"I NEED TO WRITE ABOUT WHAT I BELIEVE": JOURNALING AND AFROFUTURISM IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S *PARABLE OF THE SOWER* AND *PARABLE OF THE TALENTS*

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To Brad: I couldn't imagine the future without you.

To Jaden and Elijah: I hope that you are able to imagine your own future with all confidence and optimism.

To my students: This one is for you because you will always be worth it.

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ABSTRACT

Butler’s choice of using the diary of a young Black girl and of making that Black girl a leader is directly paralleled in real history via diaries, such as *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*. Butler’s use of the journaling technique via a Black woman ties the future to the past as the diaries of these influential Black women are read by later generations giving a glimpse of what dreams, hopes, and goals the women had for the Black Community. She further gives cautionary tales of “if-this-continues to-go-on” as a warning for the community to be on its guard, but also to look out for the young women who will become the leaders of tomorrow. Using a journal, Butler ties together Afrofuturism, the history of Black women and the Black Community, and the power of private words in public spaces.

In this thesis, I will demonstrate that Butler’s novels create a full cycle of how Black women’s personal writings are influential by allowing a glimpse of the past, present, and future in the Earthseed series. I will further argue that it is through such Afrofuturist writings that the Black community can envision space that includes them, as both citizens and as leaders. Scholars of Afrofuturism have not discussed the importance of Lauren Olamina’s journals to the authentic Black experience of the future. Scholars of journaling have focused on the individual healing process and not on the uplift of the Black community. By doing so, Butler’s novels have fallen into the cracks and have been left unnoticed in the novels' revelatory meanings.

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INTRODUCTION

"I don't want to write about this, but I need to. Sometimes writing about a thing makes it easier to stand."

--Lauren Olamina, *Parable of the Sower*

Writing creates de facto evidence of chimeric thoughts. Writing gives the writer a chance to see their thoughts and work out their own problems. When black women need to write the same reasons are evident. However, writing is also used by the collective whole of a particular group. It can create continuity between the past, the present, and give hints about the future. In so doing, the lines between writing about reality and writing science fiction can be blurred and merged in a way that creates something new and meaningful, such as in Octavia E. Butler's novels, Parable *of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), which together are referred to as the Earthseed novels. Butler's third novel of the trilogy was never finished due to her sudden death in 2006.

In her Earthseed novels, Butler uses the journal of her main character, Lauren Olamina-Bankole, to reveal the authentic purpose of journaling for Black women and the Black community at large: uplift and safety of self and future uplifting of the community. Moreover, as Afrofuturist texts, *Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents* reveal the real-world purposes for journaling in a fictional setting. Butler illuminates journaling as a safe space for Black women (both real and fictional) to think about their

consequential thoughts and pivotal ideas that have a direct impact on the continuity and destiny of the rest of the community. Through Lauren Olamina's journals, Butler's novels depict introspection through the writing of a Black woman that eventually becomes publicly outward and community-facing. As the character writes her journals, she creates the foundation for a new future for herself and her community. Her journals (written in the present) speak to future generations (such as her own daughter) in profound and challenging ways. Butler uses Olamina's introspection in her journals to challenge the community in the present and to recognize trends and trajectories toward the future. More than just a warning, it is also a road map to the future.

Within each area that I will delineate in this thesis–Afrofuturism, journaling, and the Earthseed novels of Octavia Butler–there is a space that has not been explored in the scholarship. While Butler's use of Afrofuturism has been explored, there has been no discussion on her connections to the non-fiction writing of journals from the past nor in how both Butler's novels and those same writings dovetail in purposes for Black women and the Black community. By not viewing the space that Butler's novels occupies in the scholarship, a dimension of understanding of both the novels and Black women remains hidden.

Over the last decade, academic studies have proven that journaling is a powerful tool that can be used to help those with mental illness or that need a coping strategy for the everyday stressors of life. For Black women in particular, this strategy can be key to moving forward in a racist and sexist world. It is a strategy that spans generations and began when Black women gained the right to read and write. However, the psychological scholarship has failed to look at fictional journals, such as in *Sower* and *Talents,* and has

not made the connection to the power of change that is contained in both fictional and non-fictional journals. Dywanna Smith, Katelyn Kelly-Morris, and Shaniya Chapman use journaling as a healing space in their small three-woman community; their journals became a ".liberating place of intense self-love and deeper knowing" (Smith et al 1679) They also think towards the future as Kelly-Morris and Chapman were pre-service teachers, analyzing how journaling could and should work in their own classrooms. However, they have overlooked the connection between fictional journals, particularly the Earthseed series, and Afrofuturism as well as the connection to the history of Black women's journal writing. This is significant as Butler's novels predict the power of journaling by basing that power on the authentic journaling text of key Black women and their authentic impact on the Black community.

Scholars of Afrofuturism have recently tended to focus on technology and any changes it causes to the racial-social landscape. They have also viewed Afrofuturism as a way to help Black people remove the crushing weight of an anti-Black capitalist society to a more equal and decolonized political system. While these critics have detailed the technological advances of society and their uses in closing or eliminating the racial gap, they have failed to examine the past for examples for the future. Despite their focus on space for Black people to thrive in the future, they have not focused on the subsets/groups within the collective. There has been very little discussion (only in the last few years) on the Black woman's place in the future, particularly in places of power.

While viewing places of power, scholars have begun to look at the rhetoric of Black women and how it gives truth to those who will listen. Ashley Hall, in her article, "Slippin' in and out of frame: An Afrafuturist feminist orientation to Black women and

American citizenship", focuses on the rhetoric of Black women and how they can give another perspective on Blackness. She calls this "slippin in and out of frame"; a part of the anti-Black world but not in it. Hall states,

> … [to]claim or affirm one's Blackness despite the pathology that characterizes them as inherently criminal not only resists the controlling (stereotypical) images permeating the white social imaginary but also the structures, conditions, and logics that employ these discourses to preserve the ruse of white supremacy (Hall 346).

She agrees that Black women are truth-tellers and that their words matter. However, she fails, as the other critics do, to elevate that awareness to the future or into journaling. She does not speak of writing, only of the speech of Black women. Nor does she center the changes that those journal writings can make to the future of Black people. In so doing, the critics have left out Butler's connection to Black women's journaling and the future of Black people. The significance of the scholarship hole that remains is paramount as writing is the lasting form of communication. While speeches help, they are prescribed and pre-written while journals give the true thoughts and dreams of Black women.

In her novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Butler uses a journal of a single girl to tell her story. Most of the scholarship on Butler, however, focuses on her earlier works, such as *Kindred* and the Xenogenesis series. By the late 1990s, scholarship on *Sower* was beginning to emerge and focused on a feminist perspective on the main character which is revealing as there was a trend to begin to look at Butler's writings with Black women in mind. However, none of the critics tied her use of journaling with Afrofuturism. By connecting the history of Black women's journaling and Afrofuturism, I argue that Butler connects the past, present, and future in her Earthseed novels through the use of *journaling* as both form and content. Butler tells her

story via the form of journaling and commentary while at the same time the actual content of the story ties the past, present, and future together through a mother-daughter relationship.

Butler's choice of using the diary of a young Black girl and of making that Black girl a leader is directly paralleled in real history via diaries, such as *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells*. Butler's use of the journaling technique via a Black woman ties the future to the past as the diaries of these influential Black women are read by later generations giving a glimpse of what dreams, hopes, and goals the women had for the Black Community. She further gives cautionary tales of "if-this-continues to-go-on" as a warning for the community to be on its guard, but also to look out for the young women who will become the leaders of tomorrow. Using a journal, Butler ties together Afrofuturism, the history of Black women and the Black Community, and the power of private words in public spaces.

In Chapter 2: Journaling to Plant, I will explore the history of writing in the Black community, particularly of key Black women, Charlotte Forten Grimke, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Frances Rollins, and Emilie Davis. I will further expand on the power of journaling in the Black community for future building. In Chapter 3: Journaling to Sprout, I will investigate the use of Afrofuturism in the Black community and how journaling plays a major role in the future of the Black community. In Chapter 4: Journaling to Flower, I focus on Butler's first novel in the series, *Parable of the Sower*. I will investigate her use of journaling in the novel and demonstrate that her merging of journaling and Afrofuturism solidifies the foundations of Black writing and also expands the conversation of the future. In Chapter 5: Journaling to Ripen, I will discuss *Parable of*

the Talents and how Butler uses commentary as well as a journal to connect past to present, mother to daughter, and future to past in order to depict the real cycle of journals in the Black community.

In this thesis, I will demonstrate that Butler's novels create a full cycle of how Black women's personal writings are influential by allowing a glimpse of the past, present, and future in the Earthseed series. I will further argue that it is through such Afrofuturist writings that the Black community can envision space that includes them, as both citizens and as leaders. Scholars of Afrofuturism have not discussed the importance of Lauren Olamina's journals to the authentic Black experience of the future. Scholars of journaling have focused on the individual healing process and not on the uplift of the Black community. By doing so, Butler's novels have fallen into the cracks and have been left unnoticed in the novels' revelatory meanings.

CHAPTER II
JOURNALING TO PLANT

2.1 The Importance of Journaling in Black Women's Writing

"Tomorrow I'll try to please him- him, the community and God." -Lauren Olamina

Writing is power: it is how history and the worlds that history shapes are written into being. Writing is thinking and thinking is activism. By using writing, Black people form a space where they can create their own destinies. According to Mary Helen Washington, "Every woman who has ever kept a diary knows that a woman writes in a diary when something is not going right" (Decosta-Willis ix). Women use journaling as a space to help them make sense of the world as writing is thinking. They use it to chronicle pain and triumph, defeat and victory. For Black women, writing was and is even more critical. Doubly minoritized (both female and Black), Black women have been at the bottom of the societal barrel. However, as many will say, education is the great equalizer. Writing and reading gave Black women a voice that not only served a purpose in their lifetime but also for the lives of others to come. Lucy Terry was the first known Black poet in America having written "Bars Fight" (1746). She is followed by Phyllis Wheatley, another poet who wrote several books, but had to have them attested by several important white men of the time, John Hancock being one. They all affirmed that she had indeed written her poems after they examined her in court. Ida B. Wells-Barnett

takes to writing to create societal change through pamphlets but it started in her personal diary.

A journal is where a person can work out their big ideas, hopes, and dreams. It is a space created for vulnerability without judgment, and a place for a conversation with one's self. Toni Morrison in her Tanner Lecture on Human Values (1988) entitled, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro American Presence in American Literature" suggests that "[w]e are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those who we have come in contact" (*Unspeakable Things* 133). The use of a journal then is to create self-definition and empowerment. Patricia Hill Collins, in "Distinguishing Features of Black Feminist Thought", writes that "self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment, ceding the power of self-definition to other groups, no matter how well-meaning or supportive of Black women they may be, in essence, replicates existing power hierarchies" (Collins 36). The big ideas that are worked out in a journal can be for the individual, but because the individual is a part of the collective body, they are simultaneously working out problems for the collective whole. By creating a new self-definition as described by Collins, Black women are actually creating a new collective definition as well.

Morrison espouses that writing is "the public exposure of private confidence" once it is published (*Unspeakable Things* 147). It creates space within the community to deal with "the weights of these problematical questions" and to find a way forward for the community as a whole (*Unspeakable Things* 149). Morrison further states, "[t]he reader as narrator asks the questions the community asks, and both reader and 'voice'

stand among the crowd, within it, with privileged intimacy and contact" (*Unspeakable Things* 157). The "give and take" between the individual and the community is a balancing act of tension; individuals want to create their own unique identity, and the community wants cohesion so that efforts are focused on the group and its uplift. To that end, in particular, the journals of Black women become a collection of wisdom that is given to future generations which in turn shapes the lives of future generations. Journals become a tie from the individual Black woman to the experiences of the group, as Black women or the Black community in general. This is not to say that being a Black woman is a monolith and therefore, every Black woman has the same experiences. The complexity of the intersectionality within the Black woman is myriad and to try to distill the experience down to a set of experiences demeans the idea of the individual and the uniqueness of experience for that individual.

To further understand the importance, one must look at examples from the past to see how they inform our future. Elise Vallier discusses journaling in the Reconstruction period of America by using the published journals of Black women between 1861-the 1880s and 1890s-1920. In her article, *African American Womanhood: A Study of Women's Life Writings (1861-the 1910s)*, she closely examines the diaries/journals of a former slave, Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley;, northern-born writers Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown and Mary Virginia Montgomery and Elizabeth Johnson Harris, both of whom whose parents were former slaves; Ida B. Wells-Barnett, journalist and anti-lynching activist; and an anonymous woman who was born in the south and worked as a child nurse in 1912.

Vallier analyzes the diaries of seven Black women from the Reconstruction era (the 1860s-1890s) and overlapping with the Jim Crow era (1870s-1960s). Vallier observed similarities among the women regardless of socio-economic status, geographic location, and occupation:

> The women wrote in their journals to have a place to express their personal feelings in the face of racial violence, intimidation, and discrimination but also their political ideas and demands for civil rights for Americans. Indeed, some black diarists could refer to difficult violent experiences, there for expressing a certain degree of insecurity. As a result, journals kept by African American women differ greatly from those written by white women. (Vallier 4)

The women analyzed by Vallier used their journals to cultivate their own sense of identity. Vallier demonstrates that the women dealt with the real existential crisis of deciding what it means to be a Black woman in America. White society defined womanhood along Victorian ideals, one of which was insurmountable to Black women since to be a "true" woman was by default to also be white. Since Black women were unable to fulfill that requirement, other criteria were created. The Black elite modeled the ideal Black woman after Victorian ideals but also placed the sense that Black women needed to be "useful". Since the financial status of most Black people was lower, it was deemed to be responsible for women to work outside the home, something that was not compatible with Victorian ideas of ladylike behavior. However, necessity required that Black women do so.

To combat the period bias against Black women as "women", Black women were taught to defend their reputations: Ida B. Wells stated in her autobiography, "I told him that my good name was all I had in the world, that I was bound to protect it from attack by those who felt they could do so with impunity because I had no brother or father to protect it for me" (Wells 40). The world of newly emancipated Black women was fraught

with danger from various patriarchal society traps. As a working woman, many Black women were forced to put up with sexual harassment by employers. Silence was their only mode of surviving as they depended greatly on the income their work provided their families. Consequently, journals became a way to write down their thoughts that were less than polite, less than ladylike, but very much authentic. Society created an oxymoron of sorts that Black women were to somehow supposed to be able to fulfill. On one hand, they were to be docile and subservient to their husbands, yet on the other, assertive in the fight for civil rights for Black people. Wells did not believe that she would be able to live up to the Victorian standards of women as she felt she was too temperamental and full of "hardheaded willfullness" (Wells-Barnett 73). She felt unable to meet society's expectations and so used her journal to empty out her heart about her circumstances of life. She talked about racism as well as paying her bills on time.

Vallier's analysis of the diaries proves to be an informative and comprehensive read, however, she does not take the analysis a step further to show the outcomes of those diaries on Black women, present and future, and their effect upon the future of the Black Community. In Vallier's analysis, she gives a great deal of historical context, but she does not delve into the ramifications of these Black women's writing. She does not show how the community views the writing of these Black women, nor how their writing impacts generations to come.

2.1.1 Journaling for the Community

The Black community, by and large, has particular demands on its leaders. They cannot have feet of clay and must fight for the cause in all they do. They are no longer private citizens, but instead, property of the community. What was once a person with

foibles, follies, and faults of their own, now becomes a symbol of a cause. The same can be said of Ida B. Wells. Once she became known, she was no longer allowed to be the girl who could not pay her landlady and had to borrow money. She became a symbol of the anti-lynching movement. She had a status quo to maintain as a leader in the community. Because of the racism and stereotyping that occurred in the 19th century, perfection had to be maintained. There would be no candid pictures of her as she had to look poised and capable at all times. Many people, perhaps even more so then than now, believed that Blacks had to prove themselves worthy of the acceptance of whites. While Wells did not agree with the sentiment, she did recognize that her cause would be undermined if she was not in control of herself or portrayed herself in a certain light. Therefore, the diary was a place to say all she could not say in public, to struggle with all she could not show in public, and to be herself in ways she could not be in public.

2.2 Chronological History of Journaling by Black Women

There are very few journals written by Black women from during or just after slavery, "Putzi estimates that there are fewer than 10 diaries in public record of Black women prior to 1900…the diaries of Emilie Davis, Frances Rollin, and Charlotte Forten Grimke" (Warters). Once slavery was ended and Blacks could become educated legally, Black women began to use writing as a technique to deal with life. Writing is thinking and thinking was what enslaved women needed to do: thinking about how to get free, what they could do when they were free, and how to get their children back. In short, women use journals to be more fully and authentically themselves, even if it is just between the pages of a notebook.

Through examining the journals of three real Black women, I will demonstrate how journaling helps both the writer and the community. There is tension between the community's desires and the identity of the individual. Each of these women pushed the envelope of their lives in important directions and also created a map of their identity that could be used by later Black women to help actualize what it really means to be a Black woman in America, regardless of the time period.

2.2.1 The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimke (1854-1892)

Charlotte Forten Grimke was the first Black teacher hired to educate the children and adults of Port Royal, South Carolina in 1862. She kept a journal of her time there giving the future a glimpse of the past. She, like many Black/Brown teachers now, encouraged her students to take pride in their heritage and "made a point to teach them about liberators and heroes of African descent, such as Toussaint Louverture of Haiti" ("Mary's Apron and the Demise of Slavery, 1860-1876" 95). Grimke uses the past to inform the present of her students. She wrote of acts of resistance that encourage those of the present who read them. She told the story of young girls who were separated from their family by the Union Army. The girls were so determined to find their families and ran away into the night. They made it to the Port Royal Ferry, which was too full for the girls, but when their parents discovered they were on the dock, they quickly took a boat back to the landing. The joy of the family as they were reunited was easily seen.

Grimke tells of the small but significant observations that she makes. For example, she writes of the bright headscarves worn by Black women. Black women had been required to cover their hair for nearly a century and rather than be drab wrens, they turned this requirement into peacock feathers, glorious and riotous with color. The

strength of a Black woman to "make do with what you've got" is evident here, but also is a form of subtle rebellion: "You can force me to cover my hair, but you can't force me to be unseen".

Grimke writes these as important happenings in her life, yet we as "future readers" can see more. By writing about the resilience and resistance of these girls and women, we can recognize that our own goals as a people are not insurmountable or unattainable. They are waiting to be grasped and moved upon.

2.2.2 The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells (1862-1931)

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931) was an anti-lynching activist during the 1890s. She was born enslaved in Holly Springs, Mississippi, and was emancipated by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. She experienced racism when she purchased a first-class ticket on a train and was forced off the train because she refused to give up her seat. She wrote pamphlets ("The Red Record" and "South Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases") about the inhumanity of lynching and brought this atrocity to light.

Society's restrictions on the advancement of women led Wells to dive heavily into journaling. She put her worries about her brothers, her career, her love life, and her passion for justice all in the same notebook. She was a multi-faceted woman and her diary reflected her facets. Society expected only some of those facets to be seen publicly, but the diary gave Wells the chance to be fully herself, in all her "tempestuous, rebellious, hard-headed willfulness…[with]the disposition to question…authority" (Wells-Barnett 78). She wrote these aspirations in her diary so that she could be true to herself on the pages, even as she was compliant with society in life. These same

personality qualities that were decried by society, were the exact qualities needed to fight against lynching.

For women, especially Black women in the 19th century, the importance of having a space to be fully realized as a human cannot be minimized. Her roles as a female activist and journalist played an important part in defending the image of Black women (Vallier 10). Black girls were raised in a very strict fashion, to make them beyond reproach. The girls had "a sense of responsibility, respectability, purity, and morality" instilled in them. (Vallier 10). At the same time, they were also to fight vigorously for the uplift of the Black community. The Black community's focus has always rested on creating betterment or "uplift" of the community. For example, when Black women joined the Temperance movement in the early 1800s, it was viewed as giving respectability to both the women and the men they were representing. Further, many of the teachers of the young girls were trying to mold the girls into paragons as it was believed that "the uplift of the race was at stake" (Vallier 12). The community wants to help its current members, but moreover, it wants to set up future generations for success. The expectations of and for the community created friction between the social expectations of docility and aggression in the women. In the diary, Wells allows herself to have all of the feelings and desires that society told her were too masculine. She ponders her sexuality, mourns her parents, and laments over her brothers' employment and drinking habits. She expresses her own ambitions and dreams.

Yet once Wells's diary was published, her words were no longer private. She wrote each entry for herself at the time of writing, probably not considering others reading it after her death. Nevertheless, her words became part of the public record after

her death in 1931 because of the fame she generated during the decades of her activism. Black culture, then and now, claims ownership of powerful and famous Black figures and expects something of them. They have entered the public consciousness, and in particular, the consciousness of the Black community. The rules of conduct and decorum still apply to Wells, even though she is dead. Leaders are still supposed to be paragons of the community. Yet, Wells's diary, exhibiting all her seemingly damning flaws, does not diminish her standing with the community, instead, it shows how even a woman who could not pay all her bills can still be more than useful for the advancement of the community as a whole. Moreover, it gives hope to the community members who are flawed that they too can be successful. Her story goes beyond what she did as a young woman and goes into what she became. Wells's private diary served its purpose for her in private moments of her life, but it also serves a purpose for those of us who read it 134 years into her future.

2.2.3 Emilie Davis (1863-1865)

Emilie Davis (1839-1859) was a free black woman who lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her three pocket diaries recount the Emancipation Proclamation, the Battle of Gettysburg, and the death of President Abraham Lincoln. Her diary gives a glimpse of the attempts at normalcy during the abnormality of war. She speaks of getting ice cream and listening to lectures of now-famous activists such as Frederick Douglass (Johnson et al.) in 1863.

The wealth of Davis's story does not all come from her brushes with famous and influential people. Instead, it is in the everyday life that she led. She talks of the grief of the death of her sister-in-law from "consumption" and the likelihood that her nephew

would be an orphan as his father was enlisted and later died from his own illness. Throughout her life, she was also dealing with the real issue of the War. There was concern about slave catchers who would take both runaways and freemen to return to the South. She exemplifies what it means to "make do with what you've got". She doesn't cry into her diary; she carries on, day after day.

2.2.4 Frances Anne Rollin (1868)

Frances Anne Rollin-Whipper (1845-1901) was a teacher, activist, and author. She wrote the first full-length biography written by a Black person in America. Her book, *The Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delaney*, was about the highest-ranking Black commissioned officer in the Army. She published this book under the name Frank A. Rollin in 1868.

Rollin-Whipper was born to free parents in Charleston, South Carolina. Her parents were very fair-skinned (the father was believed to be white-passing) and wealthy. She, like Emilie Davis, attended the Institute for Colored Youth which was run by the Quakers. She became an activist for the rights of Black people and women's suffrage. When she was denied her first-class passage on the Steamer *Pilot Boy*, she sued the captain, and judgment was found in her favor in the amount of $250.00. She was helped in her lawsuit by the Freedmen's Bureau, where she met Delaney who commissioned her to write his biography.

In her diary, she records the life of the Black elite as well as the violence against Black people. She details the murder of several members of the community and the unrest that was caused by each death. She also clerked in the office of Frederick Douglass. She was also the mother to Ionia Rollin Whipper, one of the first Black female

physicians in the country. (Rollin and The National Museum of African American History and Culture)

Each of these four diaries holds the memories of the woman who wrote them and promises for the women who come after. One need only look to them for inspiration and aspirations for the future. The push for more from each Black person to "uplift" the community is prominent on each page and at the same time, there is also a sense of normalcy. The women not only fought for the freedoms due to Black people and women, but also fought to pay their bills, hold themselves to a moral standard, and create examples for the next generation. In that way, they were being Afrofuturist, trying to see what they could become, which in turn would shape what the community would become.

Reading the journals of these women demonstrates the purpose of journals as a coping strategy. Each generation of Black women has picked up journaling as a healing tactic. Dwyanna Smith, Katelyn Kelly-Morris, and Shaniya Chapman in their article, *(Re)Membering: Black women Engaging Memory through Journaling*, explore the personal benefits of journaling and how sharing those journal entries in a non-judgmental space can create healing and movement towards wholeness. Smith et al. began their project as a healing community and used journaling as a process of healing for a professor and two pre-service teachers. Drawing from Audre Lorde, each one felt there was something in their lives for which they needed their own "Sisters of the Yam" to cope and manage. The process was simple in design, although profound in application and results. Each week the three women would meet having had a journal entry of some kind; simply written entries, poems, etc. centered around mentor texts and discussion. They were to read their favorite Black authors and "create self-actualization invitations"

(Smith et al. 1680). One of the goals of the process was to form a space for self-love, self-definition, and to self-validate. The women looked at this activity, not only for the growth that they would have on a personal level but also for how they could implement it in a K-12 classroom setting for Black/Brown students, particularly girls. The women avoided writing prompts as they could create "false narratives and because they are void of authenticity and typically center a Euro-centric focus, [and] further academic distance between many youths of Color and their white peers" (Smith et al. 1681). The women shared their journals and had discussions around their books to invoke a space for vulnerability without fear of judgment or censorship. The process the women engaged in was inspiring, but it did not situate their process within the commentary of diaries and journals in the history of Black women nor did it wholly connect the process to the possible outcomes for the future.

Jolaade Kalinowski, et al discuss in their article, "Shouldering the Load Yet Again: Black Women's Experiences of Stress During COVID 19", the heavy burden of responsibility that Black women hold in their families and communities and how journaling was a source of comfort to them during the COVID 19 Pandemic. Kalinowski et al used the online journaling platform, Pandemic Journaling Project, which was launched in May 2020. This platform was used by people all around the world to journal their experiences in the COVID-19 pandemic. Each week they would receive a prompt to write about and could respond to that prompt in a photo, audio, or written journal format. The researchers studied how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the quality of life and mental health of the participants.

The researchers recognized that for Black women there are schemas that come into play when coping with a pandemic on top of the other societal, community, family, and personal stressors of life. Black women have coped by creating the Superwoman Schema, in which they cannot show weakness or vulnerability in the face of the racism and sexism that are a part of their everyday lives. It is believed that the Superwoman Schema is a direct rebuttal to the Jezabel or Mammy stereotypes of the Reconstruction period (Woods-Giscombe' 669). The Strong Black women syndrome is where women feel the need to "present an image of strength and to suppress one's emotions". (Manke et al.) The researchers also focused on using Black Feminist Theory in order to frame how the pandemic affected Black women. It should be noted that while the researchers used the data to demonstrate how the pandemic affected the Black women writers, they neglected to view how the act of journaling impacted the women and their communities during the pandemic. The use of journaling by Black women and, by extension, the Black community is healing. The critics in this section have focused only on the present or the past and neglected to center their research in the history and potential of the future of Black women. As we will see, Butler does center her fictional character to demonstrate the power of a Black woman's journal on society.

CHAPTER III
JOURNALING TO SPROUT – AFROFUTURISM

"I'll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense".
-Lauren Olamina

So why call it Afrofuturism? Bibi Burger and Laura Engels define it this way: "'Afrofuturism' is a term widely used in genre criticism. When it is used to refer to literature, films, visual art, or music, it denotes a narrative of a possible future for Africans, Africa, or the Black diaspora" (2). Why not push to make the whole genre of science fiction inclusive? To some, it defeats the purpose of "Black cultural equality" to create a separate genre for Black science fiction. However, there is more than one purpose for Afrofuturism. Scholars have posited Afrofuturism as a "necessary antidote, a lifesaving response, to the poison that is the exploitation of life and history of Blackness and Black existence in the Old and New worlds" (Okoro). Black people have been enslaved and colonized and made to believe that there is no real place for them in the future except underneath the feet of white culture and its domination. Besides allowing Black people to *see* themselves in the future (a future that was not always guaranteed), it also gives them a chance to *shape* that future, to create a world that meets their needs and expectations, rather than that of the dominant culture. Afrofuturism allows Black people

to imagine themselves as the stars of their own stories (both in fiction and real life) and see what they can make of the world and themselves.

Butler's novels change both the perception of the world of the future and the perception of Black people in the future. Hortense Spillers, in her article "Imaginative Encounters", states very clearly how Butler changes the conventional perceptions,

> That Butler indeed thought it, plucking this contemporary character out of a world that parallels our own and from the nesting place of interracial marriage, inscribes the most daring of fictional moves with a result that is profoundly disturbing; if fictional time last claim to plasticity, then it can retrogress as well as progress (Spillers 5).

While in this particular quote, she is speaking about Butler's *Kindred* (1979), however I believe that the idea still rings true. Butler uses a contemporary character, in Lauren Olamina-Bankole and places her in an extraordinary situation giving a very disturbing outcome. Moreover, Afrofuturism gives Black people space to create real building blocks to achieve what they imagine. Not unlike how science fiction has connected to the inventions of the future (i.e. Star Trek communicators now cellular phones), Afrofuturism goes beyond technological advances and shows people what they can be. Connection to our future selves is critical in the Black community. Creating and imagining a possible future gives future generations ideas to shoot for and goals to achieve. Black people are always swimming into deeper water; the future was not written with us in mind, so we have to chart our own way into that future. Each speculative novel, each essay, and each poem brings another section of the map to light, leading future generations to "the Promised Land". According to Toni Morrison

> "Now that Afro-American artistic presence has been 'discovered' actually to exist, now that serious scholarship has moved from silencing the witnesses and erasing their meaningful place in and contribution to American culture, it is no

> longer acceptable to merely imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves" (Morrison 133).

Within that imagining is the true power of Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in 1993 in his essay "Black to the Future". Prior to that essay, a type of proto-Afrofuturism existed for quite some time in music and poetry. By combining the current struggles of Black people with African diasporic music and art, and giving it a futuristic flair, musical artists such as George Clinton and Sun Ra created worlds where Black people were not only empowered but *in power*. The Afrofuturist desire to have Black people included and in positions of power in the future has been demonstrated in novels, movies, songs, and poetry.

We can trace literary Afrofuturism as far back as W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* was published in 1903. In it, Du Bois demonstrates the problems with the "color line" and the issues of being Black in America. Du Bois pushes for change in the world, particularly from white people who had been the oppressors. In his essays, he uses his personal experiences and the experiences of others to push for change. Moreover, he also explored the Black future in an unpublished short story entitled "The Princess Steel." In this story, Du Bois's character invents a "Mega-scope that could see across space and time…" (Anderson 230). Du Bois's story uses technology and the theory of relativity to critique industrial capitalism. The use of technology to create change, even in his less technologically advanced time, demonstrates one of the fundamental tenets of Afrofuturism: technologically advancing for the good of the Black community. He also explored a changed future, briefly, in a short story called "The Comet" (1920). In it, two characters, a Black man (Jim Davis) and a white woman, are seemingly the last two people on earth after a comet passes. After searching for both of their families, they seem

ready to take comfort with each other and procreate for the survival of the human race. However, the woman's family finds them and reveals that the comet only affected those people who lived in New York City. The father of the woman offers to lynch the Black man if he has been inappropriate. She demurs and leaves without meeting Jim's eyes as Jim's wife comes running into his arms. Du Bois's story helps readers to see that the future can be what we make of it and that we can leave racist ideas behind for the good of the human race.

Du Bois creates compelling arguments for the advancement of Afrofuturism for the Black community. However, he looks at the future as something that is for the whole community and neglects the individuals; the focus is on the uplifting of the community. In the course of that uplift, women have been expected to sacrifice for that uplift. The focus has been on the freedom of the whole but not the fulfilment of the individual.

More recently, there has been a shift in scholarship on Afrofuturism. Beginning in the 2010s, scholars of Afrofuturism shifted to a more global view and became interested in more areas of study, such as technology, art, science, and religion. In "Afrofuturism 2.0 & the Black Arts Speculative Movement: Notes on a Manifesto", Reynaldo Anderson reviews the new adjustments that have made authentic modifications to the Black community and the world. Afrofuturism 2.0 has expanded to enfold "the good, the bad, and the ugly" of the Black experience through the integration of theories and thoughts of the 1990s and the new patterns of thought in the mid-2000s. Anderson asserts that

> Afrofuturism 2.0 is the beginning of both a move away and an answer to the Eurocentric perspective of the twentieth century's early formulations of Afrofuturism that wondered if the history of African peoples had been deliberately erased…[now] future-looking Black scholars, artists and activists are

> not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about cultural others, past present and future and, challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures.

Through Afrofuturism, Black people are retrieving their histories and imagining, not only a future that does not have slavery, imperialism, or colonization in its past but cultivating a future where the existence of slavery, imperialism, or colonization in the past does not determine the outcome of Black people any longer.

As Black people focused on their futures, technology became a game changer for the community. Anderson also delved into the technological changes that the mid-2000s had on the Black experience and how those changes had far-reaching implications, perhaps even the end of racism itself. Anderson interpreted the onset and explosion of social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, and the galvanizing impact on Black America. For example, the election of President Barack Obama can be tied directly to the grassroots usage of social media. Further, the use of "crowdfunding and other new technologies to design creative projects, escalating environmental stress, and the New Scramble for Africa" (Anderson 232) pushed Afrofuturism into its 2.0 form. Black protests of state-sanctioned police violence and a resurgence of Pan-Africanism creates fertile ground for the growth and advancement of Afrofuturism. The pandemic and the protests of 2019- 2020 brought to light the current struggles of the community (particularly police violence against Black people) and the disparity within the healthcare system and economic system within America. Eva Pirker and Judith Rahn, in their article "Afrofuturist trajectories across time, space, and media", highlight the expansion of Afrofuturism 2.0 and the effect of the COVID 19 pandemic and the protests of 2019-2020 on the future of Black people in America. They review the changes that the social

protests of 2019-2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 have caused to both Afrofuturist texts of all types and the scholarship of those works. No longer is Afrofuturism *only* about the opportunity "to sit at the table" but it is also about critiquing the very real and current issues being faced in the global Black community. Prinker and Rahn assert that there is "a need to acknowledge the coexistence of a variety of African and Black conceptualizations of futurity and their inherent ambiguity, controversy, and complexity" (Prinker and Rahn 287). Pirker and Rahn observe that the Afrofuturist movement has been American-centered rather than global in the past. While the need for connections to Africa is important for Black Americans, it is felt that their experience through the African diaspora is different. For Afrofuturism, all Black experiences are valid and should be represented, and there is a need for "transcultural awareness" for the future dream to come to fruition.

The authors also concede that much of Afrofuturism scholarship is under the misconception that new technologies will equal new social status for all; similar to how it was thought that automation would create a society free of work in the 1950s. They illustrate that the African Diaspora is now a part of Black culture; there is no closing of that Pandora's box and, therefore, today's Afrofuturist must not try to create a new culture from scratch but instead show how the diaspora, colonization, and slavery is not the final word on Black people and that the past can be overcome until it does not affect the outcomes of Black futures.

One Afrofuturist text that demonstrates the new future of Black people and has also seen an increase in popularity is the film, *Black Panther.* The popular movies, *Black Panther (2018)* and the recently released *Wakanda Forever (2022)* have galvanized

Black people to view their future without thought of the past. Tim Posada, in his article "Afrofuturism, Power, and Marvel's Comics's *Black Panther*" argues that "'Both the character and the comic book work as a grand vision of Afrofuturist blackness where black folk are no longer over determined by racism and colonialism" (Posada 630). The strength of *Black Panther* for the Afrofuturist is not in his gadgets or technology; it is that he is the future of Black people who are no longer defined by colonialism, racism, or slavery. While there was joy in the community as *Black Panther* and *Wakanda Forever* was released, there were other issues at play that caused concerning issues.

As the Black Panther character evolved, the creative powers controlling the character changed. Invented by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the treatment of Black Panther was typical of the 1960s; he was portrayed as an African chieftain with savage tendencies, and he was a side character to the *Fantastic Four*, not coincidentally all white characters. Seen as an exception to the "primitive rule" the original iteration of *Black Panther* gives a highly advanced ship to the *Fantastic Four* who marvel that he would have such a vehicle in his possession to give. By creating a Black utopia, or "Afrotopia" as stated by Posada, the creators are critiquing different parts of society than the usual utopia. Here they are addressing the reality that unless all are included and accepted in the utopian society, it is, in fact, a dystopian society. Many of Posada's points regarding Afrofuturism are on par with his contemporaries, however, he fails to acknowledge the lack of representation of Black women in the "savior" position nor are the characters encompassing the intersectionality of their identities with the representation of other genders, sexual orientations, etc. to truly encompass the full and rich Black experience.

3.1 Journaling as an Afrofuturist project

Science fiction is an imagining of the future, with all its faults and flaws. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals or having a scientific factor as an essential orienting component" (Merriam-Webster). The goal of the genre is to imagine a world/culture/universe where things have improved or devolved into chaos due to the choices that we make in the present.

However, traditionally Black people have been left out of that future or have been pigeonholed into particular roles. According to Afrofuturist author N. K. Jemisin "[The Science fiction writers and their fans] weren't comfortable letting us into their archetypal playgrounds at all, let alone in any number. When we did appear, the roles we took were limited, non-threatening to the writer's sense of superiority: the thug, the slave, the exotic sex toy" (Jemisin). The battle then is to not only see more African Americans or Black people in Science Fiction but to also imagine what *we want our futures* to be. Hortense Spillers, in her article "Imaginative Encounters", gives a definition and purpose to Afrofuturism in writing:

> [w]e might describe it this way: the writings of the imaginative artist, among which the 'extraterrestrial' prominently figures–one scholar calls them the 'translunar narrative'--deposit traces that the thickest empiricisms may well translate into products after their own encodations (Spillers 3).

The creation of Afrofuturism gives space, not unlike a journal, to define who Black people are and what we will become outside of, perhaps in spite of, Eurocentric influences. As journals are spaces for present thoughts to our future selves, it is clear that journaling is an Afrofuturist exercise in the hands of Black women. Journals are meant to record our present and project our wants and desires for the future. Simply put, it is

another aspect of Afrofuturism in the hands of Black people, one that starts on an individual level but influences the collective people.

Afrofuturist writers look at the past through new eyes, seeing and imagining changes in the past/present that would affect the future. One such author is Colston Whitehead. His novel, *The Underground Railroad (2016),* is a reimagining of slavery and freedom through speculative fiction. His novel depicts the Underground Railroad with real trains and conductors and an amalgamation of the treatment of slaves and free Black people across America with nods to Britain and the Caribbean. NK Jemison is the author of *How Long 'Til Black Future Month* (2108) which contains several short stories with Black people and Blackness as central characters and themes. Her stories envision other worlds and beings that mirror the struggles that Black people face today.

Each type of Afrofuturist writing, whether a novel, journal, or comic book, is about connection: connection of past to present or present to future, or past to future. The connection of those spaces is within the imagination of the writer and, to some extent, the imagination and longing of the Black community. Octavia E. Butler's works exhibit that longing and imagination extensively. According to Spillers,

> "Among black women writers in the genre of science fiction, Octavia E. Butler has created entire alternative worlds that uncannily reflect reality and deflect and undermine it at the same time by generating subjects who improve on the available human models: in that regard science fiction puts into play something that we know is rather familiar, while it so rearranges the signposts that he outcome is strange and defamiliarized" (Spillers 4).

Butler used the present problems in society for Black people to demonstrate how those problems could be exacerbated and extended to all people. It should not come as a surprise, then, when she uses journaling as the method of telling that story. The journals of Black women have long influenced the future of the community, that is certain when

looking at Ida B. Wells, Francis Anne Rollins, and others. As previously stated, women always write when something troubling is happening in their lives. In *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents,* there is a great deal of trouble for Olamina, her party, and American society.

Throughout the novels, Butler's character dreams of being bigger and better. Lauren's goal is for her people to "take root among the stars" (*Sower* 80). She writes in her journal in the hopes that "someday when people are able to pay more attention to what I say than how old I am, I'll use these verses to *pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future* that makes sense" (*Sower* 75, emphasis mine). Her journal is not just a place for her own woes, but also the dreams of her community.

3.2 Utopia and Dystopias for Black Women

Utopian societies have been a desire ever since Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in 1516 (British Library). Humans have been fascinated with the idea of a world with no strife, problems, war, or famine. However, according to Patricia Melzer, utopias are unattainable. Because they created sameness to remove tension and conflict, they will actually create dystopias for anyone who does not fit into that sameness. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) individuals and cultures do not fit into that Euro-centric view of sameness and Utopia.

The beauty of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* is that the utopia that is being sought after is inside of a dystopian society yet reflects a more perfect harmony across racial, sexual orientation, ability, and gender lines. Melzer explains that

> Butler's narratives reflect the notion of utopia as a potential that needs to be negotiated in its complexity, the people affected by it discuss and sometimes reject it. Butler develops the utopian term dialectically, not absolutely, and always in relation to the dystopia term, or its possibility (Melzer 33)

Butler uses reality in her glimpse into the future, creating a place where even within the hardship of a dystopian society, there can still be pockets of a utopian society that may be fraught with drama, but is strong in vision and ideal.

Butler takes that utopia and combines it with the reality of journaling in the Black community to depict the possibilities for the community and individuals. She uses the lack of safety in dystopian America and uses the protagonist's journal to create a safe space for thinking in order to chronicle the present, connect to the past and create a future all while using a disabled Black woman as the fulcrum for change in that America. She, therefore, blends the actual real needs of Black women and the Black Community for journaling and the change that occurs through writing and reading in the Black community as it looks towards the future. Jim Miller, in his article "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision", postulates that "Butler's critical dystopias force us to 'work through' the dystopian before we can begin the effort to imagine a better world" (Miller 339). Frankly, having experience with the very real dystopia that America was and has become through the aftereffects that have been American slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation, Butler is pushing toward that better world very clearly in her novels.

Butler's use of the journaling technique within *The Parable of the Sower* emphasizes the need for a safe space for Black women in society to engage in their own thoughts or feelings without the judgment of the majority and communicates how the use of that space can create change in the Black community at large. We can also see that

while many scholars have viewed Butler's novels for Afrofuturist writing, they have not viewed Butler's novels through her vehicle of storytelling: journaling. Without analyzing the technique of journaling through an Afrofuturist lens, a great deal of possible interpretation and analysis is left out by scholarship and, in turn, leaves out the full richness of Butler's texts.

3.3 Afrofuturism and Journaling

As previously stated, the goals of journaling and Afrofuturism dovetail. Journaling gives space to dream and imagine the future just as Afrofuturism is the instrument for those same dreams to come to fruition via songs, poems, and essays. Therefore, it is clear that journals are a perfect addition to Afrofuturist texts. The use of a journal allows the individual to think about their lives as well as the lives of the people around them. It also gives space for reflection and planning. In many ways, the protests of 2019-2020 could be seen as the outward expression of those inward thoughts that journals help to record. The time spent indoors during quarantine gave birth to the ideas that had previously just been in journals or conversations with others. The protests demonstrated that it was not just about words on paper or talk, but action and it is in that action that begins to illustrate the future as seen in the eyes of the Afrofuturist both past and present. To understand the future, we must look at the past.

The scholarship on Black American literature has based its foundation on oral traditions. Enslaved Africans passed on their stories and folklore via verbal telling. However, while many stories were passed on verbally, it should be noted that not all Africans spoke the same language or dialect to pass those traditions on. Soon enough, the default language was English due to the punishment by the slave owners and the need

for communication among themselves. The use of the English language allowed many enslaved Africans to coordinate escape plans via songs. The ability to read and write would have been extremely valuable to these enslaved Africans. They would have been able to forge their own papers, read the wanted posters, and perhaps even the ledgers that detailed where their children had been sold.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. speaks on the spoken language that Africans used in order to institute the differences between themselves and the dominant culture. Gates focuses a great deal on the speech patterns of Black people and how they deviate from standard English. In his book, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism,* he makes it clear that while the standard English words seem to have similar meanings when used by Black people, the Black vernacular has created new signification for those words. He expounds, "[w]e are witnessing here a profound disruption at the level of the signifier, precisely because of the relationship of identity between the two apparently equivalent terms" (Gates 47). The deterritorialization of the standard English words gives/gave Black people a chance to communicate using the language of the dominant culture yet changed it enough that the meaning was often elusive to representatives of that dominant culture; as Gates so aptly states, "[B]lack people colonized a white sign" (Gates 47). The purpose of Signifyin(g) is two-fold: first, it was and is a way to communicate in the company of white people in a relatively safe manner. As the signification of the words is different, Black people could communicate more nuances of meaning, than white people could understand. Secondly, it was a chance to do real-world "brain training". Gates states, "...it is rather a form of rhetorical training, an on-the-streets exercise in the use of troping, in which play is the thing - not

specifically what is said, but how" (Gates 70). Signifyin(g) then becomes a way to create a faster more "fleet-footed" brain, able to adjust and readjust based on the environment and circumstances in which the user found themselves. This very important skill was in many ways code-switching before code-switching was studied or known. While Gates is very clear on the origins of Black oral tradition, its purposes, and current use, he does not expand his definition to include other subversions of white skills. As we will see later in this chapter, standard English speech was not the only "white-owned" sign that Black people "colonized".

CHAPTER IV
JOURNALING TO FLOWER

"Sometimes I write to keep from going crazy. There's a world of things I don't feel free to talk to anyone about".

-Lauren Olamina

Lauren Olamina Bankole, the principal character in the Earthseed series uses journaling to create powerful changes in society. These same changes are the aspirations of the Afrofuturist author, Octavia E. Butler. Butler was the first Black woman to gain popular acclaim as a science fiction author. One of her most famous works is *Kindred,* a novel that demonstrates Afrofuturism in its play between the ancestry of the main character and how it directly impacts her future and her ethics and views on life. In her 1998 talk at the Media in Transition forum at MIT, Butler outlines that she began to write science fiction because when she was twelve, she saw a movie called *Devil Girl from Mars* and it made her realize that "Geez, I can write a better story than this" and "Geez, *anybody* could write a better story than this" and finally that "Somebody got paid for writing that awful story" (Butler).

Butler used real-world news (current in her time) to influence her novels and short stories. She stated that "[m]y rule for writing [*Parable of the Sower*] was that I couldn't write about anything that couldn't actually happen" (Butler). She defines her works as an

"if-this-goes-on" type of science fiction, meaning that whatever current crisis (present-day) were to continue and become even more problematic (Butler). She pushes the status quo in order to see what could be if humanity stays on its current trajectory.

Butler's status as the first female Black science fiction author was not always accepted in the Black community. She states in the MIT forum, "I used to get criticized for writing science fiction because the idea was 'You should be writing something more relevant', which was a big word when I was in college. And I was not behaving properly. I was not *contributing.*" (Butler; emphasis mine). Butler delineates the very real and present pressure that Black women feel to constantly work on the "community's uplift".

4.1 Journaling in Parable of the Sower

Journaling for many women, particularly Black women, is a safe, reliable place where they can chronicle their thoughts and make decisions. By structuring *Parable of Sower* as a journal, Octavia Butler emphasizes the space for thinking needed by her protagonist, and in turn, all Black women. It is a place where they can create safely, envision the future, and lament without being judged by anyone else. It is where they can create an identity that is not based on the observations of others but is wholly formed in the mind of the identity holder. However, publication creates another layer of purpose and meaning. Karsonya Wise Whitehead, editor of *Notes from a Colored Girl: The Civil War Pocket Diaries of Emilie Francis Davis,* gives a poignant definition for journal writing,

> Writing, even in a diary, is not a private act. It is a public act, where the writer is attempting to share himself or herself with others. It is part of a larger discourse that shapes how and what we remember. Writing our memories down separates the chaff of our emotional experience from the wheat of the actual experience by informing how and what we remember. The moment you record something on

> paper; that record has the potential to find its way into the hands of others—even if it takes years to get there (Whitehead 2).

Butler uses the process to her advantage in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents.* The timeline from the beginning of the first book to the end of the second encompasses the entirety of writing and its purposes for the Black community.

In *Parable of a Sower*, Butler introduces Lauren Oya Olamina, a young, Black woman who is living in a community in Robledo, California. Lauren is a "sharer", meaning that she has Hyperempathy Syndrome and can experience the pain and pleasure of anyone she sees. She has gained this condition through her mother's use of Paracetco, an intelligence-enhancement drug. Lauren considers her "sharing" status as a disability. The setting of the book is California in 2024 and the world is falling into chaos due to climate change. America is full of poor people who cannot afford basic necessities, like vaccinations or food, nor even vital services, like firefighters or police officers (these must be paid for by the individual). Many people are homeless wanderers, who often use a drug known as Pyro which causes the user pleasure while viewing fires. The drug and its use have damaged countless small towns and even neighborhoods in larger cities. Lauren's family lives in a small cul-de-sac and they have built a wall to protect them. They rarely go out into the larger city and have become relatively self-sustaining, growing crops to eat and sell or even small livestock like rabbits. Lauren writes of the lives of the people in her community and tells the story of the fall of that same community. Similar to Emilie Davis, she is living in a very real-life "war" in the form of a dystopian America and does what she must for survival. Butler used the journal to invoke the diaries of those past Black women and to take their impact further and demonstrate what happens to both the journal writer and the journal reader in the future.

The writer, in this case, Lauren, has her own purpose for her journal. As previously stated, all women know you write when something is not going right in your life, and for Lauren, that equals isolation and loneliness.

Journaling is a solitary activity. The principle goal is not to share those words with the world; instead, it is a haven to work out identity, plans of action, creativity, and sorrow. Each of these uses is particular for each woman that writes them. By using the medium of the journal, Butler further emphasizes Lauren's isolation, because journaling is a solitary activity, usually done when alone. Even as Lauren is surrounded by a larger family (with seven members), she is further isolated by being the only sharer, the only female child, and the only child of her dead mother. She had one friend, whom she lost in a perceived betrayal. Lauren tells her friend about her idea that the community will fall soon, whether due to natural disasters or human intervention, and the community must learn all kinds of skills so that they can adapt to the change that will come. Her friend is frightened and tells her parents who then confront Lauren's father. He in turn disciplines Lauren

> "… 'This is about staying alive, learning to live outside [the walls] so that we would be able to if we have to'.
> He watched me as though he could read the truth in my mind… 'All right', he said. 'You may have meant well, but no more scare talk'.
> 'It wasn't scare talk. We do need to learn what we can while there's time' (60).

Butler causes Lauren to set all the events down in her journal; she is working out her disappointment. Lauren is alone in her understanding of the state of the world she lives in. Her father, born at an earlier time, has a constant hope that the prosperity of years gone by will return and that the current apocalypse is temporary. Lauren, as a child of the apocalypse, recognizes that it will get much worse before it gets better. She tries to

convince her father, a leader in the community, that preparation is key to survival. However, her message is too blunt, and too scary for many to listen to. They ignore the abyss until it grabs them. Lauren, however, looks into the abyss and "looks for some hand and foot holds before we just get pushed in" (60). She begins by reading books on native plants for food and medicine. She also runs drills at night and prepares a bag of essentials that she can grab in case of an emergency. However, the biggest and most beneficial act for her is writing. Lauren chronicles her preparations and takes notes on all of her newfound knowledge. It is that knowledge that she journals about, that actually saves her life. The knowledge that she has seems everyday and ordinary. Collins proposes that "Black Feminist thinking rearticulates that everyday wisdom and empowers Black women and resistance" (Collins 32). This is clear with Lauren as all that she learns on her own becomes the foundation of the Acorn community and how they separate from the dystopian society around them.

Butler further depicts Lauren's journal as her primary comfort along her journey. Since all other voices are told through the filter of Lauren's mind with her tacit interpretation of their words and actions, Lauren is the only voice that the reader experiences in the novel. The use of the journal gives Lauren space, not only to create Earthseed but also to create her identity.

Butler's use of a journal clearly demonstrates the power of the journal to change the future. She depicts Lauren writing Earthseed, the religion and way of life into existence and it will eventually create a new society. Unlike the Afrofuturist scholars of today, Butler exhibits Lauren as trying to create a new community rather than uplifting the old one. Lauren believes that humanity's only hope is to "take root among the stars"

(73). She wants to create a community of like-minded believers in Earthseed who will be willing to find a new place to live on another planet, leaving the planet and all its problems behind. The primary belief is that

> God is Power-
> Infinite,
> Irresistible,
> Inexorable,
> Indifferent.
> And yet, God is Pliable--
> Trickster,
> Teacher,
> Chaos,
> Clay.
> God exists to be shaped.
> God is Change. (24)

To Lauren, Change is another name for God. However, her god does not care for her. It does not require worship, prayer, or rituals. Instead, Lauren wants others to acknowledge, anticipate, and respect her god. By respecting change, a person may mold change to create an ideal situation for Earthseed. Interestingly, and perhaps a little ironically, the one thing that Lauren does not change is her belief in Earthseed and her ability to write it into existence. She believes she is merely writing the truths that she observes in the natural world. I would posit, that while many of those truths may have existed, they only become Earthseed through the filter of Lauren's mind. It is thinking as writing that creates the tenets and beliefs of Earthseed. Butler uses Lauren's journal to demonstrate how huge ideas can be engineered by writing them into reality. Ida B. Wells-Barnett demonstrated that concept again and again as her ideas created real social change, not just in the Black community but in America.

Butler uses Lauren's writing to show the possibility of connection to others. In the novel, Lauren is writing after the fall of her neighborhood. She is keeping watch over

Zahra and Harry, two survivors of her neighborhood in Robledo. Zahra notices what Lauren is doing and asks, “Teach me to do that,” she whispered. I looked at her, not understanding. “Teach me to read and write.” I was surprised, but I shouldn’t have been. Where, in a life like hers, had there been time or money for school” (*Sower* 175). Zahra’s life has been hard; she was sold to Richard Moss to be his wife and prior to that she had been living on the streets. Just like Lauren has discovered the comfort in writing, Zahra would like to be able to gain that same comfort. Butler also seems to be drawing from the work of real Black women as she placed Lauren in a teacher-role, in Robledo to small children and now to Zahra.

Butler depicts the intimacy of sharing writing. Harry demands to know what is so important in Lauren’s notebook since he feels that she has lied by not revealing her hyperempathy: “There was a long silence. Then he asked, “What do you write in your book every night?” Interesting shift. “My thoughts,” I said. “The day’s events. My feelings.” “Things you can’t say?” he asked. “Things that are important to you?” “Yes.” “Then let me read something. Let me know something about the you that hides. I feel as though ... as though you’re a lie. I don’t know you. Show me something of you that’s real.” (*Sower* 183*).* Lauren must choose to share her writing or lose her companions. She chooses to share. Butler’s illustration illuminates the real anxiety that can be faced by sharing intimate writings. However, in that anxiety or pain, there can be a wonderful outcome. Harry and Zahra remain steadfast friends to Lauren through the end of the Acorn colony in *Parable of the Talents.* Through the relationship of Harry, Zahra, Lauren, Butler demonstrates the power of the written word in the present and the planting

of the written word for the future. However, even in the long-standing friendship of the three characters, Butler emphasizes Lauren's isolation.

Butler's isolation of Lauren through the narrative structure magnifies the isolation that minorities, particularly the racial, gender, and ability minorities, face in American society. Lauren's identity has at least four major intersections that can cause others to view her negatively, and in the case of her "sharing" or actively using to harm her, and therefore, she is alone because she cannot trust anyone too much. Her own distrust and the distrust of others regarding Lauren causes her isolation. For many Black women in American society, there is a level of distrust that can be exhibited in spaces outside of their own racial and gendered sphere. The isolation of Black women in the American narrative creates a level of comfort for the remainder of society so that society can in turn ignore the pain of the minority. The creation of Black women as *Other* in the American narrative brings distrust to society from the Black woman.

The level of distrust causes women to turn inward in their thinking and experiences. Historically, Black women, once able to read and write, use writing to express thoughts and feelings that would likely get them hurt or killed in society. It creates a space where their thoughts can be expressed and felt without judgment. After envisioning the principles of the new religion, Earthseed, through writing in her journal, Lauren becomes the leader and founder of the Acorn community. The influence that she will have on America will be profound (as will be seen in *Parable of the Talents*). Butler demonstrates that the influence of writing and the writer can, not only be profound on the Black community but on everyone within reading distance of the words. The words of the writer can be up for interpretation by the reader, but it is the writer who gives the reader

something to interpret. The act of interpreting a text or engaging with the text allows the reader to take a glimpse into the mind of the writer; to enter into that sacred Clearing of the mind. Journals are private writings for the writer with purposes of expression and thought to process. However, if those words become public, it creates an image of the writer in the mind of the reader and influences that reader with the words of the writer. In other words,

[Writing] is Power-
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
Indifferent.
And yet, [Writing] is Pliable--
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.
[Writing] exists to be shaped.
[Writing] is Change. (24)

The novel ends as Lauren and her troop plan to memorialize all of their lost family and friends by planting Acorns in their honor. It is from this planting that the colony derives its name. As the novel ends on an idyllic scene of somber and loving remembrance, Butler ends with a quote from the Bible, King James Edition, the very scripture from which the novel gets its name. She demonstrates that there is a change of growth that will be coming to the Acorn community, but it will go through pain in *Talents* before it comes to fruition.

CHAPTER V
JOURNALING TO RIPEN

5.1 Journaling in Parable of the Talents

"We might be able to do it—grow our own food, grow ourselves and our neighbors into something brand new. Into Earthseed".

-Lauren Olamina

Butler wrote *Parable of the Talents* in 1998, long before Donald Trump became president, yet there seems to be an eerily strange echo in her story and Trump's rise to power. Afrofuturism is all about exploring what was, what is, and what can be, and Butler uses this genre to her advantage. Butler takes the current issues of her time, such as climate change and the rise of the Christian Right, and uses her novels to imagine what can be, how Black people fit into the future of the country, and how we, as humanity, will one day find a new home. However, in her speculation, she is also commenting on how parent/child relationships work and how writing can connect even when there is no physical connection.

Parable of the Talents begins about five years after *Parable of the Sower*. The whole novel is told as a commentary on the journals of Lauren Oya Olamina Bankole. Her daughter, Larkin/Asha Vere comments as an academic historian. Larkin was taken from her mother when a group known as the Christian Crusaders took over Acorn. Supported by President Andrew Steel Jarrett (whose campaign slogan was "Make

America Great Again"), the militant group enslaves the members of Acorn as cultists and tries to forcibly convert them to a nationalistic Christianity. Lauren's husband, Bankole, was killed during the initial raid. The children were taken from their parents and given to "good Christian Americans" (which is a new church denomination) and are to be raised to remove the taint of Earthseed.

The second novel is told as a journal but with commentary. Similar to Wells-Barnett's diary, Larkin gives commentary on the entries of her mother and also includes entries from her father's journal to give context and her own feelings about her mother. She uses firsthand accounts when pages have been lost, such as when Acorn fell. The members of Earthseed were held as slaves and forced converts for eighteen months; they were subjected to slave collars, beatings, rape, and other degradation. Eventually, they learn enough to be able to fight back finally and win. They kill all their captors and burn their community. Because of Lauren's forethought, they are able to get to various caches of food, important documents, and money that they have stashed around the mountain. The group splits up and creates a secret location to communicate.

During this time, President Jarrett is defeated and is a one-term president. He is outed when the failed Alaskan-Canada war does not bring back Alaska as a state, and it is revealed that Jarret sanctioned the burnings of people believed not to be Christian Americans. However, for Lauren, the damage has been done. Lauren is desperate to find her daughter, yet after a year, she is unable to find her. The Christian Crusaders purposefully hid the locations of the children so that their biological parents would not be able to influence them anymore. As Lauren is unable to find her child, she turns all her

attention back to Earthseed and helps them meet the destiny she believes they must achieve: to be among the stars.

Lauren publishes *Earthseed: Books of the Living* and becomes a national phenomenon. The publication of her private words changes the views of her community and those who look at her community. She is able to gather more people into Earthseed and gain influence nationally. The novel ends as Lauren is eighty-one and dying, but she can watch the members of Earthseed take off to the starship, the *Christopher Columbus*, where the Earthseed members will be in suspended animation until they become a colony on a new world.

Butler does not depict Lauren and Larkin in a traditional mother/daughter relationship. However, they are both connected through writing. Larkin discovers who her mother was in Lauren's personal journal. Larkin also uses her commentary to uncover her own feelings about her mother: "If my mother had created only Acorn, the refuge for the homeless and the orphaned…If she had created Acorn, but not Earthseed, then I think she would have been a wholly admirable person" (*Talents* 60*)*. Larkin's jealousy of Earthseed would seem to be a valid response to the circumstances of her life.

Writing is thinking and it is my belief that Afrofuturist writers think and imagine in their writing. Butler uses Lauren's journal and Larkin's commentary to create a past, present, and future thread. Each time Larkin interrupts the writing of her mother, she drags the reader closer to the present. Each time Lauren tells her story, she is recounting the past. Eventually, past and present converge and shift to looking at the future of Earthseed as they take off to the stars.

I believe that Butler is commenting on two major points in both *Parable* novels. First, she is imagining a future where Black people exist *and* lead. In many science fiction novels, there are no Black people or they are brown-skinned but have none of the Black cultures. While there are a few instances where Black people are present, *Star Trek*, for instance, had the first interracial kiss on television, they are not leaders. Even on *Star Trek*, which was absolutely revolutionary for its time, where people of all races were portrayed as working towards a common positive goal for humanity, Black people were still subordinate to representatives of the dominant culture. They were not in positions of true leadership and had to follow the orders of a white man (Captain Kirk or Captain Jean Luc Picard). By contrast, Butler creates a leader that is not only Black but also a woman and disabled, demonstrating that a white male does not have to be the leader of a group to be successful.

Secondly, I believe that she is commenting on how writing is the most powerful legacy. As Black people, writing and reading have incredibly strong connotations. For a group that was not allowed the privilege to read and write for centuries in America, embracing the ability to read and write is important. To use that ability to leave a legacy for others is critical for the survival of the community. Lauren has to discard her idea that her child is lost forever when she meets her. Larkin has to discard the idea that her Uncle Marc was her only family.

Butler ties the new information cycle with the writing cycle very neatly. The first time Larkin (now Asha) learns of Earthseed and Lauren, she reads of her in a news bulletin. Larkin says to Marc, "Do you know anything about these people? …Are they serious? Interstellar emigration?" (*Talents* 377). Larkin is so taken aback by Lauren's

belief system that she cannot even see that she has a strong physical resemblance to Lauren. Marc dismisses Earthseed and advises Larkin to do the same. However, Larkin is very much her mother's daughter. She wants to know and learn, and so Larkin researches Earthseed and its charismatic leader, Lauren Olamina Bankole. Larkin was determined not to be taken in by the seductiveness of the cult leader, who she realized "was dangerous" (*Talents* 378).

Butler demonstrates that one can know another, without never having met in person, through reading and writing. Larkin comes to understand Lauren through her journals and the writing about her. As the novel demonstrates, one power of the written word is its ability to bridge gaps through time and space. Larkin is able to learn from her mother, not just as the adult Lauren, but as a teenage Lauren. She is able to see her mother as a whole person and not just the role of the mother through her journals. The journals reveal Lauren's private thoughts, hopes, fears, and dreams. Butler uses the journals to prove that once written, private thoughts become powerful agents for change when they become public.

5.2 Conclusion: Journaling for Harvest

Seize Change,
Use it.
Adapt and grow.
-Lauren Olamina-Bankole

The Black community has recognized that the changes that must happen for the betterment of the community will not happen in a single generation. Slavery embedded racism too deeply for the roots to be pulled quickly and cleanly. Therefore, writing has been used to pass the baton to the next generations. Each generation gives the next a push or a nudge to move the community's agenda forward. Butler clearly holds the view that

through reading and writing, each generation influences the next to fight for the change we wish to see in the world.

Butler's fictional writing, alongside the academic writing of Henry Louis Gates, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and others, empowers the Black community to continue the fight for change. In seeing "what could be" in the fiction of Butler, N.K. Jemison, and others, younger generations are given a glimpse, a mere hint, at what the world could be like if there was true racial equality. As each scholar and novelist writes, they influence the community to strive for "what could be" while also addressing "what is." Butler is clearly situating herself within the Black community's tradition. Scholars read and formulate ideas that are passed far beyond academic circles. In turn, new scholars are influenced, not in the ivory tower, but in the hair salons, barber shops, churches, and recreation centers of the community. When young Black people become scholars and writers, as Butler recognizes, they will then influence the community by formulating new ideas for the betterment of the community.

Butler depicts that cycle in *Parable of the Talents*. She shows that even though Larkin and Lauren only meet a handful of times after Larkin is an adult, Larkin can learn her mother through the words she writes. It should be noted, however, that the words are up for interpretation by the reader. As any English K-12 student, undergraduate, or graduate knows, how the words are viewed is up to the perceptions and biases of the reader. Ideas can and are discarded and replaced by new ideas. It is a perpetual cycle of growth of knowledge and change.

The use of the journals in Butler's Earthseed series gives voice to a young girl who will become a powerful leader. Butler's glaring warning about the possible future is

evident and at the same time, she gives hope from the mind of a young Black disable girl. In this, Butler reminds us that the young people are the generation to take use into the future, into the promised land. She also depicts the connections between the past to our present situations and how the present can alter to a better future. Butler's Afrofuturist novels truly demonstrate that regardless of the circumstances, Black women will, as Maya Angelou stated will rise…

> Out of the huts of history's shame
> I rise
> Up from a past that's rooted in pain
> I rise
> I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
> Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
>
> Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
> I rise
> Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
> I rise
> Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
> I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
> I rise
> I rise
> I rise. (Angelou)

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