Embracing Change at the Intersections; A Critical Intersectional Analysis of Octavia Butler's Parable Novels

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The concept of intersectionality has been popping up more and more in American media. This framework, officially being named as such in 1989 by Kimerblé Crenshaw, provides a more nuanced lens with which overlapping issues like racism, sexism, classism and other forms of discrimination can be analysed (57). The current political climate of North America is “divided” and “broken” (Balz). The divide between the democratic and conservative party seems to originate from opposing views on religion, gender, age, education, nationality and most of all, from opposing views on race (Hajnal 39). The Right-wing Republican Party here can be seen “to represent the interests of ‘traditional’ white, Christian America” while the Left-Wing Democratic Party is seen to “increasingly represent those who [are] still struggling to overturn centuries of social inequality” (Mason 95). Intersectionality is predominantly used in discourse spoken by the political Left. Flavia Dzodan, a woman of colour and a feminist, wrote an essay in 2011 critiquing the one sided fight of gender equality of White feminism. In this essay she repeatedly used the statement "MY FEMINISM WILL BE INTERSECTIONAL OR IT WILL BE BULLSHIT!" (Dzodan). This statement made it into popular discourse and is still used as a catchphrase to denote a feminism that is multifaceted and takes into account that inequality does not occur on gender alone (Romano). However, the use of the term intersectionality is critiqued by members and supporters of the Conservative Party. It was Ben Shapiro who said that intersectionality is “a form of identity politics in which the value of your opinion depends on how many victim groups you belong to” (qtd. in Asmelash). In Right-Wing conversations, intersectionality has become a “hierarchy of races and identity”, favouring anyone who is not White and not male (Asmelash).

As intersectionality is a much discussed topic in the American political arena, intersectionality can likewise be analysed in how it is used as a theme in other media, such as the Novel. Butler used her writing to lay bare the issues of inequality in twentieth century North America. Her novels *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) especially critically discuss the overlap of racism, gender inequality and discrimination based on class, religion and disability in a future North America. Butler used the genre of science fiction to create narratives in which these inequalities are discussed and provides the reader with an exploration of intersecting socioeconomic inequality. The *Parable* novels tell the story of Lauren Olamina, a young Black woman living in North America in 2024. Olamina struggles with the systems of power in her society, and ventures out to create her own community. Butler, when writing the novel, took inspiration from her own life and the systems of power in real life North America of the late twentieth century. These novels were Butler's "cautionary tales", warning that if things would not change in North America, the future depicted in the novels might well become our future (Holden and Shawl 172).

This thesis will examine the way in which the novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* present inequality based on disability, gender, class, religion and race and critically examine the intersections between these socioeconomic inequalities. First, it will describe the genre of science fiction; its origins and how it came to be a genre mostly written and read by White men. It will go one to describe the genre's change into a New Wave, allowing other non-White, non-male voices to enter the science fiction arena and how Octavia Butler played a significant role in this change. Second, this thesis will define intersectionality and describe how it can be used as a critical analysis. Third, this thesis will examine the religion of Earthseed as a

religion of united diversity and change. Lastly, this thesis will perform a critical intersectional analysis of the *Parable* novels. This will begin with an examination of the way in which the novels critically explore social inequality, followed by an analysis of the power relations in the novels. Then the intersectional relationality is critically analysed. The critical intersectional analysis will end by examining the impact on social justice Olamina has within the novels and Octavia Butler has had by writing the novels.

1. Dismantling the Dominant Narrative in Science-Fiction

"To survive,

Let the past

Teach you—"

(Talents 379)

Butler's oeuvre consists predominantly of science fiction stories. The genre of science fiction is what gave Butler the freedom to write her narratives. In order to place Butler's work in the science fiction canon, it is important to establish the dominant narrative of science fiction. First, in this chapter, the origins of science fiction will be discussed, describing the masculine, White scene of the genre. Second, the need for change of the SF genre is described, allowing more voices to write their narratives within the genre. Third, Butler's work will be placed in the SF genre, describing her importance in its changing landscape.

1.1. The Dominant Narrative in Science Fiction

Science fiction has only been named as such in the last 100 years. The term 'science fiction' was coined by Hugo Gernsback in his magazine *Amazing Stories* in 1929 (Luckhurst 15). However, its origins are somewhat harder to pinpoint. There seems to be much disagreement amongst scholars about where and when the genre originated. While some science fiction tendencies can be traced back to the beginnings of literature itself, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Brian W. Aldiss recognizes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the first science fiction story (38). Victor Frankenstein's use of science in the creation of new life puts the novel in a tradition that

we now consider science fiction. However, in its own time, the novel did not yet belong to a "recognised *genre* – a specific type or species of literature – called Science Fiction" (Roberts 3). Other names that are associated with the beginnings of science fiction are H. G. Wells and Jules Verne; both have been called "The Father of Science Fiction" (Roberts 48). Roger Luckhurst argues that "it makes no sense to talk about 'science fiction' before 1880" (16). In his opinion, trying to search history for the beginnings of science fiction, is an attempt to "give SF an honourable and canonical literary heritage to spare the embarrassment of a lowly and kinetic pulp fiction in the twentieth century" (16). Even though the genre established itself only in the 1920s, the precursors of science fiction should not be forgotten. While the genre of science fiction had not been defined yet, tropes that are now regarded as science fiction tropes were already used to tell certain stories.

With the establishment of science fiction magazines – with *Amazing Stories* in 1926 being the first – science fiction gained its own distinctive sense of a genre and began to grow a consistent readership (Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 32). It is therefore that "the period of sf history from 1926 to 1960 can justly be called the magazine era" (Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 32). In his magazine *Amazing Stories*, Gernsback set out to "supply" the readership with "knowledge that [they] might not otherwise obtain – and [..]. supply it in a very palatable form" (qtd. in Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 32). With the focus being laid on the foundation of the story being grounded in science, the stories themselves became formulaic in nature. Most stories published in these magazines were adventure stories set in space, a formula that is now more commonly known as "space opera" (Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 35). These stories often spawned multiple sequels telling the same

basic plot (Westfahl 198). Besides this formulaic nature, the focus on scientific groundings, also made these pulp stories "stylistically weak, awkwardly constructed and marked by a naive 'gee whiz' attitude toward its gadgets and settings" (Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 35). However, this disregard of high quality writing and form gave a certain "freedom within the pages of the pulp magazines to explore truly 'amazing' situations and unconventional scenarios" (Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 35). In 1932, the magazine *Amazing Stories* stated that they grew tired with "a plot [...] that simply relates a war between two planets, with a lot of rays and bloodshed" (qtd. in Westfahl 198). Because of this, space opera "must continually reinvent itself" in order to remain relevant in the field of science fiction (Westfahl 198). All these different variations on the same formula led to a "revolutionary shift" in science fiction in 1937 when John W. Cambell, Jr took over as editor of the magazine *Astounding Science-Fiction* (Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 37). This new form of science fiction, termed "thought-variant story", described as a "particular blend of philosophical speculation and fiction", focussed on applying "experimental method and technological innovation not to physical problems but to fundamental questions about society and the mind" (Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 37). This era of science-fiction writing is often referred to as "the Golden Age of Science fiction" (Attebery, "The Magazine Era: 1926–1960" 37). In 1939, there was an upsurge in new sf magazines, almost doubling in size. Butler's work already describes his thought-variant form, with its inquiring nature of societal issues, more than the original dominant masculine narrative of the genre.

Even though Mary Shelley can be named as one of the first to write a science fiction novel, when the genre of science fiction began to formally construct itself, it was mostly men

who were publishing science fiction, it was mostly men who were reading science fiction, and science fiction stories were mostly about men. The role of women in science fiction mirrored the role of women in American society in the early 20th century. This society is a patriarchy. What it means to live in a patriarchy is to live in a society that constructs itself according to the male point of view (Russ 81). Culture is seen as equivalent to the male experience. It is "both men and women in our culture [that] conceive the culture from a single point of view – the male" (Russ 81). What is thought of as possible human experience is usually equivalent to the (White) male experience. The female culture, or the female experience, is just a small underground part of society (Russ 81). While science, with its focus on knowledge, innovation and scientific pursuits, represents the masculine, nature, with it being a "passive object" of men's exploration, is often represented as feminine (Attebery, "Science Fiction and the Gender of Knowledge" 134). As the field of science was considered predominantly masculine, it was seen to "naturally exclude women", as they have no place in men's territory of science (Merrick 241). Therefore, women have often played a "supporting role" in the lives of men, "emoting bodies to their reasoning minds and nature to their culture" (Hollinger 125).

This division between masculine and feminine is often explored in literature. The focus of science fiction in the early twentieth century "was on technology as embodied by big, gleaming machines with lots of moving parts, physical prowess, war, two-dimensional male heroes, adventure and excitement" (Roberts 72). According to Roberts, what made science fiction part of a sexist discourse is the reinstatement of "normality of the male experience and the deviance from the norm that is women" (78). It is here that women in science fiction are seen as different from the norm. Science fiction in this time often used the non-human to explore the

difference between gender, where femininity is often expressed as for example “a space alien, a machine [or] a symbolic novum” (Roberts 79). The patriarchy and conceptions of gender in North America in the early 1900’s led science fiction to be a “boy’s club” in which no girls were allowed (Attebery, “Science Fiction and the Gender of Knowledge” 131).

As science fiction had a masculine perspective, male authors could easily fit their narrations into the genre. For women, this masculine outlook on science fiction, formed a wall where “women must climb over, tunnel under, dismantle – or else camp outside” (Donawerth xiii). In the beginning of the twentieth century, the science fiction community consisted of 16 percent of women (Yaszek and Sharp xvii). This low percentage did not get much space to grow substantially, as publishers were convinced of the idea that “women rarely made good SF authors, because their science education was all too often ‘limited’ by social convention” (Yaszek and Sharp xix). This idea, that women were not fit to write good science fiction, was also perpetuated by the predominant readership of science-fiction, which consisted largely of men. However, this did not stop women from writing science fiction altogether. There were women who were indeed writing science fiction in the Golden Age. Authors like C.L. Moore, Leigh Bracket and Andre Norton were already publishing science fiction stories in the 1930s and 1940s. However, they often had to assume “a male voice and non-gender-specific names to avoid prejudice on the part of editors and readers alike” (qtd. in Roberts 73). Catherine Lucille Moore, for example, hid her feminine name by using only her initials. Alice Mary Norton published under the pen name Andre Norton, but also under the name Andrew North and Allen Weston, assuming more masculine names. Leigh Bracket could be seen as lucky in this respect, being

born with a non-gender-specific or unisex name. In order for women to read or publish science fiction stories, the sense to embody a more masculine identity was prevalent.

While it was believed that women should keep busy with narrating the female experience, Joanna Russ saw something in science fiction that women could not find anywhere else. There are very few narratives a woman can experience and therefore write about. Simply replacing the male protagonist with a female one will not do, as "success in male terms is failure for a woman" (Russ 84). Women who are in competition with men "lose their femininity"; they will be "desexed" (Russ 84). Therefore, women must write about what they know, which is romance, marriage, childbirth and women (Russ 84). However, Russ sees the genre of science fiction as freeing for women writers. The genre of science fiction is dedicated to "myths of human intelligence and human adaptability [...] exploring a new world conceptually [...] assessing the consequences of technological or other changes" (Russ 91). She feels that, "at least theoretically", science fiction "ignore[s] gender roles" (Russ 91).

It was not only women but also people of colour that were excluded from writing and reading science fiction. As Sharon deGraw argues, the roots of American science fiction lie in adventure fiction, in which the hero was predominantly portrayed by men of Anglo descent (3). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, American culture was built on the ideology of gender and race hierarchy, "the protagonist's textual dominance, heroic nature, and representative status all combined to convey the normalcy and universalism of the Anglo male perspective" (deGraw 3). Both editors and authors held on to the generic formula and stereotypical characters of the White male as the protagonist of science fiction adventures (deGraw 4). The editor John Campbell, for example, is described by Asimov as "tak[ing] for

granted, somehow, the stereotype of the Nordic white as the true representative of Man the Explorer, Man the Darer, Man the Victor" (qtd. in deGraw 4).

This perception of the White man as "the Explorer" in science fiction is derived from imperialistic ideals of White (Western) men. Many scholars agree that colonialism is a "significant historical context for early science fiction" (Rieder 2). It is in the late nineteenth century – the period where imperialist expansion was at its height – that the writing of science fiction emerged (Rieder 2-3). According to John Rieder, Colonialism is "an opening up of new possibilities, a "new world" becoming available to the "old" one" (4). The genre of science fiction is reminiscent of colonialism in the sense that science fiction narratives revolve around a White male hero exploring new worlds and cultures. Science fiction authors are narrating the explorations of these new worlds and cultures through a "Eurocentric, colonial gaze" (Sanchez-Taylor 11). The effect of this is that people of colour in science fiction are portrayed as "the alien" or "the Other" inhabiting these strange worlds and cultures (Sanchez-Taylor 7). Johanna Russ explains the Eurocentric view of "the Other" as them never having "the motives that you and I have; the Other contains a mysterious essence, which causes it to behave as it does; in fact "it" is not a person at all, but a projected wish or fear" (82). It is then not so strange that the fans of the genre are the ones that relate themselves to the protagonists motives and ideologies. The science fiction audience consists of "overwhelmingly young male[s]", or as Johanna Russ described the average science fiction fan: "as an adolescent boy, at least in the early years" (qtd. in Sanchez-Taylor 4). Therefore, like women, people of colour generally could not relate to the science fiction protagonists. As Greg Tate states: "Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine" (qtd. in Sanchez-Taylor 7). It is

understandable, therefore, that people of colour do not relate to the protagonists of the science fiction stories they love, but to the alienated "Other." As science fiction authors generally begin their writing career as fans of the genre, many people of colour who considered themselves fans of the genre, found it difficult to enter the field of publishing science fiction: "How can science fiction authors [of colour] write stories that respect both the conventions of the science fiction genres and their [own] cultural experiences?" (Sanchez-Taylor 12). It is because, in the Golden Age of science fiction, technological advancement was the primary focus of the genre. Because of this "more abstract concepts like identity, gender, or race were often neglected" (deGraw 5). Not until the genre of science fiction transformed itself into what we now call the New Wave, were these concepts explored more. Now that the original dominant narrative of science fiction has been described, Butler's importance distinguishes itself in light of the genre's changing landscape.

1.2. New Wave Science Fiction

In 1962 J. G. Ballard proclaimed that the way of writing of the Golden Age of science fiction was obsolete. He wrote:

> "I think science fiction should turn its back on space, on interstellar travel, extraterrestrial life forms, galactic wars and the overlap of these ideas that spread across the margins of nine-tenths of magazine s-f . . . [the] biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth" (qtd. in Mancus 338).

Science fiction was making a change; instead of focussing on the outer space, quests of intergalactic travels, writers were focussing more on the inner space, exploring life on Earth and the human psyche. Writers of Golden Age science fiction were experiencing a "master narrative fatigue" or a "genre exhaustion" (Mancus 338) (Roberts 62). Stories of a moral hero on an intergalactic quest seemed overused. After the Second World War, America gave rise to a counterculture that "challenged the politics, culture and ideology of the generation which came before it" (Mancus 338). Adam Roberts describes the term New Wave as "a loose grouping of the history of sf writers from the 1960s and 1970s who, in reaction to the established conventions of SF, produced avant-garde, radical or fractured science fictions" (61-62). The rise of New Wave science fiction in the 1960s was brought on by the political state and the scepticism about the rise of technology in the 1950s (Roberts 81). American society in the 1950s lived in a "climate of political paranoia", working hard to eliminate communism and advocate for true "American values" (Roberts 79). Golden Age science fiction could no longer satisfy the demands of many readers since its stories now "echoed cultural narratives that justified imperialism"

(Mancus 339). The stance towards science changed as well. Now, science was seen as destructive; an imperialist military tool (Mancus 339). This created fear for the "Other" and for technological advances. This paranoia translated directly into science fiction writing (Roberts 60). In the Golden Age of science fiction, the text would often focus on the content; its concept, subject and narrative, leaving form and style irrelevant (Roberts 12). However, as the political climate of America in the 1950s and 1960s was drastically changing "not only new narratives, but new styles and forms were needed to capture the shifting intellectual zeitgeist" (Mancus 339).

The emergence of the New Wave also created space for the analysis of "gender and sexuality as social constructs" (qtd. in Roberts 71). New Wave SF saw the emergence of more female writers, bringing with them its own form of feminist reading; "not just reading about women; it is reading for women" (Hollinger 126). The second wave feminism of the 1960s brought on literature critiquing the role of women as solely housewives and mothers (M. Butler 136). Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was one of the books published as a critique on the culture in Post-War North America that pushed women into domestic roles (M. Butler 136). During this time, New Wave Science fiction grants a possibility for contemplating the future of sex roles pushed onto not only women, but also onto men in post-war North America (M. Butler 137). Prominent figures exploring the gender roles in North-American society through the channel of SF writing are, among others, Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ. Le Guin, with her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), portrays a "genderless" society, thereby omitting any gender roles (Roberts 86). Even though Le Guin's novel is still read as a feminist novel, Le Guin has received criticism on her way of portraying her genderless world. The

criticism particularly focuses on the fact that Le Guin uses he/him pronouns in her supposedly genderless world (Roberts 88). Russ, one of Le Guin critics, went the other way; presenting an "all-woman world" in her novel *The Female Man* (1975) (Roberts 76). Both Le Guin and Russ have received criticism and praise alike, both receiving awards for their science fiction work and shaping the New Wave of science fiction. Le Guin, together with Philip K. Dick, is now even featured in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, making her a canonical writer and establishing her science fiction narratives in the American canon.

New Wave SF not only paved the way for women to be more active as writers and readers, but it likewise created a science fiction that was "changing to embrace" Black culture (qtd. in Allen 1353). Samuel R. Delany is one of the key figures of New Wave SF, exploring not only issues of race, but also issues of gender through his SF writing. Delany, an African American author, had a very fluid perception of his own sexuality. While at first, his writing did not reflect his own sexuality, later in his career he eventually began writing openly about homosexuality in both his science fiction writing and his non-science fiction writing. His novel *Dhalgren* (1975) is his first novel where he "explicitly features gay sex", but already in his first novel *The Jewels of Aptor* (1962) was Delany reimagining the notions of gender and sexuality (Wachter-Grene 3) (Harris-Fain 37). His writing reflected his commitment to "defamiliariz[e] what society considers normal" and allowed to empower other overlooked and undervalued voices (Wachter-Grene 3).

Ultimately, New Wave science fiction was seen as a "tool for thinking about the here and now, and also for imagining alternatives - how the world might be different" (qtd. in Allen 1353). New Wave science fiction during the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for more science fiction

genres to follow in its wake, focussing on “complicated treatments of human morality - including treatments of race, class, gender, religion, and social justice” (Harris-Fain 41). It is because of these qualities of science fiction, that the SF genre can be considered the genre of change, as John W. Campbell Jr. has said: “unlike other literatures, [science fiction] assumes that change is the natural order of things” (Harris-Fain 31). This shift from a Golden Age of science fiction to a New Wave brought on more and more authors bringing new voices to the genre of science fiction. Another big voice in the science fiction arena in the wake of the New Wave was Octavia Butler: “Butler’s importance in the field of contemporary SF is undeniable” (Harris-Fain 41).

1.3. Octavia Butler's Contribution to the New Wave

Octavia Butler described herself as a "34-year-old writer who can remember being a 10-year-old writer and who expects someday to be a 70-year-old writer" (qtd. in Canavan). She also claimed that she was "a pessimist if [she's] not careful, a feminist, a black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive" (qtd. in Canavan). For Butler, writing was a calling, something she could not live without. She had been writing from the age of ten but began her writing career in the 1970s, publishing her first novel in 1976. She was drawn to the science fiction genre from the age of twelve when she thought she could "write a better science fiction story" than all the bad SF movies she was watching (Butler, "Black Scholar Interview" 14). What attracted her to the science fiction genre was "the freedom of it" (Butler, "Black Scholar Interview" 14). Butler referred to it as "potentially the freest genre in existence" (Butler, "Black Scholar Interview" 14). However, she did not like to label her work. When Butler wrote, she was not concerned with what genre she was writing. She considers these labels "marketing tools" and she feels that if your book is put under a specific label, "you wind up not getting read by certain people, or not getting sold to certain people because they think they know what you write" (Kenan 495). Nevertheless, she considers her work to be science fiction or sometimes fantasy, opposing the idea of calling her work speculative fiction (Kenan 495). Butler too noticed that the science fiction genre was originally a "white boy's genre" (Butler, "Black Scholar Interview" 16). Black people were not represented in science fiction without motive; they were not mentioned to be Black unless it was required to further the narrative. (Butler, "Black Scholar Interview" 14). Black characters could not just exist in a science fiction narrative. They also did not belong to the science fiction audience as Butler notes:

"Black people don't buy books" (qtd. in Strange Matings 175). Butler argues that "science fiction writers come from science fiction readers" and as more and more Black people read science fiction, there will be more and more Black science fiction writers (Butler, "Black Scholar Interview" 16). Butler began her professional writing career in 1976 with *Patternmaster*. She later expanded the Patternist universe, writing four more novels. Other notable works include the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, *Kindred* and the *Parable* novels. Butler has received multiple awards for her novels, including the Hugo award and the Nebula award for both her short story "Bloodchild" (1984) and her novel *Parable of the Talents* (1998). In 2010, Butler was even conducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. The "tradition [...] of writing science fiction that defied rigid boundaries and classifications" can be attributed to the likes of Samuel R. Delay and Octavia Butler (Sanchez-Taylor 162).

Butler has continually explored issues of race in her novels. Generally all her novels refer to some form of enslavement (Dubey 345). This reference is strongest in her novel *Kindred*, where a Black woman travels back in time to the historical period of chattel slavery in North America (Dubey 345). In her other novels, this reference to enslavement is "interrupted or decentered by fantastic constructs of cross-racial or differently racialized slavery" (Dubey 345). Butler's *Parable* novels present a dystopian future of North America where increasing global capitalism and extremist religious doctrine brought back slavery. However, in her *Parable* novels, enslavement surpasses the Black-White dichotomy of the historical period of Antebellum slavery (Dubey 345).

Additionally, Butler has taken inspiration from the cultural environment of North-America while writing the *Parable* novels. Butler's inspiration comes to the fore when

discussing her fictional presidents and their presidential campaigns, alluding to real life American presidential campaigns. In *Parable of the Talents*, president Andrew Steele Jarret uses the slogan "Make American Great Again" in his presidential campaign (Talents 29). Butler is alluding to Ronald Reagan, who used this slogan in his 1980 presidential campaign. This slogan was again used by Donald Trump in 2016 in his presidential campaign, popularising the quote. With Butler's allusion to real life presidential campaigns, her awareness of the cultural milieu of the time in which she was writing is demonstrated. With Trump in office in 2016, focused on the promotion of capitalism, ignorance of environmental decline and pushing for the strengthening of the separation of gender spheres, Butler's warning in the *Parable* novels became more prevalent once again.

2. Intersectionality

As the field of science fiction changed, creating space for more diverse voices, the genre can be used as a medium to critique social inequality. In order to analyse this critique in Butler's *Parable* novels, it is important to define intersectionality. This chapter sets out to define intersectionality and describe how it can be used as a critical lens with which Butler's critique of social inequality can be analysed.

2.1. Defining Intersectionality

As White women in the twentieth century fought for the rights of women, Black women were faced with a choice between fighting for their rights as women in a male dominated society, fighting for their rights as Black people in a White dominated society, or fighting for their rights as Black women in a society dominated by Black and White men. It is these separate fights for equality that brought about extensive social change: "Anticolonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; the emergence of a global women's movement; civil rights movement in multicultural democracies; the end of the Cold War; and the defeat of apartheid in South Africa all signaled the end of long-standing forms of domination" (Collins 1). It is during this period of great social change that intersectionality begins to play a role. As much change has been made in this period, social inequality is not that easy to erase. Intersectionality brought on a "new way of looking" and made it possible to see "the social problems caused by colonialism, racism, sexism, and nationalism as interconnected" which provides "a new vantage on the possibilities for social change" (Collins 1).

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to explain the experience of Black women in American society. She defines the way that social inequality is analysed as a "single-axis framework" (Crenshaw 57). In her article, she suggests that "this single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group" (Crenshaw 57). By focusing solely on the most privileged within a group, the "multiply-burdened" group members are marginalised (Crenshaw 57). Simultaneously, while working along a single-axis framework, a distorted reality of the discrimination based on race and of sex is constructed as only the experiences of the most privileged within a certain community are considered when constructing the conceptions of race and sex (Crenshaw 57).

After Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, the concept became a popular critical concept within the Humanities. While intersectionality is used in many academic disciplines, as well as in popular discourse, many different definitions exist. Collins and Bilge argue that most people interested in and talking about intersectionality would accept the following working definition:

> "Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age - among others - as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences" (5).

Important components of this working definition of intersectionality are the acknowledgement of power relations and the interconnectedness of different sources of social inequality. Intersectionality recognizes that power relations of race, class, gender, disability, ethnicity, age, and religion are complementary to each other and that "these intersecting power relations affect all aspects of the social world" (Collins and Bilge 5). However, as Cho et al. states: "what makes an analysis intersectional is not its use of the term 'intersectionality', nor its being situated in a familiar genealogy, nor its drawing on lists of standard citations [but] its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power" (Cho et al. 795). When using intersectional thinking, the emphasis should be on "what intersectionality *does* rather than what intersectionality is" (Cho et al. 795).

2.2. Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory

As significant as the topic of intersectionality has become within academic circles, Collins and Bilge push for intersectionality to become more critical. In order to create a unity in the way intersectionality is interpreted and used across different fields of study, intersectionality needs to be treated as a critical lens with which political issues can be analysed. As popularity of the concept of intersectionality has risen since the 1990s, people have theorised about intersectionality not only in academic spheres, but it has likewise been growing in popular discourse outside of academics. Collins and Bilge applaud this interest in intersectionality as it shows the "dynamic nature" of intersectionality and how it invites engagement, providing the discourse around intersectionality to be discussed from many different viewpoints (20). However, there is a division between how intersectionality is used in academics and how it is used outside of academics. The general assumption is that intersectionality in academics is

assumed to be exempt from political influence; where power relations are either a background component of intersectionality or not present at all (Collins and Bilge 20). By contrast, while people outside of academics draw heavily on power relations and social inequality for their interpretations of intersectionality, they fail to critically reflect on intersectionality (Collins and Bilge 20). It is this division between academics and activism, where academics is seen to not be able to *do* anything about social inequality and activism is seen to be unable to *think* critically about intersectionality, that prevents intersectionality from being used as a *critical* social theory. Collins and Bilge push for these two components – "critical inquiry" and "critical praxis" – of intersectionality to come together (48).

In order to unify the critical inquiry and critical praxis of intersectionality, Collins and Bilge "shed light on six core ideas within intersectionality: social inequality, intersecting power relations, social context, relationality, social justice, and complexity" (42). These core insights make it possible to analyse intersectional issues. When analysing intersectional issues, an "understanding [of] the historical patterns of scholarship and activism that catalyzed antiracism, decolonialism, feminism, critical disability studies, and similar critical projects" is required (Collins and Bilge 199). It is important, therefore, to analyse the issues of social inequality within Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels. However, in order to make an analysis of the inequalities in her novels intersectional, it is likewise important to analyse the social context (Collins and Bilge 202). The social context of the genre of science fiction, the context of the time period and the impetus for Octavia Butler to write her novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* have been analysed in the previous chapter. Additionally, the intersecting power relations must be examined. As power is not a static thing to be seized or surrendered, power needs to be

studied through its relationships (Collins and Bilge 200). It is important to examine both the oppressor and the oppressed and analyse the power relations between them (Collins and Bilge 200). It is relationality that is at the core of an intersectional analysis. Relationality is "the seemingly simple idea that entities that are typically treated as separate may actually be interconnected" (Collins and Bilge 205). It demonstrates "the connections among ideas, among discourses, and among political projects" (Collins and Bilge 205). It is therefore important to relate the political issues in Butler's novels to each other and not treat them as separate issues. It is here that the "notion of oppositional difference (either/or thinking)" is replaced with "notions of relational difference (both/and thinking)" (Collins and Bilge 205). However, when looking back at the idea that the focus should be on "what intersectionality *does* rather than what intersectionality is", the core construct of social justice is also of great importance to a critical intersectional analysis (Cho et al. 795). It is here that a critical intersectional analysis can be used as more than merely adding to the complexity and comprehensiveness of social inequality, but can be used to benefit the activism of social inequality (Collins and Bilge 208). Crenshaw likewise highlights the importance of the link between intersectionality and social justice (Collins and Bilge 209). Crenshaw constantly "reminds readers that the purpose of intersectional scholarship lies in its contribution to social justice initiatives" (Collins and Bilge 94). It is important, therefore, to analyse Olamina's motive for social justice in the *Parable* novels, but to also analyse Butler's motive for social justice by writing the *Parable* novels. The use of these core constructs of a critical intersectional analysis is what adds to the complexity of a critical intersectional analysis and what therefore adds to the complexity of the critical intersectional analysis of Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels. It is with an intersectional lens that Octavia Butler's

Parable novels can be analysed as belonging to the New Wave science fiction genre. Butler's writing therefore contributed to a more intersectional science fiction.

3. The Philosophy of Earthseed

"All that you touch you change.
All that you change changes you.
The only lasting truth is change.
God is change" (Sower 13).

Religion is an important component in Butler's *Parable* novels. Butler was raised as a member of the Baptist church. She refers to herself as a former-baptist; having separated herself from the God her mother taught her. What made her break from the Baptist church was the hate and prejudice being spewed at church services (qtd. in Harrison 9). She realised that "the kind of religion that [she's] seeing now is not the religion of love and it scares [her]" (qtd. in Harrison 9). Nonetheless, she still acknowledged the influence this religion had on her life and has great respect for the religion that helped her family: "Religion kept some of my relatives alive, because it was all they had. If they hadn't had some hope of heaven, some companionship in Jesus, they probably would have committed suicide" (qtd. in Brown 186). Butler is an unconventional science fiction writer. While the tendency of science fiction is to believe that religion is a "primitive artifact of the superstitious past" and that humanity one day will "outgrow" it, Butler does not "believe that for one moment" (Canavan 127). She believes that religion will always be a part of humanity, as religion has helped humanity through a lot of difficult times (Canavan 128). Still she says that religion is not "a force for good — it's just a force" (Canavan 128). Even though Butler mostly sees religion as something positive, she also sees that religion leads to a lot

of destruction and that humanity made God into a “massive power of a Big Policeman in the sky” and she rather sees humanity “police [them]selves” (qtd. in Harrison 9).

She wrote *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* with the notion that there are “no human societies without [religion]” in mind (Butler “Butler on Race, Global Warming and Religion”). As she sees that religion is in a lot of cases “the problem”, she wanted religion to be “an answer”. In the *Parable* books, it is both. The *Parable* novels critically explore “the core message of all great spiritual traditions: Be not afraid”, where the books introduce wholly contrasting reactions to fear (Jos 409). In the books, Butler presents Christianity’s dogmatic nature as the one turning America into a fascist country, their religion being the only one that is justifiable (Butler “Butler on Race, Global Warming and Religion”). By “marr[ying] religious dogmatism to political authority” Christianity in America exploits this fear and their response is prejudice (Jos 409). That is why Butler wanted to create a new religion, one that said “well, here is another religion, and here are some verses that can help us think in a different way, and here is a destination that isn’t something that we have to wait for after we die” (Butler Butler on Race, Global Warming and Religion”). It is here that Butler presents “an alternative faith that seeks to respond creatively, productively, and humanely to overwhelming fear” (Jos 409). As religion is such an intrinsic part of humanity, Butler, with these books, is able to create a new ‘good’ religion, able to respond to existential fear in a more positive way. In some ways, she is “weaponizing religion as a tool for improving lives rather than making them worse” (Canavan 129). In the *Parable* novels, Butler uses this new religion Earthseed to eliminate this prejudice and end the oppression of anyone different than the people in charge.

Lauren Olamina, referred to by Butler as Olamina, is the main character of the *Parable* novels and is the one chronicling the journey of Earthseed; its origins and journey but unfortunately, not its end due to Butlers' untimely death. The story of Earthseed is chronicled in a book called "The Book of the Living". The reader is presented with Olamina's journal entries accompanied by Earthseed verses. *Parable of the Sower* opens with a verse explaining the essence of Earthseed:

> "All that you touch you change.
>
> All that you change changes you.
>
> The only lasting truth is change.
>
> God is change" (Sower 13).

Earthseed is a religion of change. What this verse tells the reader is that each individual person is subjected to change and also responsible for change. In an easily understandable diction, she conveys this message to the reader. Therefore, Earthseed is not a dogmatic religion. It has no fixed teachings, except that everything changes. This notion of change is then the only dogmatic feature of Earthseed. Butler considers Earthseed to be a "dialogic religion" stating that:

> "God exists to shape and to be shaped. And the idea also is that in the end you do yield to God, but meanwhile, there are some things that you can do. My idea, not just mine of course, is that where there's only one thing, it's as though there's nothing. If the one thing manages to make two things of itself, then you have interaction, and you have something." (qtd. in Palwick 155).

Gerry Canavan, in his book on Butler's work, explains this concept of change as being formed "by a Darwinian recognition of the eternal flux of life as well as a post-Darwinian attempt to

seize control of that flux and apply it toward human ends" (128). Earthseed sees an importance in the way that humans are accountable for their own destiny, and Earthseed's destiny "is to take root among the stars" (Sower 87). Like Christianity, Earthseed seeks to gain some form of immortality for humanity. While Christianity promises humanity immortality through the existence of the afterlife; if you have lived righteously, in heaven, or if you have sinned through life, in hell, Earthseed promises nothing like an afterlife. It never preaches about what humanity will face after death. However, Earthseed promises humanity to gain immortality through the colonisation of other planets (Canavan 128).

Canavan sees a paradox in this destiny. The stars would provide followers of Earthseed a refuge from Earth and from its destruction. Humanity inhabiting multiple planets "could perhaps survive as long as the universe itself" (Canavan 135). However, this refuge would only be for the "tiny Earthseed elect" leaving Earth and most of humanity abandoned in a burning world (Canavan 135). This "salvation of a tiny few" is reminiscent of evangelical Christianity (Canavan 135). Butler is aware of this paradox, as in *Parable of the Talents*, through multiple characters, Olamina and her religion are questioned about the justification of leaving humanity in ruins.

Importantly, in relation to the concept of intersectionality, Earthseed is a religion of diversity. Olamina states in *Parable of the Sower*: "Everything changes in some way—size, position, composition, frequency, velocity, thinking, whatever. Every living thing, every bit of matter, all the energy in the universe changes in some way. I don't claim that everything changes in every way, but everything changes in some way" (Sower 224). This is a notion hard to argue with. If everything is always changing, how can we harbour prejudices towards people different

from us? If we ourselves are not always exactly alike as our former selves, how can we oppress those that are not like us? There is a verse in *Parable of the Sower* that clearly captures this notion of diversity:

> "Embrace diversity.
>
> Unite—
>
> Or be divided,
>
> robbed,
>
> ruled,
>
> killed
>
> By those who see you as prey.
>
> Embrace diversity
>
> Or be destroyed" (Sower 203)

Olamina lives in a divided world. She feels that what humanity needs is to be united. She believes that Earthseed and her God of change will unite humanity. Butler then uses her novel, and by extension, the religion of Earthseed, to cease oppression in all shapes. Now, a critical lens such as intersectionality can analyse in what ways Butler wants to see change in a society where the oppression of certain groups exists.

4. An Intersectional Analysis of the *Parable* Novels

"Belief

Initiates and guides action—

Or it does nothing"

(Sower 57).

In order to analyse Butler's representation of specific forms of socioeconomic equality in the *Parable* series through an intersectional lens, it is important first to define clearly which form of socioeconomic equality the author is most concerned with. This chapter will therefore start with an analysis of the inequality most prominent in the novels, namely inequality based on ability, gender, religion, class and race. Next, the chapter will go on to analyse the power structures presented in the novels. With an analysis of the socioeconomic equality and the power structures in the novel, the relations between these issues of inequality can be analysed through an intersectional lens. The examination of the intersectional relationality forms the focal point of this analysis, critically examining with an intersectional lens in what way the *Parable* novels investigate social inequality on intersecting social issues. The chapter will end with an analysis of how, within the *Parable* novels, Olamina contributes to social justice and likewise, how Butler herself contributes to social justice by writing the novels.

4.1. Social Inequality in the *Parable* Series

4.1.1. (Dis)Ability

Lauren Olamina suffers from a condition called hyperempathy to the dismay of her father. Olamina's hyperempathy makes her capable of "feel[ing] what [she] see[s] others feeling or what

[she] believe[s] they feel" (Sower 22). She shares the feelings of others; therefore, she also calls herself a "sharer" (Sower 184). This ability is seen by society as a disability. The doctors call her condition "organic delusional syndrome" (Sower 22). The word delusional denotes that the doctors see it as a form of mental illness through which Olamina feels things that are not there. Often another's pain is so strong it incapacitates her. She explains the pain she feels when seeing others, such as a "naked little boy whose skin was a mass of big red sores; a man with a huge scab [...]; a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs", as "the worst things [she's] ever felt — shadows and ghosts, twists and jabs of unexpected pain" (Sower 22). Olamina feels as though this condition makes her feel broken, or "scrambled" as she describes it (Sower 22). Olamina's mother, who died giving birth to her, was addicted to a drug called "Paracetco," or "the smart pill," "the Einstein powder" (Sower 22). This was believed by the doctors and her family to be the reason Olamina was afflicted with this disability. Her father, the preacher, professor and dean of the community, forces Olamina to hide her hyperempathy throughout her childhood, pretending or maybe even believing that her "hyperempathy syndrome was something [she] could shake off and forget about" (Sower 21). Another reason for hiding it was that other people could use this hyperempathy against her. This is demonstrated when her little brother Keith pretends to be hurt by using red ink as fake blood. Olamina, believing that her brother is hurt, feels his supposed pain (Sower 21).

Empathy seems natural, something every person experiences. If you lack empathy, "it can be seen as a sign of inhumanity" (Keen 4). Why then, in *Parable of the Sower*, is a heightened form of empathy seen as a disability? They live in a world with a lot of pain, violence and oppression. As Olamina says: "I'm supposed to share pleasure and pain, but there isn't much

pleasure around these days" (Sower 22). Many people have been desensitised to the pain and suffering around them. Again, using Keith as an example: After he leaves his gated community, he lives a life of hardship before he is tortured and killed. Keith was entirely desensitised to the pain and suffering around him having gone through so much pain and suffering himself. After Keith's death, Olamina states: "He would have been a monster if he had been allowed to grow up. Maybe he was one already. He never cared what he did. If he wanted to do something and it wouldn't cause him immediate physical pain, he did it, fuck the earth" (Sower 122). In a world this violent, it is easier and less painful for people to not care about others. Olamina sees this differently. As long as people continue to not care about others, violence and suffering will remain ingrained in society. It's a vicious circle. Olamina begins to understand her own hyperempathy as something that "might do some good" (Sower 123). "[I]f everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?" (Sower 123). This ties in with Butler's critique of neoliberalism, where everyone is in competition with the other. Here, the novel suggests that if people would only show each other some more empathy, the world might become a better place. This is where Olamina's hyperempathy is presented as more of an ability, rather than a disability.

4.1.2. Gender

Parable of the Sower and *Parable of the Talents* also explore the oppression of gender by a capitalist and religious system of power favouring masculinity. Olamina is already aware of her position as a woman when she is still living with her family in the gated community. The gender roles in the community are very traditional: women are expected to "grow up [...], get married,

have babies" while men are the ones protecting the family and community (Sower 96). Keith is desperate to be one of those men: "I'm a man! I shouldn't be hiding in the house, hiding in the wall" (Sower 101). Even though he is still only a child, he later does leave the gated community only returning to provide his mother with money he earned outside. Olamina has already planned her journey to leave the gated community and spread her knowledge of Earthseed. She already knew that "[a] girl alone only faced one kind of future outside": it is women, children, old people and disabled people who are the most vulnerable outside the walls (Sower 145). Sexual violence is common outside the walls of the gated community; young girls and women being the usual victims. "[O]ut here, the trick is to avoid confrontation by looking strong" (Sower 219), therefore, Olamina "intend[s] to go out posing as a man" (Sower 145). She has to hide her femininity in order to survive. Gender roles have caused women to be one of the most vulnerable groups, as they are not taught how to survive. However, Butler wrote a story about a strong woman who fights for what she believes in. Olamina does not willingly accept these ideologically prescribed gender roles. It is here that the novel presents gender identity as mostly culturally constructed. While statistically speaking, men are physically larger and stronger than women, these statistics do not stop Olamina from trying to achieve her goals. Olamina, being a tall and strong enough woman to be able to pass as a man outside the walls, is of symbolic significance in the novel, stating that gender roles and gender identity can be fluid.

4.1.3. Religion

Parable of the Sower and *Parable of the Talents* both explore prejudice and oppression based on religion. In the beginning of the first novel, Olamina grows up in a community that heavily relies

on their Christian faith for retaining hope in a dystopian reality. Her father is the preacher of the local church and most of the people of their community are frequent churchgoers. Olamina, however, distanced herself from the Christian faith: "[M]y father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church" (Sower 17). She does not feel free to express her changing beliefs as she lets herself be baptised, calling herself a "coward" for it (Sower 17). She feels her environment would not accept her distancing herself from the dominant religion. Therefore, she keeps her ideas on Earthseed and her God of change to herself; writing about it in her journal but never talking about it with anyone else. Even to Joanna, who she considers to be her best friend, Olamina cannot be completely honest regarding her views on the world. "I felt on the verge of talking to her about things I hadn't talked about before" but "[t]here's a world of things I don't feel free to talk to anyone about" (Sower 62). Olamina decides to express her views about the collapsing world, instead of expressing her religious views; as it turns out, she was right to be cautious. Joanne tells on her to her parents. What follows is a scolding from her father. If Olamina is forbidden to talk about the state of the world, how would her community react to her different religious beliefs? She therefore also stays silent to her father: "I wanted him to know, to understand what I believed. The nonreligious part of it, anyway" (Sower 74). Olamina is scared of what would happen if she would tell anyone about her newfound religion: "[H]ow much [Joanne] could have hurt me if I had given her just a few more words to use against me" (Sower 78). Olamina is again very careful when travelling North after her community is attacked, being mindful of who she decides to tell about Earthseed. When Natividad and Travis join Olamina's small group, Olamina very deliberately tries to ease them into Earthseed, choosing "soft, non-preachy verses, good for road-weary minds and bodies", not opposing Natividad when she

calls her verses “poetry” (Sower 219). The fact that she is very careful in concealing the religious nature of her thoughts, shows the reader a world in which deviating from the dominant religion is not tolerated.

The second novel *Parable of the Talents* critically explores religious inequality much more directly. While Olamina, in *Parable of the Sower*, only alludes to an intolerance towards anything other than the Christian faith, in *Parable of the Talents*, this deviation from the Christian faith comes with tangible consequences. The second novel takes place years after the ending of the first novel, when a new political figure attempts to gain the presidency in America. Andrew Steele Jarret bases his presidency on a very literal reading of the Bible, wanting to take America “back to some magical time when everyone believed in the same God, worshipped him in the same way, and understood that their safety in the universe depended on completing the same religious rituals and stomping anyone who was different” (Talents 28). This ideal appeals to many people, ignoring the fact that such a time never existed (Talents 28). In this apocalyptic world in which most people cannot read, “history is just one more vast unknown to them” (Talents 28). His followers do seem to be “a revival of something nasty out of the past” (Talents 28). They are reminiscent of members of the Ku Klux Klan and to Nazis and even before that to the Inquisition and people during the Crusades, who all “use[d] their crosses and slaughter[ed] people” (Allen 1361) (Talents 28). Olamina fears Jarret as he has the power to destroy her community Earthseed; “if the country is mad enough to elect him, [he] could destroy us without even knowing we exist” (Talents 30). Jarret’s followers “have been known” to “burn people at the stake” for being or following anything other than Jarret’s specific form of Christianity (Talents 28). Jarret, as being a former and somewhat well known Baptist minister, is able to

charm his way out of any blame. Even though he publicly denounces these burnings, "he does so in such mild language that his people are free to hear what they want to hear" (Talents 29). Because Jarret holds such a great position of power, his following has "acquired … if not legitimacy, at least a shadow of sophistication," making them impervious to any opposition (Talents 192).

It does not take long for the Christian Crusaders to hear of Acorn, the Eartseed community. When the Christian Crusaders attack Acorn, they enslave the men and women, putting slave collars around their necks and killing anyone who resists (Talents 197). The babies and children are taken and, in their captors' words, "saved from [Earthseed's] wickedness" and "given to good Christian homes" (Talents 215). Earthseed history is destroyed as their books and papers are burned and their community Acorn is renamed as "Camp Christian" (Talents 196).

Even Olamina's family would oppose her views on religion and community. When she is reunited with her brother Marcus by buying him out of slavery, she describes him as "sick, fearful, confused, and angry" (Talents 102). Marcus has been enslaved, tortured and raped ever since his gated community was attacked in the first novel. His trauma caused him to alienate him from himself; "I don't really know how to be Marcus Olamina anymore [...] I'm not that kid anymore. I'll never be him again" (Talents 140). Like Olamina, Marcus felt like his father's belief in God was lacking: "I think my father honestly believed that faith in God was enough. He lived as though he believed it. But it didn't save him" (Talents 314). Marcus believes that the church needs more (physical) power and sees in Andrew Steele Jarret a teacher (Talents 315). He believes in the Christian America that Jarret created. Therefore, he does not believe Olamina when she confronts him about what Jarret's followers have done to her community (Talents 318).

He also denounces what she believes in, stating that she is “steeped in sin” and “permitted herself to be pulled down by Satan” (Talents 311). It is their differences in belief that made him “turn from her” (Talents 311). It is then that Andrew Steele Jarret created an America in which everything that deviates from his version of Christianity is inherently sinful.

4.1.4. Class

In her two *Parable* novels, Octavia Butler additionally demonstrates the inequality based on class. When Olamina and her family are first introduced in *Parable of the Sower*, they belong to a gated community in Robledo. Class divisions are clearly visible. The ones with money belong to guarded communities who have the money to hire guards and arms to defend themselves. They have access to water that due to drastic climate change and ecological decline is very hard to come by and therefore very expensive. They live comfortable lives. Then you have the poor like Olamina, like the people in her community. They have walls to protect them, but are themselves scraping by to afford water and other amenities. However, their story suggests they were not this poor. As they live in a walled community, it is suggested that they once had the means to protect themselves. Olamina’s father is a minister and college professor, able to teach them how to read and educate themselves. This is considered a very good job, suggestive that once they were quite well to do. The people outside the walls, who do not live in communities protected by walls, are the poorest. They are the “squatters, winos, junkies, [and] homeless people” (Sower 20).

The gap between the rich and the poor is very apparent in how they see dogs. The rich will keep dogs and are willing to feed them, either because they like them or because they

provide protection. For rich people to be able to give away some of their own food, shows how prosperous they are. In contrast, “no poor or middle class person who had an edible piece of meat would give it to a dog” (Sower 49). The rich see dogs as a source of protection, the poor see dogs as a danger that must be avoided (Sower 49). In *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina describes how “so many poor women are willing to serve as surrogate mothers” (Talents 95). The rich, even if they are able to carry their own children, can delegate this job to another woman in exchange for food and housing for the duration of the pregnancy (Talents 95). Again, the gap between the rich (who have so much to spare that they even pay someone to not carry their own children) and the poor (who sell their body, going through pregnancy and birth, in order to survive for nine months) becomes apparent.

These class structures presented in the novel revolve around inclusion and exclusion. Who belongs where in society? In the beginning of *Parable of the Sower*, Olamina belongs to her gated community in Robledo. In both novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, the importance of community is reiterated. Olamina states that in her community in Robledo they “all know each other [t]here. [They] depend on each other” (Sower 45). However, a community is formed by including people; by forming a group. This also means that others are excluded. The rich, in their guarded communities, exclude the ones that cannot afford to live there. Olamina’s community likewise excludes people. This exclusion can lead to resentment from the excluded. This community becomes a target for the excluded. While the rich have the resources to defend themselves, communities like Olamina’s do not. Therefore, Olamina’s people would take measures to prevent them from making a target of themselves. When they would venture outside their walls, they would wear filthy clothes in order to look as though they belong

outside the walls (Sower 28). If they would leave their community looking clean "people would think [they're] showing off, trying to be better than they are" (Sower 28). In *Parable of the Sower*, Olamina's community is attacked by those excluded and Olamina finds herself as "one of the street poor, now" (Sower 162). As she no longer has a community to fall back on, "there's no one [she] can afford to trust. No one to back [her] up" (Sower 162). Throughout the book, the reader follows Olamina as she tries to build a new community, an Earthseed community.

4.1.5. Race

Butler also strikes up the issue of race in her novels. The neighbourhood Olamina grew up consists of mostly Black people or people of colour. Olamina lives in a time where "people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind" (Sower 45). Even within her own neighbourhood "interracial feuds" are very common (Talents 95). Interracial marriage is not unheard of, but comes with much strife and disputes (Talents 95). Therefore, everyone keeps to themselves. When Olamina is forced to leave her home, she travels with Harry, a White man, and Zahra, a Black woman. Olamina's decision to travel as a man is also beneficial to them in terms of race. Zahra states that "mixed couples catch hell whether people think they're gay or straight," alluding to the fact that Olamina and Harry travelling together would seem as though they were a mixed couple (Sower 177). Harry, being White, will "piss of all the blacks" and Olamina, being Black, will "piss of all the whites" (Sower 177). Zahra travelling with them, and Olamina disguising herself as a man, will create the illusion that Zahra and Olamina will form a Black couple with Harry as their white friend. Even better, "if Harry can get a reasonable tan, maybe [they] can claim him as a cousin" (Sower 178).

Another way in which the novels address the issue of race, is in the way they exhibit the notion of slavery. Butler, with her novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, connects her fictional American future to America's Past. As is seen in *Parable of the Talents*; "The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments — the ones abolished slavery and guaranteeing citizenship rights — still exist, but they've been weakened by custom, by Congress and the various state legislatures, and by recent Supreme Court decisions that they don't much matter" (Talents 50). The novels present both the chattel slavery that was seen in Antebellum America and a more economic servitude. In these novels, however, it is not only Black people who can be subjected to slavery but White people are still seen as the preferred slave drivers. When Olamina comes across Grayson, a runaway slave, who asks her: "Where'd that white man come from", it shows his distrust in Harry and White people in general (Sower 306). The novel shows that Whiteness still holds at least some power in the system of slavery.

4.2. Power Structures

One of the core constructs of a critical analysis of intersectionality is power relations. In order to critically analyse intersectionality in Octavia Butler's work, the power structures and relations in her work need to be examined. Butler does not shy away from portraying the complexities of power. Especially in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, "Butler [...] offer[s] intricate analyses of the nature of power, focusing on possible responses to power, what it means to seek or to require power, and how to handle power once it is achieved" (Lacey 380).

In order to survive in Olamina's America, one needs power. America as portrayed in the novels, is a highly capitalist country where power is closely intertwined with economic status. Those with wealth gain more power, perpetuating a cycle of deepening poverty and powerlessness for the less privileged. In *Parable of the Sower*, the presidential candidate Donner benefits from this power structure and is elected on his promise to get "laws changed, suspend "overly restrictive" minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board" (Sower 36). What this means is that as long as employers give their employees room and board, the worker's basic needs are met, but they have no control or agency over their own lives. It is his allegiance to capitalism that allows him to reinforce the capitalist nature of the country, favouring the wealthy elite and maintaining the inequality and powerlessness of the marginalised majority. This happens in Olivar, a coastal town that has been taken over by KSF, a multinational company. KSF's plan for Olivar is to "dominate farming and the selling of water and solar and wind energy" (Sower 128). The people of Olivar have accepted their cut in pay in order to enjoy the security a privatised town has to offer. What people do not realise is that when

they surrender to the big companies, they give up their freedom. The people of Olivar especially feel as though this does not apply to them. They see themselves as people who are not "frightened, impoverished victims", they are "educated" and "able to look after themselves, their rights and their property" (Sower 128). They feel as though with the protection of the big company, they are at least safe. However, as Olamina's father states: "There is nothing safe about slavery" (Sower 130).

In *Parable of the Talents*, a new politician rises to power. Andrew Steele Jarret acquires power with his campaign to "make America great again" (Talents 29). Jarret takes a slightly different approach to solidify his rise in power than his predecessor Donner. While Donner built his office around the existing power structures - the capitalist nature of the country favouring the wealthy few - Jarret uses his connections to the Christian Church to acquire his following and fuels his campaign with manipulation, scare tactics and the exploitation of the divisions within society.

Olamina finds out that one cannot run from power. As seen above, the novels express a critique of the abuse of power within American politics and big businesses. Why is it that Presidential candidates like Donner and Jarret gain so much following, even though they abuse their power, leading to tyranny and slavery? It is because people are "afraid and ashamed of their fear, ashamed of their powerlessness. And they're tired. There are millions of people like them—people who are frightened and just plain tired of all the chaos. They want someone to do something. Fix things. Now!" (Talents 37). It is their allure that convinces people that the other candidates "supposed incompetence" scares them more than Donner's en Jarret's "obvious tyranny" (Talents 37).

Olamina copes with her own sense of powerlessness. As a young Black woman who struggles to come to terms with her hyperempathy, she portrays a particularly vulnerable subject in the eyes of those in power. However, Olamina develops her own interpretation of power. This particular verse in The Book of the Living evidently states her view on power:

"God is Power—

Infinite,

Irresistible,

Inexorable,

Indifferent.

And yet, God is Pliable—

Trickster,

Teacher,

Chaos,

Clay.

God exists to be shaped.

God is Change." (Sower 34)

To Olamina, power equals change. If one is to exercise power, one must understand that change is necessary. Another verse in The Book of the Living illustrates the importance of adaptability:

"A victim of God may,

Through learning adaption,

Become a partner of God,

A victim of God may,

Through forethought and planning,

Become a shaper of God.

Or a victim of God may,

Through shortsightedness and fear,

Remain God's victim,

God's plaything,

God's prey" (Sower 41).

Olamina believes that in order to remove yourself from being a victim, you need to constantly adapt and change in the face of adversity. She believes that if she cowers in fear from those in power, she will remain a victim forever. In order to avoid the tyranny and slavery of those in power, Olamina needs to take power for herself. There is only a choice between the surrender to power or to seize power. With her religion Earthseed, Olamina is able to seize power for herself and become a leader. Olamina and her religion show that power can also be used for collaboration and unity. In order for Olamina to obtain power for herself, she has to constantly adapt and change. Olamina's creation of Earthseed is born out of her need for adaptation and survival. As she experiences the chaos of the world around her, she adapts her beliefs and teachings in order to make sense of a fractured society and builds towards unity and inclusivity. Olamina likewise presents her ability to adapt in the way that she teaches herself survival skills, in how she manages her hyperempathy, in how she is able to hide her femininity and how she transforms herself into a leader in order to survive.

Taking power for oneself, even to use it for good, can also corrupt. In *Parable of the Talents*, Olamina's daughter narrates her view of her mother:

> "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" (Talents 11).

Butler presents another side of power. Like many of her New Wave contemporaries, Butler explores Lord Acton's maxim: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lazarski and Allshouse 12). Olamina, in her quest for power to get out from under her oppressor, has the potential to be corrupted by this power. With this, it is evident that Butler does not shy away from presenting the intricacies of power.

4.3. Intersectional Relationality

In order to examine Butler's novels through an intersectional lens, it is not enough to examine the social inequalities on their own. As seen in chapter 2, what makes an intersectional analysis intersectional, is the focus on relationality. It is important to explore the relationality between the social inequalities in the novels. Butler's *Parable* novels not only explore issues such as race, gender, class, disability and religion on their own, but showcases the relations between them.

It is Butler's mirroring of the historical Antebellum period in the *Parable* novels, that illustrates the relation between the inequality based on race and the inequality based on class, religion, gender and disability. In *Sower* and *Talents*, Butler illustrates a capitalist system in twenty-first century America relying heavily on the system of slavery (Joo 286). A way in which the slavery depicted in the *Parable* novels differs from the historical Antebellum period, is that it exceeds the notion of race alone (Dubey 358). It no longer showcases the dichotomy of Black and White, as was prevalent in the Antebellum period. Now "slavery has been universalized to include all ethnic and racial groups in all regions of the country. All America has become a massive plantation, a gigantic ghetto" (qtd. in Allen 1356). It is not only affecting Black people, but referring to a more "heterogeneous mass— Black and White, Asian and Latin" (Sower 182). In *Sower*, the group of runaway slaves making their way North consist of men and women of different races and backgrounds as they make up "the crew of a modern underground railroad" (Sower 297).

While *Sower* demonstrates a system of debt slavery, *Talents* centres more on slavery in the form of "reeducation facilities" (Joo 292). *Sower* then focuses more on the intersection of race and class. With its focus on the rise of global capitalism and its way of mirroring the

Antebellum slavery period, *Sower* lays bare the correlations between the historical slavery and the workings of advanced capitalism in America. Water is privatised, public education demolished, and cities such as Olivar lure in workers with promises of pay, room and board, and safety. It is in cities such as Oliver that employees are essentially debt slaves, as:

> "such debt slaves could be forced to work longer hours for less pay, could be "disciplined" if they failed to meet their quotas, could be traded and sold with or without their consent, with or without their families, to distant employers who had temporary or permanent need of them. Worse, children could be forced to work off the debt of their parents if the parents died, became disabled, or escaped" (Sower 293-4)

With the suspension of workers laws, originally intended to protect the employees´ rights, now favouring the capitalist organisations, employees are essentially chained to the companies.

Talents focuses more on the intersection of religion and race, as it centres more on slavery in the form of reeducation facilities. As there is a shift in leadership in the American government in *Talents*, shifting to a more Christian oriented government instead of a capitalist oriented government, Butler illustrates the connection between the inequality of religion and race. When Olamina's community Acorn is rebranded as Camp Christian by members of the Christian America movement, they put collars around the necks of the followers of Earthseed. However, here, Butler presents a different form of slavery. While the form of debt-slavery in Olivar is capitalist in nature, here in Camp Christian the form of slavery has no capitalist goals (Joo 293). The enslaved people "do not produce any marketable commodities. Rather, the goal of the camp is ideological" (Joo 293). This goal is to "learn to be a servant of God and God's true church and a loyal citizen of the greatest country in the world" (Talents 238).

Butler's use of the narrative of slavery in her *Parable* novels simultaneously sheds light on its relation to gender. Butler is not the only woman using the narrative of slavery to shed light on gender inequality in her novel: "Women writers of speculative fiction during the 1980s often invoked the slave narrative genre to frame their grim tales of reproductive exploitation, drawing inspiration from a historical period when the will to resistance flared up even under conditions of extreme constraint" (Dubey 357). This can also be seen in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which showcases the inequality between men and women as they are being marginalised by a theocratic, patriarchal governing class, leaving women's biological function as their sole worth to a masculinist society. Butler too explores the relation between gender and class in her novels. In *Parable of the Talents*, women are seen to give themselves up as surrogate mothers. Olamina's society is described as a "world where so many poor women are willing to serve as surrogate mothers, carrying to term a child of wealthier people even when the wealthy people are able to have a child in the normal way" (Talents 95). In *Talents*, the disparity between women who are able to choose to not bear a child and pay someone else to do it for them and women who are so poor they sell their only value — their ability to bear children — just so they receive basic necessities such as housing for the duration of the pregnancy in return, is explored.

Butler too uses the narrative of slavery to highlight the inequality based on gender and its relation to race. In Butler's *Parable* novels women are being "sold into prostitution", essentially being enslaved for what they have to offer sexually (Sower 298). However, it is not only Black women who are subjected to this form of sex slavery. In Butler's novels, "sexual trafficking in women—affects white, black, Asian, and Mexican women alike" (Dubey 358). In fact, it is not even only women that suffer from being sexually exploited. Olamina's brother, Marcus, has

experienced the horrors of sexual slavery; raped repeatedly and sold into prostitution (Talents 137).

Within her *Parable* novels, Butler also sketches an apparent relation between gender and disability. Olamina's hyperempathy is seen as a woman's affliction. Femininity and womanhood are intricately linked to hyperempathy. Butler draws on the popular notion that women are more empathetic than men. This notion has been endorsed by multiple studies, including a study by Baron-Cohen stating that "the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy" while "the male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems" (qtd. in Keen 6). However, other studies have critiqued this notion by stating that the difference in women's and men's ability to feel empathy are "small rather than large, and specific rather than general" (Keen 7). Whether the biological differences between men and women are substantial in their capacity to feel empathy, it seems to be the dominant narrative. Butler takes from this narrative and critiques it in her novels. However, it is not Olamina who would gender her hyperempathy, but others that do so for her. It is also not Olamina herself that sees her hyperempathy as a disability — this is also done for her. When talking to Keith about the outside world, he says to Olamina to just go and "marry Curtis and make babies…out there, outside, you wouldn't last a day. That hyperempathy shit of yours would bring you down" (Sower 118). The link between a strengthened ability to feel empathy and femininity is also prevalent in the way that male sharers are perceived. As society has understood hyperempathy as a feminine disability, men seemed to be "resenting their extra vulnerability more than females" (Talents 343). Olamina herself questions: "Could there be anyone more vulnerable than little male sharers at the mercy of both

men and other boys" (Talents 345) Olamina's supposed disability cannot be seen as separate from femininity and gender.

A connection can also be drawn between race and disability. Hee-Jung Serenity Joo identifies a parallel between the realness of race and the realness of Olamina's hyperempathy: "Not unlike the category of race, Olamina's hyperempathy straddles the divide between reality and illusion. Like race, it is technically not real, yet has very real bodily consequences" (Joo 290). Doctors in Olamina's society discredit the realness of Olamina's pain by calling her hyperempathy "delusional" (Sower 22). Even Olamina begins to believe her hyperempathy might be a mental illness, gaining hope that "if the pain isn't real, then maybe—" she can recover from her hyperempathy (Sower 200). Even though race is a social construct, the consequences that people experience because of their race are very real. Likewise, even though Olamina's hyperempathy might be a mental problem, the physical consequences that Olamina experiences because of her hyperempathy are real and should therefore be treated as such.

Additionally, the intersection between race and disability is evident in the way sharers are perceived in connection to slavery, as Olamina's "brother Marcus once said what good slaves sharers would make" (Sower 304). Hyperempathy is seen as a disability by most in Olamina's society, making them more vulnerable than others and thereby making it easier for them to be subjected to slavery by means of violence. Sharers can be subjected by means of violence that would not be done to their own physical bodies, but by torturing others. Their hyperempathy ability would make them feel the same pain as the person being tortured, thus making them more susceptible to being subjected to slavery. These intersections of seemingly separate socioeconomic issues and identity make it clear that intersectionality as an analytical lens is

necessary in order to conceive a conscious analysis of socioeconomic inequality. It is not enough to acknowledge these problems as separate issues.

4.4. Social Justice

Intersectionality's link to social justice is important in critically analysing intersectional issues. It is important to analyse in what way Lauren Olamina incentivises social justice in the novels, but also how Octavia Butler demonstrates her activism and her crusade for social justice by writing the *Parable* novels. The quote opening this chapter; "Belief | Initiates and guides action— | Or it does nothing", comes from *Parable of the Sower* (57). This quote alludes that belief is capable of inspiring action, or it is not. Later, in *Talents*, the quote from "The Book of the Living" is extended in the verse:

> "Are you Earthseed?
> Do you believe?
> Belief will not save you.
> Only actions
> Guided and shaped
> By belief and knowledge
> Will save you.
> Belief
> Initiates and guides action—
> Or it does nothing"
> (Talents 353).

Here, belief and knowledge in themselves are not enough. Belief "does nothing." Only actions will be able to bring about change. Belief and knowledge are necessary to guide actions, but when it stands alone, it does nothing. What Lauren Olamina conveys here is that a belief in and

knowledge of social injustice taking place, is not enough. In order to bring about change, one needs to act. Lauren acts by writing the verses that make of "The Book of the Living," ultimately creating a religion and community spreading an alternative and inclusive way of living, and Octavia Butler acts by writing the *Parable* novels critiquing her current society of North America in the 1990's, inspiring readers to think critically about the state of their society.

In the *Parable* novels, Olamina distances herself from her family's religion as she believes that the inequalities she sees in the world will not be fixed with the current world order. She begins writing verses, or parables, of what she believes to be truths. She puts her words into actions as she creates a community that lives by these written truths and eventually brings the community "among the stars" (Sower 87). Butler critiques the dominant social order of North America in the late twentieth century; in the way that it creates a hierarchy, making certain people second-class citizens. She writes these books as a warning. With her *Parable* novels, Butler "speculate[s] that the combined forces of twentieth century capitalism and technological advancement will lead to a 'boomeranging' of history in the future so that anyone who is vulnerable to exploitation, despite their racial background, will be subject to slavery" (Allen 1356). Butler wrote the novels as her "cautionary tales" (Holden and Shawl 172). She warns the reader that if we go on as we have in the late nineteenth century, the future depicted in the *Parable* novels, might as well be the actual future. Butler makes her reason for writing the novels abundantly clear in *Parable of the Talents*. In a verse of "The Book of the Living", she writes: "To survive, Let the past Teach you—" (Talents 379). Here, Butler focuses on the message that history is bound to repeat itself. However, in the same verse, Butler also states that we should not dwell on the past. We need history to teach us, in order for it to not let it happen again, but we

also need to move on: “To survive, Know the past. Let it touch you. Then let The past Go” (Talents 379). It is important to educate yourself on the past, but it is equally as important to let the past go and apply yourself in order to change the future.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the way in which the novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* present inequality based on ability, gender, class, religion and race and critically examined the intersections between these socioeconomic inequalities. As a science fiction author, Butler's influence on the genre as a whole has been significant. Science fiction started as a niche genre particularly written and read by White men, ignoring the experience of women and people of colour. Butler's writing is part of the changing landscape of science fiction. New Wave SF allows more diverse voices into the science fiction genre, both as writers and readers. Butler is one of those diverse voices in the scene. She has continually written on issues of racism, gender inequality and inequality on the basis of class, disability and religion. These themes are particularly evident in her *Parable* novels. It is science fiction's changing nature that allows for these themes to be explored. Science fiction can therefore be identified as the genre of change.

It was also important to define intersectionality as a critical social theory. The notion of intersectionality arose in order to move away from a 'single-axis framework', laying bare the interconnection and power relations between socioeconomic issues. Again, change is an important concept in a critical intersectional analysis, as it is important to keep the notion of social justice in mind. Focussing on what intersectionality can do is more important than merely defining intersectionality in a certain context.

This notion of change is presented in the *Parable* novels as well. In Butler's novels, Olamina founds a new religion; Earthseed. This religion functions as an antithesis of Christianity in America. While Christianity is dogmatic in nature, Earthseed opposes this nature and values change over all. Earthseed suggests that if change is what shapes humanity and the world, then

prejudice cannot exist. The thought behind this reasoning is that if one person will never be alike to their former selves because they are ever changing, how can others be oppressed for being different. It is then that Earthseed is presented as a religion that might offer a solution to oppression in that it embraces diversity and unity.

Butler utilises science fiction — the genre of change — to critique social inequality on the basis of disability, gender, class, religion and race by founding Earthseed — the religion of change. Intersectionality is a tool, or lens, that aids in achieving change. Change being the common denominator here, Butler presents change as the solution of a dystopian future where society is greatly divided between the oppressed and its oppressors. This change can be achieved through power. Olamina, by taking power for herself, is able to free herself from her oppressors. According to Olamina, in order to seize power, one needs to be able to constantly adapt. If one is able to adapt to the situation at hand, one can seize power. Throughout the novel, Olamina is constantly adapting to her environment in order to gain the upper hand; when she disguises herself as a man in a male dominated society, or when she hides her hyperempathy in a society that will use this ability against her, or when she keeps her thoughts on religion to herself in a society that subjugates those who defer from the dominant Christian religion. However, Butler demonstrates the complexity of power as the reader is confronted with Olamina's potential to be corrupted by power in *Parable of the Talents*.

This thesis not only examined the socioeconomic inequality presented in the novels, but critically analysed the intersections between them. Butler uses the notion of enslavement to relate different issues of inequality to each other. The way in which the novels refer back to the historical period of slavery in her futuristic American society, exposes the relationality between

race, gender, ability, class and religion. Forsaking the assumption that slavery is merely a conflict between Black and White, Butler presents slavery as the consequence of prejudice, not only on the basis of race, but also on the basis of gender, disability, class and religion. While *Parable of the Sower*'s focus on debt slavery examines primarily the interconnections between race and class, *Parable of the Talents*' focus on slavery in the form of facilities focused on religious reeducation primarily explores the relations between race and religion. However, both novels showcase the interconnections of race, gender, class, ability and religion; *Sower* from a capitalist power system and *Parable* from a religious system of power.

Butler wrote these novels with a specific reason; to address the current socio-political climate in America at the time she was writing these novels and warn readers that if we are not careful, this could be our future. If society remains prejudiced towards others that do not fit in the dominant narrative of American society, we might come closer to the dystopia presented in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. Parallels can already be drawn between the future Butler apprehended and North American society today. As we are approaching 2024, where the story of Lauren Olamina starts, North American society is politically divided, where the political right is pushing for a less government regulated economy and promoting Christian doctrine as a basis for political policy. These ideals can be compared to the ideals honoured by Butler's two presidents in the novels; Donner and Jarret.

Even though intersectionality was only named as such just a few years before Butler published *Parable of the Sower*, she was already aware of the intersections between the socioeconomic inequality in America while writing the *Parable* novels. Her novels evidently showcase that identity is not only determined by one's race, one's gender, one's class, one's

(dis)ability or one's religion alone. It is the intersections and relationality of these identities that determines individual experience. It is important to note that while there were many other authors paving the way for a more diverse science fiction, Butler is one author that made science fiction intersectional.

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