

Dystopia:
Science Fiction and the Push Against Economic Determinism
by
Breanna Alyssa Caban

A thesis presented for the B. A. degree
with Honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Winter 2023

©Breanna Alyssa Caban

For myself

Everything I was, am, and am destined to be

Acknowledgments

During the writing of this work, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the contribution of my sister, Isabela. For her moral support, late night phone calls, and her doordash surprises during my long nights working on this project. She has helped maintain my sanity and composure throughout this project, and for that and all else to come, I am grateful. Deserving of equal gratitude are my parents, who have helped supply me with the support and encouragement I so desperately needed during the homestretch.

This thesis would have never come to fruition had it not been for my exemplary advisor, Justin Mitchell. Through every stage of this process, Justin was a strong guiding force and supplied encouragement, feedback, and discussion and for him, I am grateful. At the start of my journey, my initial advisor, Professor Hadji Bakara, was a light and was instrumental in the formation of my initial ideas and research. I must also thank the Professors of the Honors Thesis courses: Professors Adela Pinch and Mahmita Lahiri.

I am grateful to those who listened incessantly to my thesis discussion and tolerated my pacing and excited screams of discovery. I am proud to have completed this journey, but that has only been made possible by the works of incredible scholars, authors, and thinkers before me. So to those who have paved the way for me, thank you.

Abstract

In my thesis, I examine the development of society beneath two different predominating value systems- religious and capitalist values- as presented within science fiction novels. I examine what builds and breaks societies in the worlds of Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. In both novels, specific sets of societal values encourage societies that drive towards what can be overall considered a utopian or dystopian society, thus the lens of analysis and approach for the selected novels is a hybrid literary-sociological one.

In the first chapter, I discuss and define specific terms such as "capitalism" and "religion," while establishing the specific foundation I leverage for my analysis including insights from scholars such as Judith Shklar and renowned sociologists, Marx Weber and Emile Durkheim. I also emphasize in this first chapter the manner in which I leverage the terms I elaborate upon as tools to describe the state of a society. They are not to be pitted against one another as opposing terminology. I then include an analysis of the ways in which these value systems affect societies and societal values founded on a sociological basis.

In the second and third chapters, I leverage the foundation established in the first chapter to analyze both Butler and Piercy's novels, while incorporating ideas from other materials such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, Judith Shklar's *After Utopia*, and Christoph Deutchmann's *Capitalism, Religion, and the Idea of the Demonic*. In these chapters built upon Butler and Piercy's novels, my primary objective is to display the way in which economies result from the establishment of societies, and more specifically their roots in a specific value system that led to the establishment of these

economic systems. I do a textual analysis for each novel from the standpoint of cause-and-effect, finding the cause of each society and its economic effect.

Finally, in my conclusion I bring together the arguments of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx on society, capital, community, and religion, through the lens of Butler's and Piercy's novels weaving each strand together to effectively summarize my argument and objective.

Contents

Introduction	1
What Makes a Society	8
The Effects of Capitalistic and Religious Values on the State of Societal Relationships	8
Romantic Feeling in Connection with Societal Development	13
Butler's Apocalypse	18
<i>The Parable of the Sower</i>	18
From Segregation to Success	25
Piercy's Utopia	28
<i>Woman on the Edge of Time</i>	28
Detroit, Chicago, Mattapoisett	33
Conclusion	36
Works Cited	41

Introduction

The genre of science fiction is one of the most captivating to grace the literary world. During my upbringing, novels like *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, *Harry Potter* and the *Divergent* series were all the rave with their imaginary worlds, blood-pumping tales of government overthrow, people being sorted by a magic hat, and mirrors that cast the most secret fantasy of the mind's eye. Some wanted to exist in the world of the Hunger Games where they could prevail against the evil president; others dreamt of the Harry Potter universe with magical beasts and flying on brooms. In other words, science fiction seemed to encompass a wide array of possible worlds, some utopian, others dystopian. Still others fall between these poles. The latter raises the question of what makes a novel utopian or dystopian? Where do we draw the line? What is it that makes the prospect of certain worlds desirable and the mere thought of others so terrifying? What draws us to these worlds? What do *you* dream of at night? And what is that thing, hidden away in the darkest corners of your mind, away from the illumination of your peers, that is your worst nightmare?

In the time I have spent reading science fiction, the question of what constitutes an ideal world has always haunted me, and this is why I have attempted to address it here. Admittedly, I can only offer a partial answer to such a broad question. However, I do feel that by distilling the answer to this question down to its simplest form, I have reached a conclusion that touches on different perspectives and modes of inquiry. Indeed, by pouring over science fiction novels like the ones I discuss in the following chapters – namely Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1977)– I have come to view the status of social relationships as the

common denominator between utopian and dystopian fiction. More specifically, I have noticed that these relationships tend to be structured according to either a more religious or capitalist set of values with the closest relationships being bound together by something religious or spiritual in nature. This runs against the grain of the widespread belief in economic determinism, best described as the following: “When economic conditions are wrong, consequently other social conditions are wrong; make economic conditions right, and all other social conditions will be right too” (Elwood, 37).

If one googles the word “dystopia,” the first page of results turns up sources that largely frame capitalism as the catalyst of worldly destruction. Conversely, if one searches “utopia,” the results point to a world without capitalism, as if the two social orders were diametrically opposed to one another. Such a result presents capitalism as the demonic. This conception of capitalism as inherently negative bleeds into the world of science fiction and its criticism, where many scholars have overlooked the premise of this assertion entirely, taking its certainty for granted. Not only has there been little to no exploration of the role of interpersonal relationships within science fiction novels, but one is hard-pressed to find pieces that interrogate the link between capitalism and the demonic. My thesis explores the intersection of societal relationships and economic systems in science fiction narratives and therefore addresses both gaps. In my thesis, I analyze how different economic systems cultivate divergent societal relationships. In doing so, I do not seek to determine the difference between “good” or “bad” systems, rather, I attempt to interpret these systems as objectively as possible, avoiding the tendency to rely on previously conceived notions.

Both Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* have become canonical texts in the genre of science fiction and are fundamental to my area of inquiry. Science fiction seeks to critique the social conditions of the contemporary moment as well as to extrapolate potential future outcomes from modern conditions. It expresses the fears of a population by positing extreme scenarios, such as alien invasion and environmental decay, imminent or sudden realities. In the years since the publication of both Butler and Piercy's work scholars have rushed to analyze and dissect the components that comprise these utopian and dystopian societies these novels depict. In my research on these novels, I found that the current body of scholarship focuses on the intersections of race and gender and how these identities are performed, their boundaries pushed within utopian and dystopian societies. Scholars seem concerned to understand not only how Butler and Piercy view these abstract concepts but also how their novels anticipated the development of these ideas in our own time and alternative futures. While I was not surprised to find was an abundance of commentary on race and gender-based hierarchies and the toppling of the patriarchy, I was nonetheless taken aback by the absence of concern for what I assumed to be central to any discussion of utopian and dystopian worlds: relationships and economic systems.

The work of many scholars that I have encountered falls squarely into the definition of the concept of economic determinism. Originally introduced by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, economic determinism states that all aspects of a society— cultural, social, political, and intellectual—are dependent upon the system of economics present. Marx and Engels' work “presupposes that the economic is fundamentally determinative of all other social phenomena” (Ellwood, 37). I emphasize

that my thesis does not seek to fall under a rubric that would be classified as economic determinism, as I am not convinced by the theory of economic determinism and am rather in support of the opposite – that relationships are the builders of economic systems and every other societal facet. In my research, I have repeatedly found the latter to be the case, and develop my thesis around these findings. A key source I have found in support of my findings is a journal article written by Charles Ellwood that not only examines economic determinism, but does so from a psychological perspective, examining the individual human response beneath the application of such a concept. Based on psychological research and basic, scientific knowledge, Ellwood advocates for the idea of “human society as a complex living of living organisms responding... to external stimuli” but not as a group that is responding to one, singular, all-deterministic stimulus (Ellwood, 39). Instead, Ellwood argues that the economic stimulus may determine the way in which we respond to economic demands such as production or distribution of wealth, but it does not determine responses to all other stimuli. He acknowledges that while “It is true that habits of response in the social group... affect to a certain extent habits of response to all other classes... This is simply a consequence of the unity of individual personality and the interdependence of all phases of social life, that is, the unity of society” (Ellwood, 40). While economics do have an impact on society and its functions, they are not the key determining factor in every aspect of its functioning. The path to the clearest, most holistic explanation of factors that determine a society’s outcome is through a synthetic view that takes into account the different factors within the process of social life (Ellwood, 41). For this reason, I leverage a sociological lens in my thesis, examining the impacts, origins, and development of capitalistic and religious ideology. The examination of the

concepts alone would fall flat and slip into the skeletal structure of economic determinism, which only examines a society based upon a sort of hegemonic idea with little room for examination of other sources.

To better form and support my hypothesis, I read the novels not in search of race or gender commentary, but in search of the commentary on economically-structured relationships. I dove into the two very distinct societies in *The Parable of the Sower*, examining how social relationships have both formed these societies and acted to perpetuate them. I adopted the same method in my approach to Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. But in Piercy's novel there exist three societies, one very reminiscent of our own. Indeed, I scrutinize the latter society especially closely because I knew that its resemblance to our own contemporary society might jeopardize my efforts to remain objective. The dominant approach used to examine all the texts analyzed in this thesis is a sociological one. The entire purpose of my thesis is to examine relationships to one extent or another and while most critics I encountered approached the genre, to say nothing of these texts in particular, through the lens of critical race theory or a form of literary analysis, I concluded that a sociological approach was best suited for foregrounding the relationships and not necessarily the extraneous conditions that created them.

In my first chapter, I dissect the common values held within societies organized around religious values and commodity production. Here I draw on the work of social theorists such as Max Weber and Karl Marx to highlight the effects of capitalist ideology on the individual and on society. Additionally, I turn to works such as Judith Shklar's *After Utopia* and Thomas More's *Utopia* to arrive

at a definition of utopian society and, conversely, dystopian society as well. I also leverage Shklar's idea of romantic thought, specifically how it seeks to create wholeness in the individual which is starkly contrasted by what is established as the counteracting idea of enlightenment that only seeks knowledge and progress.

In my second section, I take a close look at Octavia Butler's novel *The Parable of the Sower*. In short, I examine the societies presented within the novel and how relationships have come to determine the way they are. More specifically, I seek to understand how the sector of society that values hard cash over human life has created such distant, depersonalized relationships and how the dominance of these types of relationships has perpetuated the same society that has created them. I examine the alternative society in Butler's novel which has built itself out of the ruins of a world so completely individualized that murder functions as a rational means of acquiring food. In my final chapter, I discuss *Woman on the Edge of Time* and the three different worlds conjured up by Piercy, all of which reflect and emerge under starkly different social conditions. In both Butler and Piercy's chapters, I include the authors' history, providing context and a framework for understanding the contents of each novel and the worlds developed within them.

Ultimately, I believe that utopias and dystopias are not rooted in "good" or "bad" economic systems, that the relationships they privilege are not a result of the system, but that the system is a result of the relationships. The societies in both Butler and Piercy's novels support this view. It is not a set system or set of ideas that force humanity's hand into a given social order or the destruction of one; rather it is the tendency to celebrate man-made systems that flatter human vanity that ultimately

fractures society and leads to the creation of so-called dystopias. By contrast, healthy interpersonal relationships enable the creation of a system that encourages not only humility and restraint but also the reproduction of these human values. I refer to this more explicitly in my thesis as the battle against capitalist and religious ideology. I consciously resist the temptation to label either as righteous or immoral; rather I seek to describe these societies as accurately and disinterestedly as possible. Capitalist ideology is the set of ideas that values profit above all else— including life itself. It values market growth at all costs and disregards the intrinsic value of human life, replacing it with what Marx calls exchange value. Religious ideology has the tendency to value communal bonds and moral actions above all else, putting it at odds entirely with the endless growth model of unfettered capitalism.

What Makes a Society

“The desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man. It is the most fundamental passion, it is the force which keeps the human race together, the clan, the family, society. The failure to achieve it means insanity or destruction- self-destruction or the destruction of others”

(Fromm, 17).

The Effects of Capitalistic and Religious Values on the State of Societal Relationships

The relationship between the individual and religion is a symbiotic one that simultaneously defines the world around and the world beyond and supersedes any modern day confinement of religion as solely a set of rituals and chants. As renowned sociologist Emile Durkheim presents in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, there is the attempt to define religion by the divine or the supernatural (Durkheim, 23). He cites Max Mueller who viewed religion as “an effort to conceive the inconceivable and to express the inexpressible, an aspiration toward the infinite” (Durkheim, 23). Durkheim ultimately asserts that [Religion is] “an eminently collective thing”: That it “serves to bind a community together” (Durkheim, 47). He carefully maps out that “Whether simple or complex, all known religious beliefs display a common feature: They presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of into two classes- two opposite genera- that are widely designated by two distinct terms, which the words *profane* and *sacred* translate fairly well. The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane- such is the distinctive trait of religious thought” (Durkheim, 34). The distinction between the profane and the sacred is

blurry, as any mundane object can be made sacred so long as the possessor makes it so, yet it is certainly one thing- absolute (Durkheim, 36). It is this stark heterogeneity– this contrast between the real and the sacred- that best defines religion. The forms of sacrality or real are flexible, but the contrast remains.

Yet in the crux of this contrast is what defines the human being. It is the intersection of the unseen and the tangible, of the visible and the divine, and of the body and the mind. Existing within this nexus of two seemingly disparate ideas, humans thrive in the presence of both the physical and that which transcends the earthly plane, but are constantly searching for a means by which to understand the most difficult part of ourselves. Some refer to it as the mind or the soul, Durkheim labels it our conscience. He states that when man feels uplifted by society he feels he is “in moral harmony with his neighbor” and “gains new confidence, courage, and boldness in action- quite like the man of faith who believes he feels the eyes of his god turned benevolently toward him” (Durkheim, 213). This form of moral power is representative of something that is within us other than ourselves. “It is man’s moral consciousness and his conscience. And it is only with the aid of religious symbols that most have ever managed to conceive of it with any clarity at all” (Durkheim, 214). Thus religion and its sacred nature is, for humanity, a means of self discovery. One is so tightly adhered to the other that it cannot be that man cannot understand himself without religion and religion cannot exist without man.

Similar is the relationship between man and society. Durkheim states that similar to religion, “society’s workings do not stop at demanding sacrifices, privations and efforts from us” (Durkheim, 211). Religion is the means by which man can discover himself and because society is built in man's pursuit of God and the divine, we can find God in the collective. God, religion, the Divine, is rooted in

ourselves and, consequently, in each other. "...society can exist only in and by the means of individual minds" (Durkheim, 211). Yet the kind of value that comes with humans valuing one another stems from the belief in some form of religion that acts as a facilitator for a deep intimate connection within a community. Ultimately, the connection between religion and man is one in which religion does not exist without man but in the pursuit of his own self discovery, man does not exist without some form of religion. This perspective informs the understanding of society as a whole and how or why a community can be bound or dissolved depending on its connection to and understanding of the divine as in turn it allows individuals to appreciate one another.

However, in a society where the aspects of divine belief or self- discovery are lost, there is a society that is centered not around the self but around monetary gain. In Durkheim's piece, he makes mention of two separate phases of societies- one that attends primarily to their occupations and where "economic activity predominates" and in the other, the "population comes together" (Durkheim, 217). In the former, society exists in a state that is lackluster, "monotonous, slack, and humdrum" (Durkheim, 217). It is a society driven by monetary gain and is career-centric, existing with a very different set of values than the latter mentioned society. This state of living and economic system is best described as capitalism and will be referred to as such for the duration of this thesis. However, I emphasize that money illuminates, it does not dictate. The description of this form of society as a capitalist one is because it is best described as such, but the moral downfall does not come as a result of this system. Rather the system is a result of the values held by a group of individuals. When humans have the means to produce everything they believe they could possibly need, the result is a people that

become hyper-individualistic, becoming both the means and the end. The following excerpt from Deutschmann best highlights the key point:

“Being the ‘absolute means,’ money tends to become an absolute end which connects itself with a utopia of perhaps the strongest possible kind: if only I have enough money, I personally ‘can’ everything that mankind can; I could appropriate all the goods of the world including health, beauty, education - one day perhaps even immortality, as the prophets of biotechnology are promising nowadays. At its core, therefore capitalist morality is an egocentric, even ‘narcissistic’ one. It is an ethic of rational egoism and ‘legitimate greed’ (Streeck 2011)” (Deutschmann, 18).

In Cristoph Deutschmann’s book *Religion, Capitalism, and the Idea of the Demonic*, Deutschmann boldly equates capitalism with the demonic in light of its counter - productivity to its counterpart’s primary goal - strong societal relationships. The very nature of capitalism is to drive the highest profit at any expense, leading to “The reduction of morality to the very minimum of individual property rights” which has, in turn, “greatly facilitated the global expansion of capitalism because it creat[es] a simple, abstract standard which is indifferent to local moral orders” (Deutschmann, 18). Morality, as it is known in religion, is completely discarded and replaced with the monetary ability to accelerate any agenda. The end moves slowly out of existence with the insatiable material desires that become the religion of a money-centric society. This is not only the abandonment of the traditional representation of religion, but the emergence of a new kind of religion where humanity is no longer interdependent, but self-dependent, so much so that man becomes both the means and the end.

Humans are no longer made to serve one another, but to serve themselves, consumed by their worldly desires which “represent[s] the entire process of human reproduction from production to circulation to consumption, and back to production” (Deutschmann, 18). We lose true connection and become linked to one another only indirectly via what Deutschmann references as “mirror of money-” a symbolic representation of money and markets that ultimately reflects the collective identity of society. And yet, the separation extends beyond the isolation of an individual from society and into the inability to recognize themselves: “...every individual in such a society appears fully autonomous in reproducing his or her own existence that the mirror making this self-interpretation possible and mediating the actual social interdependence of the individuals – money – must appear as something completely transcendent, objectified or even “reified” (in Marx’s terms) – just like Durkheimian religion” (Deutschmann, 14). When money goes beyond serving the purpose of commodity exchange, and becomes conflated with people’s purpose of living, it is no longer a harmless economic system. This deification of cash “endangers the very foundations of that interconnectedness, since it hollows out the embeddedness of markets into institutions and morally dense forms of social cohesion at local, regional, and national levels, without which markets cannot work. The capitalist utopia of absolute wealth throws the economy as well as the entire society into an uncontrollable and infinite dynamism, thereby endangering the fabric of society as well as its natural environment” (Deutschmann, 19).

Romantic Feeling in Connection with Societal Development

In her book *After Utopia*, Judith Shklar discusses the time of the enlightenment in contrast to romantic thought- two streams of thought that seem to be pitted against each other. While my novels are not directly rooted in romantic feeling (not romanticism proper) or enlightenment ideology, there is a clear connection between the argument that Shklar is making for the wholeness of the individual in connection with faith and the human experience. She states that in distancing ourselves from God, “We have excluded ourselves from seeing and have made the world a picture, an object to be observed by subjects” (Shklar, 12). In the light of a world that does not find higher power, there is a sense of luster and purpose that life itself loses. The examination of these two ideologies are magnified through the use of poetry and reason– two agents that effectively comprise romantic thought and enlightenment philosophy. She states that “Poetry tried to ‘heal the wounds reason has inflicted on us,’ and philosophy sought to defend itself against the growing prevalence of anti-rational forms of thought. In the course of this dialogue both sides were modified, until today we have excessively intellectual poetry and philosophers who constantly call for more life. In the beginning however, it was the aesthetic view of life which tried to save human existence from the excesses of the analytical spirit. (Shklar, 10). In a similar fashion, religion has attempted to heal the wounds that an overly commodified and privatized life has inflicted on us. Wounds such as the asphyxiation of the spirit, the oppression of the mind, and the neglect of the self. She refers to this state of neglected self as the “unhappy consciousness” – much of which we will see in both Butler and Piercy’s novels. The unhappy consciousness “does not just assert itself against the laws of reason” and stems from the man

as utility. “‘Utility,’ Schiller complained, “is the great idol of the age, to which all powers must do service and all talents swear allegiance. In these clumsy scales the spiritual service of Art has no weight; deprived of all encouragement, she feels from the noisy mart of our century” (Shklar, 11). Where art— or more specifically the absence of the spirit or of the ability to connect to the divine— is absent, society falls subject to the belief in reason and logic as its master. This is what leads to the development of societies founded upon beliefs that prioritize commodity production as the abandonment of art— leads to the dissolution of the soul. Shklar cites Schiller, arguing that the division of labor and specialization “saw only the destruction of the whole man, the cultured man” and that “What men called progress he (Schiller) regarded as mere domestication... Man had been evened out standardized, and deprived of energy, but not improved morally” (Shklar, 44). The argument for what is referred to as the whole man is made here, and that is not inclusive of a system that calls for the fragmentation of the individual from himself in the name of labor and commodity production. The following quote from Shklar frames faith as in the context of a man’s life:

“Whatever one generation may learn from the other, that which is genuinely human no generation learns from the foregoing. In this respect every generation begins primitively, has no different task from every previous generation. . . . This authentically human factor is passion. . . Thus no generation has learned from another to love, no generation begins at any other point than at the beginning. . . . But the highest passion in a man is faith, and here . . . every generation begins all over again, the subsequent generation gets no further than the foregoing” (Shklar, 44).

Faith is not the primary passion at the forefront of a man's mind, but is the driving force that permits the beauty of creation, love, and pure desire. "The division of labor, so greatly admired by all practical philosophy, seemed to Schiller to have led to 'whole classes of human beings developing only part of their capacities....' If the community 'makes function the measure of man' it is not surprising that each person develops only those qualities which bring him 'honour and profit' until 'gradually individual concrete life is extinguished, in order that the abstract life of the whole may prolong its sorry existence'" (Shklar, 11). When the man becomes a function of the community insofar and becoming only a unit of production or measured only by his use value, the community itself is reduced to little more than a common place of residence with no binding force.

I leverage Shklar's piece in my analysis as a means of explanation for the difficult task of describing the relationship humanity has with faith and religious impulse. Additionally, there is explanation in her piece of the nuances between knowledge, production, and the quality of human life that is valuable in the analysis of both Butler and Piercy's pieces. Shklar establishes that faith is what encourages wholeness. Division encourages the opposite.

Yet, despite the capitalist system and religious values appearing to be counter-agents of one another, it is important to note that the two share the same impulse. Oftentimes, within novels of science fiction, it is difficult to read a society centered around religion without feeling the implication reading that this type of society can only exist because of the negation of a capitalist system. On the flip side, it can also be difficult to read a society centered around capital gains and not wonder if the insertion of some sort of value system – similar to what we see in religious circles – couldn't improve

the conditions of said society. And so while we understand one via the contrast of the other, there is that shared impulse that so tightly connects them. Deutschmann explains that capitalism “takes on the ‘religious’ function of representing the collective identity of society, thus occupying the place of manifest religion in pre-capitalist societies. In fact, it performs this function in an even more adequate sense, since only money is truly global, but none of the religions are” (Deutschmann, 14). Capitalism is described by Deutschmann as a religious offshoot because of its global adoption, but I would add that this internalization is only driven by the human desire to seek out purpose and understanding. Both capitalism and religion function only because society has and continues to have a desire to believe in something larger than themselves. Something that acts to serve them, making these larger structures inherently operational only because society as a whole has faith that it works. There is an intrinsic desire to work towards a purpose, and the crux of both of these entities is servanthood, although working towards two very different goals. Servanthood, and more specifically the work ethic that is revered in religion is a means to be rewarded with passage to heaven in the afterlife; servanthood in the capitalist system is perpetuated as the narrative that should one work hard enough, there is ultimately a life on the other side of that work where all desires are met. Shklar refers to this briefly where she mentions the disintegration of the self upon the creation of man as a unit of production. Marx also supports this idea when he states that workers lose themselves in their work. One way or the other, utopia theoretically exists within each of these systems, with dystopia riding on the under-bell. This is why these structures continue to be reinforced as tropes by science fiction writers. Ultimately, though, writers are not grabbing at the ropes of these threads alone and braiding science fiction narratives. The

most overlooked component of it all, the third strand, is the state of human interconnectedness or divisiveness these narratives rest upon.

Butler's Apocalypse

“We keep playing the same record. Earlier I was talking about it: we begin something and then we grow it to a certain point and then it destroys itself or else it is destroyed from the outside—whether it is Egypt or Rome or Greece, this country or Great Britain, you name it. I do feel that we are either going to continue to play the same record until it shatters—and I said it in the book, though not in those words—or we are going to do something else” (Butler, “We Keep Playing The Same Record”).

The Parable of the Sower

Butler's apocalyptic drama, the *The Parable of the Sower*, is a cautionary tale of societal collapse. Situated in the year 2027, Butler, spins an intricate web of environmental destruction, extreme privatization, and economic destruction. The story begins in the city of Robledo, where the main character, young, black, psychobiological misfit Lauren Olmina, resides with her family within a gated community described as an “island surrounded by sharks” (Butler, 9). Described as formally being “20 miles from Los Angeles, and... once a rich, green, unwallled city,” this version of their city is no more (Butler, 9). In the world beyond the wall, society has turned to social darwinism, where only the strongest survive. The derelict economy has led to the privatization of entire cities, driving up the cost of natural resources to the point of no longer being affordable, leading to a massive increase in crime, making employment nearly impossible. Those who live inside the walls of Lauren's gated community do their best to remain in the glory days of the mid-twentieth century, and insist on maintaining the now dissolved notion of the American Dream (Moyaln, 225). They grow crops and trade, minimizing

their time beyond the wall by leveraging an informal barter economy system and maintaining a sense of community with each member contributing in the form of literacy, faith (Lauren's father is the minister of this community), crop production, or community security. Life inside the walls is the last piece of normalcy in this apocalyptic future, making the city of Olivar, just hours away from Robledo, exemplary of the occurring transition from normal to intense corporate ownership and privatization. Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton and Company (KSF), a massive corporation, "reposses(es) the derelict public infrastructure in order to turn it into a profit-making machine that is no longer constrained by social and environmental costs" (Moylan, 226). Taking full advantage of the state of economics and psychological stress of the city and its residents, KSF purchases the city of Olivar with the goal of dominating the "great water, power, and agricultural industries in an area that most people have given up on" (Butler 106). KSF roots itself in the community's destruction. It coerces the reinstatement of debt slavery, intending to comprise its workforce of individuals who will "accept smaller salaries than their socio-economic group... in exchange for security, a guaranteed food supply, jobs, and help in their battle with the Pacific" (Butler, 114). The horizon of Olivar's residents is outright hopeless, with no ability to sustain themselves or their families, which ultimately leads to surrendering of the people and their city officials to permitting their town to be "taken over, bought out, privatized" (Butler, 106). As one character describes it: "This country is going to be parceled out as a source of cheap labor and cheap land. When people like those in Olivar begin to sell themselves, our surviving cities are bound to wind up the economic colonies of whoever can afford to buy them" (Butler, 114). Observing these compounding events 15-year-old Lauren can see the writing on the wall and prophesizes her own

community's demise, after taking a friend's comment that someday some group will "smash in our wall and come in" to destroy everything seriously (Butler, 48). Burglaries increase as do the arson fires set by those using Pyro, a drug that draws people to arson just so they can watch things burn in a nihilistic haze (Butler, 128). When this day finally arrives Lauren is now eighteen years old, and herself as well as two of her friends, Harry and Zahra, are the only survivors of the blaze.

Following this tragedy, Lauren and her friends set out on a journey up the coast in search of a safe haven, in search of a place where "water doesn't cost more than food, and where work brings salary," vowing to protect each other at all costs at which point Lauren discloses her "hyperempathy syndrome" and religious beliefs (Butler, 151). During her mother's pregnancy, Lauren's mother was administered an experimental drug called Paraceto, also known as the "smart drug," to enhance her mental performance in a competitive society. Rather than acting as an intellectual enhancement, the drug instead causes damage to Lauren's neurotransmitters, causing her to experience the psychological delusion of feeling the pain and pleasure of those around her. Her psychological condition causes a rift between Lauren and those around her, leaving her feeling misunderstood and cursed by God in the face of such a spiritual community. Lauren wrangles with the concepts of religion and God beginning at 12-years-old, unable to understand the image of God presented to her. She insists that God "has another name" at which point her theological journey begins (Butler, 6). Pushed to the brink following the destruction of her community, Lauren's crisis of identity and faith in conjunction with her ability to see the world through her hyperempathy allow her a new sense of spirituality that pushes her to clarify what she believes. Finally, Lauren names her deity: "God" is "Change" (Sower, 22). This simple

act of naming acts as a catalyst for Lauren's public theology for, as she puts it, "naming a thing- giving it a name or discovering its name- helps one to begin to understand it" (Butler 68). She goes on to disclose these ideas to her friends, which, unbeknownst to her, plants the seeds for her journey as the leader of a religious movement and activist. Her religion, later named Earthseed, is a theological-political hybrid, best described as an "activist spirituality" (Moylan, 229). It seeks to "regain control over society in the name of a transcendent yet still secular project" that is shaped by Lauren's belief in a collective responsibility for change that is empowering rather than disabling (Moylan, 229). In the wake of such rapid, destructive change, the idea of it has become, itself, paralyzing yet Lauren realizes its necessity and the ability to shape her own destiny (Butler, 67).

Traveling north along the coast, Lauren garners a large following of people of all ages, races, and sexual orientations, which Lauren describes as "natural allies- the mixed couple, and the mixed group" (Butler, 186). On this journey, Lauren meets a man by the name of Bankole who eventually becomes her lover: "an older, but not yet old black man who still had his teeth, and who pushed his belongings in twin saddlebags hanging from a small, sturdy metal-framed-cart" (Butler, 203). After speaking with him, Lauren realizes she is attracted to Bankole and him, learning that he is a professional who comes from a certain degree of wealth. Even after having found love, Lauren insists on continuing her journey north rather than settling, not feeling as though she has found the safe haven she and her now-following are in search of. It is later revealed that Bankole could offer a solution, having mentioned "a haven somewhere- a relative's home, another home of his own, a friend's home, something- some definite destination" (Butler, 237). Eventually Bankole reveals to Lauren that he has

property in Humboldt County and owns “three hundred acres” which he purchased as an investment, and is where his sister and her family live now (Butler, 245). After many conversations and much convincing, Lauren persuades Bankole to let her lead everyone there and plant the Earthseed community. Upon their arrival however, they are met with another obstacle: “There was no house. There were no buildings. There was almost nothing: A broad black smear on the hillside; a few charred planks sticking up from the rubble, some leaning against others; and a tall brick chimney, standing black and solitary like a tombstone in a picture of an old-style graveyard. A tombstone amid the bone and ashes,” (Butler, 282). Upon further investigation, the group discovers five skulls which they conclude are that of Bankole’s sister and her family, prompting the realization that even here is not safe from intruders. They attempt to figure out what happened dealing with a nearby police department while debating among themselves whether to plant their roots or continue moving. Lauren argues that nothing any farther “will be any better or safer” than the remote valley of Bankole’s 300 acres (Butler, 287). The novel ends on this ominous note, with the future of both the Earthseed community and the outside world unclear.

This dichotomy that Butler establishes between Earthseed and the rest of the world, specifically the city of Olivar is indicative of two notions: that societies are heavily impacted and partially determined by their adherence to a given value system and that economies, whether beneficial or destructive to the population, are born out of human desire. In this critical dystopian novel, Butler comments on the socio-economic conditions of the 80s and interrogates the values of present day society and their implications for the future. In the cities of Olivar and Robledo, capital and profit

margins reign supreme. The whole of life is rooted in the pursuit of monetary capital for those who already reside at the top of the food chain even if at the expense of human life. Natural resources have become inaccessible because of their use value and thus their profitability—people cannot survive without water meaning they will buy it whatever the cost. Drugs have run rampant because of the decrepit state of living. Burglary is such a prominent societal feature because employment does not pay. Robledo and Olivar arrive in these conditions due to the greed of those that run them. This train of thought and idolization of capital is ultimately what drives Olivar into the hands of its exploiters and is what has led to the destruction of the rest of society. While the destiny of Earthseed is not revealed at the end of the novel, its development and structure speak to the prominence of secular belief in the creation of community. Between Olivar and Earthseed exists a chasm that consists of the decision to value profit or to value human life. Earthseed is built upon and rooted in community and what Durkheim refers to as the sacred and, although set far apart from traditional Judeo-Christian religion, Earthseed defines its existence in the religious sphere through its recognition of a divine and transcendent force. Lauren herself states that “...this world would be a better place if people lived according to the teachings of almost any religion” (Butler, 276). This can also be tied back to Shklar’s earlier statement regarding the highest passion in a man’s life being faith. Lauren has built the entirety of Earthseed off of this very concept and runs completely opposite to Olivar, founded upon the production that Shklar pushes back against. In a society where a sense of sacrality and purpose is likened to the accumulation of capital, a belief system rooted in theology and transcendent divinity cannot also dominate. There cannot exist two alpha forces in the same society. It is only when Lauren

and the Earthseed community isolate themselves from the turmoil and greed of the world beyond the wall that they have the opportunity to create community. Butler does not introduce Earthseed (or religion) into an apocalyptic society as a solution, but leverages the creation of this society as both commentary on and interrogation of the roots that have led this dystopia. She offers it as an alternative to the ways of extreme capitalist ideology.

The ideologies of both systems lend themselves to the creation of very distinct societies which are in clear opposition to Marx's concept of economic determinism. Where Marx asserts that the state of societies transpire as a result of a distinct economic system, it is instead presented in Butler's novel as the converse. The development of both Olivar and Earthseed are results of spiritual values. During an interview with Butler, the interviewer describes Lauren's mission as one to "bring back a sense of communal purpose and meaning by turning people's eyes back to the stars," to which Butler does not disagree (Butler, "We Keep Playing The Same Record"). It is clear in the novel that the entire foundation of Earthseed is Lauren and her strong belief in Earthseed as the explanation for not only the state of their contemporary world but as a means of self exploration and self development. She leverages Earthseed as a means to build community in the same fashion that her father leveraged his faith as a communal binding that proved effective until his sudden disappearance. In the two alternative societies created within this novel- Lauren's original home in the gated community and Earthseed- neither begins with economics. Instead, both begin with a sense of community that stems from a religious impulse. The rest of the world also does not stem from economics. The extreme condition is developed in the desire of the few for the hunger for more. This is a display of lack of

community, but is still not indicative of economics being a key player in its development. Instead, the economics are symptomatic of the state of the society prior to economic development.

From Segregation to Success

Butler herself was born into a society much like Olivar, making the world of her novel not so distant after all. Born in 1947 in Pasadena, California, she was brought up where legal segregation had been outlawed but de facto segregation was very much present (Bates). She was shy as a child and not necessarily social, but she carved her own path and ultimately received an associate's degree from Pasadena City College, whereupon her writing career began (Bates). Butler's grandmother, Estella, and her mother, Octavia Margaret Guy, play vital roles in both her upbringing and her novels. Her grandmother raised seven children, including Butler's mother, on a plantation in Louisiana where there was no schooling for black children (Jung). Nevertheless, Estella taught her daughter how to read. After saving enough money, Estella moved herself and all of her children out west to Pasadena in the early 1920s in search of a better life (Jung). Despite their best efforts, the family could not escape the grips of poverty and racism and Butler was pulled out of school after just a few years to help earn money and worked with her mother as a "day laborer for wealthy white women" (Jung). Having been a deeply religious woman, Butler's mother planted the seeds of faith that we see bloom in *The Parable of the Sower* and read her bedtime stories until she was six, at which point her mother passed off the book and said "Here's the book. Now you read" (Jung). Reading bedtime stories led to Butler finding comfort in novels and writing. She was typically found alone as a child, saying she "usually had very

few friends” and “was lonely” (Jung). She carried around a pink notebook to write in and found refuge at the Pasadena Public Library where she discovered her first love: science fiction. After watching her first science film, “Butler thought she could come up with a better story than that, so she began to write her own: temporary escape hatches from a life of ‘boredom, calluses, humiliation, and not enough money’... as she saw it, ‘I needed my fantasies to shield me from the world’” (Jung). From this point on, Butler took off with her writing. Despite being told that “Negroes can’t be writers” and suffering from dyslexia, she continued. Butler rose at 2 a.m. every morning to write. “This was the best time where her mind could roam freely. Sunrise brought the life she did not ask for: menial jobs at factories, offices, and warehouses” (Jung). She took “NoDoz” to stay alert during her shifts and was constantly crunching numbers to see just how far she could stretch a biweekly paycheck of \$99.07: “Poverty is a constant, convenient, and unfortunately valid excuse for inaction,” she wrote in her journal (Jung). Despite this, Butler went on to become one of the most renowned science fiction writers to date and is considered to be one of the pioneers of Afrofuturism. In her writing, she has a sense of freedom to not only write whatever fantasies he chooses but to rewrite herself. As she once put it:

“I can write about ideal me’s. I can write about the women I wish I was or the women I sometimes feel like. I don’t think I’ve ever written about the woman I am though. That is the woman I read and write to get away from. She has become a victim. A victim of her upbringing, a victim of her fears, a victim of her poverty – spiritual and financial. She is a victim of herself. She must climb out and make her fate” (Jung).

Within the *Parable of the Sower* is found not only a story of hope and perseverance, but the story of Butler herself. It is indicative of her longing for a sense of community, one that she found with her mother and grandmother. It is a nod to the deep spiritual views of her mother and the willingness of her grandmother to pivot and shift when necessary. Lauren's move to the north is paralleled by Estella's migration west—both in search of better things.

Following all of these experiences, Butler is looking to a place beyond the stars where humanity can begin again and come to one, common goal. She states that “Earthseed doesn't just reconcile science fiction and religion. It remakes science fiction as religion” (Jung). As Jung puts it, “Space colonization was Butler's equivalent to building a cathedral. She believes only some extraordinary feat like space travel could bring people together in a common goal” (Jung). Her writing is pulled from her real life experiences, inspired by those around her, and expresses a hunger for greater things.

Piercy's Utopia

“In imagining the good society, I borrowed from all the progressive movements of that time. Like most women’s utopias, the novel is profoundly anarchist and aimed at integrating people back into the natural world and eliminating power relationships” (Piercy, “Woman on the Edge of Time, 40 years on: ‘Hope is the engine for imagining utopia’”).

Woman on the Edge of Time

In her novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy intricately braids together three distinct worlds. The first is one that very closely resembles the America of 2023 and is the main character’s contemporary society. She is a chicana woman living below the poverty line dealing with struggles not uncommon to our society- domestic violence, housing instability, racism, poverty, etc. The story begins here, situating the reader in a world that mirrors our own. In it’s exposition, Piercy establishes Connie and her situation of poverty, recalls the death of Connie’s blind husband, Claud, dead from hepatitis, and introduces readers to her niece, Dolly, who is impregnated by her boyfriend and pimp, Geraldo (Butler, 91). Following a physical confrontation with Geraldo where Connie “smash[es] a wine jug into his face,” Connie is admitted to a psychiatric facility where the rest of the story develops (Piercy, 11). During her time in the institution, Connie comes in regular contact with Luciente, an androgynous, time traveling human who serves as Connie’s means of escape from the cruelties of the facility and introduces her to Mattapoissett- a futuristic city from the year 2137 based in modern-day Massachusetts (Piercy, 52). Connie expects “rocket ships, sky scrapers into the stratosphere” and instead finds something distinctly different. There is “a river, little no-account

buildings, strange structures like long-legged birds with sails that turned in the wind, a few large terracotta and yellow buildings and one blue dome, irregular buildings no bigger than a supermarket of her day, an ordinary supermarket in any shopping plaza” (Piercy, 69). In Mattapoissett, there is no division or specialization of labor. Work is communal and duties are rotated from one person to another and the economy is something like a loose barter-style system. Crops are shared among the community as are clothes, and even children. In the novel, it is explained that to have a truly equal society, everyone must be truly equal, meaning that women must relinquish their ability to have children so as not to feel superior or inferior to the male sex. One character explains it this way: “It’s part of women’s long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we’d never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers” (Piercy, 110). Instead, children are created in a machine called a “brooder... Where embryos grow” and have three mothers each before being released for a coming-of-age ritual at 12 (Piercy, 106). At its core, Mattapoissett is a society that operates off of communal bonds and trust. As one character puts it, “Place matters to us... A sense of land, of village and base and family. We’re strongly rooted” (Piercy, 131). Connie is confused at Mattapoissett, and in one interaction with Luciente exclaims that “things have gone backward!” to which Luciente responds, “Our technology did not develop in a straight line from yours... We have limited resources. We plan cooperatively. We can afford to waste... nothing. You might say our-you’d say religion?- ideas make us see ourselves as partners with water, air,

birds, fish, trees... Primitive technically. But socially sophisticated” (Piercy, 132). Connie continues to make trips to Mattapoisett throughout the course of the novel, initiating contact with Luciente to escape from the psychiatric facility. However, in one attempt to contact Lucient, Connie instead makes contact with a woman who introduces herself as “Gildina 547-921-45-822-KBJ” (Piercy, 315). Gildina lives in a futuristic New York (year unspecified) in an alternative society to Mattapoisett (Piercy, 314). Connie first notices Gildina’s appearance, noting that “Her stomach was flat but her hips and buttocks were oversized and audaciously curved” and that “She looked as if she could hardly walk for the extravagance of her breasts and buttocks, her thighs that collided as she shuffled a few steps” (Piercy, 314). Connie inquires about what she observes, during which Gildina reveals that she is a contracted sex worker, explaining to a perplexed Connie that it’s where “you agree to put out for so long for so much-” like long term prostitution (Piercy, 316). She also reveals that marriage is a luxury in this New York, stating that “Only the richies live longer, it’s in their genes... maybe two hundred years” depending on “what they can afford- you know, the medicos, the organs” (Piercy, 317). If not a contracted worker, everyone else is considered to be “just walking organ banks” to satisfy the immortal desires of the “richies” (Piercy, 318). As Connie explores Gildina’s apartment, she asks if the view outside of the window is real, ot which Gildina laughs and switches the view with the touch of a button, revealing that no one has windows anymore, and the only one they have is in the common area of her building which she said “made her dizzy,” but that the skies are a “gorgeous pale gray color” (Piercy, 322). She then walks into her kitchen to make dinner, and Connie, confused once more at these practices, asks Gildina what those packets are and where the food comes from: “Everything comes

in packets” and is”made from coal and algae and wood byproducts” created in “big corporate factory farms (Piercy, 323). People are privatized here; as one one character from this world explains, they “all belong to a corporate body” known as “multis” (Piercy, 327). As Connie prepares to leave this world, she says aloud, “So that was the other world that might come to be” (Piercy, 328). A crucial point at the end of the novel is presented when Connie is presented with a decision to make. Luciente explains that there is a fork in the road and that neither the future of Gildina nor Mattapoissett are secured, but that both possibilities exist in Connie’s contemporary world. The fate of the world is in the hands of Connie and the people of her time.

These three worlds illuminate the development of a society beneath different value systems, illustrating both the type of world that fosters the most ideal society and the ways in which these systems stem directly from human behavior. Piercy’s novel is key for pushing back against the concept of economic determinism as the novel highlights the centrality of human decision making and the idea that economic systems stem from human values. It is the roots of society (what is prioritized by the majority) that ultimately determine its utopian or dystopian status. In Mattapoissett, community, equality, and love prevail. The focus has shifted from Connie’s time, a period referred to by Luciente as the “Age of Greed and Waste” to a time where “Large platters of food passed from hand to hand” (Piercy, 55, 78). One character perfectly sums up Mattapoissett’s conception of evil as the following: “Our notions of evil center around power and greed- taking from other people their food, their liberty, their health, their land, their customs, their pride” (Piercy, 148). This inadvertently also describes Mattapoissett’s core values of honor, freedom, and property- values that differ greatly from the

futuristic New York that Gildinda resides in, or even Connie's world where people and their value are held in a startlingly low regard compared to Mattapoissett. This disregard is shown in Connie's world through her experience with Dr. Redding, a professional working in the psychiatric facility who "stared at her, not like she's looking at a person, but the way she might look at a tree, a painting, a tiger in a zoo" and through a fellow patient's experience with his parents who explains "My parents thought I didn't work right, so they sent me to be fixed. You know, you send the riding mower back to the factory to be fixed if you get a lemon. Why not a son?" (Butler, 95, 153). In Mattapoissett, there is a sense of sacrality towards humanity and a kind of religious impulse that is the recognition of something larger than one's self is the binding force that allows a society such as Matapoissett to exist. Durkheim asserts that it is this very sense of sacrality that sets the foundation for religion and religious belief, regardless of the nature of what is held sacred or the contents of the beliefs surrounding said sacred material. It is the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Durkheim theorizes that God is found in the collective, not in the individual and so in a society such a Mattapoissett where both the collective and sacrality are strong factors, by sociological terms it becomes a society of religious values. In stark contrast, Gildina's world lacks either any sense of sacrality or collectivism. It is entirely individualized due to the prohibition of one-on-one human contact, creating a dissonance between the human and humanity. It hinders any sense of a collective, thus stifling any possibility of communal bonds. Women are used solely as physical vessels and are not recognized as human beings, people are slaves to cyborgs, and so even basic human life is not respected let alone held sacred. If religion is collective, and it is through the collective that a society finds God, then God does not exist in Gildina's futuristic New

York, nor does any sense of religion as Durkheim defines it. In connection to Shklar's ideas of what constitutes individual and community fulfillment, it is clear that Gildina's society rests within the confines of a starkly divided society based upon labor— in clear opposition to what Shklar believes builds a whole individual. Instead, this world is founded on the very principles of the division of labor, and operates fully on privatization, with no shred of faith in sight. Where Shklar theorizes that this makes for a world that feels meaningless, Piercy proves this notion correct with her creation of Gildina and her world.

Detroit, Chicago, Mattapoisett

When interviewed in 2016 about her 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy made it clear that utopia is an expression of desires left unmet, and in an increasingly more isolated society, women long for connection. Piercy states that, "Writing about a strong community that socializes children and integrates old people is a response to women living in a society where a mother is often alone with her children and old women are treated just a step better than the excess pets executed daily in pounds and shelters" (Piercy, "40 Years On"). More explicitly, she highlights how, "We are ever more isolated from truly intimate contact with one another" (Piercy, "40 Years On") Thus, this world of Mattapoisett that Piercy develops that is centered around people and interdependent relationships is the expression of a longing for exactly that. This desire is displayed not only through Piercy and her development of Matapoisset as a utopian society, but also through Connie and her own longing for human connection. The worlds presented in Piercy's novel are an expression of the desires and fears of

the time, and considering the rapid advancement of modern technology, anticipate today's modern fears and desires as well. It is through these desires, that we develop our conception of utopian society, which Piercy depicts within the world of Mattapoissett. Much like Butler's novel, the societies depicted in Piercy's novel are indicative of economics being symptomatic of the communal bonds, or lack thereof. In Gildina's world, the land and earth is taken for granted, as are the people and human life itself. There is no regard for the human experience which is instead only researched for those of the upper class. This has led to the quality of life experienced in this futuristic New York. On the other hand, Mattapoissett thrives in the way it does because of the overarching, societal commitment to human life and wholeness as individuals and as a society. This has directly led to a system of economics that refuses to profit off of the individual or the land, and seeks to live in harmony with all.

According to her own website, Piercy was born into a working class family in the year 1936 and raised in the city of Detroit, where she experienced the city's industrial evolution and was affected heavily by the Depression (Piercy, "Bio"). While Piercy remembers most of her childhood as being relatively happy she faced some hardships such as her maternal grandfather being murdered while organizing bakery workers and Piercy herself nearly dying from rheumatic fever (Piercy, "Bio"). She attended the University of Michigan and ultimately graduated with an M.A. from Northwestern where she had a fellowship. However, Piercy's story truly begins when she moves to Chicago following her schooling and a divorce which left her again, poor and with little direction. She worked a variety of part-time jobs— a secretary, maid, artists' model, faculty instructor- and realized during this turbulent time in her life that, as a woman, "She felt she was invisible" (Piercy, "Bio"). Having left her former

husband due to his rigid gender expectations and now being defined by society as a failure - twenty-three, poor, and living on part-time employment- she felt that as a writer, she was entirely invisible. However, “she knew two things about her fiction: she wanted to write fiction with a political dimension (Simone de Beauvoire was her model) and she wanted to write about women she could recognize, working class people who were not as simple as they were supposed to be” (Piercy, “Bio”). These hardships ultimately acted as the inspiration for Piercy’s novels and her story resonates in *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Piercy’s desire as she grew older to participate in the political sphere and comment on the social conditions that she knew firsthand are the cornerstone of her work as we know it today. This is crucial for understanding the frame through which *Woman on the Edge of Time* specifically was written because in it, Piercy is calling for real life action and change. Having experienced bouts of poverty and heartbreak (she went through two additional divorces following the one mentioned above), having experienced being mangled emotionally and physically exploited by low-paying work, she fantasizes about a world in which people can have the freedom she yearns for. Physically, Piercy is in Detroit, then Chicago, but spiritually she is always in Mattapoissett.

Conclusion

“A society that disregards the individual in favor of some imaginary whole is an impersonal society, an inhuman society” (Shklar, 11).

Ultimately, it is revealed in both novels and the supplemental texts that a society's foundation is not its system of economics but rather the ideologies it chooses to uphold. This perspective goes starkly against the grain of economic determinism, asserting that ideologies are at the heart of societal development. Piercy presents a clear dichotomy between a society organized around material gain and another, situated around spiritual views. Butler creates an apocalyptic future inclusive of human privatization while creating an alternative society running parallel to it that operates instead within the practices of spiritual beliefs.

These societies, however beautiful, terrifying, or mediocre, are not results of a random draw of cards that each community was handed. As is best indicated by Luciente's warning and call to action to Connie, each situation is the direct result of humanity's decisions. The development of Mattapoisett and Gildina's world are direct results of the values that each society holds near, which then ripples out to the system of economics which is also determined by what a society values. In a world that values profits and individualism, such as the Gildina's world, capitalism is naturally the economic system of choice. On the other hand, for a society that values internal growth and development alongside strong communal bonds, capitalism isn't quite as fitting. Instead, something more like a barter system, as we see in Mattapoisett, becomes the system of choice. Similarly, in Butler's novel, there is a clear

dichotomy presented between the two societies created in the novel– one rooted in capital and the other in faith.

In both novels, displayed is a unifying and constructive nature to religion. Shklar makes the bold claim that “The unhappy consciousness knows today that spirit is alienated from itself and from the world because God is absent, for the death of God means far more than a mere decline of religious faith” (Shklar, 10). She insinuates instead, that the death of God is synonymous with the death of the community, and at a magnified scale, the death of the individual. For clarification, it is not the death of God only as the Judeo- Christian canon is familiar with God. It is God the transcendent force. This leaves us with no “spiritual home” (Shklar, 12). As she puts it, “Though we must now build our own nature and history without the aid of any eternal verities, our failures and successes are nothing to an indifferent nature and to a dead God. Whether we achieve or fail, we act ‘in the bitter realization that nothing has been promised us, no Messianic Age, no classless society, no paradise after death...” (Shklar, 12). This implies that, along with aiding in self discovery and communal bonding and building, religious belief enables a kind of hope and trust in a power beyond. Or at the very least, a sense of comfort in the companionship of God. When left in the shadow of that sense of hope, there is a void of the transcendence and all-seeing, all-knowing God that many are familiar with. What is left is a longing, which humanity has the tendency to fill with fleeting pleasures or hard cash.

On the other hand, it is apparent that a society that blossoms from the seed of a profit-driven mentality is significantly more susceptible to becoming what can be objectively described as dystopian. Workers become lost completely to their work, a concept that Marx elaborates on in his book *Economic*

and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. He states that “the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form; that finally the distinction between capitalist and land-rentier, like that between the tiller of the soil in the factor-worker, disappears and that the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes the property-owners and the property-less workers” (Marx, 70). Shklar quotes Coleridge stating, “The trade cycle may have its necessities, but people are not things-but man does not find his level. Neither in body nor in soul does the man find his level. Men are not things, and any philosophy that places the ‘system’ before the ‘man’ treats him as if he were an object. The result is that man does become an expression of a function, almost a thing” (Shklar, 7). She emphasizes that what we tend to categorize as progress, is actually a loss of human consciousness, as it replaces the man with his ability to work. Capitalism places emphasis on specialization of labor which Shklar describes as “domestication” not progress, and romantic thought, or religion, places emphasis on the person as a whole. It wants a certain fragmentation of the individual through the idea of specialization, where one becomes a component of a larger society and a tool to benefit the imaginary whole. It steals the two most valuable commodities: time and the individual.

In Butler and Piercy’s novels, it is clear that economics are not the driving force in societal development. Both authors push back strongly against the idea that one factor of society can dictate their entire lives, in the same way that they pushed against their own real life circumstances to arrive at

levels of greatness. They reject the notion that people are made not specifically by economies, but that people are made by anything or anyone but themselves. During a time of intense de facto segregation when Butler was told that because she was black she could not and should not desire more, she dared to dream and is now known as one of the founders of Afrofuturist literature. When Piercy felt invisible, unseen, unimportant, she found her way through and out of her circumstances, becoming not only known, but the author of a now canonical text in the world of science fiction. The worlds that these women created- both the ones they wrote and the ones they existed in- were not made by an abstract system. *Mattapoissett* does not develop out of economics. *Olivar* does not develop out of economics. *Earthseed* does not develop out of economics. Each respective society is created from the set of ideas that the majority choose to uphold and that is what leads to the development of the economic systems that are not the driving force, but are symptomatic of the chosen set of ideals.

Both Piercy and Butler come from societies and backgrounds that they desire more than. The examination of both authors at a base level illuminates the ability and desire for us, as humans, to create our own surroundings as opposed to allowing our environment to shape us. After multiple divorces and extreme poverty, and after a life of segregation and the odds constantly being pitted against her, both Piercy and Butler still found the courage to dream of worlds better off. These worlds, whether beyond the stars or beneath them, are not constructed out of inanimate concepts. These concepts are merely brought to life and acted out by human characters who choose to bring them to life— systems of economics are no different. Humans decide the fate of the world. We decide the fate of our societies.

We have control over whether a world becomes categorized as utopian or dystopian. Economic determinism says that economics have power. I say that we do.

Works Cited

- Bates, Karen G., host. "Octavia Butler: Writing Herself Into The Story." *Code Switch*, NPR, 10 July, 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/07/10/535879364/octavia-butler-writing-her-self-into-the-story>
- Butler, Octavia. *The Parable of the Sower*, New York, NY, Headline Book Publishing, 1993.
- Butler, Octavia. "'We Keep Playing the Same Record': A Conversation with Octavia Butler." Interview by Stephen Potts. *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 23, no.3, November 1996

<https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/potts70interview.htm>
- Deutschmann, Cristoph. *Religion, Capitalism, and the Idea of the Demonic*, Cologne, Germany, Capitalism, *Religion, and the Idea of the Demonic*, MPIfG Discussion Paper, NO. 12/2, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, 2012.
- Durkheim, Emilie. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1915.
- Ellwood, Charles A. "Marx's 'Economic Determinism' in the Light of Modern Psychology." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1911, pp. 35–46. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2763254>. Accessed 24 Feb. 2023.
- Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving*, New York, NY, Harper Collins Publishers, 2008.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Archaeologies of the Future : The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso 2005.

Jung, Alex. "The Spectacular Life of Octavia Butler The Girl Who Grew up in Pasadena, Took the Bus, Loved Her Mom, and Wrote Herself into the World." *Vulture*, 21 Nov. 2022,

<https://www.vulture.com/article/octavia-e-butler-profile.html>. Accessed 17 Mar. 2023.

Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in *The Marx - Engels Reader*, second ed.

Tucker, Robert C. New York, London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1978, p. 70

More, Thomas. *Utopia*. New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949.

Moylan, Tom. *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction Utopia Dystopia*. Westview Press 2000.

Piercy, Marge. "Bio." *Marge Piercy: Novelist, Poet, Memoirist*, 1 Jan. 2021, margepiercy.com/bio.

Accessed 17 Mar. 2023.

Piercy, Marge. "Woman on the Edge of Time, 40 years on: 'Hope is the engine for imagining utopia,'"

The Guardian, 29 November 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/29/woman-on-the-edge-of-time-40-years-on-hope-imagining-utopia-marge-piercy>

Piercy, Marge. *Woman on the Edge of Time*. United States, Ballantine Books, 1976.

Shklar, Judith N. *After Utopia*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1957.

Sterling, Bruce. "science fiction". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 6 Jan. 2023,

<https://www.britannica.com/art/science-fiction>. Accessed 19 February 2023.

Weber, Max. *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press, fourth edition, 1956.