards a more inclusive and democratic nation.

Butler's *Parable* series in a more explicit fashion also furthers the idea of a turbulent nation. Butler devotes much of the first novel to the dangerous journey Lauren and her friends must navigate in order to reach and found their Earthseed community. This journey relies on the much-established generic tradition of travel literature, but also, in particular, on slave narratives. Always in danger of being "captured," Lauren must rely on her precocious acumen to reach a Northern Californian "promised land" – itself ironically something of a plantation of "three hundred acres...[m]ost of it...good for farming" (3951-3952). In order to succeed in her trip, she even has to pass as a man, lending more credence to the intrinsic intersection between race and gender in ways that the slave narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* did 133 years earlier when Ellen and William Craft traveled northward to successfully escape slavery, Ellen having to disguise herself as a White man while William disguised himself as her attendant.

The pressure, often of necessity, for the African-American to travel from her home in search of liberation even well after slavery is best documented by Isabel Wilkerson in her 2010 groundbreaking work, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. The respective book is the product of decades of research in which she chronicles the migration of thousands of African Americans from the antebellum South to the “progressive” North during much of last third of the nineteenth century and the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, a close reading shows that Wilkerson’s epic reflects dystopian, rather than utopian, thought because her work documents African Americans’ abject inability to thrive within the United States. Throughout *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren and especially her African-American friends in much the same way figure more as second-class citizens or immigrants to their own country, a metaphor *Parable of the Talents* goes on to reify in its most sinister sense when Lauren and her friends are enslaved by the White supremacist group Christian America. This kind of alienation generally reminds one of the long, tragic legacy of African-American expatriates that includes Richard Wright, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Paul Robeson, Marcus Garvey, and many others.

The *Parable* series also demonstrates how nationalist, utopian thought is often used as rhetorical manipulations. In addition to Jefferson’s shrewd use of liberalism to help found a slaveholding republic, American politicians have continued to weaponize American utopian ideals for rather dystopian ends. For instance, it is no surprise that in their bids for election, politicians such as John Kerry, Rick Santorum, and Donald Trump have uprooted Hughes’s poem “Let America Be America Again” as campaign slogans.

This cynicism warrants a justified distrust of American utopianism that is best encapsulated in Lauren's faithlessness in American politics as a mechanism for change.

She says,

He's the only person I know who's going to vote at all. Most people have given up on politicians. After all, politicians have been promising to return us to the glory, wealth, and order of the twentieth century ever since I can remember. (302)

Lauren's disillusionment peaks in *Parable of Talents* when Andrew Steele Jarret, the tyrannical president of the United States and leader of Christian America, persecutes dissidents in his campaign to restore the nation to its former glory. What is significant is that the established gains made by African-American pioneers such as Douglass, who himself had envisioned the city of Washington, D.C., to play "a symbolic role...to move beyond its slaveholding past and become the literal embodiment of the promises of America" (Culbertson 912), King, and, by extension, Obama, are rendered fruitless by the perpetual plight of African Americans. The lofty aims of American liberalism, democracy, and integration are as empty as they were when they were espoused by White Americans.

Regarding the figure of Jarret, the fact that Butler more or less prophesies Trump's presidency almost two decades beforehand and even showcases his exact political slogan, "Make America Great Again," only proves that, like in good Jameson fashion, she has proven herself a proficient archaeologist of the future and thus can proficiently study the past in order to predict the cyclical calamities that one must resist in order to change their future for the best. Like Morrison, Butler also demonstrates the powerful influence national iconography can exert, even slogans, whether words, phrases, or sentences. Just as 20th century Italian irredentist fascists galvanized citizens in attempt to reclaim some kind of lost glory and 21st century American patriotic politicians can

exploit the tragedy of the September 11 attacks, Jarret extracts full use of the potent marriage between nationalism and nostalgia. In one of his most prominent sermons, he preaches:

“There was a time, Christian Americans, when our country ruled the world,” he said. “America was God’s country and we were God’s people and God took care of his own. Now look at us. Who are we? What are we? What foul, seething, corrupt heathen concoction have we become?”

“Are we Christian? Are we? Can our country be just a little bit Christian and a little bit Buddhist, maybe? How about a little bit Christian and a little bit Hindu? Or maybe a country can be a little bit Christian and a little bit Jewish? How about a little bit Christian and a little bit Moslem? Or perhaps we can be a little bit Christian and a little bit pagan cultist?”

(Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, ch. 5)

Jarret reminisces, or fantasizes, about a greater United States that existed in the past and that his followers must reclaim. However, in order for this America to be great, undesirable citizens must fall victim to eradication. As Tweedy points out, “Jarret's vision and destiny can only be accomplished through the elimination of cultural as well as religious difference. His merger of faith with nationalism uses racism, classism, and xenophobia in an attempt to reclaim the divine provenance of God” (6). In other words, as is always the case, nationalists scapegoat certain groups of people. Like the Ruby men’s condemnation of the Convent women, Jarret also demonizes those on his laundry list of enemies of the nation, calling them “allies of Satan” (Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, ch. 5). Conjuring images of atrocities such as the Inquisition, the Holocaust, the Tulsa Race Massacre, and the Salem Witch Trials, Jarret’s followers and the Ruby men hunt and kill their victims, solidifying the intrinsic relationship between nationalism and violence, especially within the context of the pursuit of utopian ideals.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This dissertation responds to several questions: Given the long history of American utopian literature, what, if any, role have African-American women writers played in this particular literary tradition? Moreover, what significance can one attribute to this apparent role? Thus, this dissertation bears witness to a longstanding engagement between African-American women writers and utopianism both in literary fiction and criticism and extracts from this literature a nuanced criticism of American history and culture. This criticism illuminates the latent dangers inherent in the superficial optimism that utopianism conveys, namely when such utopianism is based in myths and metanarratives that define the United States as exceptional. The hardships endured by African Americans from the founding of the nation to today speak to a different experience brought to full fruition in African-American utopian literature, an experience that lies within the margins of mainstream American culture.

Representing an indictment of American utopianism, Enlightenment thinking, and modernist optimism, African-American utopian literature rests comfortably in the annals of postmodernism. This kind of literature provides much-needed critique of such common ideals – from the American Dream to the idealism of post-racialism – and also scrutinizes the conventional wisdom that held such movements as the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century as exceptional events that have perfected an imperfect nation and restored it to its original, pure state. One especially cannot ignore this point after witnessing a perpetual political, economic, and social stagnation of African Americans despite what may appear as significant gains elsewhere. In essence, this

dissertation's goal is to explore African-American utopian, and thereby its complement – dystopian, literature to deconstruct and expose commonly held beliefs in the United States as harmful towards African-Americans precisely, in many cases, because they're conventional and thus unchallenged.

What then is the solution? What do African-American women writers, such as Morrison and Butler, offer? While they do not propose panaceas in their criticism, they do, however, offer new ways of viewing conventional ideas, events, and the like in ways that eschew uncritical examinations and encourage provocative demystification. Their works suggest that utopia is something to *not* aspire to, especially if it is a utopia defined by exclusion, oppression, and naivety. These authors provide cautionary tales to remind us to question our past as well as the principles that govern such a past so that we can better arm ourselves in the present to effect not a perfect future, but one that is much more mindful in proactively escaping a utopian/dystopian binary.

Therefore, as *Parable of the Talents* especially has proven, the five novels that remain the focus of this dissertation are limitlessly valuable in their utopian critique, but also their prescience is as important as their admonishment. These novels motivate their readers to avoid blind or passive acquiescence to normative thought and practice and to instead gravitate toward assuming a proactively critical eye towards history and culture. In other words, the novels provide an urgent call for vigilance, and given the exploration of integral institutions that consist of religion, community, nation, race, gender, and other major facets of life, the stakes are too high to dismiss such a call. Moreover, one should always mind the inherent relationship between utopianism and violence, a relationship that has historically deteriorated into war and has thus claimed millions of lives. At the

present moment in the 21st century, this issue is particularly relevant given the rise of nationalism, especially across Europe.

As referenced throughout this dissertation, these novels do not, however, exist in a vacuum. Instead, they converse with, modify, and influence each other. Whether explicitly or implicitly utopian, African-American literature boasts a rich history of intertextuality that has raised important questions and posited equally impactful answers in the debate on what constitutes an ideal place and how to effect such a novelty. Given the aforementioned prophetic nature of these novels, their narratives blur the lines between fiction and reality so vividly that large groups of peoples, lest they miss bits of keen wisdom that apply to their lives, force themselves to listen closely especially when these texts speak to each other.

For example, Petry's *The Street* tells its reader that the American Dream is more mythical and exclusive than its symbolic interpretation seems to suggest. Faithfully following the figure of Benjamin Franklin as a model of social mobility only found in the land of opportunity that is United States, a poverty-stricken Lutie repeatedly and tragically falls short of this goal and ultimately resorts to killing her would-be rapist and abandoning her son. Novels such as these further challenge forgone conclusions woven into the fabric of American exceptionalism, arguing, for example, that the American exaltation of rugged individualism is insufficient and doomed to fail without an equal devotion to community. Iconography that perpetuate these forgone conclusions are just as problematic; for example, the Statue of Liberty still claims to be a welcoming symbol of immigration even as immigration ironically remains an exceedingly volatile issue in the

United States in the 21st century. These revelations are particularly important for the most marginalized groups in the United States:

In the United States, for instance, the American dream is sustained by the “wave theory” of migration--the Irish, followed by the Italians, Jews, Koreans and South Asians. There is, however, an ingrained insouciance, a structural injustice, shown towards African Americans or First Nations Peoples whose ethical and political demands for equality and fairness are based on issues of reparations and land-rights. These rights go beyond “welfare” or “opportunity” make claims to recognition and redistribution in the process of questioning the very sovereignty of national traditions and territories. (Bhabha xv)

Therefore, immigrants and citizens alike may face the hardships of systemic racism in ways that counter the national narrative blames them for their own victimhood.

This focus on the American landscape is quite germane, as African-American utopian novels have shown that even the more successful utopian enclaves can succumb to the ravages of the larger environments in which they reside. Therefore, a prudent quest for utopia must be far-reaching enough to cut across the nation and, given the precarious nature of Puerto Rico as an example, American territories that might eventually attain statehood. As many critics have pointed out, isolation only serves to doom a community, regardless of how closely-knit said community is. *Tea Cake* harshly arrives at this discovery when after enjoying relative peace in the Everglades community before the massive hurricane, white men force him at gunpoint to collect the dead bodies, wherein there are “coffins fuh all de white folks,” but the African-American bodies are dumped in “de hole” (209).

The only question that remains then is whether or not utopia is a sustainable international or global project. If utopia can be too small, can it be too big? With all the obstacles that a nation faces, can a collection of nations survive together? Must they, in order to achieve worldly peace? In evoking the original utopian drive to imagine, perhaps

these questions simply depend on how much one imagination one possesses. After all, Lauren imagines and successfully actualizes her utopian plans beyond even Earth:

“The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars,” I said. “That’s the ultimate Earthseed aim, and the ultimate human change short of death. It’s a destiny we’d better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth-skinned dinosaurs—here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities, and so what?” (Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, ch. 18)

As new frontiers arise, small towns emerge before growing into big cities, and space technology advances, humankind also evolves as hope continues to drive the utopian desire for progress. Nevertheless, always clever, Butler adds one more warning at the end of *Parable of the Talents*: Lauren lives to see her vision, as Earth’s first starship launches into outer space in order to colonize a new world. Nonetheless, this starship adopts the name “Christopher Columbus,” and despite her objections, Lauren acquiesces, flippantly declaring that “one can’t win every battle. One must know which battles to fight. The name is nothing” (epilogue). However, as African-American utopian literature carefully has taught its readers, a name can be extensively treacherous.

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