

Figuring the Future in Los(t) Angeles

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *COMPARATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES*:
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL 1, NO. 1 (2003): 19–34.

Los Angeles, California, is a city that has a very complex symbolic relation to the rest of the US. For me, the story of the Belmont Learning Center vividly dramatizes the betrayal of minority dreams by the boosterism, corruption, ineptitude, and potential for environmental disaster that characterizes the political culture of the city. Planned more than a decade ago at a projected cost of \$200 million, it will be, if completed, the most expensive public high school ever built in the US.¹

Construction of the Belmont Learning Center proceeded despite warnings issued by the State Division of Oil and Gas about the dangers of the site, an abandoned oil field. The black officials of the school board were desperate to solve the overcrowding and generally dire conditions in which so many young black, Latino, and poor students do *not* get educated in the Los Angeles Unified School District. But potentially explosive methane gas and toxic hydrogen sulfide gas, known to cause neurological damage, seeped into the school structure for which there appeared to be no remediation. Finally, after spending \$170 million, the School Board voted in January 2000 to abandon the project.² However, Superintendent Roy Romer revived the project, and, with \$175 million spent so far, completion could add yet another \$100 million to the costs. Oil-well logs have revealed an earthquake fault underneath already existing buildings on the campus; any seismic activity would cause a rush of the gases with devastating consequences.³ More than a metaphor for the city, this unfolding tragic narrative actually embodies the multi-layered political, social, economic, racialized and environmental complexity of Los Angeles from its fissures and abandoned oil fields below ground to the concrete highways soaring through, around and above its neighborhoods.

In *Ecology of Fear*, the historian Mike Davis reminds us that the city used to be regarded as the “Land of Endless Summer,” a national symbol for a “lifestyle against which other Americans measured the modernity of their towns and regions.” Today’s metropolitan Los Angeles, however, has become “a dystopian symbol of Dickensian inequalities and intractable racial contradictions . . . with its estimated 500 gated subdivisions, 2,000 street gangs, 4,000 minimalls, 20,000 sweat shops, and 100,000 homeless residents.” Rather than representing America’s modernity, Los Angeles has come to symbolize “the collapse of the American Century.”⁴

Davis provides us with an intriguing account of the city's fictional and filmic annihilation and claims, "no city, in fiction or film has been more likely to figure as the icon of a really bad future."⁵ He asks us to consider why Los Angeles is the city we love to see destroyed. Acknowledging that the city has, to a certain extent, become "the scapegoat for the collapse of the American Century," Davis emphasizes the power and popularity of pulp fiction and film that incessantly recycles the "ritual sacrifice of Los Angeles," and cites these texts as part of a "malign syndrome, whose celebrants include the darkest forces in American history."⁶ While it is Robert Heinlein's novella of 1952, "The Year of the Jackpot," that in "crowning Los Angeles the disaster capital of the universe . . . anticipated the cornucopia of imaginary disaster to come," it is the issue of race, Davis concludes, "which unlocks the secret meaning of Los Angeles disaster fiction."⁷

I share Davis's distaste for much of this disaster fiction, particularly the neo-nazi survivalist narratives with their predictions of imminent race war. But his observations prompt me to consider what motives African American writers may have for representing Los Angeles as a politically and environmentally disastrous living space for many of its residents and even, perhaps, for contemplating its destruction. Literary representations of the city in the work of black writers span many periods, take many forms and range across a variety of genres, but even when African American writers imagine its destruction, I would argue that far from being part of a "malign syndrome," their work should be seen as an attempt to interrogate the limits and the possibilities the city offers for imagining self, community and citizenship.

If Los Angeles is "the most culturally heterogeneous city in the history of the United States,"⁸ it is also true that many of the white and wealthy are running away as fast as they can from that very heterogeneity. They flee toward homogeneous gated enclaves and the suburbs in an attempt to escape a declining economy, abandoning the multi-colored, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic residents



Announcement for the annual *Artists of Los Angeles and Vicinity* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1961. Courtesy of Virginia Jaramillo.

of the metropolitan region who remain in poor neighborhoods with declining schools. Of course, the desire of many white US citizens to live and go to school separate from citizens of color is a wish not confined to those who live in Los Angeles. For large sectors of the white middle class, residential segregation is their American dream.

Since 11 September 2001 the racial politics of the 20th-century US has remained securely in place: the language of democracy and justice continues to paper over a deeply segregated, poverty-ridden and unjust society, a glaring contradiction that seems to bore politicians and the media alike. At the same time, politicians and the media have fostered a blitz of public discourse about the relation of the self to the other, of friend to foe, of home to foreigner, since the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City. Bodies seem to be in suspended relation to one another while concepts of citizen and subject are being re-negotiated.

The US, as a national body politic, is publicly figured as “home.” However, in the face of the increasing surveillance and confinement of citizens suspected of being members of terror cells or possibly planning to make “dirty bombs,” who is to be included and nourished within its walls remains ultimately unclear. For the last quarter of a century the “have a nice day” home has been the public face which rendered invisible the home that houses the poor and the black in disproportionate numbers in the largest prison population the world has ever seen. The poor and black not within the penitentiary system are condemned to a life of segregation in devastated inner-city projects and schools that do not school. The invention of an Office of Homeland Defense, the pronouncements of the Bush administration and the language of the media, particularly the *New York Times*, CNN, and *Time* magazine, all spoke to the need to defend “home” from both external *and* internal threats. At “home,” residents have been subject to increasing questions about their legitimacy, a process overdetermined by the language and practices of racialization. After the first six months of apparent intensive labor, the Office of Homeland Defense unveiled a color-coded alert system in which levels of threat were represented as red through orange, even though everyone “knew” that it was brown bodies at home and abroad that represent potential danger.

Since the early days of President George W. Bush’s “Crusade,” which bodies constitute the national body has been marked by contradictions. “Home” is multiple bodies seemingly endlessly divided, a home in which neighbor has become potential enemy. Despite the absolutist implications of “crusading” language, exactly who is to be blessed by God, as opposed to subjected to his wrath (courtesy of the US military), exactly who is to be embraced and comforted while others are to be shunned, spat upon, assaulted, arrested, and even murdered, remains ambiguous and elusive. The endless sea of Stars and Stripes that proclaims the freedom to rule the universe and glories in the “American Way” of domination and consumption of the majority of the earth’s resources waves alongside a constant stream of arrests of US citizens, people’s neighbors, accused of complicity with terrorists. People disappear through the evocation of military rule of law.

My small town American flag waving neighbors in New England (predominantly white) are very satisfied that they live in almost total segregation from the residents of New Haven (predominantly black and Latino), let alone New York City, which many regard as a veritable Sodom and Gomorrah and very few ever visit. Although the public expression of grief from small towns and suburban America for New York City was obviously genuine, “One Nation Under God” has clearly demarcated urban/suburban borders. I doubt that most white Americans imagine their ideal homeland as international, cosmopolitan, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic communities of the type that was destroyed in the World Trade Center Towers or that can be found in metropolitan Los Angeles.

There is clearly much more at stake for the politics of citizenship in the racialized formation of metropolis versus “the American way” than a discussion of the literary representation of any one city can encompass. But, for a number of African American writers of the 20th century, Los Angeles became a figure for the state of the nation. The value that black writers place upon and celebrate in the multiple and complex range of urban ethnicities is at odds not only with the class and racialized political and economic hierarchies of the city which oppresses its black residents but contrary to contemporary dominant models of American citizenship.

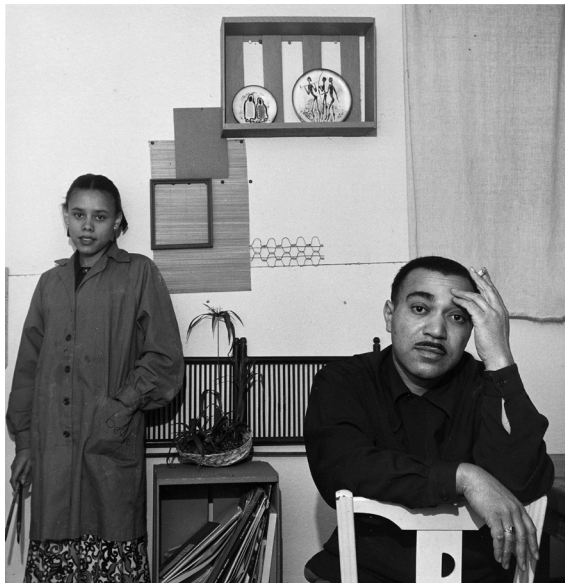
Some brilliant young scholars of the black diaspora are carrying out the excavation of the earliest history of black writers from California by recovering what they wrote in British Columbia, Canada, after they left the US. As Karina Vernon states, “more than half the black population of San Francisco migrated to British Columbia *en masse*” in 1858 when the “California legislature passed a series of racially repressive laws, culminating in the proposal of a bill that would ban outright any further immigration of blacks” into the state. Their writing, in the form of letters, diaries, poems and autobiographies has been recently published⁹ and is, Vernon attests, a “textual legacy . . . [of] the desires and disappointments of black subjects.”¹⁰

In addition to regarding Los Angeles as a significant measure of the systems of racial injustice that permeate the entire country, the work of Chester Himes, Octavia Butler and Walter Mosley offers powerful accounts of the limitations of the 20th-century American dream and acute intellectual analyses of the future of its rampant and unrestrained capitalism. These African American writers explore the complex questions of the relation between transnational, national, regional, and local geographies of self, other, community, and citizenship in Los Angeles.

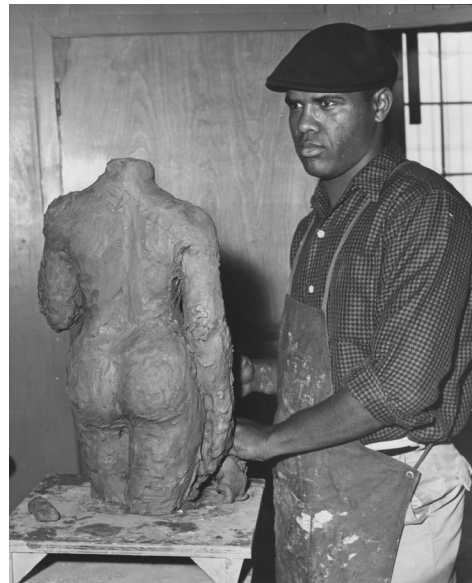
An unconventional history of the literary relation of African American writers to the city could begin with Chester Himes and his novel, *if he hollers let him go*, written and set during World War Two and published in 1945. *if he hollers* presents us with a stark but convincing portrait of the particular racial formation that emerged in Los Angeles during the war and was to shape the city’s future. For Himes, the war years marked a turning point in the development of white supremacy in the country and he imagined a Los Angeles in which the geography of its human relations pre-figured and epitomized

the future of the urban racial formation of the US. Himes created a particular social, political and philosophical landscape of Los Angeles that set an agenda of questions to which contemporary writers, like Butler and Mosley, continue to respond.

The forces of destruction permeate every page of *if he hollers*, but it is not the city's infrastructure that is under siege. Rather, it is the physical, political, and psychological well-being of Los Angeles' minority residents that is being attacked at each and every turn. This Los Angeles, imagined as a literal and metaphorical landscape in which the forces of oppression roam unchecked through its streets, workplaces and neighborhoods, reappears in our contemporary moment in the work of Octavia Butler and Walter Mosley. Each interrogates Los Angeles as a site in which the struggle for economic, political and social justice is a matter of life or death.



Betye Saar (née Brown) and Curtis Tann in the office space of their decorative arts business Brown and Tann, 1951. Photo by Bob Willoughby, courtesy of Betye Saar.



Melvin Edwards in his Los Angeles studio in the 1950s. Courtesy of Melvin Edwards and Alexander Gray Associates.

James Holston and Arjun Appadurai emphasize the importance of perceiving cities as “challenging, diverging from, and even replacing nations as the important space of citizenship—as the lived space not only of its uncertainties but also of its emergent forms.”¹¹ I would argue that the fiction of Himes, Butler and Mosley explore[s] these “uncertainties” and “emergent forms” of the relation between transnational, national, regional, and local geographies of self, other, community, and citizenship.

Chester Himes arrived in Los Angeles in 1940 on a Greyhound bus from Cleveland. What he found there, he declares in his autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt*, was a city that “hurt [him] racially as much as any city [he] had ever known—much more than any city [he] remembered from the South.”¹²

“Figuring the Future in Los(t) Angeles” by Hazel V. Carby, from the digital archive of the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* at the Hammer Museum.

hammer.ucla.edu/now-dig-this/essays/figuring-the-future-in-lost-angeles

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For him, the war years mark a new moment in the racial formation of the US and he constructs a Los Angeles that both pre-figures and epitomizes the new directions of American racism.

if he hollers recreates a specific historical moment in the history of Los Angeles, the 1940s, when migrants streamed into it from all over the country to work in “the huge industrial plants . . . shipyards, refineries, oil wells, steel mills, [and] construction companies.”¹³ The shipyard where the protagonist, Robert Jones, works is a microcosm of the racial formation of the US and a symbol of the shifting demographics of the state; Jones’s co-workers seem to come from every state in the Union except California. The spatial organization of their work sites, categorized by racial and ethnic division, intensifies and concentrates racist hatred.

Jones lives in constant fear in both his sleeping and waking hours. He traces the source of this fear to that of the internment of Japanese Americans rather than to the Jim Crow conditions of life and work in Los Angeles, an experience with which he was all too familiar long before he moved to the city. Jones describes the nature of the racism he had to confront:

When I got here practically the only job a Negro could get was serving in the white folk’s kitchens. But it wasn’t that so much. It was the look on the people’s faces when you asked them about a job. Most of ‘em didn’t say right out they wouldn’t hire me. They just looked so goddam startled that I’d even asked. As if some friendly dog had come in through the door and said, “I can talk.” It shook me.

Maybe it had started then, I’m not sure, or maybe it wasn’t until I’d seen them send the Japanese away that I’d noticed it. Little Rike Oyana singing “God Bless America” and going to Santa Anita with his parents next day. It was taking a man up by the roots and locking him up without a chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me . . . that started me to getting scared.

After that it was everything. It was the look in the white people’s faces when I walked down the streets. It was that crazy, wild-eyed unleashed hatred that the first Jap bomb on Pearl Harbor let loose in a flood. All that tight, crazy feeling of race as thick in the street as gas fumes. Every time I stepped outside I saw a challenge I had to accept or ignore. Everyday I had to make one decision a thousand times: *Is it now? Is now the time?*

I was the same color as the Japanese and I couldn’t tell the difference. “A yellor-bellied Jap” coulda meant me too. I could always feel race trouble, serious trouble, never more than two feet off.¹⁴

I quote this passage at length to highlight the sophistication of Himes's insights into the politics and processes of racializing citizenship. He stages Jones's monologue as a gradual process of recognition. Although Jones's meditation begins with his Jim Crow experiences, he moves quickly to reflect upon the hegemonic ideological strategies of racism intended to categorize, divide and isolate groups of racial "others," strategies which produce his experiences as a "nigger" as distinct from those of a "yeller-bellied Jap." He then acknowledges the relation between these experiences and, finally, he recognizes the common threat to the rights of citizenship for all racialized peoples.

The juxtaposition within the monologue of the young Japanese American boy being taken to an internment camp with his singing of "God Bless America" is not just a poignant evocation of an image but also a political realization, in literary form, of the contradictions between racialization, nationality, and citizenship as they are articulated at this particular historical moment. Himes renders these contradictions visible, ambiguous and fragile. Anxiety ricochets through Jones's vision of a possible common fate for African Americans and Japanese Americans alike, but at the exact moment of realization, Himes also undermines the hegemonic spatial equation of discrete racist ideologies and distinct categories of peoples. He raises to visibility, I would argue, the possibility of renegotiating the "geography of difference."¹⁵

In an argument based upon the premise that the "transnational flow of ideas, goods, images, and persons . . . tends to drive a deeper wedge between national space and its urban centers," Holston and Appadurai identify Los Angeles as a city which "may sustain many aspects of a multi-cultural society and economy at odds with the mainstream ideologies of American identity."¹⁶ Though I would not disagree with this conclusion, I would question the relation of cause and effect in their premise. Rather than trying to trace a causal relation of effect from the global to the local, I would prefer to develop a way of mapping the dialectical relations between a variety of spatial scales that coalesce in one place at a specific moment.¹⁷

if he hollers let him go consistently moves across and through a variety of spatial scales—the local, the national, and the global—each over-determined by ideologies of masculinity, which act *simultaneously* to reassert and reframe relations between processes of racialization and definitions of citizenship. Los Angeles enables Himes to represent how racialization and citizenship coalesce, accumulate, concentrate, intensify and, ultimately, penetrate through the skin to the body of Robert Jones, arguably the most localized site of all. The racial hurts and slurs, the slights and threats, fall like blows battering Jones, circulate throughout his system, pound in his chest and his head and, finally, seep out through his pores, drenching his body in fear. Jones wants nothing more than to kill to bring an end to this constant fear. In the end his wish is fulfilled, though not in a form he either anticipates or desires. At the end of the novel Jones is drafted into the army. His rage, arising from his recognition of the true nature of the threats to his sense of self, manhood and rights as citizen,

is confined, controlled and directed by the state toward a new target. In the future Jones will kill in the interest of the nation that denies his humanity.

As a writer, Chester Himes turns his back on Los Angeles and limps away. It was Los Angeles, he declares in his autobiography, which almost destroyed him:

I had survived the humiliating last five years of the Depression in Cleveland; and still I was entire, complete, functional; my mind was sharp, my reflexes were good, and I was not bitter. But under the mental corrosion of race prejudice in Los Angeles I had become bitter and saturated with hate. . . . I was thirty-one and whole when I went to Los Angeles and thirty-five and shattered when I left to go to New York.¹⁸

Octavia Butler was raised in Los Angeles. All of her novels are concerned with the multiple forms of struggles of its population for and against domination and oppression. Unlike the uncritical masculinity of Chester Himes, Butler is particularly concerned with forms of patriarchal domination, oppression, and exploitation. Patriarchal power and abuse is produced within, reproduces and maintains the destructive capitalist and repressive relations of Los Angeles and its suburbs, but patriarchs in Butler's novels are ultimately either destroyed or superceded by their female offspring and the parasitical nature of patriarchal relations transformed. Butler's work displays a "thoroughly grounded understanding of place, space and social theory" and, alongside that of Samuel R. Delany, is among the most interesting, innovative, and politically challenging contemporary science fiction being published in North America.¹⁹

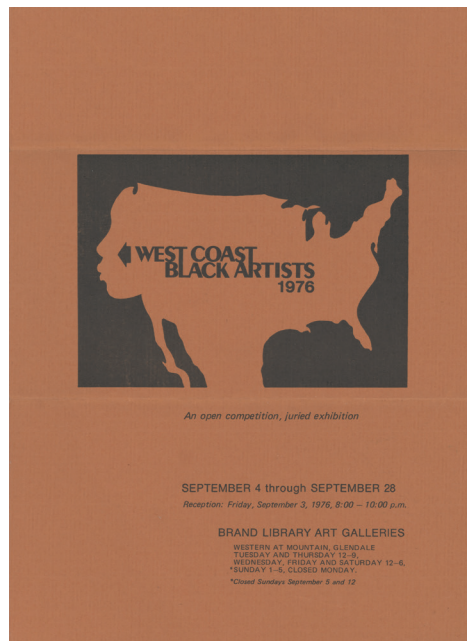
Butler's fiction offers her readers the possibility of seeing the world from multiple perspectives, while rejecting both totalization and relativism. Because they all are set within the landscape of a decaying or destroyed Los Angeles, I will begin my discussion with the novels in her "Patternmaster" series and then turn to *Parable of the Sower*. The "pattern" of the "Patternmaster" series allows Butler to imagine a cartography of subjectivities, a cartography that in her hands becomes a tool in the fictional exploration of partial and imperfect ways of knowing, sensing, and making claims upon others.²⁰ In two of these novels, *The Patternmaster* (1976) and *Mind of My Mind* (1977), telepathy forms a primary mode of connection between and among her characters. Butler forges these connections into a web of possibilities, a web which guides the reader through an exploration of a variety of forms of knowledge. The novels are literary explorations of the use and abuse of ways of knowing structured into relations of power and subjection, control of the self and of others. The "pattern" allows for the representation of both spatial and temporal relations between and among her characters and its

manipulation produces very specific consequences for Butler's fictional geography of individual and communal politics.

Butler creates her telepathic pattern as a web of arteries, an alternative geography and mode of communication to the conventional arteries of the city and its suburbs. Literally, the pattern acts as a set of alternate lifelines to the disintegrating social and political formation of her fictional Los Angeles. In particular, her arteries form a multi-racial, inter-racial, and multi-ethnic web of imaginary relations that replace the segregated spatial pattern of the actual city. At times, the pattern provides alternative avenues of movement to the freeways: Butler's characters are constantly physically and mentally moving between metropolis, suburb, and edge city. This movement, while being multi-layered and multi-dimensional, is also structured in relations of power and control. Those who learn to control it can manipulate the web, and those who travel its threads are often drawn into movement through the will of another. However, the multi-racial, inter-racial, and multi-ethnic mind-body relationships in the conduits of the pattern are also creative and offer the characters an opportunity to leave behind the destructive mind-body relations that characterize the city's segregation and communication systems for which Butler appears to have utter contempt. In *Clay's Ark*, Butler describes the spatial relations of Los Angeles as follows: "Enclaves were islands surrounded by vast, crowded, vulnerable residential areas through which ran sewers of utter lawlessness connecting cesspools—economic ghettos that regularly chewed their inhabitants up and spat the pieces into surrounding communities."²¹

Though the relations between and among members of the pattern are fraught with struggles over power and control, like that of the city and its sewers in which they are embedded, the pattern is a fictional device for theorizing the construction of social relations, communal solidarities, and loyalties. It is only within the parameters of the pattern, for example, that a multi-racial, inter-racial, and multi-ethnic community is represented.

As I have said, all of Butler's novels are primarily concerned with multiple forms of struggles for and against domination and oppression. In the "Patternmaster" series and in her most recent two novels, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), she is particularly concerned with forms of patriarchal domination, oppression, and exploitation—those produced within, reproducing, and maintaining the destructive spatial-temporal relations of Los Angeles and its suburbs.



Flyer for *West Coast Black Artists* juried exhibition, Brand Library Art Galleries, Glendale, California, 1976. Courtesy of Brockman Gallery Archive.

Butler expresses her most elaborate, detailed and powerful condemnation of Los Angeles in *The Parable of the Sower*, a deeply philosophical meditation upon the nature of our society, published in 1993. Set in the near future, the novel begins within the confines of a walled community in 2024 and closes in Humboldt County, California, in 2027. Its protagonist, a young black woman only 15 years old in the opening pages of the novel, is a most unlikely heroine for American fiction. In the racialized and gendered political discourse of the US, black female teenagers are characterized as pathological, dismissed as unworthy citizens and represented in the media predominantly as unwed mothers. In stark contrast and in direct challenge to these ideas, Octavia Butler makes her protagonist, Lauren Olamina, a symbol for the future and the force behind the building of a new society.

Parable of the Sower opens with Lauren trying to be her father's daughter but feeling as if she is living a lie trying to please him, a Baptist minister, her middle-class community, and their God. As readers, we follow her developing analysis of the patriarchal nature of all three. In a reaction against the narrow vision of her community, Lauren embarks on a deep interrogation of the terms and conditions of her citizenship and all aspects of her belonging.

In what appears to be a revision of the opening trope of Alice Walker's (1982) novel, *The Color Purple*, Lauren, instead of writing to the God of her father and her community, records in her diary the invention of her own spiritual entity which she calls God and defines as Change. Lauren dreams of escape but, in *Parable* there is no telepathic web, or pattern, to act as an alternative set of arteries

through which to communicate and build alternative communities. Instead Lauren, at 18, responds to the destruction of her walled community by setting out on the second stage of her journeying, a search for a new way to live. She quickly gathers around her a group of refugees from Southern California and leads them north on foot along the freeways to found a community called Earthseed.

In addition to surmounting her youth and her uncertainty about what she will find outside the walls of her gated community, Lauren must also learn how to transcend her own ability to enter into the minds of others. This ability, called “hyperempathy syndrome,” was caused, Lauren explains, by a drug her mother took: “Paraceto, the smart pill, the Einstein powder,”²² which was invented to halt the deterioration of the mind associated with Alzheimer’s disease but which also boosted the intellectual performance of the young and the healthy. It “became as popular as coffee among students, and, if they meant to compete in any of the highly paid professions, it was as necessary as a knowledge of computers.”²³ As a consequence, Lauren is a “sharer,” one who can feel both the pain and the pleasure of others. However, because in her society there is little pleasure and much pain, the ability becomes a disability, a terrifying and frequently paralyzing response to the agony of others. Yet that which disables her also brings an acute awareness and understanding of social and political conditions. While the members of her family and community put their faith in the walls of their enclaves behind which they hide from the violence of city and suburb alike, Lauren understands that those walls will not protect them from the forces of change that will inevitably engulf them. Rather, she attempts to embrace change by adopting it as her own form of religious belief, or set of doctrines. As one character tries to describe the principles of Lauren’s philosophy: “Some of the faces of her god are biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle and . . . the second law of thermodynamics.”²⁴ It is from this rather eclectic combination of theories that Lauren shapes Earthseed, an alternative ecological, political, and social philosophy and practice out of which she intends to found and build an alternative community.

Whereas the pattern of telepathy in Butler’s earlier novels acts as a postmodern compression of space and time analogous to cyberspace,²⁵ in *Parable of the Sower* Lauren is grounded by the pain of others, though she constantly fights against paralysis, seeking always to act upon what she learns from such pain in order to allow herself and others to transcend it. Her hyperempathy is at one and the same time a bizarre combination of a disabling weight and a source of vision and insight. Structuring the novel by the progress of this struggle allows Butler to create a constant fictional theoretical conversation about the processes that connect the complex relations of self, other, and community, processes that are accessed through the representation of what David Harvey calls “the militant particularism of lived lives.”²⁶

Parable of the Sower, situated only 24 years into the future, is Butler’s imaginative response to, and extension of, the political and social conditions which already exist in Los Angeles and its environs,

conditions with which we are already too familiar but ignore: our most public secrets. The novel explicitly challenges the consequences of the conservative political agenda which has come to dominate the national body politic since the Reagan/Bush (the elder) administrations. Maquiladoras, renamed “borderworks” in the novel, which currently exist along the Mexican border, have in *Parable* proliferated, flourishing along the Canadian border. The reintroduction of slavery by corporations is represented as a logical extension of current exploitative labor practices: the form of peonage under which agricultural workers labor in California at present becomes debt slavery in the novel; and industrial workers in the borderworks are similarly enslaved. In this manner, Butler deliberately crafts an interventionist role for science fiction as she disturbs and challenges the expectations of her readers, demanding that they recognize their responsibility for the shape of the future. The premise of *Parable of the Sower* rests upon a vision of an active citizenship; accepting the exploitative and oppressive economic systems of the present is an act of complicity with the state and determines the systems of re-enslavement of tomorrow.

When Lauren ventures outside of her privileged, middle-class, walled community she sees the broken people that have been excluded from it and who form the residue of their exclusive existence: children with running sores, adults with missing limbs, women recently raped with blood still running down the inside of their thighs, and the dead—merely food for feral dogs. Feeling and sharing their pain is what the walls have prevented Lauren from experiencing or from knowing.

In one of Butler’s earlier novels, *Mind of My Mind*, there is a particularly vivid and horrific scene in a Los Angeles apartment which epitomizes the poverty and desperation hidden behind walls which Butler seeks to bring into view. Children lie in their own filth and a newborn baby, battered to death by its parents, lies covered in maggots. In an intertextual reference, *Parable of the Sower* extends this image to encompass the entire city and its destructive effect on processes of community formation: Los Angeles is abruptly dismissed by Lauren’s father as “a big carcass covered with too many maggots.”²⁷

Lauren invents an alternative community in her imagination and records her imaginings in a diary in poetic form. Earthseed is her response to the pervasive environmental and human disaster that surrounds her and it articulates “the need to plant ourselves far from this dying place.”²⁸ Earthseed is also Lauren’s response to the need to escape from “politicians and business people, failing economies and tortured ecologies.”²⁹ Her reflections and deliberations gradually evolve into a spur to political action.

Parable of the Sower draws upon the form of 19th-century slave narratives while also telling a particularly Californian story and conjuring up a vision of those 19th-century black migrants from San Francisco moving north to Canada in the hope of finding liberty and justice. As an author, Butler abandons Los Angeles as her preferred fictional landscape. Lauren Olamina finally flees north, gathering a multi-racial, inter-racial, and multi-ethnic band of runaways and ex-slaves around her as

she goes. It is interesting to note that Butler has also abandoned Los Angeles as a resident. Having spent her entire life in the metropolis, she has recently moved to Seattle.³⁰ Los Angeles has become the most exportable model of future metropolises, a model that has already been copied from Phoenix, Arizona, and Mexico City to São Paulo, Brazil. But, within the terms of Butler's critique, the model of this metropolis cannot sustain a politically viable future for an inclusive vision of community, self and citizenship.

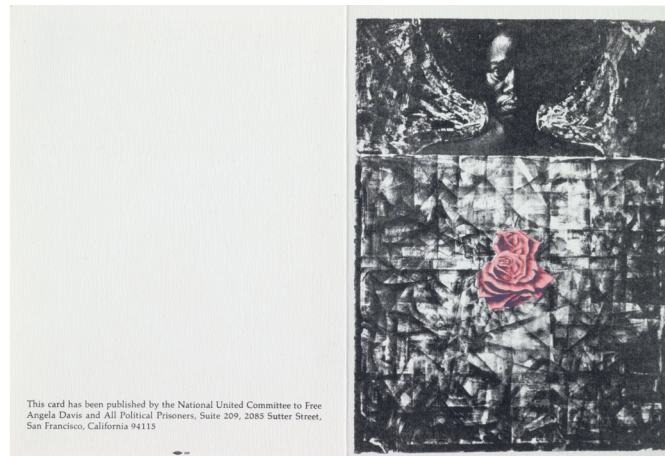
In *Parable of the Sower*, Los Angeles is disintegrating and returning to the desert it once was while the wealthy cling tenaciously to their privileged existence in their fortified outposts. Only the rich can survive intact because only they can afford that luxury. Having abandoned the poor to their fate *outside* the walls of their gated communities except, of course, for those needed as domestic servants, the wealthy concentrate on protecting *themselves* and *their* property in enclaves secured primarily through extensive use of advanced technology and, in case that fails, armed guards. The rich also have exclusive use of the educational system for, while still mandatory, education is no longer free. Only those with plenty of money and resources can obtain police protection because the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) demands high fees for any sort of investigation. Water, being more expensive than gasoline, is sold in small amounts to the poor, those who are homeless and those who are squatters. Consequently, trading in such a valuable commodity makes peddling water an extremely hazardous occupation. Using gasoline to actually fuel a car is strictly a privilege of the wealthy, but in the hands of the poor petrol becomes a weapon. Arsonists burn anything and anyone under the influence of an easily available drug which transforms watching a fire into a source of intense sexual pleasure. This is the future in Butler's Los Angeles.

On the night the last big "Window Wall" television in her neighborhood went dark for good, Lauren records that on its screen: "We saw a dust-dry reservoir and three dead water peddlers with their dirty blue armbands and their heads cut halfway off. And we saw whole blocks of boarded up buildings burning in Los Angeles. Of course, no one would waste water trying to put such fires out."³¹

We are already too familiar with the stark inequalities that exist in Los Angeles with regard to protection from fire. Mike Davis has documented how the entire city's fire-fighting infrastructure, with federal support, has become focused on the protection of the wealthy in their precarious perches in canyons down which the hot, dry Santa Ana winds blow from the desert. In the center of the city, apartment blocks that warehouse the poor are neglected by fire services already stretched to capacity: for them, inadequate or no fire inspections or protection is the norm.³²

The wealthy, as they always have in Los Angeles, simultaneously defy its multi-racial, inter-racial, and multi-ethnic realities and its environmental limitations with an arrogance that is truly breathtaking to behold. Butler deftly exposes the way in which these social contradictions and

environmental disasters are inextricably interdependent, making *Parable of the Sower* a powerful political indictment of contemporary American society. It stands, I would argue, as both a stern reminder of James Baldwin's warnings in *The Fire Next Time* and as a fictional re-enactment of the street cry from Watts in 1965, and South Central Los Angeles in 1992: "let it burn, baby, burn."



Card published by the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners, featuring Charles White's *Love Letter #1*, 1971. Photo by Ed Glendinning, courtesy of Charles White Archives.

Walter Mosley, I would argue, sets up a dialogue with the fiction of Chester Himes and Octavia Butler. But while Butler's protagonist turns her back on Los Angeles and lets it burn so that we can build a more just and equitable future, Mosley, in his novel, *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*, deliberately refuses Butler's resolution and persuades us that the ashes will produce only madness. An insane arsonist writes in his diary:

. . . if I could just get them to see that we got to burn down all this mess we done stacked up and hacked up and shacked up all around us. If they could see the torch of change, the burning of flames all around their eyes. We could come together in fire and steel and blood and love and make ourselves a home. Not this shit, not this TV and church world.³³

But the response to the devastation of the world of South Central Los Angeles, Mosley suggests, is more complicated and difficult than the metaphorical and literal baptism of fire that has touched and irrevocably damaged so many lives. Mosley creates an urban hero, Socrates Fortlow, who emerges from the rejected and criminalized waste of American society and subsequently becomes a figure of compassion who offers hope for finding a way to survive in the streets of Los Angeles.³⁴

The character of Socrates, like so many of Mosley's protagonists, seems to arise from the questions that Chester Himes left unresolved in *if he hollers let him go*. In particular, Easy Rawlins, Paris Murton,

"Figuring the Future in Los(t) Angeles" by Hazel V. Carby, from the digital archive of the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* at the Hammer Museum.

hammer.ucla.edu/now-dig-this/essays/figuring-the-future-in-lost-angeles

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and Socrates all struggle with the fears to which Chester Himes gave voice through Robert Jones.³⁵ But, in addition to the constant fear that haunts black manhood, Socrates is a fulfillment of Robert Jones's desire to murder and rape. When *Always Outnumbered* opens, Socrates has recently been released from jail where he served 27 years for committing both of these crimes. The reader must come to terms immediately with what on the surface appears to be the most unsympathetic of protagonists.

It is a testimony to Mosley's extraordinarily creative imagination that the character of Socrates Fortlow forces readers not only to live with his crimes, as Fortlow himself does on a daily level, but to transcend, while not ignoring, the fear, horror and hatred within him. As Socrates emerges as a philosopher worthy of his name, out of the mouth of the murderer and the rapist come the most profound questions of justice and equality, of rights, responsibility and obligations. As Socrates stumbles, falls, picks himself and others out of the gutter and carries them with him into an uncertain future we, the readers, cannot fail to recognize the limitless depths of his humanity in his fragile but persistent attempts to build a future for himself and others.

Twenty-seven years in jail did not teach Socrates Fortlow how to survive outside of it. What we learn from *Always Outnumbered* is that Socrates' constant struggle to find ways to live is irrevocably bound to his attempts to teach others how to survive, to value living in a way that improves all our chances at life. Socrates finds depths of humanity in himself by discovering the humanity in others, despite the fact that he is a product of a society that denies all of their humanity on a daily level.

If we are to find a new way of being in the world it is important that the work of African American writers, and other so-called "minorities," break the chains with which institutions of education and publishing bind them. Within and without the borders of the US, labels like "minority" or "ethnic" literature ghettoize, marginalize and minimize its significance. Yet, so much of this work is currently carrying the weight of the search for a more ethical and moral sense of responsibility for the state of the nation. It is carrying the weight of hope in the heart of an American empire that is skidding down the path of increasing inhumanity, injustice and disregard, not only for the majority of its own population but for the majority of the residents of this planet.

These fictions are significant acts of dissent: dissent from the perpetuation of injustice in contemporary politics; dissent from the increasing extremes of wealth and poverty; and dissent from the parasitic relation of the US to the earth and its environment. These writers should be regarded as a barometer of the American dream. Re-visioning the "sunshine state" of California as the epitome of the 20th-century version of that dream allows these writers to document how the condition of black existence is an important measure of who paid for and suffered in its shadows.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Rachel Rodewald for her astute reading and careful editing of this article.

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- ¹ Todd S. Purdum, "A 200 Million School That May Never Open," *New York Times*, July 28, 1999, A12. [The school was completed in 2008, at a cost of more than \$400 million, and was renamed the Edward R. Roybal Learning Center. —Ed.]
 - ² It was announced that the project had been abandoned on *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, January 26, 2000.
 - ³ Helen Gao, "Belmont's New Woes: Earthquake Fault Found under Trouble-Plagued School," *Daily News of Los Angeles*, September 14, 2002, N1.
 - ⁴ Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 354.
 - ⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.
 - ⁶ *Ibid.*, 355.
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*, 276.
 - ⁸ Edward Soja, "Transnational Geographies: The Restructuring of Territorial Identities," paper presented at Dartmouth College "Los Angeles, la Frontera, Mexico City" conference, July 30–August 1, 1999.
 - ⁹ Wayne Compton, *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2001).
 - ¹⁰ Karina Vernon, "The Black Arctic: Literature and Subjectivity in Black British Columbia," paper presented at Purdue University Black Atlantic Graduate Symposium, March 21–23, 2002, 3.
 - ¹¹ James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Cities and Citizenship," in James Holston, ed., *Cities and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 3.
 - ¹² Chester Himes, *The Quality of Hurt: The Early Years* (New York: Paragon House, 1971), 73.
 - ¹³ Chester Himes, *if he hollers let him go* (1945; New York: Signet, 1971), 23–24.
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7–8.
 - ¹⁵ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996).
 - ¹⁶ Holston and Appadurai, "Introduction," 3.
 - ¹⁷ I would agree with David Harvey that a socialist politics needs to come to terms with issues of geographic scale—as he puts it: "to negotiate between and link across different spatial scales of social theorizing and political action" (Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, 41–42).
 - ¹⁸ Himes, *The Quality of Hurt*, 76.
 - ¹⁹ See David Harvey (*Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*), who has argued that "theory is never a matter of pure abstraction. *Theoretical practice* must be constructed as a continuous dialectic between the militant particularism of lived lives and a struggle to achieve sufficient critical distance and detachment to formulate global ambitions." Harvey demonstrates how we can utilize fiction in the crucial task of "building a critical, materialist, and thoroughly grounded . . . understanding of places, space and social theory" (p. 44). Novels, he feels, are "not subject to closure in the same way that more analytic forms of thinking are. There are always differences, subtle shifts in structures of feeling," he concludes, "all of which stand to alter the terms of debate and political action even under the most difficult and dire of conditions" (p. 28).
 - ²⁰ Donna Haraway argues that: "the topography of subjectivity is multi-dimensional; so, therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and

therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity; a scientific knower seeks the subject position not of identity but of objectivity; that is of partial connection" (Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* [New York: Routledge, 1991], quoted in Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, 284).

²¹ Octavia Butler, *Clay's Ark* (New York: Warner Books, 1984), 34. *Clay's Ark* concerns the transmission of disease organisms brought back to earth by a lone survivor of a space mission. The processes of transmission and spread of these organisms provide Butler with literary opportunities to discuss the complex relations of self and other and the struggles for power and control that are similar to her use of the pattern.

²² Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), 11.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

²⁵ Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, 245.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁷ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁰ Butler died in 2006. —Ed.

³¹ Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 18.

³² Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 93–148.

³³ Walter Mosley, *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 181.

³⁴ Mosley, *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*.

³⁵ The Easy Rawlins series includes *Devil in a Blue Dress*, *A Red Death*, *Black Betty*, and most recently *Bad Boy Brawley Brown*. Paris Minton is the protagonist in *Fearless Jones*.