

**Utopian Narratives in Speculative Fiction:**  
*Angels in America, Parable of the Sower, and the Practice of*  
**Resistance in Writing and Theatre**

A Thesis in English Literature

By

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the popular texts *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, and investigates how they create utopias. Because both texts center respectively queer and Black voices, the belief systems of ACT UP and womanism are utilized to examine the interplay between fictional worlds and characters and real-world resistance. Through examining the direct actions of ACT UP and the tenets of womanism, this thesis establishes the ways that *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower* utilize engage with ideas of real-world resistance and temporality to create utopias. Through a focus on leadership, religion, and perspective, these narratives engage large audiences in an active, radical, and intersectional conversation, highlighting key beliefs from ACT UP and womanism, and directly opposing hegemony in lieu of a more accepting, utopic society. The texts' utilization of both real-world issues and speculation about the future roots them directly within a fraction of the practice of resistance as they have developed in America has led to the continued reference to these texts in both popular culture and academic spaces. Through an examination of both the temporality and history and the literary and rhetorical devices used in the texts, this thesis studies the way that Kushner and Butler imagined utopias in 1993, and how and why those utopias still impact us today.

## Introduction

The narratives of both *Angels in America* and *The Parable of the Sower* contain not only visceral and detailed narratives of marginalized individuals, but also present a practice of resistance rooted in, inspired by, and continuing the work of the real-world efforts presented by queer people and people of color. Today, their relationship with temporality and history is complicated and strengthened by the time that has passed since the release of the texts, and the discourse between the inherent presence of both works and audiences today demonstrates the complication that grassroots resistance through the forms of literature and theatre bring about. Both texts provide an accessible and holistic framework and entrance into the practice of resistance. In doing so, they resist a hegemonic and prescriptive ideology of identity, while continuing in a relationship with their respective histories, frictions, and presumptive utopias.

Beginning in 1848, feminism as a movement was addressing inequalities in the social sphere and workplace for women. First-wave feminism refers to the push for women's right to vote, and second-wave feminism, beginning in 1963, began an acknowledgement of more specific oppressions on women, such as workplace and educational inequalities. As a response to second-wave feminism, Black feminism then emerged, centering the liberation of Black women from power structures. As a response to the second-wave and Black feminist movements of the 1970s emerged an organized movement called womanism, based on principles that had long been held by people around the world about the intersectionality and interconnectedness of social issues. The term "womanism" was first coined by writer Alice Walker in her collection of short stories, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, and though it first was a simple word used to explore a literary idea, it was later claimed by what came to be known as the womanist

movement. Womanism was created as a response to second-wave feminism as well as Black feminism to center the specific plights of women of color. Instead of focusing, for example, mainly on the issues being faced by middle-class white women, womanism aimed to address the particular social and economic inequalities that women of color face, with the end goal of equity for all. While the movement emerged as a way of addressing the fracturing of the feminist community under scrutiny and difficulties with inequity within the movement for Black women specifically, a deeper exploration into what it means to have freedom for Black women becomes a productive lens through which to look at the embrace of identity for all marginalized people, as discussed by Layli Phillips in *The Womanist Reader*, which I will engage with further later. It is crucial and central that womanism emerges from and for the protection of Black womanhood, and though part of this particular construction of resistance means holistic freedom of identity for all, the focus of womanism remains Black women. *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower*, contextualized next to the groups that highlight the particularities of friction within resistance in these contexts, provide excellent examples of utopian construction through fiction in the late 20th century.

*Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower* continue, complicate, strengthen, and diversify resistance as it was seen, experienced, and interacted with in the time in their unique ways. The vision of utopia and connection with history that is established and played with so masterfully in both pieces propel social thought and action by playing with the dynamics between audience, inner life, religion, and the grounded conversations happening in the real world. The theatrical and literary forms provide a unique way for audiences to interact with political and scholarly conversations centered around marginalized groups and oppressive systems. Butler's novel, written in the first person and in the format of journal entries, gives

insight into the becoming of a young Black woman in a world crumbling by the day. Lauren's tenacity and maturity regarding the state of the world manifest themselves into a religion that is focused on change and the betterment of the communities that it surrounds, and her hyperempathy, or the condition of sharing the pain and pleasure of those she sees, allows an insight into the wide-spread pain experienced by the world. Lauren's first journal entry happens in the year 2024, just two years prior to when I am writing this, and describes the fires raging across Los Angeles, which is eerily similar to the fires that destroyed Los Angeles County in 2025. *Angels in America*, though it is set in the 1980s, is still often performed today and remains relevant within its discussions of humanity and marginalization. Good literature and writing can provide a nuanced, ever-green, and actionable practice of resistance that contributes to the progress of social movements and not only reaches the world and audience in a new way, but complicates the arguments of the movements in individual ways.

There are many different texts that could be used to look at the ways in which movement politics are explored through fiction and utopia. I have chosen the particular texts of *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower* for, besides the aforementioned utopia and the intake and reimagining of social action, because their place in the larger pop culture frameworks, the movements that they emerge during and are influenced by, and how they are talked about and read/performed today. Both texts emerge out of their own unique movements, with hundreds of years of rich history and resistance to the oppressive and hegemonic power structures of society (and where I'm focusing, particularly America). However, they also have key touchpoints that make them particularly interesting to look at in tandem. Both texts explore spirituality in both conventional and unconventional ways, and contextualize both the resistance to and reliance on religion to emphasize and explore experience and relation with other groups. *Parable of the*

*Sower* and *Angels in America* were also both released in 1993, placing them in a very specific time within the large tapestry of movement politics in the late 20th century. In looking at these texts side by side, the theoretical frameworks I've identified are key to intertwining and informing my looks into both of the texts. Examining both side by side reveals the multiplicity within the act of resistance; there are many ways to create utopias and examine temporality and morality in fiction, but any small piece of these larger movements will hold their own friction, contradictions, and conversations that open up a larger discourse about resistance through speculative fiction.

In pursuing this line of discourse, I hope to contribute to a broader understanding of and conversation surrounding literature, theatre, and writing in general as it pertains to social movements and action. In examining these texts, I am not seeking to reinterpret *Angels in America* or *Parable of the Sower*, but am rather looking to investigate their public appeal and subsequent interactions with broader theoretical ideas and concepts about presence, utopia, history, and the common good. In viewing these texts as products of their time and respective historical and political conversations and influences on the conversations that follow them, I aim to explore how these particular examples of literature and theatre are especially discursive, emotional, and foundational in bringing social issues to a broader audience. Though I am framing each of the texts' interactions with vastly different movements and conversations (queer rights/ACT UP and womanism respectively), a key similarity between the texts is their relationship with an adoption of friction. In establishing ideologies as typically rigid in nature, I bring in central issues faced by the protagonists of each text that are predicated by the rejection of stagnance and the embrace of change. Although the texts are accomplishing similar feats within their respective movements, the remainder of this writing will be dedicated to showing the

individual and unique ways in which queer and Black people interact with their histories and contribute to their futures.

Alongside discourse regarding marginalized groups in their relationship to temporality and utopia, I situate these seminal works of fiction as potent and affecting contributions to the issues that they are individually discussing. A piece of the uniqueness of the womanism movement was its work towards an intersectional and boundariless approach to empowerment, and this is not only echoed, but complicated and enhanced by the narrative, structure, and insight of *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler. Over the course of the 20th century the queer rights movement fought against the marginalization of members of the queer community, and the AIDS epidemic of the 80s brought much of the difficulties faced by this group to the forefront of the world's mind. In the surge of media-centric resistance to the disease came a theatricality and physical presence to the gay rights movement, centering around the organization ACT UP- The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Key to understanding how ACT UP played a role in the queer rights movement as a whole is understanding their emphasis on direct action and the address of issues regarding healthcare. In practice, the organization lacked some of the intersectionality and scope that it could have attained, through not addressing the comparatively larger impediments that particularly Black people had in combatting the epidemic, as Chandra Ford explores in her research on research disparities in the HIV/AIDS crisis. Though stigma surrounding AIDS exacerbated the marginalization of queer people and particularly queer people of color, texts such as *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner gave a wide-spread and intriguing insight into the humanity of those affected by the epidemic, exercising a practice of resistance that goes hand in hand with the theatricality of ACT UP and has remained poignant through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Utopia within both the real world and within the literary and theatrical fields is a form often used to find a world away or free from the horrors of the world. Ruth Levitas, in her book *The Concept of Utopia*, defines utopia as it is perceived within the late 20th and early 21st centuries as “about how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that” (1). In short, utopias have come to mean a vision of a world that people, generally, can live in in happiness and comfort. Levitas identifies the fact that utopias have been, and perhaps continue to be, viewed as escapist and nonsensical. While the idea of utopia necessitates removal from the current moment, I would like to establish that utopias specifically within the context of the texts and social movements that I am writing about are key to understanding the hopes and ideals of a group, and in turn, the change they hope to achieve in a society as well as a fully realized version of themselves. A utopia does not always refer to an otherworldly or fantastical notion; instead, I will be leaning into the social and political forms of utopias, ones that are centered around an ideal or idealized future for a group of people. Applying this definition of utopia to *Angels in America* and *The Parable of the Sower*, I will point out the ways in which the concept functions within the texts to not only create an ideal world for the marginalized groups represented, but the ways in which the authors and stories utilize the exploration of utopias as a tool to connect with their audiences and the social and political conversations that they live alongside.

In what ways, then, do *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower* imagine political and social utopias? In looking at these texts and the secondary theoretical sources that I’ve identified as helpful in investigating the construction of utopia, temporality, and social resistance, a key central tenet emerges: intersectionality. Scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw both introduced and developed the concept of intersectionality, using the investigation of Black women’s erasure

from multi-dimensionality through the wide-spread use of single-dimension analysis of existence as a starting point. In examining the many ways in which Black women are marginalized, Crenshaw points out how many of these elements overlap and intersect, creating a larger and more full understanding of the experience of Black womanhood. This intersectionality, or overlap between marginalized identities, encourages the exploration of how oppressive structures interact with each other (Crenshaw 139). Predicated on Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality, *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower* imagine a political utopia that not only addresses marginalization and oppressive histories as they affect the present moment, but also one that acknowledges human flaws and looks to an alternative. Each of the authors examines the plight of their central characters through an intersectional lens, acknowledging each of their multiple identities and associations in conjunction with the issues that they are experiencing. By creating a baseline that acknowledges the multiplicity of marginalized and intersecting identities, the imagined future that then emerges is able to encapsulate a future that encompasses all, and problem solving that accommodates all.

In investigating these texts and looking at the ways in which they construct a world conducive to social action, the crossover between utopias and marginalized groups becomes central to understanding how the authors and texts are situating themselves in a social context. The inquiry into exploring a group, specifically a marginalized group, and looking at the ways in which they survive, exist, and persist centers partially around the resistance to the prescriptive and hegemonic structures that were especially prevalent at the time. Queer theorists Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz investigate what a resistance to prescriptive and heteronormative identity means for marginalized groups, and queer people in particular, through exploring and discussing how temporality impacts the existence of people within an oppressive structure. In

discussing this, they also each define what it means to be queer in a different way, and use the relationship to time as a way to investigate how a marginalizing social structure affects people's relationships with their identity. Both Edelman and Muñoz center the creation and cultivation of an authentically queer identity in different ways, but similarly pose the idea of heteronormative and prescriptive identity as in complete opposition to queerness. Edelman, in "The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive," structures his conception of resistance to prescribed identity as centered around the present moment and refocuses it on the multiplicity and complexity of the identity of queerness. His argument begs the queer person to live in a radical presentism that necessitates a rejection of heteronormativity. Within his argument, the heteronormative focus is on the ever-innocent child; their perceived symbol for the future as constructed by the ruling social class. He argues that the focus on the present actively takes the control away from this ruling class and gives it back to the queer and the marginalized. The conception of queerness living not within identity and social viability, but within the truth of the individual and their own personhood predicates the deconstruction of the perceived symbolic nature of the "child" to heteronormative society. By not pinning hope for the future on a product of heterosexual sex, queer people are inherently divorced from this way of living. Edelman, in turn, suggests a step away from this idealized version of the future and towards the here and now, where people can live freely as themselves with no regard for what might come next.

Muñoz, some years later, enters the theoretical conversation of queerness, temporality, and identity formation, and begins to engage with some of the ideas that Edelman presents. In Muñoz's book, "Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity," he works with Edelman's ideas and the larger conversation of a queer stepping away from heteronormativity, but instead makes the argument that queerness lives in the future. Specifically, he takes issue

with Edelman's use of the symbol of the child as the basis for heteronormative reproductive futurism. Muñoz argues that, though he still aims to resist the socially accepted cultural practice of the nuclear family, the children who are currently alive in the world, particularly queer black and brown children, are not afforded the luxury of getting to live freely in the here-and-now, as Edelman presents it. Again, this does not by any means mean that the two theorists were fully opposed; on a fundamental level, they are both writing in resistance to heteronormative familial structures, imposed identities, and hegemonic structures, but Muñoz chooses to engage with the spectrum of queerness and lived queer experience in the present, which is by no means ideal or even safe. In centering the person in his argument, he poses the idea of utopia and futurity as central to queerness. He writes that "queerness is not yet here" (1), and that in the effort to reach such a future, queer people must suspend themselves and find, through the joy and hardship of the present, the construction of a happier future, one that he finds most examples for through art.

Using the tenants central to womanism and Edelman and Muñoz's explorations of queerness, I will explore not only the way that these conversations become a part of and central to *Parable of the Sower* and *Angels in America* respectively, but will also use a look into the friction of these real-life movements through the lenses of the texts. Both Butler and Kushner explore the humanity of the tension implicit in real life movements, and take a deeper dive into the conversations that the ideologies and frameworks associated with said movements sparked. Movement politics are often based in conversation and disagreement, and the conceptualization of utopia constructed by these authors creates an engaging frame through which to experience discord and the struggle to be "correct." Within the framework of womanism, there is direct conversation about ways in which other versions of feminism have fallen short and not been able to fully serve the people that they are trying to protect. In the context of ACT UP, which is a

direct-action focused group, there is conversation about the ways in which that group did or did not address the social, economic, and racial inequality that affected those suffering from AIDS. In embracing this inherently human aspect of resistance and exploring the reframing of well-meaning ideologies, the writers center the human experience and use this friction to create a strong relationship between the characters and their lives and the audience and the world that they are living in.

Butler's construction of America in *Parable of the Sower* explores a future of the country not yet seen by the people who were reading the novel at its time of release. She engages with history and temporality in several different ways, and brings together and blends the ideas of several different visions of utopia, the present, and resistance. Within her own practice as an author, Butler is actively engaging with the present and playing with the tenets of womanism, as well as finding ways to bend and open up the boundaries of Science Fiction as they were established at that time. Within the novel, Earthseed is the religion that springs up and becomes central to the arc of the story and the dissection of the characters within it. A key teaching of Earthseed is that "God is change," and seeing this teaching as central to the progression of the characters and the story opens up direct relations to the assertions made by both Edelman and Muñoz. On the one hand, the conception of interacting with God is brought very much into the present tense through Lauren, the novel's protagonist, and her interactions with religion. She directly opposes what she views to be a stagnant and passive view of religion, with a God coming in to fix things that are wrong and a human population left to wait and hope. Instead, Lauren frames her conception of God around change and the active participation in the present moment in order to engage with a model of active change for herself and her peers. Taking these ideas through the view of Edelman's politics of living in the here and now brings to light the

centrality of the self, personhood, and the dismantling of oppressive power structures within *Parable of the Sower*, and further strengthens the presence of Lauren's rhetorical engagement with the concept of religion.

Simultaneously, however, Lauren is building a framework that is actively working towards a physical and social utopian state for all of those who she brings into her social circle. *Earthseed*, in all of its presence, also is, at its center, a work in progress and an active journey towards a hypothetical, ideal situation; a utopia. Central to everything that she is figuring out is Lauren's adherence to the concept of changing and growing into a utopia that will fit her and her peers' needs the best; she writes that "clarity and truth will be plenty, if only I can achieve them" (125). In her journey to find this utopia, she must blend a recognition of the present with the knowledge that there is, indeed, a better future out there for her. Muñoz's utopia centers around the idea of creating a better future for those suffering on the margins today, and for those who fall to the outskirts of the protections put in place for the wellbeing of the elites. Lauren similarly centers the building of a better future for her followers, but instead of focusing on art as finding glimpses of utopia like Muñoz, she finds her glimpses of utopia within the relationships that she builds with her followers, and specifically, the promise of a better future for the children of the group. In this way, Butler blends ideas of futurity and presence into a vehicle for the exploration of the marginalized and forgotten, and using the definitions and conceptions of living through marginalization presented by both Edelman and Muñoz, weaves a prescient and compelling addition to the canons of Science Fiction, speculative fiction, womanism, and groups writing from the margins; a product not only of its time but deeply relevant in the continued fight against oppression and marginalization.

Kushner, in *Angels in America*, discusses utopia, history, and temporality in not only a fantastical and otherworldly way, but also within the context of an ever-evolving and socially-centered practice of resistance, which is where I will be focusing. Similarly to Butler, Kushner centers the rejection of the notion of a static and “perfect” utopia within his writing, instead constructing and discussing a fluid, ever-changing, and human-centered one. Inherent in anything that is being performed live in front of an audience is presence, and therefore, *Angels in America* lives in a presence that not many pieces of writing can claim. Although many pieces of theatre do this, the way in which *Angels* interacts with the audience and with political conversations happening at the time brings a somewhat unique and important aspect of presence to it. Kushner also begins with a strong foundation in the history of the Jewish identity; not only that, but continues to be in conversation with physicality and the relationship to the past throughout the story. In the very first scene of the show, a Rabbi preaches after an old woman’s death, “How we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up here, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America..... no such place exists” (Kushner 10). The discussion of place, belonging, and history alongside each other blends the conceptions of here-and-now and a social utopia for the blend of people in marginalized communities. Kushner uses a blend of outlooks on queerness, utopia, and the here-and-now to construct a discursive and poignant piece of the social and political landscape in the 1990s. Further, his writing continues to live on as a reminder of humanity and what queer people of all types have always been pushing for; a safe place to live in the now, and a better future for all.

In engaging with history and the past in the way that I have been and will continue to do, it is important to establish a relationship with what the past may mean to any particular group of

people. For black and brown people and queer people in *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower*, is a relationship with the traumas of the past necessary? Is it possible to disregard a troubled history in favor of a better, fuller utopic future? To understand a relationship, or lack thereof, with history in this way, I utilize Heather Love's introduction to *Feeling Backwards*, which is writing on the conception of queer identity and the erasure of the past. In her synthesization of the way that queerness has been studied in the past, she writes

A central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence. Oppositional criticism opposes not only existing structures of power but also the very history that gives it meaning.... Critics find themselves in an odd position: we are not sure if we should explore the link between homosexuality and loss or set about proving that it does not exist (1).

Love identifies, in a more theoretical sense, the balance that I am investigating within *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower*. Where she finds to be a useful balance between past and present is what I have found most helpful to use in my conception of how these groups use their literary, rhetorical, and theatrical devices to synthesize and complicate social patterns and discussions. Additionally, the key question that she raises above, regarding the link between homosexuality and loss, predicates my own wonderings about the ways in which these groups are able to move forward after the traumas of the past. Love engages with several seminal queer authors alongside key historical times in queer history to investigate how these authors and others might and, perhaps, should engage with the past in order to retain a clearer picture of the subjectivity of the body and experience.

Positive affect in recent queer media, to Love, is a result of a move away from melancholia in queer media. Though positive affect towards queerness is a way to bring together

those with a shared experience, Love argues that “we need to pursue a fuller engagement with negative affects and with the intransigent difficulties of making feeling the basis for politics” (14). Here, a clear connection between what Love calls “negative affect” as a key tool for social change and history as an integral piece of that negative affect for marginalized groups appears. This makes Love’s ideas about the negative (partially equated to history) and positive (partially equated to change or present social action) a key framework with which to examine these writings’ interactions with and utilizations of history, the here-and-now, and utopia as a tool for social change. In engaging in the negative historical aspects of queer people, a more truthful and fulfilling present can be explored. Understanding the fullness of love, loss, and resistance that has made up the deep history of queer marginalization and existence encourages a more fully embodied present can be found. Love emphasizes the many layers of queer and marginalized existence in general, and encourages a resistance more complex than painting that existence as either positive or negative. In accepting that past, Love urges us to “engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (1). Kushner and Butler both take these ideas one step further in engaging with the past and reworking it into individual frameworks and lenses with which to improve both the present and the future.

Alice Walker was the first to use the word “womanism” in her 1983 anthology of short stories called *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, where she writes, "The wife has never viewed herself as a feminist—although she is, in fact, a ‘womanist.’ A ‘womanist’ can be seen as a feminist, but one that is more common.” From there, pushback on the pitfalls of second-wave feminism and Black feminism coalesced into womanism as a movement centering the freedom of Black women. Expanding on this initial concept of womanism, author Layli Phillips notes in her preface to *The Womanist Reader* that "the combination of the words

‘woman’ and ‘common’ at the intersection of ‘feminist/not feminist’ placed a specific way of women’s resistance firmly within the context of the ‘everyday,’ thus challenging both academic and ideological assertions regarding the definition, categorization, and detailing of women’s resistance efforts solely under the narrow designation of ‘feminist’ (xix-xx). Phillips’ definition of womanism centers around the idea that Black women must survive and be treated with equal respect to everyone else. Under this premise in the society that we live in, everyone must be raised to equality, leaving no one behind. The common good becomes central in this worldview, and the activity of claiming the identity of womanism brings a presence to the movement.

To claim the womanist identity, one must associate oneself with it and abide by the common good through the liberation of Black women; “womanism is an ethnically and culturally situated (although not bounded) perspective that does not seek to negate difference through transcending it” (Phillips xxi). Instead, Phillips identifies the central ideas of womanism around a harmonization of culture and personhood, and welcoming all who would benefit from it into the fold. Importantly, the concept of womanism is not necessarily a single, homogenous idea. Rather, it is an ever-changing source of discussion, reflection, and revision, led by people and discussion. While this framework is incredibly helpful when trying to parse through the intricacies of heteronormative and hegemonic rhetoric, it is particularly potent in its interaction with Butler’s writing of Lauren. Difference and tension drive the relationships in *Parable of the Sower*, and the ideology that springs from it intertwines itself with womanism in poignant and fruitful ways. In examining the tension between the history of these characters and the futures and presents that they desire to build, a practice of existence and resistance emerges.

Both *Parable of the Sower* and *Angels in America* were not only incredibly intertwined with the social and intellectual movements happening in the 1990s, but are also incredibly

relevant today. *Angels in America*'s subtitle, for example, is *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. Not only is this a play discussing the AIDS crisis, but this is a play interrogating the human experience of suffering and the slightly less wide-spread but nonetheless potent experience of marginalization. Even during the AIDS crisis, the first half of the play was lauded by one of the most brutal theatre critics on the East coast, Frank Rich. He identifies it as a poignant look into Reaganite politics and the AIDS crisis (Rich par. 3), even though the AIDS crisis was only partway through at the time when Rich was writing about this play. *Angels in America* has been talked about similarly for years, and continues to be today. Just in March of 2026, PBS published an article discussing the longevity and relevance of the play today, and the way that it continues to speak to audiences from many walks of life. Regardless of a person's experience with loss, the AIDS crisis, or queerness, anyone can walk into the theatre and watch the story of Prior and the Continental Principalities. Disregarding that basic fact of theatre, *Angels in America* addresses a wide array of groups and people and appeals to many sensibilities. In particular, the religions of Judaism and Mormonism are explored in the play, therefore exploring a wide array of stories and bringing in people from all walks of life. That is not to say that the play does not face backlash; while it certainly doesn't quite as much as it did during its initial publication and run, the present attacks on trans people, HIV funding, and more prove to strengthen the relevance and importance of this work today. Part of what makes this play work so well, according to Ross Haarstad (a professional who is currently directing this play), is that it is "people with very different backgrounds who crash together in New York City," where "It's not a melting pot— [because] nothing ever melted" (Snyder par. 10). The "national themes" talked about in the play are not a homogenized version of the queer rights movements happening in the 80s; they are a swirl of

conflicting thoughts and ideas, and the push for human decency towards all, which Kushner not only highlights in his dialogue, but also in his setting and theme.

Though it did not reach the bestseller list until 27 years after it was published, in 2020, *Parable of the Sower* has thoroughly woven its way into both social and scholarly circles over the years. From the moment it was released, critics saw the connection of Butler's work with the coming of the new millennium (Gerald par. 2). It is no new phenomenon to be nervous about a coming century; even the turn into the century of 1000 likely also brought along fears regarding mortality and the state of the world. Anxieties about changes in health, the world, and the climate have and likely will continue to be exacerbated at times of large change within the world, as discussed in an article synthesizing some of the anxiety from the past millenium (Michel 4). Central to these fears are the idea of a second coming of Jesus. The concept that the world could be overturned in a second, and that everyone could face their judgement day terrified people. Although many of these fears centered around technology and the perceived difficulty with digitally representing the year 2000, they are indicative of larger anxieties about the future and the changing of the world.

Butler, in her speculative and Science Fiction take on the matter, brings into her writing many themes that speak not only to the political landscape of the time, but also the fears and uncertainty held by the world. Not only did the 1990s see an intense amount of change and marginalization for people of color brought about by the Reagan administration, but fears about otherworldly or godly interventions brought to light the general instability that people were seeing politically and socially. Butler keenly uses these current fears and events to inform and fuel her discussion of the future; what will happen if, in her opinion, the world continues to degrade at this rate? What does the hoarding of resources and ideas look like in a society that has

all but fallen fully apart? How will people continue on after seemingly everyone, from political figures to God, has abandoned them? In her investigation of religion and intersectionality, womanism ties all of these elements together to create a terrifying and poignant view of the future.

What world, then, can a marginalized queer or Black person expect to live in? Does being marginalized mean that one must suffer through grief and pain beyond measure just to be able to ground oneself in the importance of what it means to be a part of a certain group? Marginalized existence and resistance looks incredibly different for queer people versus for Black people, but both groups resist different difficulties in ways that can be related to each other, and, in some instances, are quite similar to each other. In studies of queerness and queer theory, which can also be to many (not all) marginalized identities and marginalizing structures, the holistic and intersectional view of self and collectivity is necessary in constructing an adequate and encompassing understanding of social conversation and resistance. The practice of living as a person in these groups, however, is the entire reason why resistance is needed in the first place. The act of resistance, the art of education, and the willingness to explore and dissect the traumas of the past are all stones in the path that leads to collectivity, conversation, and a better future.

Within the unique format of theatre, I would be remiss to not touch upon the singularity of the theatrical experience as it pertains to social action and movement. Predicated on a solid construction of ideas, vision, and the plethora of other elements (including physical ones) that collectively create “good” theatre, there is a hopefulness and volume that can fill the people in an audience; the hope for a better world, and the creation of such emotional moments that we get to see all together. This is constructed not only through the text being performed, but is enhanced and becomes visceral and specific within the design, casting, and specific vision of the creative

team. In experiencing all of these emotions and this grasp as a more fully realized emotional future, a group becomes eternal in its brief, important, and easily forgotten hope. Those who have connected with plays or any work on a stage long to again experience moments such as these, and therefore return to the theatre again and again in search of this collective force that pushes us to think more deeply about our lives and the space that we share with others. This definition, however, is non-specific and esoteric, and devoid of tangible evidence of utopia. How, then, can we identify the specifics of what brings a certain feeling out in a group of people? *Angels in America* provides a prime example of not only the unifying aspects of theatre, but of the prowess with which Tony Kushner is able to explore identity and collective identity in the same breath.

Successful live theatre, specifically *Angels in America*, takes a real, physical space (the building of the theater) and simultaneously morphs it into a vision of utopia and an active push against commonly held beliefs. Over the years, the show has found its home in theatres across the globe, including the Walter Kerr Theatre, the National Theatre, and the Neil Simon Theatre, bringing new audiences, histories, and layouts to the writing. Theatre is a radical way of sharing and resistance because it allows us to explore, with separation from reality, the experiences that certain groups of people have and share them with the larger population, bringing an intimacy and way into real feelings and experiences through a live and visceral experience as part of (what must be accepted as) a slightly fictional experience and practice. Casting is a particularly potent way that the production communicates with an audience. Not only is this emphasized by the way that Kushner writes characters to be played across genders and experiences, but in the ways that each actor might embody a certain character. Prior, for instance, may appeal to different facets of the character when played by Stephen Spinella versus Andrew Garfield. At the same time, a

theatrical group can hone and cultivate an idea to be framed a certain way to the audience; although no reaction can ever be guaranteed, one could push an audience towards being more sympathetic to a character than they would normally be based on the presentation and framing of their motives, gestures, and general demeanor.

The embodiment of theatre plays another role in resistance: to speak as language between a group of individuals with a similar or shared identity, and to bring a broader understanding of this identity to a wider variety of people. Jill Dolan again has words that strengthen this idea: “theater and performance offer a place to scrutinize public meanings, but also to embody and, even if through fantasy, enact the affective possibilities of “doings” that gesture toward a much better world” (18). The theatre does not automatically attain these goals, though. The essence of theatre is not a guarantee of doing, of being, or of affecting any sort of indication of a better world. This takes purposeful and thoughtful consideration and writing, which is the first step on the way to a piece of theatre that offers up hope to a population. Using Dolan’s ideas as a stepping stone, there is revealed a deep exploration of the self and relationship that paves the way for an audience to work towards personal and societal peace and understanding in *Angels in America*.

Kushner and Butler both are keenly aware of the point in history in which they are writing their poignant and at times utopian stories. History, context, and hegemonic rhetoric in relation to marginalized existence are key to understanding the ways in which these writings were informed by the backdrop of their time and the conversations that were going on around and within them, as well as the way that these stories fueled and encouraged a broad audience to interact with what had typically been worldly conversations in a more digestible way. This is not to say that those conversations are not academic in any way, but to show the widened

accessibility of these conversations. Inspired by and building upon the discussions presented by Edelman, Munoz, Love, and Phillips on womanism, I will be exploring the intricacies of *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower*, and the elements and context that has made them such individual and powerful pieces of social writing. This discussion will particularly utilize the discussions of opposing oppressive power structures, the here-and-now, and utopia fleshed out by Edelman and Munoz, the conception of history and presence as it is seen by Love, and womanism as a larger framework for understanding true intersectionality and liberation through a Black-led lens. Both of these pieces of writing claim an active, radical, and intersectional place in their movements, in addition to stimulating thought and conversations about history and temporality that strengthen their discursive and emotional power.

## Chapter 1: Collective Identity, Leadership, and Religion in Utopian Fiction

Identity, as it has been constructed over the course of history, is a tool held by the dominant social class used to “other” those who they felt were lesser than themselves. The queer and black communities, in their history with enforced identity and hegemony in society, have a unique, polythetic, and complex relationship with not only the history of America, but their own history and relationship to identity. In particular, I feel that *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler and *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner engage with my definition of political utopia, temporality, and social thought in a way that centers history, friction, and action. Both of these authors and their writings have remained culturally significant and relevant in the over 30 years since they have been released, and are important texts to the queer and black feminist canons, as well as pillars of culture in the literary and theatrical worlds. Both texts raise important questions about the relationship between marginalized communities and history, and both employ utopian and dystopian narratives and settings to achieve this goal. In particular, a close reading of the way that the texts interact with the ACT UP and womanism movements reveals the ways in which these texts build off of and complicate social movement and thought. As mentioned before, knowing the history of such groups is key to understanding them and their utopias. Tony Kushner centers *Angels in America* on a search for and haunting by history; ancestors leaving behind their memory, angels looking to standardize the coming of the future, ghosts coming back to haunt the people of today. Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* positions itself as a potential of the horrors to come in the world, and squarely places pressure on the familiar racially-motivated, class-oriented, and hierarchical ways of America, while simultaneously resisting that vision and creating a utopia amidst the chaos.

Social movements, here in particular ACT UP and womanism, and their associated art make attempts at finding a truth or ideality within life as we live it, and grasp at what could be a better world. Queer theorists Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz engage the idea of temporality and attempt to break down the queer experience and queer identity in their own ways, as an opposition to hegemonic rhetoric. Edelman, in “The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive,” identifies a heteronormative focus on the ever-innocent child as the perceived symbol for the future as defined by the ruling social class. For Edelman, this model of identity becomes a subject of the institutions and organizations it is a part of, and is depersonalized not only because queer identity as it has been constructed falls outside of these institutions, but because meaning is placed in only an idealized version of the future that is separated from the individual. For Edelman, a politics concerned primarily with social viability comes from the want to survive, the want to reproduce, and in the act of planning for the future. While he also takes issue with this as a way of living, Edelman points out that queer identity, as perceived by the public, falls inherently outside of this constructed ideal. In response to this politics of futurity, Edelman calls for a radical embrace of the queer “negativity” that resists the future-focused idealism that the child has come to symbolize. His is a model resistant to reproductive futurism for the sake of a more radically present here-and-now characterized by an aesthetic that might even embrace the death drive.

Muñoz engages in conversation with the ideas presented in Edelman’s writing with his own; “Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.” While their theses seem opposed, with one advocating for a practice of queerness that lives in the present and the other looking at politics, engagement, and the queer want for a world free from imposed identities and familial structures, both theorists resist the socially accepted cultural practice of the nuclear

family, and the inherently heterosexual hegemonic identity and family politics. In Muñoz's reaction to Edelman, however, he takes a more holistic and, funnily enough, presently engaged stance on identifying queerness. He critiques the idealized portrayal of the "child" that Edelman poses as the epitome of heteronormative innocence with the argument that queer children, specifically queer children of color, are not typically afforded the innocence of childhood. In positioning queer identity against the heteronormative and idealized perceived innocence of children, the idea of the present proposed by Edelman begins to falter, through not looking at the spectrum of the living queer community itself in any given moment. To Muñoz, queerness lives within the knowledge of the disproportionate freedom and joy in the present, and the subsequent construction of a freer, happier future, mostly through aesthetics and art.

The stakes of these theories and conversations become visible in two core texts of the late 20th century; *The Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler and *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner. Both writings display aspects of Muñoz's utopian logic as well as Edelman's radical presentism. Both are narratives by authors who are a part of marginalized groups that engage with utopic and dystopic ideas, as well as play with the practice and struggle of identifying oneself within a time of struggle. Central characters to the texts are not only discussing, parsing through, and exploring their own humanity through struggle, utopias, and hope, but are actively living within and resisting an identity-driven society. Written by authors struggling with the same plights in real life, the central characters of both texts embody a small sliver of a picture of how marginalized individuals identify with themselves and groups around them in 1993. The texts are not only concerned with individuality; they are also concerned with collective identity and how it interplays with individuality and resistance. While theorists such as Edelman and Muñoz can be perceived as resistant to this type of grouping, I argue that individual identities and collective

identities, when constructed in an anti-individualist, utopic, and present way, are not only able to exist simultaneously, but are necessary to creating the utopia that Muñoz talks about.

As the discourse around Edelman and Muñoz as well as around queerness and self-identification have shifted and developed, these texts have stayed relevant in assessing the issues presented in the texts and continue to bring to light the nuances of the conversation that they engaged in. Both of these texts were exciting and invited semi-mainstream conversation and commentary on their respective issues in the time they were released, but have also stayed relevant and studied texts, changing and developing their related conversations and interpretations along with the times, as discussed earlier in tandem with journalists Rich and Jonas' notes on Kushner and Butler's work respectively. The writings of both Edelman and Muñoz provide a theoretical and related framework through which to explore *Parable of the Sower* and *Angels in America* (which I also consider key to discussing the theories that I am discussing). Edelman and Muñoz's discussion of queerness and temporality is complicated by both of the texts through their respective representations of time as well as their evolving relevance to the cultural queer and black zeitgeists, specifically pertaining to ACT UP and womanism.

### ***Angels in America* and otherness**

Every character in *Angels in America* is plagued by their "otherness." For one reason or another, each of them are on the outskirts of society, not taken seriously by others, or are hiding crucial parts of themselves. Harper, wife of closeted homosexual Joe, embodies this on every level, from her interactions with the general populace to her interactions with her own husband. Though Prior is the prophet of the plot and the Angels of the Continental Principalities, Harper's

characterization, through dream-like monologues and large scale musings about the state of the world, establishes her as a sort of prophet as well, only for the audience reading or watching the play instead of the characters within it. As a member of the Mormon religion, Harper has a lot of boxes to fit into, being a good wife, woman, and potentially mother under the scrutiny of the church. Joe also provides a set of goals which are understandably high for anyone. Harper's life and marriage are set up with a fixed utopia in mind, and she must live her life in this specific way for her to be able to attain this utopia. However, she falters under this pressure, and turns to Valium to keep her sane. In her intoxicated state, however, she enters, as a character and as a person, a new plane of existence, one wherein she complicates the idea of utopia and dystopia as the characters around her and the audience see it. Harper battles ideas of the coming millennium, her own religion, and finding truth in her own sexuality; when Joe comes home from work one day, she informs him that "I heard on the radio how to give a blowjob... Then they went on to a program about holes in the ozone layer. Over Antarctica. Skin burns, birds go blind, icebergs melt. The world's coming to an end" (Kushner 27-28). She sees the world in its most stark form, where the people on earth are slowly destroying any chance that they might have to live fully in the future. The new millennium, in all of its perceived newness, has no promise to reinvigorate or begin again with a clean slate.

Harper's state here is oddly similar to Edelman's description of queerness. To use Edelman's ideas about queerness as a radical way of living in the here-and-now as a framework for sexuality as a whole gives a perspective on fulfillment and satisfaction for a person. Though Harper herself is not queer, her desire for a sexually fulfilling relationship with her husband is rooted in the same ideals that Edelman discusses. He asks the question, if not this, what? For Harper, the question is the same. If she does not have her connection with her husband, if she is

not fulfilled and enjoying herself, then what is there? As soon as she begins asking these questions, she delves into the tension between futurity and the here and now. Harper and Joe converse in language clearly used repeatedly between them throughout the years, and Harper, without someone to share it with, is forced into thinking about herself (and then, the world) on a larger scale. She longs for collectivity and connection with others in her world, and yet has none.

At the beginning of the play, her desperation and longing for a connection or small type of collective identity is strong; she is a Mormon living in New York City, and is isolated from the rest of her religious community. Regardless of whether her desire is to be a part of this community or not, Joe's ambition and need for validation from his superiors drags her along to parts of the world where she is placed at a disadvantage in connection with others; while he is moving up in the world, getting promotions, seeking soothing words from his superiors about his competence in his field, she is left at home, alone, to ponder and wallow away with no community to support her. When arguing to stay in New York, the argument that she comes up with is that she must finish repainting the bedroom. Joe retaliates by saying that she has been painting the bedroom for a year, and if they are moving, why does it matter anyways? The bedroom is not just the room that Harper is painting, but a representation of the fears and hopes that she has about her life and relationship with Joe. Their bedroom is constantly brought up by Harper, looking for a way to fulfil herself and live in the moment. The sexuality connected with the bedroom also falls alongside the idea of longevity, though that may seem contradictory. Harper plays with ideas of her own sexuality, of enjoyment for herself and Joe in the current moment, of enjoying where they are and exploring each other, but also has internalized the notion that sexuality is inherently connected to reproduction and the future (their potential children). Like the *Odyssey's* Penelope, she tries to delay the inevitable of a coming moment by

stretching out her domestic actions- the weaving of a shroud, the painting of the bedroom, both epitomes of care and love that extend far beyond their intended physical purposes. Harper resembles Penelope in this moment, but instead of the perfect, waiting, dedicated wife that Penelope is, Harper is waiting for a husband to journey back to her that will never fully be back. Joe, like Odysseus, is lost, but ultimately has love outside of his wife, and a secret that he is loath to tell her. In a desperate attempt to hold on to her femininity, position as a wife, and autonomy in her marriage, Harper attempts to drag out her project, and within that, continues to build her idea of a home in their current apartment.

The other characters are tied up in thinking about everything else about the world; Roy about politics and power, Prior about his illness and the disparity of the human race, Joe about his sexuality and relationship to religion, Louis about justifying his goodness to himself and those around him. Harper, even with much to worry about in her own personal life, is ostracized even further by taking on the affliction of the prophet; the outcast, the truth-teller, and the one who must be doubted by all of those around her. She acknowledges the ambiguous and esoteric fears and hopes about the new millennium, speaks them aloud, and puts words and meaning to the feelings that everyone has. In her relationship with the audience, she occupies a different space as well. On a base level, she gets the closest to breaking the fourth wall. She breaks away from the established rapport and consistency of the show's format, and, though high, hauntingly reveals that she believes the world is going to end. Though these moments might vary based on the directing choices being made, there is the potential to address the audience in the text.

Whether Harper directly addresses the audience sitting in front of her or just takes a break from the reality that she's living in within the show, the outcome is similar. Though the audience knows that she is not in her "right mind" in these moments, what she is saying becomes murky

and unclear, and occupies a space that is difficult to distinguish as “true” or “false” within the context of the show. She garners sympathy from the audience with her less-than-fortunate relationship with her gay husband, and her connections to potential motherhood gives her a softness and an empathy that can often be found by looking at a tragic relationship from the outside. We know, however, that she is still under the influence of drugs, so how do her prophetic visions make their way to the audience? She has unclear ideas of what utopia is in her mind; is it finding her sexuality and happiness within her marriage? Is it the attempt to build Zion? Is it finding a larger truth amidst the desolation of Earth?

Harper spends much of her time onstage wavering between her want for happiness and a future and the death drive within her. She has spent her life being told that she is always wrong, that she is damned to do things in a certain way, and that she is slipping past the ability that she has to bring herself back to anything good. Her own husband says about her “I know I married [Harper] because she... because I loved it that she was always wrong, always doing something wrong, like one step out of step” (Kushner 56). Even through her union with another person, she is expected to do the wrong thing, expected to act like the pill-popping housewife that she was planted to become. Her Mormonism and livelihood come into direct conflict here; both contain aspects of looking for a utopia in a future, saved world (Harper has this through the people surrounding her, particularly Joe and his mother), and of damnation and failing to gain a certain level of “goodness” in the world. From her perspective, she already cannot attain a perfect Mormon life and is doubted by all around her, but also sees catastrophe in the near future. She toes the line between a death drive in regards to the new millennium and the prospect of a life “well-lived” in the Mormon eyes. The Mormon religion provides a repressive state of being for Harper, while she still lives in longing for a utopia of the world.

The imagery of a seed is used, unsurprisingly, repeatedly throughout *Parable of the Sower*. As both a physical object and a representation of the metaphor of sowing in the novel, seeds bear a heavy weight, and connect further to the conversations about reproductive futurity and utopia with which both Edelman and Munoz are engaged. Munoz takes for example Andy Warhol's Coke Bottle, positing that "The quotidian act of sharing a Coke, consuming a common commodity with a beloved with whom one shares secret smiles, trumps fantastic moments in the history of art ... [this] is a present that is now squarely the past and in its queer relationality promises a future" (6). Through society's shared understanding of what Coca Cola is, we can anticipate a certain relationship with that item. Paired with the idea of sharing that with someone else, we construct a beautiful, fleeting moment within our mind that promises not only joy, but the sharing of an ephemeral and sweet moment with another. These same ideas can be applied to the seed as used by Butler. Lauren writes in her journal, of her newly blossoming religion, Earthseed, "I am Earthseed. Anyone can be. Someday, I think there will be a lot of us. And I think we'll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place" (78). Taking the seed in this moment as a container for much more than an object, like Warhol's Coke, brings a multiplicity and depth to what was once a simple object. A seed is not only a tiny item, one in a million or easily missed, but is an ephemeral object that holds the utopia of Lauren's dreams for a safe future in it. In her world of death, lack, and decay, seeds and plants are the livelihood of everyone in her town. When thieves ransack some of the houses in the town, the first focus is the fruit trees and what it means to them; "Our thieves didn't steal all that food because they were hungry. They stripped those trees— took everything they could" (Butler 70). The people living in this society know that the easiest way to take people down is to take their source of sustenance, nip their chance of survival in the bud. The fruit and vegetables growing in the backyards of each

family prosper much more than the families themselves; they have the potential to grow larger, to create energy and sustenance, while the families themselves are stuck in a world where they cannot leave their houses without fear for their lives. The greenery flourishes and grows in the sun, while the families themselves wither away, stagnant and desperate, within their houses.

Lauren's idea of the future is imbued with life and prosperity, and Earthseed brings with it an anticipatory longing for the world as it could be. To her, seeds bring life, literally and figuratively, and to center her praxis of improvement for the world around "seeding ourselves" away from a crashing and burning world centers utopia and futurity squarely in her life and story. Her use of the word "ourselves" in conjunction with replanting and seeding themselves is key as well; much like Munoz's study of Warhol's Coke bottle, Lauren is granting autonomy and individual freedoms to her potential or future followers by placing the act of moving away from death and destruction not in her own hands only, but in the hands of the collective. A seed is a symbol but also an inherently useful and functional object; there is a tension between the functionality and commonplace-ness and the promise and awe-inspiring potential of what a seed can provide for a group of people. Contrasted with this is Lauren's recognition that this place that she is in, the town of Robledo, is dying. She, among many of the people of the town, recognizes that there is little life or prosperity within their current living situation.

### ***The Parable of the Sower and otherness***

In a world plagued by the lack of so many things, the need to create, innovate, and lean on each other becomes central to survival, encouraging a stronger collective. Food, in their world, is equal to survival, and they must work together to keep themselves alive. The residents of Robledo know that, regardless of their feelings towards each other, they must protect each

other and help foster a sense of protection, or they will not survive. As new members are brought into the community, the only thing that they must know is that they depend on each other to survive (Butler 35). If someone is robbed, the rest of the town provides their homegrown and foraged food to help keep them alive. If someone's food is touched, it is akin to violating a sacred, holy temple. Food, in this context, becomes the epicenter of what it means to be a community and a collective; no future can be had if none of them are alive, and the recognition of that is what binds them together in a unit being forced to put their full trust in one another to survive. In this way, the circumstances of the world force the residents of Robledo to embody a piece of the presentism that Edelman presents to his audience. Their complete reliance on not only food, but on the generosity and continued competence from their neighbors forces them to gather around the element that makes them a community; the ephemeral and ever fleeting sustenance. While their gathering around this element of livelihood binds them in a safe, if begrudging at times, community, food and gardening on their own also represent a utopic future in the simplest sense; the seeds that are planted will grow into food in the future, sustaining and nourishing a life to be lived, hopefully outside of fear. Even after Lauren has left Robledo, the appearance of gardens is a symbol of hope. As she travels north to what she hopes will be freedom and a future, Lauren sees "small, ragged gardens— new plantings and remnants of summer vegetable gardens" (259). Though ragged, the plants bring a promise of a future, and a desire from the planters to live on and build a better tomorrow for themselves and their potential children.

Lauren sees more than a hope placed in the plants of the world, and looks to building a heaven on their fraught Earth. In her construction of Earthseed, she introduces to religion new ideas of temporality, bridging the gap between a here-and-now and utopia. Within each day that

she lives, she adds more to her ideas of what Earthseed is, she explores her beliefs and is building new ideas into her religion through her journaling. One of her large qualms with institutionalized religion as it is socially accepted in her town is its seeming lack of focus on people; by redirecting the core of religion and redefining what it means to reach a utopia, Lauren combines both idealities. As Lauren tells one of her soon-to-be followers, “my heaven exists, and you don’t have to die to reach it” (Butler 222). Her idea of utopia, or heaven, is still in the future, outside of the fraught reality in which she must fight for her livelihood on the daily, but at the same time transcends what the typical religious definition of utopia/heaven (something to be reached post-life and as a reward) and fashions instead life worth living in the real world. Earthseed, in its simultaneous presence and utopic state, is rooted in the reflection of the self and more importantly, change, and the acceptance of differences, contradictions, and development as a part of the natural human experience. Her grand ideas, however, come into conflict with the socialized norms of this post-apocalyptic town’s structures.

Lauren’s relationship between herself and the societally accepted ideas of the town can be directly related to the conversation between Edelman and Munoz regarding futurity and living in the here and now. In regards to politics, Edelman says;

“In opposing itself to the negativity of [the death] drive, [conventional politics] gives us history as the continuous staging of our dream of eventual self-realization by endlessly reconstructing, in the mirror of desire, what we take to be reality itself. And it does so without letting us acknowledge that the future, to which it persistently appeals, marks the impossible place of an Imaginary past exempt from the deferrals intrinsic to the operation of the signifying chain and projected ahead as the site at which being and meaning are joined as One” (10).

Desire, within Edelman’s construction of future and present, distracts us from living within the present moment; the promise of a better future, intrinsically linked to heteronormativity, renders

the act of living life as a radical, marginalized person fighting to self-identify (whether aware of this fact or not) impossible. We see this glorified and undeniably hegemonic and monolithic vision of the future that is posed by the dominant social class, and therefore have no space to explore the desires and wishes of our present selves. The residents of Robledo, in this analysis and comparison, then occupy a space that, in living through the destruction of the world, becomes eponymous with the idea of presence that Edelman discusses in a very literal way. In looking to the future, these people see little more than “rape, robbery, and now murder” (Butler 53) in their own future. The world is collapsing, and the safest way to live and survive is to focus on the present moment and the love and humanity that they find in this small town. In their constructed idea of the world, the singular way to oppose the death drive that is constantly impending doom over them is to prosper in the present home, family, and relationships as much as they can, ultimately, finding comfort within each other. Survival on the day to day becomes central, necessitating a life lived in the present. Within this, their futures both are and aren’t aligned with the concept of the dominant society; they are living in a forced here-and-now (deviation from this would surely mean death), but at the same time, their imposed future can contain little more than heterosexual procreation and homemaking.

Lauren, on the other hand, is the first and only one who breaks this constructed idea of safety through presence and the stability of comfort. In conversing with her best friend Joanne, who has just asked if there is anywhere one could possibly go outside Robledo, Lauren responds ““there might be,”” to which Joanne responds ““not if you don’t have money. Not if all you know how to do is take care of babies and cook” (Butler 53). The constructed safety of the town revolves around marrying to those around you, learning how to grow plants and construct safe structures, practicing how to use a gun and alert the town of impending danger. Although these

people are living for the present, there is a fatalism that comes through in this moment; Joanne thinks that regardless of how she interacts with the world, there is only one option for her, and there is no way for her to self-identify in the current state of society. Lauren thinks that “there might be” something else out there. She too experiences the human emotions of falling in love and wanting a future with someone, but is able to recognize that “if all I had to look forward to was marriage to him and babies and poverty that just keeps getting worse, I think I’d kill myself” (Butler 87-88). She is the only one to recognize the fragility of the small society that they live in, and cannot find holistic fulfillment or comfort in the idea of marrying a childhood sweetheart, having children, and living on in fear. She understands that living in the planned hegemonic town leads nowhere, and identifies a want to create a better world for herself. As she is leaving Robledo, Lauren toes the line and dances with both Edelman and Munoz; she is woken from the stupor of societal living and takes her way of living and survival into her own hands in an incredibly present way, but at the same time, is working towards building a physical utopia within the apocalypse. Lauren alone recognizes and is able to come to terms with the fact that Robledo, and the world as a whole, is dying, and it is time to start scattering their seeds elsewhere. In this way, she is falling into line with the idea that “hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naive but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present” (Munoz 12). Though the residents of the town see her as naive (directly after this conversation Joanne divulges to their parents that Lauren is looking for a way to leave), her persistence towards a future as well as Earthseed as a utopia, and the clash of these two ideologies, brings to a head the conversations about the relevance and utility of futurity and presence. Through the burning of her town and only safe haven, the constant attack from desperate people trying to scrape a living surrounding her, and

Lauren's persistent preaching about her ideals about religion, there is a melding of the need for survival and radical presence and the promise of a better, utopian future to live for.

What does futurity and presence have to do with *Parable of the Sower*, and how do these two ideologies form or influence collective identity within the novel? One would assume that the town of Robledo has a strong collective identity; repeatedly, the reader is reminded that none of them could survive without the support of the others. In every situation, the residents help each other out; their fire plan brings “adult men and women to put the fire out with garden hoses, shovels, towels, and blankets,” and each of the townsfolk picks up their own job, and because “there were a lot of us, and we kept our eyes open” (32), the town could survive. However, their version of living in the present excludes any sort of collectivity in values or views on the world. They are constantly at each other’s throats, worried about “interracial feuds” (Butler 87), and they have a sense of protectiveness and reactivity towards each other that directly counteracts any reliance that they have on each other. These people have a common history and common experience, but do not have a strong sense of collective identity or willingness to protect each other for the good of the deed itself; they would not survive without each other. With robberies and distrust running rampant, Lauren observes that “we are coming apart. The community, the families, individual family members. We’re a rope, breaking, a single strand at a time” (Butler 116). The fall of the community cannot be fully attributed to a lack of unity within the people, as the rapid depletion of their resources caused by burglary is a prominent reason as well, but the lack of a collective want for the others in the community to be safe damns any chance of recovery that they had. As Lauren begins to grow her religion, however, she simultaneously begins forming a collective, well-meaning identity between herself and her gathering group of followers with a common cause; to live freely and with intention in the world. Butler establishes

these interpersonal relationships and connections in part through Lauren's ability to hyperempathize with others, with an emphasis on her slow build of trust and the practice of instituting a strong belief in this collective religion and utopia of Earthseed.

### **Temporality, utopia, and dystopia**

In their explorations of religion and longevity as a human race, both *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler and *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner establish complex relationships with temporality and utopia/dystopia, creating a memorialized homage to the intricacies of self-identity within times of struggle. In their exploration of livelihood and self-actualization, many of the characters, including Harper, Prior, and Lauren, all dissect their own relationships with time, their communities, and themselves. In critically analyzing how these characters are presented, elements of Edelman's radical presentism, in acceptance and particularly queer and sexual relationships in general, are accepted and promoted, bringing their joy in pleasure and the moment to the forefront of the search for identity. Lauren, with no want for children, is able to literally physically share in the pleasure of being with her partner sexually, and revels in those brief moments of bliss and no fear. For many people during the height of the AIDS crisis, especially queer people, the ability to put aside fear and accept the potential dangers that might come with having intercourse and intimate relationships with another person is the ultimate example of Edelman's radical presentism; for them, the most present they could ever be is engaging in those moments, in that pleasure. These characters must put aside their fear for their health in the future and fully commit to living in the moment, to the point of not caring about death. For all characters from either texts, these moments are the key to self-revelation and therefore, to the creation of collective identity. For Earthseed, Lauren's god does not even allow

escape from the present moment because it is reliant on shaping God through what they see in the present and where they are in a particular moment. Though Earthseed is still reaching towards a tangible utopia, their journey towards said utopia is what builds the ideal future for them. Each moment spent discussing Earthseed and sustaining each other is simultaneously a defiance of cultural standards and refusal to be dragged down in the present moment as well as a step towards their future and a stronger collective identity and memory. For the characters in *Angels in America*, many of the moments that they are living could be their last. They are dying, in pain, and shunned by the larger society, and yet they choose to live anyway. The fleeting potentiality of a utopia, the idea of a world free from lesions, medical bills, and corrupt politicians is enough to keep them going. As they connect and see themselves and their struggles in each other, the other becomes the self, and vice versa. Harper and Prior, although two vastly different outcasts of society, find themselves in each other because of how similar their intensely opposite strifes can be. Through each other, they are able to identify the otherness in themselves, self-actualize, and build a personal world unwilling to give into stagnation. Lauren, in living in any moment on her own, must face the reality that her hyperempathy makes any “other” in the world to her a piece of herself, a piece of her pain. In this version of 2025 America, otherness might mean death, but Lauren and her compatriots continue to fight anyway. As I will address in Chapter 2, in Prior’s cathartic monologue at the end of *Perestroika*, he puts into words perfectly his wants; he declares “But still. Still. Bless me anyway. I want more life. I can’t help myself. I do” (278).. These people, by all means and standards from a heteronormative and identity-politics driven society, should have no reason to live. They watch their loved ones, children, and parents be wronged and die, and yet, they keep living until the moment that death

takes them. They all push on, reinventing themselves in living in the moment, and propelling themselves towards a brighter future.

## **Chapter 2: The Construction of Resistance and Utopia in Fiction Alongside Real-Life Movement Politics**

In examining the narratives of *Angels in America* and *The Parable of the Sower*, it is key to investigate the context in which they were written. Importantly for my work, this centers around real-world movements that were happening at the time, and an examination of the practice of resistance as presented by queer people and Black people in regards to the actions that I've identified, ACT UP and womanism. Both texts were released in 1993, coming off of the heels of fraught times for queer people and people of color, including activist group the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power and practice and writing centered around womanism, all who were pushing for the protection of their identities. In their resistance, I find myself wondering how they could, and how we can, move forward after the traumas of the past and, by extension, the present. In the over 30 years since these movements were most actively doing their work, both of these queer and the Black resistance groups have continued to press forward in their fight for a better future. Though each of these movements are vastly different from each other, they both grapple with similar questions regarding temporality and the recognition of their groups. First, how will these marginalized groups contend with the horrors that were inflicted upon them by others? For groups of people who have been so heavily dehumanized by the dominant social class, continuing to live as themselves in an authentic way with knowledge of the way that they've been treated in the past requires a level of tact and care, and the balance of processing that trauma and celebrating regardless is a difficult one. Lastly, how can you continue to live in a world that has been and may continue to be diametrically opposed to your existence and happiness? Regardless of whether one is living for the present or for the future, the practice of

engaging in a full life requires some sort of contestation of a world structured around an identity that is not your own. Each of these questions calls on the marginalized individual to live a life that must actively combat and resist the world that they live within.

### **Queer liberation, AIDS, and ACT UP**

For queer people, one of the most prominent traumas to contend with was the AIDS crisis, and the act of retaining their identity as a collective manifests itself partially through the practice of living openly as their identity. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP, is widely regarded as an intensely successful social movement of the 20th century according to Sarah Shulman of the ACLU in her essay on “How Act Up Changed the Face of AIDS and Activism.” The organization succeeded in not only achieving many of the aims outlined from the beginning of the movement, including prioritizing combatting the epidemic within the medical world and then centering humans in the development of medications. ACT UP also used theatrical forms of protests and created a platform through which queer people became humanized and seen in the media as they had rarely been before. Their main goals as an organization were to expedite the release and lower the price of drugs being used to treat HIV/AIDS, create safer practices to slow/prevent the spread of the disease, and to reframe the issue from “the gay plague” to a national crisis with thousands of casualties.

Leading up to the AIDS crisis and ACT UP, the “mainstream” and institutionalized gay rights movements began in the 1920s with Henry Gerber’s foundation of The Society for Human Rights in Chicago. Groups such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s sought to bring dialogues about queerness into the U.S., especially during the time of the Lavender Scare. A few years prior to the exacerbation of queer marginalization through the

AIDS epidemic came the Stonewall Riot (June 1969), which became a call to action and an outward and visible representation of the silencing of queer people. Throughout the weight of stigmatization placed on the queer community, there emerges through resistance a promise of a better future and movement towards the utopic world of acceptance. That's not to say that the past and history were forgotten by these people in any way, but rather to emphasize the ability and integrity of having to balance the traumas of the past with the promise of the future. In her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love writes that "homosexuality in this era [the 1980s] is defined by reverse discourse, and the pushing against stigma- pride and visibility offer antidotes to shame and the legacy of the closet" (3). The existence of these people (marginalized people) is, of course, multifaceted, but this idea specifically is potent in the dissection of the relationship between the past, present, and the future in this context. Pride and visibility must come along with discourse against the general conception of queer people in the world and throughout history. However, it is important to note that much of the discourse happening surrounded the people (mainly white men) who had access to the resources to heal from their traumas, and an important complication to Love's proposition is the intersectionality of queerness and visibility. I have already established that Jose Esteban Munoz's use of concepts of intersectionality, in *Cruising Utopia*, is key to understanding and more largely grasping the amplitude of what resistance must be for queer people, but more generally for marginalized groups as a whole. To his construction of utopia, he finds the work of feminist scholars and scholars of color central, and ties hope for a better future directly to the freedom and joy of all queer people, but especially people of color (Munoz 17).

In understanding the queer reaction to the AIDS crisis, ACT UP, and the role of resistance and utopia in *Angels in America*, it is imperative to understand the history of the

movements, the ways that these groups have been marginalized, and those who have historically been excluded from even the queer liberation narrative and do not have access to the same tactics that the mainstream community did. Because of the centrality of the body and AIDS for *Angels in America*, it is also key to know the severity of the disease and the symptoms with which those who suffered from it contended.

As we've come to understand it, The Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV, is a virus that targets white blood cells in the body, resulting in a failing of the immune system. AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), occurs in the final stages of infection, resulting in the irreparable damage of the body and often death. In the weakening of the immune system, the body is incredibly susceptible to opportunistic infections and cancers, and as a result, most people who developed HIV/AIDS in the 80s were thought to be sentenced to death. Grace Bernstengel with PBS interviewed survivor Stephanie Stuart, who said that people were "just diagnosed and you really could pull out a calendar and mark a year and a half to two years and somewhere during that time they would be gone" (Stuart par. 7). Hospitals were overwhelmed with people fallen to the disease, and the world was overwhelmed by a disease spread in unknown ways. It was referred to as the "gay plague," and as scientific research was being worked on, fears about the spread of the disease grew unfettered. Mention was made of quarantining gay people so as to quell the spread of HIV/AIDS, and the public stigma associated with queer people grew into a fear of interaction with gay men, though it was later confirmed that it spread through bodily fluids being shared between people, mainly through (anal) sex, intravenous drug use, and the sharing of bodily fluids that held the virus. Through the steady rise of the disease's impact on the queer community and the United States as a whole, the government's response, in large part exacerbated by President Reagan, was non-existent, and

since the disease was first primarily found in mainly gay white men, stigma began to abound. General apathy, revulsion, and even disdain from the media and government towards the issue meant that little progress was being made towards a solution, cure, or medication to help the growing populations of those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

The first case of HIV/AIDS in the US was documented in 1981, and ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was officially formed in 1987. From the beginning, ACT UP targeted pharmaceutical companies and the medical community as a whole, demanding that faster and more effective action be taken to develop medication to help combat the disease, combatting the stigma running rampant against queer people, and demanding action from all levels of government, the church, and the media. The structure of their organization was horizontal and spread out, giving the power to make decisions to those who were actively protesting and being affected by the crisis. Events and meetings were headed by community members and volunteers, meeting weekly in various groups and committees to discuss options, reach consensus, and plan upcoming actions. In their protests, they focused on non-violent direct action; the members of the organization were in the streets and interacting with the people they were protesting, but were not using any physical force or harmful actions to attain their goals. This partially took the form of marches and protests; demonstrations of queer love like making out in front of counter-protesters, walking in masses with signs through the street, and the storming of local and state governmental events were some of the few ways that they interfered.

Additionally, the people of ACT UP utilized theatrical forms of non-violent protest that have a large part in a consistent non-violent protest vocabulary used in a long line of direct action activism. Die-ins involve participants lying down on the ground, occasionally accompanied by blood smears, chalk outlines, or faux graves. Protesters lie in a public space for a period of time

with the intention of shocking viewers and giving visibility to the thousands of deceased or soon-to-be diseased people for whom they are protesting, often garnering a large press coverage. The theatrical demonstrative death of protestors brought new light to the vastness and severity of present and future casualties to the movement. Die-ins have been utilized in past movements such as the anti-Vietnam protests and would be utilized in forthcoming movements like Black Lives Matter, in protests against police brutality.

Another form of non-violent protest utilized by ACT UP were political funerals, which used the deaths of real AIDS victims (only those who gave express permission), and protested the reason for their death, pinning the blame on the government for inaction regarding the epidemic. The political funeral structure allowed for simultaneous protest against the government and a celebration and memorial of those who were killed as a result of this inaction. Non-violent political actions such as die-ins and political funerals brought the humanity of those suffering from HIV/AIDS to the forefront of the movement, humanizing and destigmatizing queer people, intravenous drug users, to general stigma towards those groups; reactions to HIV/AIDS and resulting stigmas have and still continue to take their toll.

Over the 10 or so years after their formation, ACT UP protested the exorbitant prices of AZT (the first drug created to help cure AIDS) and forced the media to cover the atrocities that were occurring within communities suffering from AIDS, and even stopped trading at the New York Stock Exchange (which had, before then, never happened). In one of their most famous protests, the organization partnered with WHAM!, the Women's Health Action and Mobilization, to protest the church for their refusal to teach safe sex or outwardly support a queer lifestyle, while at the same time accepting people suffering from AIDS in their hospitals. In discussing the intersectionality of this movement in conjunction with Munoz, Love, and more, it is important to

note that ACT UP centered a white, middle-class centric view of the crisis. At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, the majority of people who were known to be affected by the disease were white, cis, gay, middle class men. As the epidemic made its way into America's perspective, the stigma around the disease grew to be associated with that group of people. In the early days, those were in fact the people who were publicised as suffering the worst and were being diagnosed the most, according to census data from the CDC, though this does not account for the likely large amount of Black and Brown men suffering and not being addressed.

As the disease progressed and spread further, however, the broader demographic became visible. HIV/AIDS spread to the more marginalized groups in society, specifically hitting those without access to hospitals or healthcare, which tend to be Black and Brown communities. The institutionalized segregation that persisted in America throughout the 20th century meant that as the disease spread to underserved communities, they were much less likely to have access to the assistance needed to effectively combat the disease. Throughout this demographic shift, however, ACT UP's actors continued representing mostly middle-class white people, as they had been at the beginning of the epidemic, meaning that the collective identity as it had been formed around the initial issue was not developing with the times. There was a person of color caucus (the Majority Action Committee) that emerged as a part of the group, and though their involvement and innovations made immense impacts on the communities that they were looking to help. Yet the core diversity, mission, and goals of ACT UP as a whole did not change enough to make a strong impact on the communities of color that were suffering.

Though much less active, ACT UP is still in motion today, working to protest non-equitable conditions for queer people and continue to support the distribution of treatments for HIV/AIDS, as well as the research going into finding a cure. In the 45 years since the AIDS

crisis began, there has been a significant shift in the view of people with AIDS, in no small part due to the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Regardless, stigma continues to permeate the diagnosis, and education on the disease is still lacking in many communities. Though AIDS is no longer a death sentence, there continues to be no universal cure, leading those who contract it to live with it for a lifetime. Countless queer people today still feel the hole in their community from the toll of the AIDS crisis. A new generation of queer people will know only the names and legacies of those same people, and will never get to fully know or understand their lives. Many queer people today have to hold the loss of the AIDS crisis and the people that it took from them every day, and have to live on regardless.

*Angels in America* by Tony Kushner is an 8-hour-long 2-part epic play revolving around the AIDS crisis. The main plot focuses on 2 couples, Prior and Louis and Joe and Harper, as well as real-life political figure Roy Cohn. Prior and Louis have been together for a few years and live together in New York City in 1985. Within the first few scenes of the play, Prior reveals to Louis that he has found a lesion on his body, meaning that he has reached the stage of having contracted AIDS. Meanwhile, Harper and Joe struggle with their marriage and their relationship with their religion, Mormonism. Harper, through her addiction to Valium, dips in and out of reality and addresses the audience about the state of the world and the climate. Joe is a devout Mormon and closeted gay man who works for and is mentored by Roy Cohn, a lawyer and prosecutor who was responsible for the conviction of the Rosenbergs and was a mentor of Donald Trump. Roy Cohn, during his real life, died of HIV/AIDS related complications, though publicly claimed that he had liver cancer. Over the course of the play, Prior and Harper come into contact with each other in a mysterious dreamscape that bends reality.

When Prior is diagnosed with AIDS and admitted to the hospital, Louis breaks up with Prior, leaving him alone and without company except for his nurse and good friend, Belize, a queer man of color who shares his own experience during the epidemic and tempers some of the inconsequential, overblown, or overly intellectual conversations that some of the others have. Though I am not centering Belize in my character analysis of this show, his voice serves as an intensely grounding and consistently intersectional one. Louis considers himself to be a morally sound man, with a strong handle on his place in the world and his involvement in politics, and struggles with heady ponderings about the state of the world over the course of the plot. He also meets Joe and immediately realizes that Joe is gay, forcing Joe to confront his homosexuality and, consequently, fall in love with Louis. The two of them hook up and spend time together, regardless of Louis' potential exposure to HIV. While Prior is in the hospital becoming sicker and sicker, he begins being visited by a mysterious Angel who informs him that he is the prophet of a new age to come. As Joe and Louis become more deeply embroiled in each other, Louis begins to have doubts about his life decisions, and Harper wanders into the outdoors with her supposedly imaginary friend, Mr. Lies (played by the same actor who plays Belize). Soon, Prior is able to ascend to heaven to meet with the Seven Continental Principalities, which are each an angel connected to and in charge of a continent on Earth. The Angels, in their desire to control the Earth, want to centralize each group of people to their own "original" land, so that they cannot mix and cause the issues that humans have had over the course of time. While he is meeting them, though close to death, Prior feels the human desire to live more and to plumb the depths of his relationships and life. His blunting of their wishes fends them off, leaving him to continue to explore his fraught, human relationships with those around him. Roy Cohn dies, as

he does in reality, Prior is given a bit of stolen AZT, and the messy and imperfect web of human life, love, and politics lives on.

Both *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower* relate to their respective histories and historical moments differently, and center their own practices and modes of resistance in the construction of their utopias. In the case of *Angels in America*, Kushner is interacting with queer resistance in general but is in particular interested in the direct action that was necessary in the moment. ACT UP, as an organization, was focused on direct action that would immediately help the droves of people who were dying from AIDS; this took the form of many forms of protests and demonstrations that had the goal of actively changing attitudes, policies, and actions regarding people associated with or infected with HIV/AIDS. Part of what makes ACT UP a helpful tool for looking at the way *Angels in America* functions as a play and political tool is that Kushner is also concerned with this direct action, and writes the characters of the play as actively living through the AIDS crisis. In imagining utopia for queer people and the characters in the play, Kushner centers the embrace of friction, humanity, and change. *Parable of the Sower*, on the other hand, is concerned with the speculative repercussions of Reaganite politics on Black people and the lower class. Instead of looking at the difficulties that were being faced in her present moment, Butler extrapolates and dramatizes a future from the intense detriments of the Reagan administration. In constructing this future, however, the same societal and economic issues that Butler and other Black people were contending with at the time are present. In dramatizing current events and morphing it into a dystopia, Butler stays intensely focused on and interested in social dynamics and resistance. Through Lauren's theology of change and hope for the future, *Parable of the Sower* presents a utopian counter-narrative to the political turmoil of

the time, centering tenets of womanism and intersectionality in building a truly free future for Black women and all oppressed and marginalized people.

### **Womanism and intersectionality**

In the late 20th century, the United States had a rich history of a century of resistance, protest, and action within the Black and queer communities as well as many others. In 1993, where I am focusing, America was dealing with the social and political mass destruction led by the Reagan administration (with cuts to welfare programs, a widening wealth gap, and more, as authors Arthur Tolson and Q. R. Hand Jr. discuss in their writing on the Black political economy during the Reagan presidency). At the same time, feminism was developing and along with it, critiques on the way that the larger movement was addressing race, class, and other intersectional issues. The organized feminist movement began in 1848, with a push for social equality and more involvement in the workplace for women. During the second wave of feminism, there was a want for specific equalities in the workplace, and the acknowledgment of the labor that women were putting into the economy, as well a move towards sexual freedom and freedom from gender-based violence. As the conversation continued around women's rights and freedoms, Black feminism emerged, with a specific focus on the freedom of Black women from the particular oppressions that they face. In general, there was a movement towards creating, enhancing, and asserting the right for opportunities for women. Particularly in the case of second-wave feminism, and somewhat similarly to the shortcomings of ACT UP, the rhetoric presented by the movement failed to include the multiplicity of women suffering from the continued oppression, specifically Black women.

Unsurprisingly, then, along with the rise and development of second-wave feminism came pushback, specifically from women of color, about the constraints and exclusions of the movement. In her seminal piece of writing *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan writes “Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love?” (78), and her ideas alongside this piece of work became central to second-wave feminism. Though this framework promotes what would seemingly be a helpful movement, the reality of the work that was happening meant the disregard of the difficulties that faced Black women, particularly within their intersectional identities as Crenshaw establishes (141). Though important work towards a better future for women was undoubtedly being done, that better future confined itself automatically, through the failure to recognize the extra economic, social, and interpersonal restrictions imposed upon specifically women of color, to an exclusionary practice of progress. Alice Walker first used the term “womanist” in her collection of short stories titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, where she writes “The wife has never considered herself a feminist—though she is, of course, a ‘womanist.’ A ‘womanist’ is a feminist, only more common.” Building off of this beginning framework for womanism, author Layli Phillips writes in her introduction to *The Womanist Reader* that this specific construction of the term situates a womanist as everyday, “thereby defying both academic and ideological claims on the definition, labeling, and elaboration of women’s resistance activity under the exclusive and limited label ‘feminist’” (xix-xx). By establishing and synthesizing the widespread and multifaceted tenants of womanism, Phillips provides an umbrella description of the movement and worldview. Importantly, her emphasis on the “everyday” as a part of womanism brings to light the accessibility of such ideas; the goal is for there to be no intellectual barrier on account of the

exclusionary nature of academia, but to provide a framework working towards the common good for anyone who is willing to commit themselves to that. Womanism seeks to bring equality and equity to all by lifting those most affected by that (Black women) to a place of right and might.

Octavia E. Butler, as a writer and person living through these discussions, was not only living within this moment of turmoil and instability for people of color, but also experienced firsthand the detrimental effects of the Reagan administration for all marginalized groups. The Reaganomic budget cutting or “saving” significantly affected funding for many key social programs that supported people of color. Welfare, food stamps, and housing protections all took a large hit from program cuts; all of which are programs that supported the wellbeing of Black individuals disproportionately. The administration comprehensively pulled back on Civil Rights wins, as well as gave a general disadvantage to all people of color as the US was facing difficulties in the 80s. Even the AIDS crisis disproportionately affected people of color, not because they are more susceptible to the illness, but because the pharmaceutical price gouging and focus on making AZT affordable for those with insurance and eventual lack of protections for poorer neighborhoods where Black people were systemically concentrated gave them less of an ability to combat the disease. The AIDS crisis is but one example of the systemic inaccess that faces people of color, but is a potent and timely case study that can be used to gain further insight into the intricacies of oppression in this way.

With the political backdrop of oppression and intersectional identities resisting power structures, using the ideas associated with womanism gives additional insight into the way in which Lauren is working through her own history and the history of Black oppression. Additionally, womanism shares key goals with Lauren’s utopian theology, focusing on the freedom of Black women, through which all others will become free from oppressive power

structures. Octavia E. Butler's writing encapsulates components of Black history, culture, Science Fiction, and technology that shape not only the stances against oppression and critique of a white-centric society, but the centering of Black experience, excellence, and vitality that sets the stage for the coming of a new millennium with a fresh wave of protests, movement, and resistance to the white-centric America. Butler's construction of a utopia within this novel, like *Womanism*, stems from a young Black girl; someone who is oppressed and suppressed, but looks to the future and to her own experiences and abilities in the present in order to create a new space that is safe for all. In *Parable of the Sower*'s speculative future, everyone but the rich and powerful are subject to the bloodthirsty whims of others and instability of the economy for basic necessities, but Lauren, through her journals, is able to synthesize the difficulties going on and create her own religious framework for the freedom and longevity of the human race. Like *womanism*, this framework stems from the suppression and difficulties that Lauren faces, but does not fail to encapsulate and shelter anyone who is willing to believe in her mission and work towards a better future.

Interestingly, *Parable of the Sower* reaches for a utopian world through the discussion of the dystopian social landscape in which it is set. Extreme social oppression, elements of a post-apocalyptic world, and the push towards conformity in the population's reaction to oppression are all elements of the novel that Butler includes in her warning of a world that is yet to come. With the centrality of Reaganite politics to the 80s and the post-AIDS epidemic social action landscape, it becomes clear how much of an influence the aggressively oppressive administration has on Butler's fictionalized vision of the future. A key piece of what makes *Parable of the Sower* so potent and frightening is the parallels that it draws between the dystopian hegemony and oppression that Lauren and Butler's written version of America face

and the actual disparities that were happening in real life. Key to Reaganite politics was the emphasis on economic growth and gain at the expense of central programs and budget cuts that severely impacted the wage and wealth gaps (again discussed by Tolson and Hand Jr. in their writing on Reaganite era Black political economy); the same patterns can be seen in *Parable of the Sower*. From a social perspective, the rich that Lauren hears about are doing nothing to protect those who are actually struggling, but are working to create systems that actively only benefit the most wealthy and further oppress those who are struggling.

Throughout this exploration of dystopia, however, Butler constructs Lauren's theological and political utopia as an alternative to the grim, dystopian present. In Lauren's construction of utopia, all people can live side-by-side, all working together for a better future for the collective without having to be beholden to the whims of the upper class. Though dystopia and utopia are terms that can often be associated with a fantastical or escapist ideality, Butler purposefully keeps both elements of her novel incredibly grounded in reality and possibility. Lauren's theology, centered around the idea that "God is change," presents a utopian counter-narrative to the harshly split and violent present. In contriving a prediction of where Reaganite politics might lead the country to in the future, Butler also brings in a womanist narrative that centers change, discussion, and the freedom of Black women as the basis for freedom of humanity. The use of an understandable and slowly and rationally constructed theology to find a utopia built indirectly on intersectionality and womanist ideas makes Butler's writing a key example of a grounded political utopia.

In *Parable of the Sower's* 2024, Butler also focuses on climate change as it has altered the world and forms it into a cut-throat, rabid, and merciless social disaster. A small and relatively intact town houses Lauren Olamina, a fifteen-year-old girl who possesses

“hyperempathy,” a condition where she shares the physical feelings of those she sees, whether it be pleasure or pain. Lauren lives with her father, a preacher, and their small family survives by guarding their food and assets with their lives. Each member of their town plays a role in keeping each other safe by going on watch and lending a hand; not out of the kindness of their hearts, but rather out of the necessity for a support system in these trying times. Life here is reduced to fear and monotony, and exit from Robledo is near impossible without fear of death by vicious and desperate vagabonds, and Lauren’s prospects are limited to finding a partner, giving birth, and continuing to survive. Though her father is the town’s pastor, and his faith keeps the rest of the family and the town grounded, his construction of utopia is one that Lauren cannot get behind. Her father’s God, she says, ceased to be her God in her teenage years, as the grim reality that surrounded her was realized as inescapable.

Within her musings, however, Lauren knows that there is more to the world. Over the years, she arrives upon a new religion that gives her genuine hope and a utopia to believe in. Earthseed is predicated on the idea that God is not a person-like figure that acts in mysterious ways, but that it is active and encapsulates change and people as they move towards a better world. As she develops her belief system, the world around her begins to deteriorate more and more, with her family being killed off and eventually, her town being run down and ransacked by the poorest of the poor, desperate beyond measure. Though Lauren escapes, she now has to face the world and decide where she wants to go next. Through scraping out a survival for herself, she connects with others along the path, and slowly introduces them to her new vision of the future. Soon, they have set the goal of what they believe to be a safe house north of Robledo, and her small following journeys to build the utopia and safe place that they dream of for them and their children; a future living not away from, but despite the horrors sweeping the world. When they

arrive, the group discovers that their hope has been shattered, and the land and building have been burnt to the ground. Standing among the ashes of their dream, Lauren leads them all to decide that they will rebuild what was lost, and create their utopia with their own hands.

### **The histories and contexts of *Parable of the Sower* and *Angels in America***

In part, both *Parable of the Sower* and *Angels in America* are also breaking down the stereotypes associated with the people represented through creating a realistic, holistic, and well-rounded picture of these characters and their lives, morals, and trials. Kushner and Butler both utilize the act of writing and the creation of their fantastical worlds as a form of protest, and their fictionalized but effective contribution to their respective movements. The characters and plots themselves even present resistance and utopia in an embodied and revolutionary way; through their otherworldly elements, a fresh way of resisting oppressive practices, reevaluating and reinvigorating the fight against hegemony, and crafting a utopia of freedom and fully-fledged living. The above are two distinct practices that are intertwined and inform each other, but use specific and individual tactics to engage with their movement politics. From the perspective of the writers of these two works of fiction, there is a clear purpose, causality, and ultimately, physical product to this resistance; a published and bound book or a staged play, reflecting each of their frustrations and relationships with the history of their groups. For the worlds that they have constructed, identities that will outlive both authors as well themes, fantasies, and utopias that will appeal differently to each person who interacts with the texts take control. In my investigation, I will be focusing on the ways in which these texts, *Angels in America* and *Parable of the Sower*, relate to their contexts and histories and the associated collective identity and

movement politics, as well as how they structure their own versions within their fantastical worlds.

Within the exploration of identity, theorist Heather Love postures that “the emphasis on injury in queer studies has made critics in this field more willing to investigate the darker aspects of queer representation and experience and to attend to the social, psychic, and corporeal effects of homophobia” (Love 2). With this as a framework, Love problematizes the idea of positivising the lived experience and history of marginalized groups, specifically queer people. She specifically cites history (“the darker aspects”) as central, or even necessary, to constructing any sort of view of the future. In examining queer writings, she challenges theorists, thinkers, and writers to push against the impulse to move on from traumatic or difficult parts of the past, and to instead acknowledge the truth of the matter. To Love, these elements of queer history are vital in the study of queerness and queer expression. In using this broader lens to “look backwards” and continue to refocus the study of queerness and identity to encapsulate the historical elements (such as homophobia) that are a key part in creating the vision of queerness that society has today.

Kushner’s characters live in partial awareness of the conversations in which they exist, leading to a critically poignant and humanizing construction of queer lives on the stage. Not only do we see this dissection of queer theory and thought in regards to activism and utopia in each of the individual characters, but in the overarching story as a whole. Within my discussion of *Angels in America*, I am focusing on what I have previously established as a political utopia, as opposed to a fantastical one, though the latter certainly exists within the play. Within the play, the Continental Principalities, or the Angels, have the goal of reinstating and stagnating all culture to their individual origins. This fantastical iteration of passivity and status quo presents a new lens

through which to see “mainstream” America and the heteronormative structures that it clings to. The Angels, in their rigidity and desire to break the world down into digestible parts, reflect 1993 America’s tendency to oversimplify identity, resort to stereotyping, and ameliorate marginalized groups’ plights, and in turn, destroy the important relationship that these marginalized groups have with their history. The marginalized, which is in this case mostly queer people, are battling the traumas of the past and trying to create a utopic world in which to live while simultaneously insisting on their right to exist. Prior, in his relationship with the Angel of America, sees the attraction of a life lived without friction, a world devoid of worry about difference. Despite this, his longing for a human life, which inherently houses friction, individuality, and the push for belonging, prevails. Throughout the play, the Angel of America prods Prior in the direction of simplicity and consolidation; a world in which no one has to mix, everyone goes back to their own “homeland,” and the issues of the world resolve, and Prior resists and refuses for the promise of a better world and utopia for all queer people.

The Angel wants to take away friction, take away the prospect and reality of living on the margins. But inherent in queerness, there is the idea of living on the margins, which to Teresa de Lauretis on her writing in “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities,” means breaking out of a heteronormative practice and specifically constructing an identity separate from that of mainstream society. The beauty of queerness comes from the absolute rejection of assimilation to the cultural norm, and that friction and history has become, for better or for worse, an intrinsic part of the queer identity. Queerness is living and learning from the many intersections of identity, marginalization, and culture, learning from all of those around you, and learning to live through and beyond the struggle. Prior wants to live anyways, regardless of the potential ailments that life might bring anyways, and the humanity of his statement brings to a head a

small facet of why queer and marginalized people do continue to live despite the traumas of the past. The promise of a life and love the way that they know is fulfilling and correct, the promise of queer utopia, impels the livelihood and will of Prior and masses of queer people who, bless them, want to live anyway.

At the time of its release in 1993, *Parable of the Sower* was an exceptionally radical novel and voice within the SciFi and literary genres, but has regained popularity within the past few years because of its eerie similarities to the present moment, particularly in terms of the climate and politics. Set in 2024 on, Butler's uncanny anticipation of what the future could hold socially and politically has resonated throughout the landscapes of America, forcing readers to reckon with history's relationship to the present moment. Put in the context of Layli Phillips' strategy of discussing womanism, the novel fits the structure of looking at issues from an intersectional lens, drawing on her ideas of subsumption from other political movements as well as a staunch stance outside of the academic framework (which, for Butler in this case, means the novel) (Phillips xxi). A starkly politically divided world, coupled with the exacerbation of racial and class divides, brings to a head the plight of the Black woman, specifically. Butler, in her construction of this world, forefronts Black characters in an inherently utopic way. Butler has always written in the Black feminist tradition, and in disregarding the typical white-centric construction of Science Fiction and focusing on her Black heroine, she finds a fresh way to interrogate reality in conjunction with womanism. This does not, by any means, indicate that these stories and narratives were not already happening, but instead, brings them to the front of the social mind, envisioning a reality which gives the space to a Black woman to explore her ideals and views for the world. In this way, Butler takes a step in the direction of a world opened

up through the freedom of Black women through the tenants of womanism; not yet a perfect world, but one that highlights the wrongs of the world and a path to making those right.

### **Narrative points-of-view and relation to audience**

In constructing *Parable of the Sower* as a narrative written by someone who begins the journey as a teen, Butler presents the act of curating and discovering identity. The use of a first person narrative, in general, is a direct and effective way to appeal to a reader and to connect the humanity, thought process, and core of a character to the broader public. In the case of *Parable of the Sower* in particular, the SciFi genre takes on a much more plausible and personable relationship with the audience; while there are still elements of a world with new drugs that cause disastrous psychoses as well as with more extended consequences to climate change and political malintent, Lauren lives in California, crossing the same land that exists today, eats the same food that we do, and ultimately lives life with the same amenities that we might today, albeit in a different social, economic, and political situation. Additionally, the story is told from not only just a first person narrative, but also through Lauren's journals. An entire world is opened up to the reader through a sole voice and point of view, and importantly, that voice is a Black one. This speculative idea of what America might become is experience through an unfiltered and uninterrupted Lauren, who apart from her construction of Earthseed not only experiences the change in racial oppression over the downfall of America, but lives life full of love and conflict, brought to the audience through a fully Black lens, untinged except in oppression from other characters by white presuppositions, misgivings, or ill intent. Butler creates for herself an active resistance in her writing by crafting what, for America, is inherently

politically utopic; a narrative written by a Black woman which, though still marred by racial prejudice and inequity, is given full and absolute jurisdiction over what is within it.

Alongside all of this, Butler is able to explore identity in an even more intimate and holistic way through the maturation of Lauren as a character throughout the novel. In the few years that the *Parable of the Sower* spans, she grows from a young child of 15 to a full adult. Within the journal as a rhetorical device, the reader is able to see, in a concrete way, the way that Lauren's values and goals shift over the course of the beginning of her life, as well as how her perception of herself and others matures over time. On identity, however, it is important to note the use of the word and the limitations and restrictions that come along with it. Phillips, in her discussion of womanism, puts it succinctly; "Ideology is rigid; it relies on internal logical consistency and some degree of central control that seeks the resolution of difference by means of homogenization. Ideological perspectives and, to a lesser extent, movements rely on processes that compel or seduce people to conform and do not deal effectively with difference or paradox. Differences and tension that cannot be elided or erased trouble ideologies, and unresolved paradoxes tend to cause ideologies to crumble and lose efficiency " (xxv). While it is a difficult feat to discuss the many facets of identity without being reductive or contradictory of the vastness of this esoteric term, Phillips' clear definition of the rigid and exclusionary concept of ideological frameworks provides a helpful tool in discussing such a subject. Phillips' poses womanism as the opposite of this rigid and exclusionary ideology, which is a lens of seeing the world that is guided by questioning and the common good, as opposed to drawing a line around what is perceived as "the truth." Identity, in my use of the term, therefore refers not to a boxing in and discerning of a person, but rather to the practice that a person or character has cultivated in the expression of themselves and their beliefs.

Through the point of view of *Parable of the Sower*, which Butler has intentionally constructed both in the first person and through a single character's journal, the reader sees Lauren go through a series of rapid shifts in her belief systems and way of living. Not only does she grow from a young child into an adult who matured at much too young an age, but she constructs and begins to grow a belief and questioning system that is reminiscent of Phillips' discussion of womanism, specifically in regards to the centering of intersectionality and change, as well as the centrality of the freedom of Black women. The reader experiences Lauren's uninterrupted and unfiltered line of questioning; why is the world this way? How can she and the people she loves move through and forward after the trauma they have endured? How can she move towards an emotional and physical freedom for herself and others? The vision presented by Lauren is not only the construction of a world focused around the freedom of Black women (similarly to womanism), but is one that is focused on constant change and redefinition. As Lauren repeats often in her musings, "God is change." In the moments of her discovery, questions and multiplicity are central, and Butler fictionalizes some of the many questions that womanism and the world that she lived in were asking at the time. Though they were involved in different movements and conversations, both Butler and Kushner are providing the key incorporation of fictionalized and speculative (but ruthlessly relevant) conversations into social resistance.

With the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, it is clear that Tony Kushner is contributing to the large, nuanced, and rapidly developing scene of resistance in a unique and multifunctional way. As central to the themes of his plot, Kushner uses identity as a jumping off point for all of his discussions. As a medium, the theatre inherently brings pieces of identity to the center of attention, even without the effort of incorporating it into the plot. Seeing the actor physically

represent a character on a stage, watching them function, interact, and do all of the things any person might engage in brings the perception of identity into sharp focus. As mentioned before, Kushner intentionally plays with cross-gender casting, forcing the audience to reckon with identity in a new way. In the perception of identity by the general public alone in the late 20th century, consider the gay man. This is someone set apart from society and barred, legally and often also socially, from a heteronormative vision of partnership, marriage, and children. Much later, in the 21st century, this would change, with same sex marriage becoming legal in Massachusetts in 2004 and in all 50 states in 2015- same sex adoption was soon after made legal in all 50 states in 2016. While identity is, conceptually, not necessarily a definable idea, the way that it might be generally viewed does not change. *Angels in America* brings representation of the human body and soul, played by the human body and soul, onto a stage, and thrusts its characters and participants into an irreverent and esoteric, yet fully grounded in human experience, exploration. However, most of that description could be used to look at performance and its ability to interact with other informational and artistic systems.

*Angels in America* recognizes and dissects the role of history in the formation of collective identity. Combined with the use of the present moment (or the here-and-now) as a resistance to stigma, stereotypes, and the highly polarized and politicised hegemony of the time, a critical analysis and exploration of resistance is formed. The history of each of the characters in forms their expectations for the future; Louis, after leaving a lesion-riddled Prior, struggles to separate himself from the role that he is playing in his own life, and his longing to solidify himself as a positive moral model and enforcer of political “goodness” is at constant odds with his actions and the way that he speaks. Harper, in her quest to find a world in which she is even remotely satisfied or safe, is constantly at odds with her history as a Mormon and the strict social

strata that that identity ties to her life. Prior, as a gay man with AIDS, is expected to be unhappy with his perceived plight in his identity and its effect on his life. Within each of their characters is explored identity and history and the effect of those on their present selves.

For someone living with HIV/AIDS and being surrounded by the deaths of thousands of people across his community and identity, a character like Prior makes sense to discuss and dissect. The idea of not erasing history, but moving forward into a world that eliminates friction between groups and encourages dialogue surrounding what Kushner refers to ironically as the “melting pot of America” is key to understanding the complex relationship that these marginalized groups and characters have with identity and hegemony. In short, the oversimplification or boiling down of ideas that the Angels of *Angels in America* brings to our attention is not a foreign concept; they directly parallel the hegemonic attempt to move away from collective knowledge, intersectionality, and a discussion of the stakes that make the concept of identity important in the first place. Prior’s resistance to the Angels is not rooted in destruction of the enemy, but in the acceptance of the past, acknowledgement of the present, and the hope for a better future. Prior’s realization of his needs and wants for himself and the world manifests itself in a succinct, passionate, and gut-wrenching plea and promise for the future; “I want more life. I can’t help myself, I do. I’ve lived through such terrible times, and there are people who have lived through much worse, but... you see them living anyways” (Kushner 278). In the moment in the world in which this play was published, the gravity of this statement brings complexity beyond measure to the resistances of queer people and ACT UP in the 20th century. Prior, critically, does not achieve any sort of completion or attain his ideal and perfect world; instead, he is able to acknowledge the way that his identity has formed, and the way that the

strength of his peers, ancestors (who visit him in the form of dead relatives also named Prior), and all around him has carried through even the deepest of woe and uncertainty.

### **Building a collective identity**

Kushner is building a national fantasy on the freedom of identity, which is a utopic and radical way to explore the present, especially through live theatre and the force with which one must come to terms with it. Within the structure of a live performance, the ideas of identity, presence, and the future take on new and more complex meanings. The process of gathering a group of people to sit together in a theatre is a powerful feat all on its own; regardless of experience with the subject matter, beliefs, or really any demographic categorization, there is a collectivity within the people who are grouped together and experiencing a similar phenomenon. Performance, if done well, brings about a fleeting glimpse of utopia experienced by everyone who is in the room.

Within his writing, Kushner not only has a strong sense of history, but uses a general awareness of time as it has passed and as it has come. Kushner's utilization of temporality and its effects on the characters brings to light many of the issues that many in the 1990s were worried about. Harper, for instance, in taking on her prophetic role within the play, serves as an (admittedly biased) adjudicator of the state of the world. From the beginning of the show, she is catastrophizing about the protective ozone layer and the end of the world, saying "everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way" (Kushner 18). The ozone layer was just beginning its descent into severe pollution in 1993, and Harper identifies the darkness of the moment and the role that she and her fellow characters play in history; the relentless marching forward of time within a world refusing to do anything to change it is a

terrifying thought. She offers a forceful and nearly horrifying statement while simultaneously painting a picture of the slow death of the world. That alone, though, is not an original or striking idea for a character to speak. What makes this in particular so meaningful is the audience's inability to turn away and the direct relationship that Harper forms with them; in a heightened reality wherein someone can perform a monologue potentially to an audience which is non-existent to the character, the audience is forced to reckon with their role in something like global warming (in this situation specifically) in an abrupt and forceful way through a direct address. Harper also sees and shares what she sees the future of humanity to be: catastrophe and death of the human race. Though the audience is later called to question her sanity and ability to connect with any of the characters around her, the link that she has established within the audience's minds lingers.

Though *Parable of the Sower* claims an active and intersectional place in social thought and liberation at the time, the active discussion and role of history within Lauren's world and as it relates to then present time strengthens its discursive and emotional power exponentially. Again, the novel reflects womanism's aim to address the social and economic inequalities that faced women of color. In Lauren's questioning and knowledge of history, there are obviously imperfections within her teenage knowledge; her strong feelings about where she thinks the future should lead her and her loved ones becomes a point of contention between herself and her equally strong-willed father. However, Lauren demonstrates wisdom beyond her years and a temperance for the horrors that she knows have come before her and might come again. After Lauren frightens a good friend with promises of the downfall of the rich communities surrounding Robledo and the promise of a future scraped together but full of peace, her father says "'You don't really understand what's going on here. The problems we have now have been

building since long before you were born.” Lauren responds, “I know” (Butler 63). Over and over, Butler acknowledges the past and identifies the belittling and marginalizing behaviors that end up popping back up in this speculative future, and as the novel progresses, it is clear that Lauren begins to understand these dynamics more and more.

Once she has left Robledo and begins to make her way to her hopeful future of safety “up North,” Lauren begins to gather a group of followers around her. Her travel across the land brings together what Hampton describes as follows; “The racial make up of Lauren’s congregation is easily described as “motley” as is the marauding bands that they encounter during their travels. America as a nation is quickly falling apart along with its national identity as is the racial identities and prejudices in Lauren’s congregation. As the racial, gender, and class identity boundaries fall by the wayside, so does the national identity” (135). In her leadership and acknowledgement of the past, her maturity is centered and makes way for what is an undoubtedly womanist perspective, ideology, and way of living. Hampton’s identification of Lauren’s group brings to light the centering of the person and of well-being as a whole and healing, as opposed to the fractured national identity that America has impressed upon all of them, but most dramatically Lauren. This “fractured national identity” is not a part of the Science Fiction of *Parable of the Sower*, but rather, is a reflection of the real American experience in the past, in the 1990s, and even today. The history outlined earlier in the chapter is not only a small fraction of the lived experience of oppression in Black America, but an infinitesimal amount of the joy and thought put into resistance.

Lauren’s construction of Earthseed speaks to a hopeful and utopic world opened up for all through the freedom of Black women. The central ideas of womanism, action, humanity, and more, play an integral part in both the development of the novel and the development of

Earthseed. Phillips writes, on womanism, that “As a womanist, there is no need to be “perfect”; personhood is enough to qualify” (xxv). Lauren knows that she is imperfect, and pushes to question the world around her and herself to improve as a person and to, in turn, help those around her. To move forward from the trauma of the past, Lauren must gather all of the pieces of herself and her history and share them with those who are willing to listen and commit to a better, utopian future for all.

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