Gods and Monsters: Power Dynamics in the Works of Herbert and Butler

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I certify that I have read *Gods and Monsters: Power Dynamics in the Works of Herbert and Butler* by Samer Ghassan Dabit, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English Literature at San Francisco State University.

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This thesis examines the works of Frank Herbert, primarily *Dune* and *Dune Messiah*, as well as the works of Octavia Butler, primarily *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, in order to consider their representations of violence and paternalism as an inevitable consequence of injecting religious elements into political movements. This thesis argues that Herbert and Butler through an exploration of power dynamics, including the racial, political, gendered, and theological, caution against the potential colonial reverberations of particular methods of self-preservation, namely following or becoming a charismatic leader. It additionally analyzes Herbert and Butler’s exploration of their characters’ psychology under traumatic circumstances and the ways in which established dynamics of power can be reinforced by movements intended to be liberatory.
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Introduction and Inspiration

When first embarking upon the brainstorming and research process for my culminating thesis, I initially looked back on a series of observations I had made when applying to San Francisco State University’s M.A in English Literature program during the 2020 Democratic Party presidential primary. At that time, I began to notice a series of implications relating to linguistic shifts employed by my left-leaning peers when speaking about particular political figures who aligned with their views, including presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, amongst others. The people I spoke to, often my own age and of similar ideological dispositions, seemed to be elevating these figures into the role of a political savior working to liberate the socially and economically disenfranchised, rather than acknowledging them as fallible human beings working within corrupt systems. Both these figures were self-aware of the cults of personality forming around them and worked to rhetorically counteract it through an emphasis on engaging their followers in grassroots organizing. Bernie Sanders’ “Not Me. Us.” campaign slogan represented this resistance, insisting that the political stakes were higher than personal ambition, party affiliation, or popularity. Yet, similarly to the ways in which I had observed Trump supporters venerate and deify their representative beyond reason, I recognized a deep disconnect between the rhetoric of these figures when held up against the public discourse that would inevitably surround their coverage. It seemed that, in spite of their best efforts, these reluctant saviors were thrust into positions as liberators that were incongruent with the limitations of their power and sway and independent of their place on the political spectrum.
Although I was personally in full support of Sanders’ campaign and even volunteered to text bank for him, I recognized the political and linguistic elevation of him by his most fervent followers both online and in real life. I began to notice that he would often be referred to in familial terms from different languages of often marginalized racial groups, such as “Amo Bernie” and “Tio Bernie.” The implication of this was that Bernie Sanders was an honorary member of the marginalized groups he sought to politically represent. I recall watching videos of his speeches which had been edited to be set to the backdrop of inspirational emotional music meant to create an association between Sanders and abstract concepts of hope and equity. I began to realize that just as Trump had become a conduit for polarization and grievance politics, Sanders’ public image, through no intent of his own, grew into one of an idolized superhero who could do no wrong. Alternatively, to his detractors, he became a dangerous boogeyman for setting out to challenge institutional and cultural norms. Contrastingly, President Trump seemed to be relishing in and directly feeding his supporters’ lionization of him, complicating my initial understanding of movements built around charismatic leadership by introducing the idea of weaponizing affection. Gradually, I became aware that this phenomenon in which individuals outsource their desires and grievances onto a charismatic leader they see as representative of their struggles and interests is a bipartisan one with deep historical, political, and literary roots.

These observations were not necessarily original nor groundbreaking, as the Trump administration had exemplified the ways in which rhetoric and branding could be weaponized to build a loyal following around a particular personality, blurring the lines between religious and political affiliation. They did, however, set my initial research process into motion by inciting an interest in the human inclination towards following and figuratively worshiping leaders who are
in some way charismatic. For the sake of my research, I developed a particular definition of “charismatic” as a human attribute by which individuals embody being somehow personally compelling enough to inspire devotion in potential followers, whether it be through intentionally or unintentionally establishing relatability, similar goals, and grievances, or an appealing vision of futurity that aligns with central values. I also grew more self-aware about my own complicity in this phenomenon and came to recognize the ways in which our media apparatus and social-media driven lives often ensure far-reaching susceptibility to the mystique of these individuals. Ultimately, my focus developed into broader questioning of the ways in which literary narratives reflect the unholy marriage of religion and politics in our contemporary landscape, particularly through the employment of linguistic modes and directly appealing to groups of people who feel forgotten, underappreciated, and adrift in an accelerating world.

I developed my background knowledge of a myriad of historical instances which I would describe as messianic or relating to a particular figure being elevated or elevating themselves into the role of savior. During this process, I came to the realization that mobilizing supporters through charm, oration, and personal mythology was not necessarily limited to political campaigns and movements but extended beyond to a variety of industries and contexts. My research included a number of texts relating to cults and their inception, ranging from infamous examples such as Jim Jones’ Jonestown settlement in Guyana which resulted in a massacre of hundreds to more insidious, but troublingly commonplace iterations of religious language, misinformation, and “us versus them” dichotomies that manifest on social media. This can be seen in numerous examples such as the development of the QAnon political movement around disproven conspiracy theories. I developed a particular interest in how religious and social justice
vernacular could be appropriated to appeal to ideologically vulnerable people and potentially radicalize them. This includes the ways in which Jim Jones utilized the language of desegregation to build a racially diverse congregation at a time when Black people were often denied entry to places of worship, for example. At this point, however, I continued to grapple with a variety of interlocking concepts that had yet to be synthesized into a congruous proposal and lacked a literary object through which my analysis could be expressed.

In searching for texts I could use to interpret these dynamics of power and their various manifestations throughout history, I gravitated towards the speculative genre and was confronted with a startling familiarity of tropes and signifiers that seemed to mirror contemporary headlines. In the literary works of Frank Herbert, author of the Dune series, and Octavia Butler, author of the Earthseed series, I found a multitude of corollaries and similarities that seemed to naturally position the texts within a larger conversation with one another. In particular, one focused upon the linguistic and interpersonal methods through which religious political movements can be built, and the cyclical nature of power across history. Both texts are incomplete science fiction epics whose impact on the genre as a whole is incontrovertible. Herbert focuses upon a hyperprivileged youth in Paul Atreides, whose inherent superpowers and leveraging of institutional knowledge over an Indigenous nomadic group launches an interplanetary holy war. Meanwhile, Butler presents the process of accruing power from an outsider perspective through Lauren Olamina, who is Black, female, and disabled. Butler elucidates Lauren’s forays into creating a new religion through writing original scripture by emphasizing her overwhelming drive to overcome social disadvantages. In doing this, she highlights the susceptibility of marginalized people to unintentionally reinforce exploitative systems and explores the methods
through which marginalized identity intersects with power. In leveraging their respective backgrounds and abilities, these two charismatic figures become conduits of hope and indignation in environments defined by upheaval, similar to the political figures that inspired my initial spark. What made these characters most interesting to me was that rather than being portrayed by Herbert and Butler as morally bankrupt, their efforts seemed alternatingly genuine and calculated, presumably necessary techniques for survival that inevitably played into human nature.

I choose to focus on the works of Frank Herbert and Octavia Butler primarily because I recognize the utility of speculative fiction in tracing the ultimate trajectory and nuance of human impulse. By utilizing allegorical elements that comment upon both contemporary and historical issues of social and political note, Herbert and Butler’s works express universally relevant motifs regarding the human condition, attesting to their ubiquity within the zeitgeist. Both these writers distinguish themselves within the field of the speculative genre by sidelining traditional themes of technological advancement in favor of omnipresent issues of race, religion, and politics. This stylistic choice safeguards their work from obsolescence relative to other classic science fiction narratives and centers visions of futurity by capturing historical perspectives of marginalization. In this sense, both the *Dune* and *Earthseed* series are constructed in a way that connotes a sense of discomforting familiarity, which invites the reader to draw parallels between envisioned worlds and our own, fictionalized narratives of understated manipulation and actual iterations of the same phenomenon.

Take, for example, the now infamous events of Theranos, a health technology company whose Chief Executive Officer Elizabeth Holmes utilized methods of charismatic leadership to
entice powerful and influential investors into funding nonexistent forms of blood technology. As a woman appealing to a primarily male Silicon Valley audience, Elizabeth Holmes adopted established methods of style and communication to amass credibility and minimize the perception of her femininity, an assumed vulnerability based on her context and field. By tailoring her wardrobe of black turtleneck sweaters to explicitly mimic the habitual attire of Steve Jobs and dramatically lowering her voice, Holmes performed an androgynous image. As a result, Holmes appealed to notions of familiarity and relatibility in audiences that were not necessarily predisposed to following a female leader. I argue, therefore, that adaptability and code-switching based on context and audience are a necessity for maintaining the relatibility, familiarity, and perceived charm that often serve as the foundation of charisma. After all, what proves to be charismatic and alluring to one audience may prove grotesque to another based on differing value systems and aesthetic preferences. As such, I argue that charismatic leaders, both in the speculative genre and in real life, must persistently grapple with their relation to systems of power and privilege to craft an appealing public persona that becomes commonly seen as the key to unlocking an egalitarian vision of futurity regardless of actual intentions. Charismatic leaders, therefore, are inherently representative of a larger ideological vision, often carefully crafted to appeal to the economic, political, and sociological desires of potential followers. This ability to influence wide masses of people, I argue, is a heavy burden to bear, and allows for possibilities of both godhood and monstrousness.

1 See cited article by Theis for further reading and analysis of Holmes.
In naming my thesis *Gods and Monsters*, I make direct reference to a famous quotation from the cult classic 1935 film *Bride of Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale. This rendition was inspired by Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel and its preoccupation with the phenomenon of man seeking to emulate God. In this film, the character Dr. Pretorius proposes to Dr. Frankenstein a toast “to a new world of gods and monsters” (Whale 20:39-20:44). This is both an aesthetic and argumentative choice, as it ties my project to a cinematic cultural touchstone focused on similar themes. This foundation additionally connects to my central argument regarding Frank Herbert and Octavia Butler’s respective protagonists. I contend that just like Dr. Frankenstein, Paul Atreides and Lauren Olamina seek to transcend the perceived limitations of their humanity and material conditions by aspiring toward godhood as a way of responding to the monstrousness of their worlds. In doing so, however, they recreate similar manifestations of monstrousness in the movements they build, as witnessed by the consequences of their actions which fall upon their followers and loved ones. I argue that monstrousness can take a myriad of damaging forms, including but not limited to religious violence, the permeation of paternalism and dogmatism, and the recreation of the circumstances which drive followers to seek guidance and structure in the first place.

Consequently, I posit that both Herbert and Butler present power as a corrupting influence to which no group or leader is immune, regardless of intention, and as a cyclical force through which history repeats itself. I additionally seek to engage with and complicate the different methods through which credibility and charisma are established between followers and leaders in these narratives. This includes the thorough demonstration of relatability and “insider” group status, appeals to institutions of power, and the obfuscation as well as occasional
embracing of marginalized identity. Through my title choice, I actively invited my readers to ponder a particular question that both Herbert and Butler engage with through their protagonists: When has man playing God ever worked out well for man or God?

Chapter 1: Introducing Dune

It is difficult to overstate the reverberating impact and transformative nature of Frank Herbert’s 1965 science-fiction epic Dune, a watershed novel that has provided a mainstream cultural touchstone for the genre,\(^2\) spawning an extensive multimedia franchise of sequels, spin-offs, and screen adaptations. Herbert’s eminently dense work grapples with a multitude of complex heady themes, including the iterative nature of colonialism and religious indoctrination, and the utility of cultural and linguistic modes in wielding socio-political power. Dune’s imagery of a nearly uninhabitable desert landscape and emphasis on the inevitable costs of unregulated self-preservation has inspired a myriad of notable entries within the science-fiction genre, including George Lucas’ Star Wars saga and as will become more relevant later on, the works of Octavia Butler. In turn, Herbert drew inspiration from the historical colonization of majority Arab and Muslim countries under the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate system, and the rise of Middle Eastern oil production throughout the 1950s. Dune as a speculative text is replete

\(^2\) I would posit that the continued popularity and sense of universality of Dune in part stems from Herbert’s lack of emphasis on technological advancement in the text, preventing it from becoming dated in the same way many other science fiction novels of his era have.
with narrative and thematic elements analogous to real geopolitical events set against an intergalactic backdrop twenty thousand years into the future.

In this sense, *Dune*’s fantastical turns of plot and ever-expanding cast of characters are buoyed by patterns of Islamic iconography and Arabic linguistic modes to interrogate the experience of colonial rule under a distant foreign empire. To do this, Herbert writes *Dune* from the perspective of the colonizer, inquiring into both coercive and personable approaches that reproduce hegemony, including hostile occupation and proselytism. In turn, he explicates the dangerous consequences of introducing religious elements into political movements and calls into question the methods through which self-preservation is ensured. Timothy O’Reilly, in his aptly titled 1981 biography; *Frank Herbert*, quotes Herbert’s conception of *Dune* as a plan “to do a long novel about the messianic convulsions which periodically inflict themselves on human societies. I had this idea that superheroes were disastrous for humans.” Herbert’s particular distrust of charismatic leadership and diplomatic figures as arbiters of faith-based movements undergirds much of *Dune*, as he utilizes a protagonist caught between conflicting interests and factions of power to interrogate the dynamics of power in savior narratives. Consequently, he traces the implications of a monarch’s claim to divinity and lack of accountability to earthly figures of authority to their inevitable conclusions: continuing cycles of violence and subjugation of those without access to means of power and capital.

Herbert chronicles the journey of the central protagonist, Paul Atreides, the young scion of an ancient feudal house. His exploitation of the desert planet Arrakis’ natural spice resources and Indigenous peoples to seek revenge and regain his royal position results in permanent alterations to the economic and theological power dynamics of his universe. Paul leverages his
uniquely privileged position within institutional hierarchies to infiltrate, manipulate, and radicalize the historically dehumanized Fremen people for his gain. In doing so, Paul strives towards both symbolic and metaphysical godhood, transcending his mortal limitations at the cost of humanity. I assert that Herbert focuses on gradual dehumanization in Paul’s development as a side effect of acquiring and maintaining power to highlight the cost of seizing autonomy from would-be worshippers and perpetuating cycles of racial and religious violence. Kevin Mulcahy contextualizes *Dune* through the Cold War, noting the subversive nature of the narrative relating to “a presidential campaign centered around fears of a missile gap,” and proposing that “Herbert dramatizes in *Dune* an unpleasant political truth: people cannot free themselves of Machiavellian leaders until they first free themselves of their desire to be led.” Herbert engages with the dangers charismatic influence poses to both those who use it as a method of leadership and those who follow said leaders for guidance and structure. This engagement holds up a mirror to real colonial oppression and religious incultation by exploring Orientalist tropes, attitudes, and imagery. Dr. Willis E. McNelly, a close friend of Herbert and author of *The Dune Encyclopedia*, posits that *Dune* “can be construed as a thinly veiled allegory of our world’s insatiable appetite for oil and other petroleum products. (After all, Arrakis can be read as “Iraq,” “melange” may be a metaphor for oil, and so on.)” (371). These allegorical elements are complicated by the cultural ties and advanced understanding the Fremen possess concerning their planet’s most precious resource, the spice. Herbert’s *Dune* does not employ direct one-to-one comparisons, nor can it be defined with a singular didactic motive. Rather, the reading and analysis of these texts allow for the study of the acceleration of religious and political extremism under militarized conquest,
providing deep insight into the potential utilities and ramifications of material scarcity, ideological radicalization, and cultural knowledge in amassing impactful uprisings.

**Dual Legacies: Introducing Paul Atreides**

To understand the narrative and epistemic trajectory of *Dune*, it is imperative to first explore the background of its lead character, Paul Atreides. Paul is introduced to readers of *Dune* as the sole inheritor of a pair of conflicting legacies, which provide alternate but not mutually exclusive paths to accruing influence. Described as ‘small for his age,’” Paul is not intrinsically noteworthy (Herbert 4). In truth, he is primarily significant due to the circumstances of his birth and upbringing and the particular characteristics this backdrop has instilled in him. As the teenage son of the charming oligarch Duke Leto Atreides, Paul is raised with intense privilege and responsibility to uphold the honor and political ascendancy of his house. These attributes are exemplified by his efforts towards learning to wield power and master diplomacy through his father’s tutelage. Through his instruction, Paul is able to develop a similar charm offensive approach to statecraft and ability to captivate potential allies. Paul is deeply enmeshed in the public relations and inner workings of House Atreides while completing rigorous training in combat and statesmanship. This legacy, which stems from the paternal line, represents the political half of the binary Paul is saddled with.

However, his life is further complicated by a second birthright passed on through the maternal line. Paul’s mother is Lady Jessica, royal concubine and member of the religious Bene Gesserit Sisterhood, an ancient order who develops a mutualistic relationship of power with the ruling houses of the Imperium not unlike the role of the Church during the era of European feudalism. Through lifelong training, including extreme physical and mental conditioning,
members of the Sisterhood can develop seemingly superhuman abilities, such as controlling the gender of their unborn children and detecting lies. While they operate under the guise of providing invaluable services to the elite, training their daughters, and providing for members as potential wives and mistresses, their exact motives remain vague to the wider public. Herbert frames the Sisterhood as a religious force that has weaponized its necessity to systems of power to leverage ideological influence wherever possible under the guise of altruism and tradition. In this sense, they engage in both ideological and interpersonal warfare, patterns that repeat through Paul’s ascent to metaphorical godhood. Gradually, it is revealed that the Sisterhood is orchestrating a multigenerational breeding program, filtering through particular strands of human genetics like “sand through a screen,” and combining them to eventually engineer an evolved superbeing, presumably Paul, meant to stabilize humanity for generations to come (Herbert 15). This hypothetical being, the Kwizats Haderach, meant to be the first male able to master Bene Gesserit skills, references the Hebrew term “Kefitzat Haderech,” which roughly translates to “leap forward” or “contraction of the road.”³ Representing an acceleration of human evolution, this figure is predicted by the Sisterhood to be capable of prophetic feats beyond their ability, such as seeing into both the past and the future. Although stability is positioned as an ultimate good that will force threats to the status quo into submission, it requires a great deal of sacrifice and ironically the ability to rapidly move between methods of communication, perception, and

³ The term’s connotations of traveling rapidly between two distant places is given particular salience in Dune because of Herbert’s emphasis on space travel and ensuring accessibility to fueling resources. The acceleration of spiritual and physical mobility become closely intertwined throughout Herbert’s narrative.
self-identification. As the latest product of this scheme, Paul is born into a context of warring power dynamics beyond his control and is trained in vocal modulation and measured performance by his mother, while he is discreetly monitored by the superiors of the Sisterhood to achieve cosmic feats. These circumstances fuel Paul’s uniquely inflated sense of drive and purpose because as an only child at the novel’s start, he is the vessel through which House Atreides and the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood are ensuring the survival of their political, economic, and metaphysical ambitions. Lorenzo DiTomasso writes the following:

Clearly, Paul is a historically spawned and highly influential catalyst who sparks the awesome inertial forces of history into motion and as such is completely intertwined with the already-present institutions and structures he will use in his rise to godhood.

(DiTomaso 321)

Keeping DiTomasso’s description of historical fruition and leveraging of systemic advantage in mind, we can recognize the role Paul’s privilege plays in the development of his heightened sense of exceptionalism, turning him into a tinderbox of entitlement legitimized by competency and birthright. This disposition serves as the foundation of his character arc; he is able to shape the trajectory of history by convincing others of his perceived unique expertise. He has close ties to multiple hierarchical institutions, a particular combination of formal education, informal training, and dual claims to divinity both through the Dukedom and the potency of his evolving metaphysical skills. This ability to exert inherited privilege to assert perceptions of competency and amass power and influence as a result mirrors several contemporary figures, including Donald Trump and Elon Musk. Herbert, therefore, argues that those who are primed to wield power will be inclined to do so, resulting in cyclical iterations of interchangeable individuals
who are compromised and corrupted by their ability to influence events and people beyond their purview.

From his inception, Paul simultaneously reaffirms and threatens existing power structures as his mother’s choice to bear a son to inherit the Dukedom disrupts the breeding program sequence which requires a daughter. Herbert positions even this as an implicit calculation of power and pride on the part of Jessica as a son will be guaranteed political power and legitimize her social standing and connection to House Atreides even if she is widowed and may still result in the genetic superbeing the Sisterhood desires. Boundaries of friction between the systems they work within shape Paul’s family structure, although he excels in both political and mystical training. He aspires to be a worthy heir to the Duke who only tolerates his beloved concubine’s religious affiliations and is rarely given the opportunity to be at ease or falter. These tensions of seemingly conflicting priorities and dual legacies result in an individual proficient in code-switching, alternating between different personas to please figures of authority and assert dominance disregarding context. Herbert includes numerous axioms of Bene Gesserit teachings throughout the novel which members use as sources of wisdom and courage, one of which reads “Survival is the ability to swim in strange water” (504). I argue that this particular belief manifests in adaptability as a core tenet of self-preservation regardless of reverberating impacts, instilling in students of these teachings a willingness to conceal the truth and take advantage of the good faith of others. Throughout Dune, Paul shifts between various personas based on his surroundings to impact how he is perceived, using the name Usul, which is Arabic for “base of the pillar,” amongst the Fremen to relay connotations of stability and contributing to larger structures. The implications of this name appeal directly to Fremen sensibilities of communal
responsibility, situting Paul as familiar rather than alien and making them more likely to accept him as a tribe member. This penchant for swift maneuvering and discrete manipulation is part and parcel of Paul’s upbringing; he has been raised to rule and has been given a unique skill set and background that enables him to stockpile the loyalty of others similarly to his father. Paul masters the Duke’s methods of conveying “an air of bravura” regardless of his ability to follow through, carrying himself with performative bravado even in his eventual reduced circumstances of seeking asylum in the desert (Herbert 168). This allows him to convey an air of assured control even as a refugee and aids him in endearing himself to potential followers such as the Fremen and surviving members of the Duke’s court. I argue that Herbert represents Paul as following in his ancestral footsteps, fulfilling destinies foisted upon him from birth, not to absolve him of personal responsibility but to recognize the dynamics of power that are passed down intergenerationally.

The steady diet of Atreides mythology and propaganda that Paul is fed expedites his outlook; Herbert emphasizes the lineage’s descent from the people of Greece, along with their reputation for proficiency in war, scrupulous governance, and unrestrained courage. The mythos of Paul’s grandfather, a legendary matador whose murderer remains “mounted on a polished board” as a public display of intimidation strengthens these connotations (Herbert 77). These symbols contribute to the larger mythology manufactured by House Atreides to construct the public perception of their role in Imperial politics as a justified force for positive change. By cultivating distinction for charming public faces, the Atreides display adroitness in creating compelling narratives, even using their infamous rivals, House Harkonnen, who are known for their brutality and deceitfulness, as natural points of comparison. This framework protects the
Atreides from accountability, leading Paul to develop an egoistic sense of infallibility and a willingness to manipulate and command others under the guise of altruism. Herbert subverts heroic archetypes through Paul’s embrace of theocratic autocracy, interrogating the role white-coded savior narratives play in fortifying hegemonic systems. The stories Paul is told about himself and his role within hierarchical institutions, namely that he is uniquely capable and divinely called upon to lead the Fremen into salvation and regain his rightful seat, lay the groundwork for him to combine his dual legacies into an effectual yet menacing singular role: a mortal god. Paul develops an uncritical reverence for his paternal lineage because he is raised within a framework of righteousness, one that shields him from his family’s corrupt role in perpetuating the same exploitative imperial methods as House Harkonnen.

**Regime after Regime (An Introduction to Desert Power)**

Although the aesthetics and tactics of House Atreides and House Harkonnen are diametrically opposed, their regimes on Arrakis and impact on the Indigenous Fremen showcase a myriad of similarities between the two. Duke Leto positions himself as a benevolent leader who “rules with the consent of the governed,” tolerating the traditions and territories of the Fremen people and working to earn their approval (Herbert 149). Although the Fremen are publicly maligned, the Duke’s gestures towards acknowledging their humanity contribute to zealous loyalty in his advisors and a widespread progressive reputation. A calculated charisma is framed as central to the Duke’s methods of governance and political strategy; this is bolstered through his unofficial union with Lady Jessica and her abilities to recognize deception in his allies and rivals. His decision to remain unmarried is politically advantageous as it preserves the
possibility of gaining influence through marrying a highborn, yet genuine displays of affection
towards his son and courtesan humanize him.

Herbert contrasts the Duke’s characterization with his political foil, Baron Harkonnen, a
figure aligned with the grotesque through his underhanded schemes, morbid obesity, and
pedophilia. Whereas the Baron views the Fremen as an obstacle to profit and expresses racialized
animus, referring to them in dehumanizing terms such as “scum” and “mongrel,” the Duke
begrudgingly respects their resiliency, even to the extent of considering their efficacy in his plans
for Arrakis (Herbert 32-33). Herbert illustrates this with his proposal for maintaining economic
dominance on Arrakis through rapid production of allegiance, building a framework based on the
previously overseen fishing and agricultural industries. He explains to Paul that “Our
supremacy...depended on sea and air power...we must develop something I choose to call desert
power” (Herbert 145). The Duke views “desert power” as encompassing the spice reserves and
its rightful stewards, reducing an entire people to geopolitical props and belying the same
disregard for their autonomy the Baron displays in ham-fisted strategies of bombing them into
submission. Although his calculations situate the Fremen as their key to success, the Duke poses
no structural threat to the continued extortion of their resources, labor, knowledge, and lives. He
offers their representative, Stilgar, a reprieve from raids and land encroachment in exchange for
an opportunity to send an emissary to study their civilization. However, this action is a
transactional play for the Fremen’s loyalty and information valuable to his ongoing imperialist
enterprise rather than a humanitarian mission. Herbert frames the Duke’s charm offensive as
merely appropriating the aesthetic of progressive values without adequately challenging the
status quo.
Whereas Paul’s foray into the Fremen community is a continuation of the Duke’s political strategy wherein he establishes goodwill intending to produce fealty, the Harkonnens instead contrastingly choose to employ more callous methods. They instead tyrannically enforce spice production and restrict the Fremen’s resistance through targeted raids, a strategy that backfires and radicalizes them into “a pool of troops already conditioned to the bitterest survival training” (Herbert 607). The sophistication and nuance of the Atreides strategy emphasize personability and hollow gestures towards progress and is mediated through the ancestral lore their House publicly disseminates and privately internalizes. This process frames the issues of Arrakis as a challenge to overcome, essentially another unruly bull to tame into submission. Yet the ultimate goals remain consistent across both the Atreides and Harkonnen regimes: feudal supremacy must be enforced, and the mining operation must maximize output regardless of ramifications on the Fremen and environmental fallout. DiTomasso writes that “the tenets of the twin pillars of inequality and feudal hierarchism are driven into...the members of the nobility or other power groups, not excepting Duke Leto and Paul. Clearly, father and son are in command...they use their resources, human or otherwise” (321). This contributes to the aforementioned framework of righteousness the Atreides work within; they reduce the Fremen to a potential battlefield advantage and engage with them primarily in transactional terms, showcasing little empathy for their plight.

The dividing lines between Houses Harkonnen and Atreides are further blurred when Paul realizes that Jessica is the Baron’s biological daughter, representing both blood ties and ideological similarities that call into question their ancestral myths and the “purity” of their opposing approaches to governance. What distinguishes the Atreides regime and proves to be the
undoing of Duke Leto’s ascent is the emphasis on charisma, an asset that engenders a sense of fear in political rivals who would rather compete against the widely abhorred Baron Harkonnen for power. The Baron fails to inspire loyalty (or even adequate amounts of fear) in members of his own family, remaining vigilant against assassination attempts, and so he does not pose the same threat to existing dynamics of power as the Duke. Analysis of the similarities in outcome and motivation between the two regimes on Arrakis is crucial in dismantling our understanding of charismatic leadership and complicating our reading of Dune. The aesthetic, interpersonal, and geopolitical decisions made by the Atreides may position them as the lesser of two evils, but they also result in an insidious penetration of cultural and religious spaces and light the tinderbox created by the Harkonnens' unflinching violence against the Fremen. Through a thematic exploration of interpersonal and political influence, Herbert invites readers of Dune to question the wider power dynamics in exchanges between leaders and followers, colonizers and the colonized, righteous savior and racialized other.

Desert Power, Continued

Much has been made of Herbert’s decision to include cultural and linguistic elements of Eastern societies when portraying the desert planet Arrakis and its Indigenous people, the Fremen (ironically derived from “free men”). Their portrayal is deeply rooted in the lifestyle of the nomadic Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and hunter-gatherer groups in Southern Africa such as the San peoples. However, their characterization as a brutalized racial minority that worships and is misled by an autocrat into launching a holy war naturally invites accusations of perpetuating orientalism. This critique hinges on how Herbert involves stereotypical Western representation of the East that promotes imperialist attitudes and represents particular ethnic
minorities as primitive, irrational, and inherently inferior. In his cultural critique titled *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes the Western conceptualization of the East as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1). To be sure, *Dune*’s portrayal of Arrakis has each of these in spades. For example, the reader is introduced to the Fremen through the racial outsider perspectives of Paul and Lady Jessica, who are startled and intrigued by their “blue within blue eyes” (Herbert 24).  

4 This otherworldly characteristic, derived from regular ingestion of the spice, has a genre-specific justification within the plot, but also alienates the Fremen to an Atreides audience who are shocked to recognize familiar, white-coded physiognomy in an ethnic minority deemed exotic and “other.” The Atreides’ introduction to Arrakis emphasizes their culture shock, particularly when it comes to material scarcity. The Atreides are unaccustomed to the idea of water as a limited resource, having reigned over an oceanic planet, and only know of the Fremen through mediated news sources and legend. Said describes the Orient as:

...the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other...help[ing] to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience... (1-2)

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4 To clarify, this description is not of a racial characteristic. Rather, it indicates blue pupils within blue irises, providing connotations of otherworldliness to accentuate cultural differences between spice ingestion on Arrakis and elsewhere. As other characters become reliant on the spice, they, too, gain this trait.
Again, this description of a racialized other rich in nonrenewable resources without which the dominant culture cannot thrive fits the context of *Dune*. Given that Arrakis is the only known location of the valuable spice, Melange, an essential tool utilized as fuel for space travel and an addictive recreational stimulant, the spice is an economic asset that drives the warring political factions of the imperial feudal system to interchangeably mine and exploit Arrakis. Ultimately, this leaves the Fremen to suffer through the resulting chaos of the ongoing regime change. Consequently, the Fremen experience racialization at the hands of foreign settlers, are given little role in governing their planet, and struggle to maintain the boundaries of their land. I argue that their experiences of militarization and lack of stable access to material resources aside from the spice make the Fremen ideologically fertile ground, fueled by injustice and desperate enough to try anything. This is not Herbert commenting on the Fremen’s particular failure to see through Paul and Jessica’s deceit, but rather the long-term ramifications of oppressive colonial rule on cultural values of survival and its costs.

Arrakis also fulfills Said’s description of the Orient as a “contrasting image” as its landscape and social fabric constitute a sociopolitical danger to the unprepared, facets that intimidate and titillate an aristocracy accustomed to rigid hierarchy and economic stability. The Fremen are not necessarily eroticized, but their attitudes regarding sexuality, the rearing of children, and combat are distinguished from those of the denizens of the white-coded ruling class. These differences emphasize practicality and the communal good. Moreover, their religious beliefs stem from a combination of Sunni Islam and Zen Buddhism, and their skin is consistently described as “leathery” and darkened from increased exposure to the sun (Herbert 207). As the corroborating evidence continues to pile up, we must ask ourselves: Does Herbert’s
inclusion of orientalist tropes and messaging makes Dune an “orientalist text?” In delineating his definition of orientalism, Said writes that:

“It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts...an elaboration...of a basic geographic distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident)” (12).

Although the Fremen are marginalized and manipulated throughout the narrative of Dune, Herbert’s work stares unflinchingly into the long-term ramifications occupation and mining have on their lives and portrays their culture as nuanced and storied even from Paul’s perspective. Rather than simply functioning as emissaries of the “unequal half,” the Fremen exemplify the importance of ecological and cultural knowledge to surviving in the face of insurmountable odds. Their adept system of water conservation and ability to ride the native sandworms undermine and subvert the Atreides’ expectations of primitiveness, challenging the potentially limited perspectives of the Western readership they function as stand-ins for.

Herbert’s consistent efforts to complicate the Fremen culture, religion, and people allow them to be read not as harmful stereotypes but rather as a testament to the resiliency of humankind, our collective unwillingness to accept persecution without a fight, and the consequences of following charismatic leaders. Their development of a culture based on discretion demonstrates shrewdness; they purposefully present themselves as struggling to cope with ecological hostility in order to remain underestimated and overlooked by colonial forces. In actuality, they develop a structured network of subterranean communities and shared oral history that provides physical shelter and psychological reprieve. Through nurturing a culture of extreme discipline and creating a surface illusion of a lower population than the millions they actually
number, the Fremen even evade satellite surveillance and discover new usage for the spice. They form a specific reverence for water as a holy symbol due to the lack of rain, engaging in intricate combat and burial rituals to conserve and maximize their limited resources, and referring to their blood as water. The hardships that directly result from imperial rule shape Fremen life, allowing for *Dune* to be read as a text conscious of orientalism, and employing its tropes in order to criticize the treatment of the Fremen.\(^5\) In his essay, “Islam Through Western Eyes,” Said writes about the role Western media portrayals of Arabs and Muslims play in distributing orientalist modes, describing “a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression.” The narrative of *Dune* does not line up with these objectives, as Herbert unfailingly represents the militarization and pillaging of Arrakis as indicative of the cruel injustice that breeds unending cycles of violence. He additionally imbues Fremen characters such as Chani, Stilgar, and Harah with individual personality, humanity, and narrative roles that extend beyond the over-simplistic and hypersexualized caricatures associated with orientalism. I contend that in order to reflect real-life hegemony, Herbert intentionally portrays marginalized cultures through an imperial gaze to interrogate the hierarchical systems that create, enforce, and disseminate these modes of thinking. Paul’s ascent to the religious leadership of a group his class views as primitive under

\(^5\) A potential counter argument arises given the popularity of screen adaptations of *Dune*, many of which scrub the source material’s references to Islam and utilization of the Arabic language. Denis Villeneuve’s 2021 film adaptation drew backlash for failing to cast any MENA (Middle Eastern/North African) actors in Fremen roles. I hold that this stems more from studio anxieties regarding the “controversial” elements of *Dune* and systemic underrepresentation of MENA people on screen than the content of Herbert’s work. See cited work by Hadadi for further reading.
the guise of liberation reflects the role white savior narratives play in perpetuating orientalism and colonial fallout.\(^6\) In taking advantage of the Fremen’s traumatic experiences of material insufficiency and encroachment upon their territories, Paul pinpoints the ideological vulnerabilities fomented by societal insularity and religious conditioning and weaponizes them to build a radicalized movement to fight on his behalf.

**The Missionaria Protectiva (Women’s Work)**

Throughout *Dune*, various characters reference the Missionaria Protectiva, a secret branch of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood specializing in religious engineering and conditioning. The Sisterhood develops this branch as a means of self-preservation for its members, seeding mythos on supposedly primitive planets, instilling complex networks of code words and savior narratives in the religious development of Indigenous peoples to make them more hospitable in emergencies. Herbert frames the Missionaria Protectiva as engaging in exploitative endeavors that make groups such as the Fremen more susceptible to deceit and radicalization, alluding to their history of infiltrating Fremen education systems to slowly alter the curriculum to instill a safety net for their members.

In doing this, the Sisterhood engages in religious syncretism, the blending of multiple belief systems into a singular tradition, instilling in the Fremen faith in a foreign messiah known as Lisan-al-Ghaib, Arabic for “the unseen tongue,” and a myriad of recognition symbols meant

\(^6\) Colleen Murphy defines the complex that results in these narratives as “an ideology that is acted upon when a white person, from a position of superiority, attempts to... rescue a BIPOC person or community.” This emphasis on salvation can result in imbalanced dynamics of power that recreate the initial circumstances that result in the necessity of being “saved.” See cited work by Murphy for further reading.
to signal his arrival. This weaponization of doctrine has analogs in colonial history; missionaries often supplanted existing Indigenous beliefs in favor of Christian ones, sometimes combining the two to ameliorate the conversion process.\(^7\) This ongoing exercise in indoctrination compounds the oppression the Fremen face and makes them ideologically fertile; Herbert continuously reminds his readers that “repression makes religion flourish” (614). Their faith in a liberator who will deliver them to a water-rich paradise provides comfort, ideological structure, and community amid dire straits. However, when the Atreides first encounter the Fremen, the abilities of perception Paul gleans from his training create the impression of inherent wisdom, a sign the Fremen believe positions Paul as a candidate for Lisan-al-Ghaib.\(^8\)

Paul continues to meet the criteria of the implanted lore as a commanding presence whose proximity to power implies the potential for ecological and political progress. This creates power disparities in both Paul and Jessica’s interactions with the Fremen borne not only out of class and racial difference but also out of ingrained inclinations towards worship and anticipation for the opportunity to be led. This phenomenon of expecting and anticipating the deliverance of liberation through the same systems that create inequality in the first place can be pinpointed in our own contemporary political zeitgeist. The timelessness of these issues, I argue, makes *Dune* a seminal and interdisciplinary text that maintains academic and cultural relevance today and showcases the same prescience in Frank Herbert that he imbues Paul with.

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\(^7\) See cited work by Lindenfield and Richardson for further reading on this topic.

\(^8\) Interestingly, they also refer to him as “Mahdi,” the name for an Islamic figure believed to appear as a savior when the apocalypse draws near, demonstrating widespread belief in impending doom and desire for salvation.
Although Herbert maintains patriarchal structures in *Dune*, he complicates traditional notions of gender by presenting many of his female characters as conscious of power and unafraid to wield it, even if it further marginalizes other women. He presents Jessica’s exchanges with members of the Fremen, particularly the women, as transactional; she recognizes their ability to explain aspects of Arrakis’ politics and environment and ingratiates herself into their modes of communication to subtly assert influence. She picks Mapes, the lone Fremen applicant, when presented with options for a housekeeper, to mine her for information regarding the Fremen belief system. Jessica is able to ascertain code words in their conversations and strengthens Mapes’ loyalty, so much so that Mapes ultimately sacrifices herself to defend them. Mapes is framed as another casualty necessary to maintain the health and wealth of House Atreides; Paul and Jessica never discuss her again after her sacrifice whereas the members of their household guard continually recur in their internal monologues.

Moreover, as the engineered mythology refers to a maternal figure accompanying Lisan-al-Ghaib, many of the Fremen, including Mapes, are inclined towards Jessica despite her social formality and verbal cautiousness. However, her internal narrative betrays her prejudice; she incessantly refers to the Fremen in minimizing terms such as “creature” (Herbert 91), and dismissively calls Arrakis a “Hell hole” (459). Jessica’s calculating nature and lifelong training cause her to see the Fremen as a force to harness, a means to an end rather than a people worthy of respect and humanity. When House Atreides is overthrown, Paul and Jessica lose social standing for the first time, leading them to turn to the Fremen for refuge as a last resort, in hopes of eventually regaining control. Upon being educated on the details of Fremen life, Jessica notes the intricacies of the Missionaria’s work, calling the Fremen “…beautifully prepared to believe in
us” (Herbert 459). Jessica displays admiration of religious syncretism as a craft without considering the ramifications on the Fremen, like a scientist observing patterns of behavior within an ant farm. The sinister nature of syncretic tampering is front and center in Fremen society; their religious hierarchy mirrors that of the Sisterhood, similarly elevating female elders to the role of Reverend Mother. This is an anomaly in their primarily patriarchal social system that presents Jessica with a revered position that enables her to insert herself into and establish holy authority, supporting and guiding Paul in his quest to overthrow the Emperor, avenging Duke Leto. Herbert, therefore, portrays Jessica not as passively complicit in but rather as the driving force behind the creation of this new religion.

Although they never outright lie, Jessica and Paul conceal crucial information from the Fremen that may damage their public approval or conflict with the savior narrative erected around them, including their genetic connection to the Baron and Jessica’s pregnancy. As the groundwork for the Fremen’s radicalization has already been set by the Missionaria, they need only catalyze, foster, and augment superstition. Adapting to new cultural modes and communities empowers them to gain protection and access to valuable information previously hidden from them as outsiders. This ongoing infiltrative ruse is multifaceted and can also be seen as a form of cultural appropriation that manifests even in physical appearance. Jessica and Paul develop a dependency on the spice, which results in their eyes changing to the same “blue-within-blue” color as the Fremen. Herbert’s portrayal of religion as a tool for ideological warfare calls into question the role stories play in fueling and reinforcing disparities of opportunity and power. Although the Fremen’s belief in Lisan-al-Ghaib provides them with hope and long-term visions of the future, it makes them vulnerable to Paul’s convincing oration,
masterful displays of Fremen masculinity, and rapid acclimation to their way of life, methods through which he becomes the de facto leader of their community. The sequence of Paul and Jessica’s plan can be therefore read as the following. First, they ascertain the belief system and cultural traditions of the Fremen and master them in order to become ingratiated and trusted within the larger community. Subsequently, they gradually turn the tides of Fremen belief and desperation to fuel their own political, economic, and theological machinations.

**Engineering Miracles (How the Sausage is Made)**

Herbert posits Paul’s ascendancy to the role of messiah as a choreographed amalgamation of weaponized imagery and oration, fulfillment of prophecy, and intrusion upon exclusive spaces. Explicitly seeking to unseat the Emperor, Paul conceals his pernicious intentions through the instantaneous adoption of Fremen tradition. The achievement that signifies his transition to desert life is killing in combat for the first time, going against the Atreides code of restraint. This event signifies a break from his previous character impulse to appease their contradicting notions of honor. As Fremen tradition dictates status must be earned rather than inherited, Paul is forced to go against the training and ideological systems he is raised on to convincingly perform Fremen identity and cultural modes, which is what allows him to enter their world. This act temporarily severs Paul from his paternal heritage, symbolizing a transition from sheltered childhood to burdened adulthood, an evolution catalyzed through his increased reliance on his Bene Gesserit training. By offering to teach the Fremen forms of martial arts and mental clarity unfamiliar to them, Paul engages in an ongoing cultural exchange, positioning himself as destined to lead the Fremen against their common enemies. He takes on the moniker of “Muad’Dib,” Arabic for “teacher” and the Fremen term for a self-sufficient desert mouse. This
alias is a calculated appeal to their prioritization of practicality and self-preservation, one of several symbols Paul leverages to steer public perception. Moreover, Paul develops romantic and familial connections within the community, taking on Chani as an informal partner and conceiving a son whom he names after Leto to further his image of having gone native. Although Paul experiences genuine fondness for Chani, Herbert implicitly frames their relationship as a transactional one, as it provides Paul with new opportunities to rebuild his base of power, strengthening his connection to her influential uncle, Stilgar, and providing him with a deep reserve of insider information.

Paul’s tacit long-term plan is multifaceted, relying on Jessica’s influential position as a revered priestess and her ability to influence the female realms of Fremen life. When Jessica gives birth to a mentally gifted daughter not included in the Lisan-al-Ghaib mythos, she enlists Harah, a woman whose livelihood and safety are dependent on Paul, to minimize the gossip and potential for doubt this produces. Jessica thinks of Harah in utilitarian terms, believing that they “need Harah. The tribe would understand Harah—both her words and her emotions..” (Herbert 644). Although Harah willingly complies and quells the bubbling uncertainty amongst the women, Jessica reduces her from a presumed member of their new family structure to a cultural guide and lever of power in the flow of information. Herbert complicates the patriarchal elements of Fremen society by emphasizing the crucial role women play in matters of faith and family. Fremen women are shown to engage in the same strenuous combat as their male equivalents, but more importantly, they are primarily responsible for teaching the Zensunni principles and methods of water conservation to the children. Jessica’s ability to tap into institutional power through the formal educational spheres of influence unavailable to Paul,
therefore, results in a permeation of idolatry that alters the most impressionable members of future generations. Fremen women and children become central to their strategy of reeducation. This connects back to Paul’s “teacher” title and reflects the real history of missionaries imposing European Christian ideals onto Indigenous peoples to assert cultural dominance.

Herbert complicates political power in *Dune* by presenting it as intrinsically linked to social power, showcasing these dynamics in Jessica’s relationship with Paul’s paramour Chani. Though she tolerates the interracial union, she plots to ensure it is temporary so Paul can marry a highborn, drawing parallels with her unofficial relation to the Duke. By pressuring Chani to embrace this, Jessica strengthens the racial and hierarchical status quo. This in turn, blurs the lines between political stratagem and personal liberty as a leader. Procuring the Emperor’s daughter as a hostage bride ensures an enemy house can never retaliate without severe consequences. The closing lines of the novel, spoken by Jessica to Chani, reinforce the importance of narrative over reality to Paul’s victory and continued rule, emphasizing storytelling as a crucial tool to steering public perceptions regardless of reality. The religion of “Muad’Dib”, therefore, hinges upon centralized sources of power and authority that appropriates elements of Fremen culture without granting them political autonomy and the mass dissemination of a heroic narrative that frames Paul as an altruistic god.⁹

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⁹ This centralization contrasts the religion of “Muad’Dib” with other new religious movements, such as the Rastafari, which developed in Jamaica during the 1930s as a response to dominant British colonial culture and similarly focused on a human being as god figure, Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia. See cited text by Subin for further reading, particularly Chapter 1.
Herbert frames the Fremen’s budding zealotry as a byproduct of their hostile conditions coupled with Paul’s performative gestures towards inherent superiority and accelerating metaphysical visions. O’Reilly dismisses logic as a central reason for the Fremen’s acceptance of Paul as a religious and political figure, explaining that “..unconscious needs for security and belonging play a much larger role in a messianic upheaval than the conscious content that masquerades as the cause” The lack of stability on Arrakis produces an increased psychological desire in the Fremen for consistency and guidance, a need Paul fulfills in exchange for unquestioning support and participation in organized violence against his adversaries. On his end, Paul is seduced by the possibilities of power his visions provide him with. Consequently, Paul loses touch with the ramifications of his actions in the present in order to prioritize reshaping the future. As the limitations of his own humanity no longer apply to him, Paul becomes less humane, growing callous in his calculations. Initial visions of a coming holy war resulting from proselytizing the Fremen, alternately referred to as a “jihad” (Hebert 500) and “crusade” (586), unnerve Paul. However, he ultimately embraces this process and adopts delusions of grandiosity in order to avenge the Duke and overpower any opposition to his rule. This manifests through his gradual honing of his cognitive capabilities, as well as the accomplishment of athletic feats, becoming the first non-Fremen to ride the native sandworms and developing a reputation for physical prowess that impresses the men in particular.

In a scene original to the 2000 miniseries adaptation, Paul rigs water to flow from his feet after reciting a rousing call to violent action before the Fremen crowd, gesturing towards their worship of water as symbolic of life and representing himself as a capable liberator. He invokes the violence they’ve experienced to weaponize their collective trauma against the Harkonnens,
while deflecting the Atreides' complicity. Across adaptations, Paul takes advantage of the Fremen’s material desperation, promising to unlock the waters of Arrakis and give them stability and a brighter future for their children. With the notable exception of David Lynch’s film adaptation, however, the miracles that Paul performs are choreographed and engineered to achieve particular psychological goals. Specifically, these include instilling devotion to tap into the rage and pain of a people who have been systematically brutalized and wielding it against regimes not dissimilar to his own. Aside from vague promises of working towards environmental change on Arrakis, Paul makes no particular policy promises to the Fremen. Rather, his political and religious movement is built on a bedrock of grievance and self-righteousness. By leveraging the Fremen’s knowledge of the spice and amassing them as an army, Paul is able to enact a stranglehold on the Imperium by threatening to destroy the spice supply, which invokes possibilities of economic collapse and an epidemic of mass withdrawal symptoms.

Paul’s monopolization of the spice and the Fremen is the final manifestation of the Duke’s idea for “desert power.” This dynamic represents a culmination of the Atreides mode of governance enhanced by elements of worship and zealotry. Herbert portrays Paul and Jessica as engaging in a colonial project of widespread indoctrination, emphasizing the Fremen’s ensuing religious fervor and interplanetary genocide of alleged infidels in subsequent novels. These reinterpretations of existing cycles of violence relating to race, capital, and religion result in inevitable fallout on Fremen life and psychology, which call into question the legitimacy of the modes of liberation they so wholeheartedly embrace.
Colonial Fallout

To be sure, *Dune* is an interdisciplinary text that can be construed through a myriad of perspectives, including many I do not address in this analysis. As Herbert emphasizes implicit communication in a narrative bursting with intrigue and exhilaration, it is entirely possible for readers of *Dune* to consume and experience its plot and characters on a surface level, and I’m sure many have. In fact, the dynamics of power in *Dune* are so easily overshadowed by its imagery of massive sand worms and feudal warfare. Moreover, David Lynch’s infamous 1984 film adaptation completely rewrites the ending to unironically portray Paul as a literal god rather than a boy playing one. I, however, maintain my reading of *Dune* as a study of power and indictment of charismatic leadership based on close reading and analysis of subsequent novels in the series and assert that these dynamics are an integral part of the series’ themes, tone, and overall trajectory. Whereas the original novel may function as a send-up of mythical saviors, Herbert makes clear in sequel *Dune Messiah* that the fallout of Paul and Jessica’s colonial project, namely, an interplanetary genocide enacted by zealous Fremen, is indicative of the project’s original intent: amassing and maintaining power by any means necessary. Paul even comes to embrace the monstrous implications of his actions, bragging about and comparing his death toll to Adolf Hitler, stating “He killed more than six million. Pretty good for those days...at

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10 Under my framework of understanding *Dune*, this conclusion implies that power resides where it is meant to, and that systems of economic and racial exploitation should not be questioned, directly contradicting Herbert’s novel to provide a more cinematic and hierarchy-affirming conclusion. Ironically, this inaccurate retelling of the story confirms Herbert’s notions of narrative as a malleable weapon that can be used to reinforce the status quo of power dynamics.
a conservative estimate, I’ve killed sixty-one billion, sterilized ninety planets, completely
demoralized five hundred others. I’ve wiped out the followers of forty religions...” (Herbert 139-
139). Herbert works in extremes throughout the *Dune* series, as is evidenced by this quote, in
order to showcase common dynamics of power maximized in scope and impact. By
demonstrating how rapidly Paul succumbs to the grips of power and highlighting his
transformation into a grotesque monster not unlike his maternal grandfather, Herbert reveals that
even those seen as uniquely evil such as the Baron Harkonnen are simply banal vessels for power
who are ultimately interchangeable.

Paul ultimately pays the price for his demagoguery, struggling to balance his political and
religious power simultaneously without inciting doubt in even his most fervent followers. Paul
also struggles to execute this balance without losing beloved family members in military and
espionage related struggles. Likewise, the Fremen suffer from widespread alienation, mental
illness, and substance abuse now that ecological changes on Arrakis make their culture of
conservation irrelevant, along with physical wounds and disabilities from fighting in Paul’s holy
war. Whereas they are granted increased access to resources such as water and above ground
housing, the Fremen of *Dune Messiah* grow increasingly dissatisfied with their end of the
bargain and lose faith in the altruistic narratives of House Atreides, trading in zealotry for
apathy. Kenton Howard argues that “the Fremen come to power through the assistance of the
colonizer, and instead of maintaining their own culture and identity, they transform into the new
colonizers, adopting hierarchical customs very similar to the..Dynasty that preceded theirs” (8).
In this sense, Herbert frames the Fremen as having inadvertently engaged in a colonial project
that not only strips them of humanity and community but recreates the same circumstances that
plagued them on a multitude of other planets. Herbert intimates this is a colonial fallout set for repetition as Paul raises his own children to rule. Power is framed in *Dune* as a cyclical force that corrupts even those with good intentions. This same force feeds off material insecurity and the universal psychological need to belong to larger communities, narratives, and systems that provide security, meaning, and purpose. This brings me to an idea central to both my thesis and the works of Frank Herbert and Octavia Butler: the methods through which we work to ensure our own survival and self-preservation can potentially recreate the circumstances that jeopardize the well-being of others, resulting in physical and ideological reverberations of violence.
Chapter 2: *Earthseed* and Narrative Parallels

Often affectionately referred to by the moniker of “the grand dame of science fiction,” Octavia Butler was a pioneer in blending explicitly Black racialized and gendered experiences with speculative elements of the utopian and dystopian. Butler’s works can be classified as proto-Afrofuturist, a cultural aesthetic that explores the intersections between the African diaspora with developing trends of scientific achievement, primarily because of their reliance on Black history in envisioning potential visions of futurity.\(^\text{11}\) In her *Earthseed* series, composed of *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* (hereupon referred to as *Sower* and *Talents*, respectively), Butler envisions a future version of the United States in which the traumas of the past are set for repetition due to a lack of systemic change and increased deregulation. She represents racism, colonialism, imperialism, and a myriad of imbalanced dynamics of power as cyclical, drawing parallels between her narrative, which is set in 2024 and covers an expansive timeline, and numerous patterns throughout American history. Some of these parallels include Jim Crow-era policies that enforce wage slavery, the formation of discrete underground networks leading to Northern California, which is reputed for holding increased opportunities relative to Southern California, and the vicious separation of Black mothers from their young children.

In doing this, Butler blurs the lines between past, present, and future, positing that the worst crimes of humanity are set to repeat and will only be complicated and exacerbated by the passage of time. I argue that she imbues her portrayal of the burgeoning Earthseed movement

\(^{11}\) See cited work by Delan for further reading on Afrofuturism.
with a sense of ambiguity, implying that even marginalized individuals are not immune to the corruptive nature of power. In this sense, Butler complicates traditional notions of representation by refusing to center Lauren’s narrative on a singular political motive or identity. Rather, she provides an intersectional analysis of marginalized participation within larger systems of capital and ideology. Although Lauren’s Blackness is inextricably linked to her spiritual and political understanding of the world, and undergirds her interactions with said world, it does not function as her primary distinguishing characteristic.

Melzer argues that Butler “…refuses to ideologically ghettoize her characters…implicitly reject[ing] the tokenism that categorizes her work primarily in terms of her identity.” I agree with this analysis and extend it by adding that Butler refuses to position representation as sufficiently radical, choosing instead to portray diversity as a necessary natural given. One passage of Lauren’s Earthseed scripture, many of which are scattered throughout the text reads “Embrace diversity/Or be destroyed” (Sower 196). In this sense, Butler demands more than a figurative seat at the table. She situates herself in a position of futurity, one in which race operates as a source of knowledge and therefore, power, but does not function as all-encompassing. Butler represents this embracing of change and irregularity as fundamental to Lauren’s ideology, abandoning the emotional framing of diversity as a moral imperative and choosing instead to position it as required for survival and an act of rebellion against hegemonic segregationist forces. I argue that literary choice is deeply connected to her lived experiences as an outsider to traditional hierarchies of power and unburdens her characters from the responsibility of representing the groups they belong to while simultaneously challenging race and gender-based assumptions.
In explaining the inception of her literary interests, Butler stated “I began writing about power because I had so little” (Davidson 3). This emphasis on lack can be interpreted through analysis of her choice of protagonists, who are often socially and politically disadvantaged Black women in direct confrontation with systemic forces. Keeping this in mind, it is extremely difficult to separate Butler’s experiences of forging a new path as a Black woman in a predominantly white male genre from the trajectory of *Earthseed* protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina. Lauren develops the Earthseed movement, a nondiscriminatory mutual aid-based organization based on her own original scripture. This scripture replaces the personified patriarchal figurehead of godhood with the inevitable concept of change; one core tenant reads “All that you touch/You Change/All that your Change/Changes you/The only lasting truth/Is Change/God/Is Change” (*Sower* 3). Lauren argues at various points with potential converts that her ideology is based on indisputable observations, and is therefore, particularly accommodating to a chaotic world that is in constant flux due to environmental collapse and epidemics of addiction. Described by Lauren’s later husband Taylor Bankole as “biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and, of course, the second law of thermodynamics,” the ideology of Earthseed is a secular one devoid of an afterlife (*Talents* 46).

As Lauren’s faith is expressed in logical and observational terms, she is distinguished from Paul in that she is a true believer in her own ideology, preventing her from traveling down a similar path of demagoguery. Paul’s delusions of grandiosity, which are legitimized by his privilege and hierarchical position as an insider, do not form a stable enough bedrock for his ideological movement. Lauren’s indisputable observations, on the other hand, are able to tap into
the ubiquitous desires for stable housing, communal bonds, as well as ideological and theological structure.

Butler, therefore, positions prescience and adaptability as skills within Lauren’s arsenal, which she utilizes to her advantage. I argue, however, that Earthseed and Paul’s religion of Muad’Dib are connected through a shared tradition of implicit interpersonal transactionality. Just as Paul leverages his relationship to Chani, Lauren’s burgeoning romantic relationship with Taylor Bankole is undergirded by his connection to stable land to plant the long-term seeds of her movement. The significant age difference between the two hints at a power imbalance, as he is nearly her father’s age, a fact that causes him distress and guilt. Yet Butler presents Lauren as possessing a great deal of knowledge Bankole does not, subverting expectations of power imbalance in a May/December romance. He is narratively aligned with her father at several points, and as such, I argue that relationship could represent Lauren coping with the lack of closure when it comes to her Father’s death, looking for a replacement.

Butler utilizes the different characters that Lauren enlists into Earthseed to explore various reactions to the ideological framework she works within, as well as a variety of experiences in this speculative context. Melzer describes Earthseed as “an assembly of refugees...fleeing destruction and oppression...represent[ing] shelter for disoriented and abused people that are on the receiving end of patriarchal capitalism’s oppressions.” As such, members include former sex slaves, victims of employer harassment, abuse, and seemingly random acts of violence, many of whom are desperate for the ideological stability Earthseed provides. Lauren therefore positions Earthseed as a form of resistance against the ills of capitalism and systemic
racialization and sexual violence in order to align herself with associations of refuge while quite literally collecting refugees during her travels.

Portrayed as the only daughter of a Baptist preacher who has been raised and sheltered in a multiracial gated community in Robledo, Lauren, similarly to Paul, functions as a character preoccupied with power as a means of self-preservation, identity formation, and spiritual enlightenment. She is able to recognize the untenability of her stagnant insular community from a young age, and pinpoints sources of conflict and contradiction, such as racial tension between neighborhood families and the sexual exploitation of women and children that is aided and abetted by a culture of looking the other way. Peter Stillman describes communities such as the Robledo compound as “born of dreams of stability, security, property, and family...but they end up as small dystopias, collections of individuals and families increasingly endangered by the outside world, blocks of fear and defensiveness in an inimical and threatening world.” As such, Butler presents Lauren’s surroundings as defined by an anxiety due to lack of preparedness for the worst-case scenario. She is distinguished from her peers through her inclination towards doomsday preparation and is able to learn from her father’s sermons different ways of representing scriptural information and stories to convince and connect with would-be worshippers. By internalizing these oratory techniques, Lauren develops an understanding of the dynamics of power between preachers, the texts they utilize, and potential devotees, analyzing her father’s form as a way of coping with her inability to connect to his content.

A notable intertextual connection I recognize is the early stages of Lauren’s development of Earthseed as a scripture-based belief system, injecting academic lessons to the young children of Robledo with the verses she writes and learning new methods of altering the perspectives of
the intellectually vulnerable, much as Jessica does in the predominantly female spaces of the Fremen community. Across these texts, children are framed as an inevitable element of ideological conflict, potential casualties to dynamics of power beyond their understanding. Lauren does not necessarily prioritize couples with children when recruiting stragglers as potential Earthseed converts; rather, she recognizes the potency of utilizing children as potential symbols of the future and tools to create interpersonal and communal bonds with emotional and ideological stakes that inspires trust, loyalty, and faith in a larger mission. However, as Lauren’s following includes women who have lost their children, this can be read as an insidious appeal to their grief as the movement she builds raises and cares for children collectively, dissolving biological ties. Earthseed’s family structure is therefore communal, putting into practice the village theory of raising children and equal responsibility, one implemented into various real-life communes and cults such as Jonestown, challenging traditional notions of the nuclear family.

Although Lauren and Paul characters exist at opposite ends of hierarchies based on race, gender, class, and ability, I argue that there is a metatextual dichotomy between these two protagonists, one that drives their motivations in building movements with political and religious undertones that primarily cater to the disenfranchised. Whereas Herbert invites readers of Dune to consider the role of inherited privilege and access to institutional knowledge in Paul’s journey to amassing and wielding colonial power after losing what he considers his birthright, Butler provides in her Earthseed duology what I argue is a complementary narrative that similarly utilizes metaphors relating to ecology to engage in dialogues relating to ideological fertility. By presenting dynamics of power from the point of view of a politically conscious protagonist who is disadvantaged within larger hierarchies of power, Butler questions how the process of accruing
influence over a following is complicated when the potential leader is a visible outsider. As Butler and Herbert both recognize the iterative nature of these patterns of exploitation and colonial fallout, these stories set both relatively near and extremely far off into the future both portray issues of precarious civil rights, political and religious instability, and egregious racialization at the hands of imperial and fascistic powers.

I contend that the corollary between these two texts is strengthened by the symmetry between the narrative trajectories of their two central protagonists, and that *Dune* functions as an antecedent to *Earthseed* because of their engagement with similar themes of power as a corrupting force in the political and theological realms. Both *Sower* and *Dune* are comprised of a first half defined by anticipation of inevitable collapse and a second half focused on religious ideology as a political coping mechanism bisected by central incidents of sudden paternal loss. Both Herbert and Butler portray the loss of their protagonist’s respective fathers as representative of destabilization to the status quo within a patriarchal world, and forcibly inciting the coming-of-age process. As both characters are taught to ideologically engage with the dynamics of power under paternal tutelage, these losses trigger sequences of events in which both Paul and Lauren seek to implement their knowledge as a way of honoring their deceased teachers. Just as Paul moves from a privileged position and identity as a member of House Atreides to a marginalized one as a refugee and honorary Fremen, Lauren, in turn, opposingly moves from a feminine domestic role to a paternalistic masculine one. Their insider/outsider dynamic is complicated by Lauren’s ability to remain underestimated, which I juxtapose with Paul’s bravado-based persona.
I argue that Lauren’s outsider status extends her road to influence relative to Paul’s and imbues her journey with reiterated versions of past events, including gendered and racialized traumas inflicted upon Black women throughout American history and even experiences Lauren has already had. Her trajectory in Butler’s works, is therefore, cyclical, as multiple iterations are relayed in which she follows a potential lead to accruing influence and building a long-term settlement, inevitably finds the available figurative ideological soil to be untenable and moves on to search for new ground. This mirrors the original biblical parable the initial novel is named for, in which seeds are scattered across a multitude of potential plots of land to maximize the possibility of survival, what Lauren ultimately seeks to do on a cosmic level with human genetic material (Matthew 13: 1–9, 18–23). Both characters engage with adaptation as a natural mechanism for self-preservation but do not instill the necessary safety guards in place to limit their own power and influence. Although I do not seek to equivocate between the actions and circumstances of these two characters, the dichotomy created by discussing their similarities and differences in tandem is crucial to my overarching argument and analysis of Butler and Herbert’s works.

**Hyperempathy: A Case Study of Lauren Olamina**

Lauren Olamina is represented as being burdened by the fictional disability of hyperempathy, a condition she is born with due to her deceased mother’s drug abuse during pregnancy. Butler initially frames Lauren’s hyperempathy as a liability to surviving in an inhumane world, closer to a disability than a superpower. As a consequence of Lauren’s involuntary physiological and psychological reaction to witnessing pain and pleasure alike, she is unable to engage in combat or self-defense without harming herself. That her condition stems
from drug use is ironic given Herbert’s portrayal of Paul’s hallucinogenic drug-fueled prescience, which elevates him onto a higher state of consciousness and constitutes a superhuman ability. Butler contributes to the overall sense of cyclicalitity by connecting the destruction of Lauren’s community at the hands of addicts to the same drug with her mother’s substance abuse, which grants Lauren an ability that both disempowers and enlightens her. I argue that Butler uses hyperempathy as a metaphorical stand-in for intergenerational trauma, as Lauren is further disadvantaged in a particularly violent world through no fault or choice of her own but is also given access to new forms of information unavailable to most. Across Paul and Lauren’s respective journeys, their unique access to information serve as catalysts for their spiritual awakenings and aid them in pitching their visions of futurity to the ideologically susceptible. It is Lauren’s ability to understand the suffering and pleasure of others on an intimate level that accelerates her development of an ideology based on interconnectedness, and this preoccupation with the experiences and feelings of others drives both the form of Butler’s texts and Lauren’s movement. I argue, therefore, that Butler complicates the binary between disability/super ability in portraying hyperempathy as a double-edged sword that presents a liability to survival but also operates as a building block of Lauren’s ideological dispositions.

Whereas Herbert utilizes an omniscient third-person narrator who is able to move between character’s minds during interaction and conversational sequences, Butler’s epistolary narrative is told in hindsight through the at times sporadic journal entries of Lauren. As the entries often reflect upon violent events only once time has passed and the dust has settled, Butler utilizes the literary device of tone to imbue unflinching portrayals of trauma with a sense of banality and emotional detachment and gradually introduce the possibility of unreliability in
her narrator. In doing this, Butler explores desensitization and the death of empathy as a long-term psychological effect of late-stage capitalism, environmental collapse, and all forms of violence, from the sexual to the systemic. I argue that Butler engages in a metatextual analysis of empathy by engaging the reader through the private thought processes of her characters.

Just as Lauren is burdened by ongoing nonconsensual empathy, readers of Sower and Talents experience incidents of trauma such as Lauren’s time in a reeducation camp and sexual assault secondhand and therefore, are better able to understand the invasiveness of nonconsensual empathy. Additionally, readers, through Lauren, are forced to recognize shared humanity and commonalities with even those who commit heinous acts. In understanding a crucial aspect of another being, namely, the trauma that drives their actions, both Lauren and we as readers are to some extent denied the opportunity to pass judgment and invited to connect our experiences of marginalization and imbalance dynamics of power with others. This forms a metatextual empathy that drives the narrative and shapes its dissemination and reception in nuanced ways, one that is complicated in the second novel when additional conflicting narrative voices are introduced. Like Dune Messiah, Talents punctuates previously unchallenged versions of events with intruding voices that contradict established narratives about the development of their respective movements. These ruptures of narration and focus imbue both series with a similar structure of initially building up a charismatic leader with an intimate look into their psychology and upbringing, only for them to ultimately be torn down when the reverberations of their actions become clearer. I argue that this provides the reader with a simulated experience of being indoctrinated into an ideological movement, only to gradually recognize the contradictions of following a charismatic leader into an uncertain future. As Herbert states, “Even if we find a
real hero (whatever-or whoever-that may be), eventually fallible mortals take over the power structure that always comes into being around such a leader.”

Although Butler does not present Earthseed as damaging to the same extent as Paul’s religion of Muad’Dib, she leaves open-ended the possibilities of where such a movement might head.

**Crossing Over**

Whereas Herbert represents Paul as being given automatic access to the levers of institutional and social power, Butler interestingly depicts Lauren as socially and emotionally severed from the feminine world throughout her narrative. The only daughter of a blended family with multiple sons, she is resented by her stepmother as a constant reminder of her husband’s former life, and excruciatingly has her infant daughter ripped from her arms in a life-altering incident of violent trauma. Within the context of her Robledo community, Lauren’s domestic role of womanhood poses few possibilities for futurity, and she expresses deep discomfort with her female peers’ idolization of motherhood. Lauren lacks these basic maternal tendencies and sees marriage, children, and the traditional path as stifling to her budding intellectual framework. Her interpersonal and social life is therefore, primarily defined through her connections to men, including her father, brothers, and male partners. This allows her to further her understanding of male privilege and the unique vulnerabilities of womanhood at the cost of authentic and unmediated identity.

In order to sufficiently adapt, Lauren is therefore forced to maneuver herself into fitting dominant norms of masculinity. When forming Earthseed and traveling, she therefore engages in

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12 See cited article in *Omni Magazine* by Herbert for further reading.
a crossing over into a new identity and mode of communication, not unlike Paul’s transformation into Fremen life. Lauren conceals her gender and disability, posing as a man while traveling in order to minimize the likelihood of experiencing gendered and sexual violence. The masculine authority she is able to exert while explaining the tenets of Earthseed to potential converts mirrors her father’s relationship to his congregation and increases her ability to develop a following as a socially marginalized leader. This strengthens her association with the androgynous and masculine, mirroring the aforementioned contemporary of Elizabeth Holmes, who similarly downplayed her femininity when pitching to investors, and positioning marginalized identity as something that can be obfuscated and watered down when appealing to hegemonic systems. The process of crossing over is represented as physical and psychological, and Lauren’s experiences of empathizing with men throughout her life uniquely prepare her to do this. She is familiar with their experiences of pain and pleasure, having experienced the male orgasm in tandem with own during sexual encounters, and as such, is able to put on a more effective performance, mimicking patriarchal notions as a means of self-preservation and reasserting fluidity as the key to Lauren’s success.

Contrastingly, characters who exhibit an inability to physically and mentally adapt, including Lauren’s older brother who works as a drug dealer and prioritizes his freedom over long-term planning, are positioned as incapable of surviving in a world that demands the constant evolution Lauren excels in. I argue that Butler frames code-switching and cross-dressing as evolutionary adaptations that allow for multiple, sometimes contradictory methods of communication and perception. After all, if God is aligned with change, then stagnation is inevitably aligned with a failure of religious principle. Just as Paul is able to read individuals and
respond accordingly, Lauren is able to at times literally slip into the perspectives of others to better comprehend the sources of their pleasure and pain, crossing over into differing human experiences and gaining knowledge she uses to bolster her performance as a man. In this sense, both *Dune* and *Earthseed* engage with a process of assimilation into larger dynamics of power. Paul’s foray into the Fremen world is never intended to be permanent and is framed as a temporary situation of reduced circumstances in which he and Jessica are able to bide their time and energy to build a base of “desert power” to exploit. Lauren’s journey to building her Acorn settlement is likewise a pitstop on the road to a larger destination in the stars and the opportunities they present for humanity to expand and evolve.

In addition to crossing over while recruiting, Lauren additionally shifts her tactics and approach to *Earthseed* as a response to a series of traumatic incidents that damage her credibility amongst her following and weaken her base of power. The deregulation of Butler’s speculative United States leaves open a power vacuum that is leveraged by the rise of a far-right fundamentalist organization known as Christian America, led by Republican politician Andrew Steel Jarret, who vows to “Make America Great Again.” Ultimately, Jarret becomes president in similar fashion to Donald Trump, appealing to societal prejudice against communities already struggling to overcome their lack of economic opportunities. Lauren’s engagement with the political realm is initially underpinned with apathy. Stillman contends that within the context of Butler’s text, “...politics can no longer excite or energize people with realistic promises of purpose, meaning, or involvement.” As such, Lauren often mentions political events only in passing and seeks to build communities that are the exception to traditional rules of power rather than enact systemic change, but the election of Jarret results in an uncharacteristically detailed
and emotionally heightened analysis within her journal. She describes Jarret as insisting “on being a throwback to some earlier, “simpler” time...He wants to take us all back to some magical time when everybody believed in the same God...There was never such a time in this country (Talents 19).”

As Lauren’s belief system hinges upon change, she is deeply disturbed by a President who represents not only the status quo, but an unyielding sameness that eerily regurgitates particular combinations of imagery to harken back to the past rather than signaling towards a vision for the future. Although Lauren similarly aspires to repeat agricultural and tribal systems of the past, she seeks to build communities free of the prejudices Jarret uses to fuel his rise to power. Jarret’s election triggers a rise in hate crimes and emboldens fundamentalist to pillage, enslave, rape, and kidnap under the guise of reeducation, cycles of violence which destroy Lauren’s Acorn community, resulting in a mass kidnapping of their children, including her own newborn daughter. Within Lauren’s framework of children as representative of future generations that instill hope in and inspire older Earthseed recruits, this represents a destruction of her vision for egalitarian progress and proves to be a massive setback, scattering her own progeny across the country.

As a result of this, Lauren engages in a tactical crossing over, abandoning her previous strategy of grassroots organizing of the disempowered in favor of seeking connections to the wealthy and powerful, enlisting them to fund Earthseed. This shift in priority towards capital means as a force of legitimization represents an ideological failing of Earthseed as a democratic vision for the future free of capitalist notions. Melzer argues that this “narrative exploration of what form of activism has the most potential to achieve social change is crucial when looking at
Butler in terms of feminist politics.” I argue that Lauren engages in a figurative selling out of her own political and ideological framework as a direct result of Acorn’s destruction and transformation in a reeducation camp for Christian America zealots. This isolates a now widowed Lauren and results in her daughter being renamed and raised by fundamentalist Christians who impose onto her the same experiences of sexual violence endured by her mother, once again representing cycles of violence and capital as an unavoidable constant in a world that is otherwise inconsistent and defined through pervasive change. I argue that what is most disconcerting about Lauren’s embrace of capital and wealthy benefactors who find her vision for the future novel is how effective it is. Throughout ensuing chapters, Lauren is able to build Earthseed into a scholarship-based organization with numerous budding communities. She is able to provide psychological structure and guidance to a myriad of people, and her political woes are assuaged after Jarret is defeated after a single term. However, as Earthseed manifests its ultimate goal, Butler reveals to readers of her work that paternalism and colonialism have inevitably seeped in, eroding its original mission and calling into question the methods through which Lauren achieves her goals.

**Cosmic Climax and Paternalistic Permeation**

As previously stated, the ultimate goal of Earthseed is to accelerate human evolution and technological achievement in order to break free from an unsalvageable Earth and plant human “seeds” amongst the stars. Although initially framed as a goal metaphorical in nature, as Lauren is able to accrue capital and influence, she manifests her vision of futurity into a literal space mission. Earthseed’s culmination is the launching of a starship that carries “frozen human and animal embryos, plant seeds, tools, equipment, memories, dreams, and hopes” (*Talents* 363).
Because Butler maintains the possibility of life on other planets, Lauren’s ultimate goal is one of colonization and genetic productivity, a cosmic Noah’s Arc meant to carry on a fragment of humanity even after the host planet Earth is gone. This mission eerily parallels the contemporary goals of Elon Musk’s aerospace company SpaceX. In describing the goals of SpaceX, Musk writes that “You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great—and that’s what being a spacefaring civilization is all about...thinking that the future will be better than the past...I can’t think of anything more exciting than...being among the stars. (Musk 2018)” I encourage my readers to question these cyclical repetitions in which life imitates art, which in turn reflects life.

Lauren’s ideological trajectory can therefore be read as radically pessimistic because of lack of consideration of hope. The United States of America and planet Earth as a whole, are to her, unsalvageable, and the colonial implications of her mission are emphasized through the ship’s name, Christopher Columbus. Although Lauren obfuscates and insists she did not pick the name, this cannot be overlooked as it casts a shadow upon what was meant to be a progressive movement. Butler never indicates in her narrative that humanity has learned from its mistakes on Earth, and therefore, readers can infer that the same cycles of environmental exploitation, sexual violence, and racial marginalization will repeat on other planets yet to be colonized or incubated. I argue that Butler’s emphasis on Lauren’s experiencing of the male orgasm and crossing over into masculine gender expressions culminates in the launching of the starship, which carries overt phallic implications and can be read meant to quite literally impregnate another planet.

Just like Paul Atreides’ plan to terraform Arrakis into a lush paradise, Lauren’s insistence on expanding beyond the limitations of material resources and willingness to utilize the
ideological vulnerabilities of marginalized individuals represents a desire to overcome human limitation to shape cosmic events like a God. Although Lauren does attempt to maintain the egalitarian and nondiscriminatory nature of Earthseed, welcoming queer and disabled individuals and embracing diversity, she cannot prevent the permeation of paternalism and reliance on capitalism throughout her movement. Earthseed members, including Lauren, are shown to be ironically hostile and close minded when faced with different religious beliefs repeating the dogma of Christian America in more implicit ways that may accelerate with time. Butler complicates audience perception of Lauren’s actions, particularly through the overt condemnation of Lauren by her estranged daughter, who is renamed Asha Vere and argues that Lauren prioritized her movement over her family and maternal duties. She states that the followers of Earthseed will ultimately “make a god of her...that would please her if she could know about...she’s always needed devoted, obedient followers...who would listen to her...And she needed large events to manipulate. All gods seem to need these things” (Talents 7). Asha Vere positions Lauren as psychologically benefitting from her role as a charismatic political leader and religious symbol and accuses her of succumbing to the same patterns of paternalism Butler presents figures of authority and influence as often possessing.

One could argue that Asha Vere’s characterization is driven by bitterness as she attributes her personal traumas to the decisions of Lauren and is slighted by her mother’s preference of Earthseed as her ideological brainchild, the fruit of her intellectual and theological pursuits, which she is more actively engaged in than the realm of the physical, sexual, and maternal. Stillman argues that “Vere fails to take into account Earthseed’s radical post-secular, post-humanist stances...overlooks how Olamina’s followers gain a sense of agency and empowerment
through their religion...active dissension and debate can occur.” While I recognize the emotional bias in Asha Vere’s framing of her mother’s exploits, I assert that the agency and empowerment of its members do not necessarily absolve Earthseed and add that Asha Vere is not the only one to question Lauren’s intentions and motivations. Lauren’s companion Len also notes that she “enjoys telling people what to do...” (Talents 342) and interprets her use of language as intentionally seductive. Butler refuses to endorse or indict Lauren’s actions, ultimately, leaving the responsibility of interpretation to her readers but emphasizing cyclical at every possible turn, contrasting her with Herbert, who explicitly frames Paul as following a path laid out for him well past the moral point of no return.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Movement building is portrayed in both texts as a messy process of trial and error, one in which inevitable ideological and philosophical inconsistencies are bound to rear their ugly heads and potentially lead to long-term ramifications on leaders, followers, funders, and bystanders alike. Herbert argues essentially that power does not corrupt, that it attracts the corruptible. Butler does not flinch in portraying even marginalized peoples with good intentions and valid grievances to be capable of corruption, a humanizing argument. If people of color are to be represented as people in genre fiction, as fleshed out and nuanced characters, then I argue that they must be given the full range of representative modes, including the potentially villainous, the shallow, the aggressive, the savvy, the inhumane. Butler asserts this in every stylistic choice throughout the novel, including narrative voice and tone, epistolary formatting, logical clarity and emotional distance. What unites Butler and Herbert is their portrayal of movements built on charismatic leadership as inevitably leading to the recreation of the circumstances that birth these
movements, a phenomenon I assert is more prevalent now in our social-media driven age than ever.

I additionally argue that in spite of their willingness to engage with the utility of religion as a tool for political manipulation, neither Butler nor Herbert’s works are anti-religious or atheistic in nature. In fact, they similarly portray and engage with the role religion plays in binding communities together around common beliefs and values, providing a larger narrative of meaning and comfort in times of uncertainty and distress. Rather, they provide steady and nuanced analysis of the dogmatic and exploitative ways religion can be used to manipulate the vulnerable. They also assess the methods through which written scripture and performed acts can obfuscate truth and inject paternalism and potential for violence into otherwise peaceful spiritual movements focused on mutual aid and cultural identity. In this sense, both Butler and Herbert engage in a multifaceted appraisal of religion as a malleable weapon that has been wielded throughout history, and will continue to be wielded throughout future generations, a seemingly unavoidable phenomenon set for repetition.

I conclude by arguing that these narratives are not prescriptive because the political and theological coping mechanisms employed by Paul Atreides and Lauren Olamina fail to adequately challenge and change the systemic exploitation and violence of their respective worlds. Butler and Herbert resist pigeonholing their works within the realm of the prescriptive, choosing to forsake simplistic answers in favor of more complicated questions and intricate portrayals of interpersonal and systemic dynamics of power. As such, both the *Dune* and *Earthseed* series can be read as maintaining a universality independent of singular didactic or political motive. Rather than endorse a particular mode of resistance against these messianic
compulsions, they magnify implicit and explicit imbalance of power in order to ask a series of questions regarding humanity’s alternating inclinations towards leading and being led, following and being followed. Octavia Butler and Frank Herbert, therefore, provide us with a lens through which we can better discuss and understand these issues of godhood and monstrousness, centering interpersonal dialogue as a first step in the admittedly optimistic endeavor of alleviating the fallout of these compulsions.
Works Cited


