

DOMESTIC FAITHS, GLOBAL MISSIONS: POST-SECULAR SCIENCE FICTION AT THE
MILLENNIUM

BY

DAVID MORRIS

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Susan Koshy, Chair
Associate Professor Trish Loughran
Associate Professor Jonathan Ebel
Associate Professor Ted Underwood

ABSTRACT

In the late twentieth century, new “post-secular” modes of literary representation emerged that challenged the implicitly Protestant epistemologies of dominant twentieth century American secularism. My dissertation, *Domestic Faiths, Global Missions: Post-secular Science Fiction at the Millennium*, examines science fiction novels that respond to the religious character of late twentieth century cultural conflicts by constructing “post-secular” narratives that imagine communities of genuinely diverse people on equal political and cultural footing. The novels’ near future setting allows them to examine contemporary problems in systemic contexts but free from the principles of causality demanded by realist novels and political programs. The first half of the dissertation reads novels by astronomer Carl Sagan and evangelists Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye to expose a co-constitutive relationship between conservative Christian fundamentalism and secular scientific materialism. While the novels appear politically opposed, Sagan and Jenkins/LaHaye both articulate global cultural visions based on similar conceptions of a private, rational subject with roots in a white Protestant intellectual tradition. Reading novels by Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood, the second half of my dissertation explores partially religious subjectivities that escape the Protestant-secular binary and expand American secular culture to accommodate alternative religious traditions on a potentially equal basis. Rejecting the simple utopianism of Sagan and Jenkins/LaHaye, the novels imagine interim communities that build slowly toward revitalized public relationships without dramatic revolution.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: EMERGING RELIGION AND RESIDUAL SECULARISM

In the second act of the 1951 play *Inherit the Wind*, Bert Cates announces the definition of acceptable religion in the dominant paradigm of post-World War II American secularism: “Religion’s supposed to comfort people, isn’t it? Not frighten them to death!” (Robinson and Lee 77). On trial for teaching Darwinian evolution in public school, Cates objects not merely in terms of his own freedom of speech and religion, but in terms of the “proper” function of religion. In the final scene of the play, Cates’ lawyer, Henry Drummond, alone in the courtroom, holds in one hand the bible and in the other Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Weighing them in his hands, he places both together, puts them in his bag, and leaves the courtroom as the curtain falls. Relegating religion to the status of a privately chosen commodity, the play represents an early example of the dominant position of religion vis-à-vis the American post-war secular subject: the secular subject chooses “beliefs” from a set of available options. Secular institutions ensure that all options remain available for individual believers. For the play, the problem with forbidding the teaching of Darwin to school children lies not in the teaching of creationism, but in the holding back of choices from students. Conscious choosing among religious options closely fit within the importance of a consumer economy among the rising suburban middle classes of the American 1950s. Further, the play sets up a clear distinction between “bad religion”—the kind that imposes regulations without the “options” of other modes of being—and “good religion,” which “comforts people,” providing personal, therapeutic benefit. Tracy Fessenden identifies this “good v. bad religion” opposition as a prevalent assumption of American literary and historical scholarship, where good religion is “rational, world-centered,

non-ritualistic, middle class, unemotional, compatible with democracy and the liberal state.” “Good religion” remains “invisible,” whereas “all visible religion is irrational and regressive, except in cases where it directly serves progressive causes (like anti-slavery)” (Fessenden 2). Further, Jose Casanova identifies “differentiation,” or the separation between clearly defined public and private spheres, and “privatization,” or the confinement of religious belief and feeling to the private sphere, as the defining elements of American secularism (7-8). Fessenden and Casanova identify the crucial cultural structure of dominant American secularism: good religion remains a matter of private choice and constructs the morality of private individuals, but makes no overt demands on public life. When citizens formed political action organizations with explicitly religious goals in the late twentieth century, they seemed at first to violate this opposition. Under the normative, favored religious conceptions of American secularism, these organizations risk dismissal as “bad religion” in public discourse.

While the emergence of the “Christian Right” in the 1970s and 1980s in the U.S. represented a departure from secular normativity, it did relatively little to challenge the overriding privatized, differentiated religion favored in American secular culture. While secularists read legislation advocated by the Christian Right as invasion of private choice—for example, around abortion rights—the conflict did little to destabilize an overriding differentiation between public and private spheres. This differentiation in American secularism, however, breaks down when faced with global phenomena of postmodernity. The vertiginous connections of the global economy seemed to undermine the private/public division as vaguely defined and uncontrollable cultural and economic factors affected American individuals. In this context, the much discussed “return of religion” in the form of public religious expressions, interests in religious belief, arguments about religion, and the violent rhetoric and actions of

religious fundamentalisms appear as emergent rather than residual cultural phenomena. At the heart of this dissertation lies a set of rhetorical problems about the functions of religion particular to late twentieth-century America: to what extent do the expansion and emergence of contemporary religious discourses undermine the dominance of secular differentiation? If, as I have suggested, secular differentiation between public and private provides inadequate conceptual means for describing religion, how might it be possible to theorize religion in American life at the end of the twentieth century? Is it even possible to theorize secularism beyond the twentieth century? And, if so, with what literary forms might new maps of religion and the secular be imagined?

This dissertation examines literary responses to the conflict of the private-public religious location and attempts to theorize religions as world-changing projects that reorient individuals and communities toward spiritually-inflected duties toward one another and the world. *Domestic Faiths, Global Missions: Post-secular Science Fiction at the Millennium* examines science fiction novels that offer “post-secular” solutions to the problem of individual location in an increasingly networked, globalized world. Each post-secular narrative renegotiates the relations among religious ideals, individual lives, and public missions. Examining four separate series, I construct a literary-cultural history of a “post-secular imagination” characterized by the dissolution of boundaries between secular, progressive cultural projects, and biblically-inspired religious modes of being. The novels’ “near future” setting allows them to examine contemporary problems in systemic contexts but free from the principles of causality demanded by realist novels. The four series stake claims on post-secularism’s possibilities, offering explicitly religious visions, emerging spiritualities, and complex arguments for global cultural visions. Each of the novels uses religious narratives to help characters cultivate proper internal

structures of feeling that enable them to act for personal survival and broader, world-changing projects. The history I trace shows the development of a mode of literary representation of individual relations to historical circumstances, material networks, and shifting identities. Over the course of thirty years, the post-secular science fiction novel moved from attempts to discern underlying structural unities to embracing diversity and globality. The resulting post-secular narratives provide some material for building communities of genuinely diverse people, where differing cultural modes of being stand in equal relation to each other.

SCIENCE FICTION

To explicate the shift in public sphere-private sphere relations around religion I am calling “post-secularism” and the development of a distinctly post-secular mode of literary representation, this dissertation focuses on four series of science and science fiction works from 1979-2009: Carl Sagan’s 1985 novel *Contact* along with several other of his books and television shows, the first three novels of the popular *Left Behind* series, Octavia Butler’s “Earthseed” novels of the 1990s, and Margaret Atwood’s recent “MaddAddam” novels. While these series come from widely divergent religious and political perspectives, they have a set of crucial commonalities that help characterize them as post-secular. Each novel features characters grappling with the metaphysical nature of creation, through or against institutional western religious conceptions of history and existence. Each of the works self-consciously embeds characters’ lives with broader historical narratives and world systems. Each series places its characters in a near future setting—that is, the world of the novels is a recognizable version of the world in which the novels first debuted. Along with the future setting, each of the novels

makes use of the genre conventions of science fiction: characters use new technologies, and semi-magical occurrences challenge characters' conceptions of the possible. The representation of broader world-spanning systems from diverse perspectives helps set up possibilities for new roles for religion and new definitions of the private and public.

The near-future settings of the novels provide the basis for post-secular modes of representation because they allow for a dialog between the present and possible futures, between broader world-spanning contexts and local, even individual, conditions. In his 1984 study of science fiction *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, Samuel R. Delany contends that science fiction functions socially to create a "significant distortion of the present that sets up a complex dialog with the reader's here and now" (Delany 177). Delany's argument suggests that, while set in other times and places among virtually unrecognizable peoples and situations, science fiction actually addresses issues pressing in the reader's present, allowing readers new ways to examine contemporary situations. I want here to focus on "near future" science fiction as a particular form of "significant distortion" and "complex dialog," to use Delany's terms. The fact that the novels this dissertation examines take place in the "near" future suggests that the "distortions" they offer may not be all that significant; that is, readers may not have much difficulty recognizing their own "here and now" in the novels. Nonetheless, the science fiction elements allow a special relationship with that recognizable here and now. While similar to the reader's immediate context, the near future setting allows the stories to explore relatively immediate consequences of present day world conditions while simultaneously freeing them from strictly confining historical continuity incumbent on realist representational modes. The novels set in the near future freely address the implications of, for example, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the growth of multi-national corporations, and global climate

changes. At the same time, they do not have to explain thoroughly how the results they imagine came to be. The novels, in other words, can offer critiques of present modes of thinking and action through possible futures with fair imaginative freedom.

Moreover, through their near future distortions and partial escape of continuity, the novels both signal an interest in and free themselves to explore global significances of individual experiences. That is, near future novels are uniquely suited to representing relations among complex networks of capital and information that developed in the late twentieth century, particularly in the 1990s as “globalization” helped structures of western capitalism penetrate into areas formally partially closed in the Soviet bloc. To help explain, I appeal here to two related theories by Frederic Jameson found in “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of late Capitalism” (1984) and *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992). In “Postmodernism,” Jameson explores the generic conventions of postmodernism as a phase of capitalism in which “aesthetic production...has become integrated into commodity production more generally” (*Postmodernism* 65). The form Jameson identifies with this absorption into commodity production is “parody without vocation” (73)—that is, a genre assemblage characterized by the combination of older forms rather than innovation of newer forms that might be genuinely resistant to global structures (74). In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Jameson identifies the conspiracy-thriller genre of film as the only aesthetic form “capable of taking a wild stab at understanding” a complexly interconnected world that defies understanding by individual agents—at “understanding what kind of forces—vast, impersonal, and bureaucratic--confront us” (*Geopolitical Aesthetic* 3). For Jameson, conspiracy thrillers like *All the President’s Men* (1976) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) attempt to expose the minds behind the exploitations of global capitalism; that is, following the “owner of money and the owner of labor-power” can give one a “deeper view” of the systems

that dominate the world (*Geopolitical* 15). Full exposure of conspiracies always eludes the protagonists: “But in representations like these, the operative effect is confusion rather than articulation. It is at the point where we give up and are no longer able to remember which side the characters are on, and how they have been revealed to be hooked up with the other ones, that we have presumably grasped the deeper truth of the world system” (15).

This “operative effect of confusion” does not end, however, in a nihilistic abandonment of the possibility of understanding, but invites us to reconceive the very categories by which we understand our relationships in a global system. In these two works, Jameson identifies two related poles of a problem with representation in the complexly interconnected political-cultural economy of the late twentieth century: on one hand lies the “pastiche without function,” wherein forms seemingly removed from context and redeployed as allusive play display atomized bits of text for consumption. That is, despite their intertextuality, pastiche texts elide connections and provide no particular basis for understanding meanings within broader fields of production—within, as Jameson would say, “the world system.” At the other pole lies the conspiracy film described in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, which features a real attempt at something like totality, an always thwarted effort to form a working understanding of the impersonal forces that confront people. Both of these works look for new forms that somehow either achieve the elusive totality of the conspiracy thriller or revive a politically subversive parodic form. The hope is for a form that contains liberatory value at the very least in its ability to expose “the truth of the world system,” or which can intervene directly into the economic through its brazenly commodified form.

Jameson’s desire to find an almost-total model for representing world systems, however, sometimes limits his ability to theorize the simultaneous sounding of multiple voices, or what

William Connolly has called “the plurovocity of existence” (Connolly, *Secularist* 15), a term that accommodates both diverse modes of being and a “politics of becoming” wherein groups of people can reconfigure the means by which their identity and difference is configured in a broader cultural matrix (51). I want to build on the above discussion of near future science fiction and the fictional representation of global systems to explore how science fiction novels might confront Connolly’s “plurovocity of existence” while avoiding both reductive totalization and nihilistic surrender to an endless deconstruction of meaning. The novels further work in part to find a method for efficacious interaction within the confounding and networked forces of the globalized political economy of the late twentieth century. Whereas for Jameson the achievement of a unified narrative remains an unattainable goal for political organizing, I argue that post-secular works have begun a construction of narrative forms that accommodate culturally diverse voices with neither totalizing narratives nor what Amy Hungerford calls “belief in meaninglessness,” or religious models of understanding without specific theological content (Hungerford xiii). The multi-book science fiction series allows the pursuit of a longer-form exploration of consequences and forming of complex narratives through character movements and character changes.

SECULARISM AND POST-SECULARISM

Through the four chapters of this dissertation, I construct a narrative of the development of a literary form that confronts and constructs the broader societal move from the secular to the post-secular. A thorough history of Euro-American secularism and a clear explication of the elements of post-secular politics, culture, and theology remain for books in other fields. It is my

plan here to establish a working definition through a usable genealogy so that we might understand some of the specific civic features of post-secularism that literature helps to define and produce. This project examines novels and other works that self-consciously engage with and construct grand narratives of history; that is, along with being works of fiction and entertainment, each also features explicit and implicit intellectual exercises that intervene in discourses of philosophy, theology, and intellectual history. They are, in other words, stories-cum-manifestos, self-conscious works of amateur philosophy, theology, and intellectual history, often accompanied by intentional political programs. To construct a working genealogy of the secular to post-secular transformation, then, I am going to engage with some of the central philosophy and intellectual history around secularism in the late twentieth century. Through a dialog with Charles Taylor and Jose Casanova in the first part of the following section, I construct a definition of secularism in its twentieth-century emphasis on religion as a matter of “choice” for a private individual among many possible religious-secular options. Casanova’s concept of “differentiation” and Taylor’s of “secular” as denoting a society in which commitment to religious feeling and action “is understood to be one option among others” (Taylor 3)¹ provide a basis for conceiving secularism as a quality of American civilization that allows for the construction of public, hegemonic narratives with religious inflections that privilege private choice. Just as importantly, it allows us to complicate what Casanova calls “deprivatization” by understanding the entrance of religion in the later part of the twentieth century as redefinition of the public and private spheres. The move into the post-secular involves a three-pronged entrance into that discourse of “privatization.” I define three separate strands of

¹ Taylor specifically names “belief in God” as the “option among others” in a secular society. Part of my purpose is to think of religion as something broader than merely “belief,” and to show how literature might articulate visions in which multiple modes of religious being might exist simultaneously, whether, like American Protestantism and American secularism, they center personal belief, or they imagine religion primarily in terms of structures of intersubjective feeling and action.

post-secularism: post-secularism as the fulfillment of the progressive secular tradition, post-secularism as the religious colonization of mass culture, and post-secularism as a broadened secularism that rejects the tacit primacy of Christianity and imagines models for equal cultural relations among people with genuinely diverse modes of being.

The change from secularism to post-secularism lies embedded in a long history of conflict over defining a private sphere for individual citizens. Though this differentiation and the characteristics of the two spheres have always been contested, their differentiation has afforded opportunities for models of production and consumption that helped drive an American economy based on the production of commodities. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor lays out three useful definitions of secularism or “senses of secularity.” The first two largely involve what Casanova calls “secularization”—that is, in the first, public institutions are run according to logics at least mostly apart from religious institutions of belief in God, and, in the second, public spaces are fairly “emptied” of God. In the third sense, Taylor defines secularism as a state of society in which multiple religious and non-religious modes of being are present as viable *choices* for individuals and groups (1-3). Taylor’s definition suggests that we could read the works this dissertation examines—from the overtly rationalist *Contact* by Carl Sagan to the worldly religious fundamentalism of *Left Behind* to the speculative religious possibilities of *Parable of the Sower* and *Year of the Flood*—as assuming the normative secular definition of religion that Taylor identifies: religion is a set of choices to be made by individuals. None of the novels feature characters forced to undergo religious conversion, for example; all do so voluntarily. In this sense, even the fundamentalist *Left Behind* fits squarely into the category of secular as defined by Taylor. If we accept Taylor’s broad definition of the secular—which I am inclined to do—then it appears that secular and post-secular overlap.

Several definitions of post-secular become available depending on the definition of secular we choose. If by secular we mean what Taylor and Casanova call *secularization*—the slow retreat of religious belief and enchantment from public life, a transition that Taylor categorizes as pre-modern to modern—then *post-secular* would suggest something like the reverse of this process. In other words, after the post-Scopes Trial (1925) retreat from public life of fundamentalist Christians, their *reappearance* as an organized political force and legitimate location of public dialog in the late 1970s/1980s would characterize a post-secular moment. However, as Casanova argues, the emergence of the Moral Majority and other religious organizations engaged in broad social and political activism tended to register objections to reversals of differentiation; that is, to intrusions of government, market, and cultural forces on “the evangelical lifeworld” (Casanova 151). In other words, the emergence of the Moral Majority (a slow, largely grassroots process, as leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson at first resisted direct civic-political engagement) cannot be read simply as a reversed process of differentiation, because organizations like the Moral Majority wanted to defend versions of private-public differentiations.

Indeed, secular differentiation helped to produce the dominance that white American Protestants enjoyed in federal and state institutions through most of the history of the United States. It was under the umbrella of secularism that religion was largely defined as “a matter of conscience,” so that, for example, the Supreme Court ruled in *Reynolds v. U.S.*, 98 U.S. 145 (1878) that Mormons were free to believe in polygamy but not to practice it (Deloria 221). In other words, the differentiation of public action from private conscience, and the definition of religion as that located in private conscience, tended to delegitimize religious formations that required ritual observance or broader modes of being. Tracy Fessenden usefully traces the

enshrinement of this Protestant-secular subject in canonical U.S. literature through the twentieth century, arguing that, along with definitions of religion in the U.S. public school system, a slow and largely intentional discursive and institutional accretion naturalized a privately-oriented religious faith. These scholarly challenges to dominant definitions of the secular accompany broader intellectual, cultural, and political-economic developments. For the purposes of this discussion, I want to focus on some specific challenges to secular assumptions brought on by changing international relations and economic production systems of the 1980s and 90s in the United States. The thawing and eventual end of the Cold War, the sudden absence of a monolithic “communism” against which to define American liberal democracy, and increased contact and wide-spread circulation of multiple cultural forms in the American economy disrupted dominant definitions of American subjectivity. That is, challenges from overseas labor markets and new international diplomatic relations—among, for example, NATO nations and nations formerly of the Warsaw Pact—demanded new mass cultural confrontations with Otherness without the comforting dualistic matrix of democracy v. totalitarianism. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, for example, revived longstanding western orientalist narratives that equated Western Christendom with freedom and Eastern Islam with oppression; news outlets and organizing committees through the U.S. repurposed these narratives to highlight the purity and justice of the American individual.² Developing trade relationships among U.S. companies and businesses located in the former Soviet Bloc and in China demanded more contact and reassessment of cultural otherness, driving widespread conflicts over the nature or validity of American superiority. Additionally, new evaluations of secular institutions circulated among scholars considering the successes and failures of secularized institutions in India and other

² In *Epic Encounters* (2001), Melani McAlister explicates a narrative of a private American citizen attacked by irrational religious others (always Muslim, explicitly or implicitly) in coverage of the 1979 Iranian Hostage Crisis and 1991 Gulf War conflict.

formerly colonized countries. Confidence in the “neutrality” of secularized public institutions—that is, in the openness of such institutions to people from varying religious standpoints—began to wane. In *Belief*, Gianni Vattimo links the “return to religion” with the “breakdown of an idealistic dream,” or the dissolution of what had been a widespread progressivist hope in the promises of modernity not just to better lives around the world, but to provide meaningful narratives (Vattimo *Belief* 23-24). For Vattimo, the answer to this “shattering of dreams of renewal and hopes for political redemption” (23) lies in the revival of a Christian message stripped of its “metaphysical” quality and reduced to its core of *caritas*, or generalized justice paired with individual charity (66). The first two categories of the following breakdown of post-secularism similarly offer reconsiderations of historical Christianity and secularism to offer alternatives that are also fulfillments of tradition. The third category—and second half of this dissertation—examines deconstructions of the categories and assumptions that underlie this secular-Christian project. The novels in the second half of the project struggle to find new models of partially religious being.

POST-SECULARISM AS SPIRITUALIZED RATIONALISM

In *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Jose Casanova describes public religious activism in the late twentieth-century U.S. as “deprivatization,” a religious response to challenges to the private sphere of American individuals, arguing, for example, that Christian fundamentalists in the U.S. in the 1980s were responding to what they saw as incursions into their private lives by the institutions of government, mass media, and the market (Casanova 57-58). I would argue, however, that this “deprivatization” occupies a small role in a larger set of

political-cultural phenomena aimed at protecting the institutional privilege of middle class white Protestant subjects. This includes direct institutional confrontation—for example, in bringing legal challenges against affirmative action policies in public and private institutions—and more subtle cultural conflict. The first half of this dissertation addresses two particularly powerful examples of this cultural conflict. Both chapters explore the lending of metaphysical, even sacred, significance to hegemonic definitions of Euro-American subjectivity that draw clear distinctions between private and public spheres. In chapter one, “‘A Sense of the Numinous:’ Science as a Religious Experience in the Work of Carl Sagan,” I examine astronomer and author Carl Sagan’s novel *Contact* (1985) alongside his 1979 PBS television series *Cosmos* and other publications. While Sagan’s popular work seems to privilege secular science, he actually articulates a religious view of the specialness of mankind in a vast cosmos rooted in the European Protestant intellectual tradition. Sagan constructs an early post-secular subject characterized by a spiritually-inflected secular mode of being. Through the characters in his novel and his own public persona, Sagan creates an “aspirational subject” that stakes claims simultaneously on legitimate science against pseudo-science and legitimate religion against anti-modern religion. The aspirational subject is a well-educated individual capable of using science to form a personal, religious relationship of awed wonder with the universe. Further, this subject is best equipped to advance a united, internationally-cooperative humanity to Godlike scientific capabilities. Written at a moment suffused with hope for the end of the Cold War and fear over nuclear war, Sagan’s work attaches religious significance to secular visions for scientific international cooperation within a peaceful and cooperative world. Sagan argues for an awe-filled, spiritual affect that unites scientists, politicians, and a broader public behind cultural “advancement” through the development of experimental science. In the tradition of utopian

novels like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1887) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Sagan links religious development with the elimination of social problems and the accumulation of scientific knowledge. His contribution to the tradition involves seeing the world as integrated into a wider universal hierarchy of civilizations at varying degrees of advancement, setting up humankind as potential gods. Sagan's enshrinement of the Euro-American rationalist subject, however, partly undermines his vision of multicultural cooperation, revealing connections between secular and Euro-American imperialist projects.

POST-SECULARISM AS RELIGIOUS MASS CULTURE

Carl Sagan's work supports academic projects by reinterpreting a long tradition of the spiritualization of American secular progressivism; in creating a public ethos for himself, Sagan constructs an individual, private subject with a religious but not institutionally mediated relationship with the universe. While Sagan often saw himself as opposing American religious fundamentalism (which he dismissed as atavistic and mislead), his broader project centers the individual conscience in a way that found analogs in the very Christian Right discourse to which he objected. The second chapter of this dissertation examines the *Left Behind* franchise of novels and other media as an attempt to assert a cultural hegemony on behalf of an individual, private subject whose self-definition similarly lie in Euro-American Protestant conceptions of the self. Casanova argues that American fundamentalist entrance into mass public discussion represents more of an effort to protect the private "life-world" of American evangelicals than a complex program to deprivatize religion more broadly. *Left Behind*, however, engages in a broader entrance into public *culture* as part of what Melani McAlister describes as "a remarkable

mainstreaming of evangelical pop culture” (McAlister, “Prophecy” 775). Through its many novels, children’s books, films, video games, board games, interactive and communal websites, and other media, *Left Behind* helps to join the culture industry more broadly and makes “Christian” a consumer demographic along with a religious identification. For the characters in *Left Behind*, defending their rights to make the right consumer *choices*—how to live, what religion to identify with, how to move about the world freely—drives their opposition to the antichrist.

Full participation in this culture industry, however, requires not just the marketing of cultural products suitable for and attractive to Christian audiences, but also a cultural capital and purchase power that allows freedom of purchase and freedom of movement. It requires, in other words, that evangelical Christians in America enjoy the economic and cultural privilege that white middle class Americans had been enjoying for the better part of fifty years. A post-cold war, rapidly globalizing economy in the 1990s, however, presented dangers in both of these areas. On the economic side, overseas labor markets with few protections for workers and fewer environmental and safety restrictions welcomed what had been American manufacturing interests, cutting into working class and middle class security in the United States. Further threats materialized from immigration, affirmative action, and multicultural education. The second chapter, “‘Let Them Reach Their Own Conclusions:’ Secularism, Consumerism, and Faith in *Left Behind*” examines the cultural and material politics of the first three *Left Behind* novels (1995-1997). I argue that the novels place a white male subject at the center of unchallenged American dominance over a globalizing world without opposition from the Soviet bloc. Responding to challenges to American ascendancy posed by economic competition overseas and the proliferation of cultural difference in media, the novels set up a white Protestant middle class

subject as uniquely American and favored worldwide to compete in a justly administered globalized economy. Even as globalization threatens the economic and cultural security of American Christians, it provides networks through which Christians can organize and evangelize. Combining biblical prophecy interpretation with conventions of dystopic science fiction, the stories construct a “world system” that contrasts threatening globalization (wherein centralized authorities consolidate power) with good globalization (wherein moral Christians evangelize, oppose evil, and protect their own interests). The favored utopian end of *Left Behind’s* narrative imagines a political economy that prioritizes securing middle class American nuclear families against a threatening political and religious other. *Left Behind’s* global narrative and widespread success suggest a sophisticated fundamentalist engagement with post-Soviet globalization.

POST-SECULARISM AS THICKENED, NON-CHRISTIAN SECULARISM

Both Carl Sagan’s work in *Contact* and *Cosmos* and the definitions of religion in the public sphere offered by *Left Behind* rely on a centered, believing subject whose commitment to actions and principles are expressions of that belief. In the second half of this dissertation, I examine two sets of works that explore the potential and limitations of religious models that expand the possibilities of the religious beyond individual belief to create intersubjective structures of feeling and action. In *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, William Connolly sets aside a simple secular-religious binary that, he argues, both limits possibilities and misses a long history of philosophical and social engagement that embraces neither metaphysics in the Christian tradition nor atheistic rationalism. Connolly examines the tendency of secular narratives of

“tolerance” to be tied to “minor traumas” of religious intolerance for young atheist/agnostics, and that “the intensity of some of these experiences can also forestall critical thinking about defects and deficiencies in the judgments to which they are bonded. The visceral register of subjectivity and intersubjectivity...is at once part of thinking, indispensable to more conceptually refined thinking, a periodic spur to creative thinking, and a potential impediment to rethinking” (3). This mixed and problematic “visceral register” has the potential “to thicken an intersubjective ethos of generous engagement between diverse constituencies or to harden strife between partisans” (3). For Connolly, post-secular or non-secular thought can help construct “a critical liberalism that both expands and thickens the range of secularism” (10). In other words, the purpose of European secularism—to build a just order open to democratic participation by multiple constituencies and to spur justice based on principles beyond or outside of religious identification—can actually be achieved in “thicker” form by rethinking secularism. The eventual thought-goal is to allow religious modes of being and to “cultivate the fugitive spaces of enchantment lodged between theistic faith and secular abstinence” (15). In this sense, *post-secularism* is both a category of partial belief and an emergent possible socio-political phenomenon that provides a weakly prescriptive category in which the Protestant/secular subject is decentered and no one particular mode of being—secular-consumer, religious fundamentalist, theocratic, etc.—replaces it.

Each of the novels in the second section features characters attempting to create cohesive, mutually supportive communities that draw strength from the presence of cultural diversity that includes various religious and intellectual traditions. The third chapter, “‘Only a Religion Can Do It:’ Community Affects and Virtual Utopias in Octavia Butler’s ‘Earthseed’ Novels” reads Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) as exposing the

limitations of secularization and religious fundamentalism as critiques of the political-economic structures of globalization. Set in an economically and ecologically devastated southern California of the 2020s, the novels focus on a group of people displaced from Southern California who form and practice a religion, Earthseed, believing that “God is change” and planning long term to leave the Earth and establish colonies on other planets free of the destructive patterns of Earth history. I argue that the long term utopian goal of colonization and communalist ideals constructs a “virtual community” that allows the pursuit of communitarian ideals in an economic-cultural environment that denies possibilities for localism. The religion, “Earthseed,” provides affective regulations that strengthen community connections among diverse people and even across long distances. With this virtual community, characters attempt to bypass rather than change the destructive conditions of globalization. The *Earthseed* novels address the threats of 1990s globalization with grassroots solutions formed through dialog and action among socio-economically dispossessed characters. However, breaks in the novel’s timeline reveal a persistent difficulty in representing progression from near future realities to far future goals, which suggests limitations of utopian programs to redress social and ecological problems.

In the fourth chapter, I examine Margaret Atwood’s two novel set *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009) as intervening in environmentalist discourses around localism and globalism. Each novel narrates the same apocalyptic events from both hegemonic and outsider perspectives. Through a careful representation of the relations among varying subjects, Atwood’s novels explore the possibilities for liberation and democracy in environmental-religious millennialism. I argue that the MaddAddam novels critique the utopian narratives of neoliberal corporate ideology, American environmentalism, and religious fundamentalism.

Rejecting three major areas of contemporary American oppositional discourse, the novels narrate the movements of characters across socio-economic strata and through loose networks of counter-cultural movements. Multiple narrative perspectives throughout the two novels create an ongoing dialog around the same conditions, rejecting both totalizing narratives and postmodern nihilism to favor flexible cultural and political approaches to oppositional organization and discourse. *The Year of the Flood* ends with ironic hope in an incomplete apocalypse, which makes possible new social and ecological relations rooted in the commitments of the survivors to each other and to religious practices. This chapter brings eco-criticism and post-secular criticism together; by showing the limitations of secular progressive environmentalism for challenging the ecological destructiveness of global capitalism, the MaddAddam novels set partially embedded localist ecologies parallel with partial religious commitments, arguing for an approach to modernity that invites multiple narratives to co-exist together.

BEYOND BELIEF: POST-SECULARISM AND LITERARY STUDIES

Contemporary scholarship on religion—particularly in the fields of history, sociology, and religious studies—has gone a long way toward deconstructing the binary between secular and religious. Thorough, thoughtful work has been done not only in showing the binary false, but in exposing some of the crucial socio-political processes in which this dichotomy is embedded. Nonetheless, this divide persists not only in some scholarship, but, more importantly, in public debate and in institutional and discursive structures that drive public policy and institutional behaviors. While I do not entertain any illusions that another work of scholarship can by itself reorient public discussion, my hope remains that the methods I have described here--which

embed literary production within popular media production, institutional structures, and conceptions of individual agency—can provide models for public engagement beyond scholarly publication. Moreover, work on religion in literary studies has remained relatively confined to canonical works in a post-canonical era. By turning toward non-canonical literature, I want not only to continue work that helps open up the canon, but conceive of methods for engaging with broader sections of postmodern American culture.

The deconstruction of the secular-religious binary is a crucial part of a broader project of equitable, just, open participation in the contemporary U.S. public sphere. As Tracy Fessenden ably demonstrates in *Culture and Redemption* (2007), both the “secular” and the “religious” as categories assume an enlightenment, Judeo-Christian, *believing* subject of conscience; they locate conviction solely in the private conscience. This structure normalizes a very narrow set of modes of religious being, all but locking out or forcing change from religious subjectivities that place emphasis on, for example, communal ritual. An effective post-secular turn decenters the individual conscience and places it in context of many possibilities: many modes of practices, many methods of worship, many religious modes of being. In other words, it tries to conceive of American culture and American democracy as open to modes of being and modes of participation that do not require professions or orientations of “belief” that allow only Euro-American Protestantism in various forms (including agnosticism and atheism).

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Judith Butler argues for an ethics based precisely at the limit of our ability to narrate the coming-into-being of our own subjectivities. Butler suggests that the acknowledgement of the limit of a subject’s ability to describe itself fully ideally leads to a humility that eliminates the certainty that undergirds hierarchies and violence. My dissertation addresses the way individual agents and groups use religion to narrate

subjectivities—that is, to understand how individuals and groups fit into and are able to act in the postmodern world. This involves not just narrating the self, but contextualizing (and even sometimes denying) the limits of narrative. Butler suggests that interrogation of social and cultural environment is the core basis of ethics—and everyone in this dissertation is involved in this enterprise. Religion is a key site of this interrogation, both as a traditional source of ethical vocabulary and as a constituent element of the formation, or coming-into-being, of selves. In other words, any account of the present moment—even among the rigorously secular, even atheist—must address religious realities.

I use the terms “secular” and “post-secular” with the full knowledge that the categories remain fluid. What these terms as analytical categories invite is not so much faith or certainty—for example, that the U.S. is or was a secular nation, wherein religion was private and differentiated from non-religion—as an invitation to consider the dynamic relations among these categories, while acknowledging that some official and quasi-official cultural, political, and economic norms were in place that naturalized *specific* religious beliefs and practices acceptable in public and private. Post-secular, in the sense that I use it, suggests not so much a shift away from secularism’s differentiation of private and public spheres as a change in the way those spheres are differentiated, a change driven by multiple voices—some of whom argue for specific political goals, some of whom argue for a broader role for religion, some of whom argue for or hope for decline of religion, and some of whom wish to open up new combinations of religious and non-religious ways of being that go beyond unself-conscious consumer poaching of disconnected traditions. It is in this last definition that I operate, with hope for open, just, self-conscious religious engagement. This project represents a small offering—of questions about categories that structure academic engagements with public religion, of suggested methods of

understanding how religion works in individuals, of protest against combinations of religious and secular modes of interpretation that constitute structures of injustice.

CHAPTER 2

‘A SENSE OF THE NUMINOUS:’ THE RELIGION OF SCIENCE IN THE WORK OF DR. CARL SAGAN, 1975-1985

“We are star stuff which has taken its destiny into its own hands. The loom of time and space works the most astonishing transformations of matter,” Carl Sagan announces in the 1979 PBS television series *Cosmos*. Writing during a time of resurgent political conservatism, changes in diplomatic and military realities, and an ascending Christian Right in the U.S., Sagan’s combination of spiritual and scientific language deploys spiritual-ethical vocabularies in defense of scientific progressivism and American liberalism. Sagan, an accomplished astronomer, became the premier public intellectual of the 1970s and 80s; from 1973³ until his death in 1996, he published fifteen non-fiction books for popular audiences, one novel, and a PBS television series. He also contributed to scores of scientific articles and made over twenty appearances on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*. While Sagan’s publications and appearances focused ostensibly on the history and practice of science, each featured broad political and particular policy arguments. An opponent of the Reagan administration, Sagan argued for more public funding for scientific research not connected to national defense, for more attention to the environment, and against nuclear arms proliferation. His educational mission and policy arguments occupied important roles in broader efforts to reconsider the worldwide function of science in the 1970s and 1980s. Rejecting the deployment of science for the development of Cold War weaponry, Sagan understood scientific discovery as the engine for the progressive advancement of a unified human race. Ideally, that progress slowly eliminated religious and

³ Sagan wrote for popular consumption prior to 1973, but his work was not widely read. One of his pieces, published under the pseudonym “Mr. X” in Lester Grinspoon’s 1971 *Marihuana Reconsidered*, featured a consideration of marijuana’s possible consciousness-raising qualities.

cultural conflicts and moved toward a unified human race with a spiritual and rationalist relationship with the universe. Through multiple media and his own public persona, Sagan lent religious significance to secular-progressive politics and scientific research. The end result reaffirmed the cultural centrality of a tacitly Christian, Euro-American enlightenment subject.

Through historical narrative, his own public persona, and a fictional imagining of a near future contact with space aliens, Sagan creates an “aspirational subject” characterized by a sense of sublime wonder, curiosity about the universe, commitment to arts and science education, and technical expertise. The aspirational subject invokes a spiritual, wonder-full relationship with the cosmos, the grand power of which is accessed through the practice of scientific research unattached to the vulgar pursuits of commerce or war. Sagan’s subject regards the universe with respectful awe and curiosity, convinced simultaneously of her/his own smallness and her/his own specialness. Through self-narration, Sagan and his characters turn these feelings into an affective matrix that drives individuals and cooperatives to work toward greater mastery of the technologies and knowledge that allow “contact” with the universe. This awed affect naturalizes an individual, Protestant subject of belief, relegating religion to the private sphere and replacing religious ritual with scientific experimentation. In connecting this subject to the special power of communion with the universe, Sagan lends divine endorsement to a Euro-American secular liberalism. This in part undermines Sagan’s opposition to the American Cold War military-industrial complex; while he rejects military conflict and the nationalist posturing of the U.S. against the U.S.S.R., the “aspirational subject” naturalizes a culturally specific, Euro-American version of scientific rationalism that unintentionally relegates non-western histories to an atavistic cultural past.

The aspirational subject develops in the mid to late 1970s at the intersection of two political-economic phenomena. First, the slow dissolution of *détente*⁴ re-opened the possibility of nuclear confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States. Ronald Reagan ran for president of the United States advocating the development of new weapons systems and the possibility of direct confrontation as responses to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and other conflicts. Coupled with Reagan's promise to cut government funding of scientific research, possibilities materialized for dramatic changes in the administration of research funding and, more generally, the purpose of scientific research. For liberal scientists like Dr. Sagan, the power of Reagan and "the Christian Right" with which he aligned himself represented a threat to both the cultural prestige of scientists and the funding of scientific research.⁵ Second, consumer demand for entertaining, educational material in print and television created opportunities for public intellectuals to build cultural capital and lead broader cultural movements. This chapter explicates the development of Dr. Sagan's aspirational subject at the confluence of these two phenomena, first through his own public persona and later through the protagonists of his novel, *Contact*. The first section of this chapter shows how Sagan constructs the aspirational subject across several texts and contexts, including nonfiction books, newspaper interviews, and his 1980 PBS miniseries, *Cosmos*. This "early" aspirational subject responds to immediate cultural conflicts by constructing a history of science and progressive enlightenment as under threat from the atavistic politics of American conservatives, who seek military solutions and doubt the value

⁴ *Détente* describes US-Soviet relations from the mid 1960s until the late 1970s. It was characterized by a relative thawing of the Cold War, featuring slowing of arms stockpiling, treaties, and general lack of direct hostility. It ended sometime in the late 70s with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, confusion over the extent of possible cooperation between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., and finally, the election in 1980 of President Ronald Reagan, who advocated a generally more aggressive engagement with the Soviet Union.

⁵ For more on this "Reagan coalition," see Gil Troy, *The Reagan Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009). For an especially clear and pointed explanation of the Reagan campaign's appeal to white working class voters on the basis of racial resentment, see Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era, 1980-1992* (Oxford, 2007).

of scientific discovery. Through broad liberal education and proper affective relationships to the universe, the subject constructed through these early texts is best equipped to understand the meaning of the present and lead a united mankind into the future. Reading the long scientific and cultural progress of mankind as being at a sudden crisis, Sagan sets up the aspirational subject as a leader capable of pointing the world away from nuclear conflict, environmental destruction, and false supernatural modes of knowledge, and toward the material and spiritual fulfillment attainable through proper deployment of progressive narratives. Through narration and self-enrichment, Sagan himself enacts and embodies this subjectivity, connecting himself to the struggle of historical scientists to work despite opposition. Taking the role of teacher, Sagan models the proper emotional response to the wonders of the universe. He accomplishes this through narrative-lecturer performance and through manipulation of emergent media forms.

The first section of this chapter shows the emergence of the aspirational subject across a set of texts and contexts. Despite Sagan's penchant for repetition, however, the subject remained relatively fragmentary until Sagan thoroughly developed the aspirational subject in his only novel, *Contact* (1985). In the novel, Sagan presents an archetypal aspirational subject in Dr. Ellie Arroway, the protagonist of the novel, by narrating her childhood background, collegiate study, and work as director of the Search For Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) while foregrounding her intellectual processes. The narrator's and Ellie's voices merge to create a map of the aspirational subject within a history not just of the world but of the entire galaxy. The novel is set in the mid-1990s, approximately ten years after the novel's publication. The aspirational subject bridges the gaps in the novel's temporal map between the troubled history of Earth, the crisis-laden present (of both the novel and the 1985 in which it was published), and the possible far future of a human race infinitely advanced and part of a cooperative group of galactic species.

The near future setting allows the bridging of this gap between the 1980s in which the text was published, the near future in which the world can be changed by an alien message, and the distant imagined future where humankind can take their rightful place as galactic citizens. The novel constructs spatial and temporal maps that suggest a generally progressive notion of a constantly advancing human race. The characters' emotional reactions and self-narrations lend sacred significance to this progressive narrative of history that echo longstanding narratives of American exceptionalism by suggesting that, led by aspirational subjects, the human race can advance through science to godlike knowledge and technological capability.

INDIVIDUAL FAITH AND INSTITUTIONAL MISSION

Sagan developed the aspirational subject within a set of intersecting cultural phenomena in the late 1970s: a new cultural populism based on the rejection of powerful state and market institutions and the embracing of dedicated, driven individuals; conservative politicians and commentators arguing for ethics with religious-spiritual vocabularies; and popular interest in and fear of non-Christian spiritual forms, including astrology, parapsychology, and palm reading. Sagan constructs his public persona with this populism in part at its core; while he does not reject institutions per se, he bases his argument for science around the idea of inspired, dedicated individual scientists working to unlock the secrets of the universe. Conservative Christian commentators like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and, to some extent, Ronald Reagan, used a religious-ethical vocabulary to advocate socially conservative goals and enshrine Protestant subjectivities inflected by late 70s populism. Sagan frames science and liberal⁶ politics in a

⁶ Throughout the chapter, "liberal" in connection with Carl Sagan connotes a few general, long-standing stances toward societal governance and values, including state regulation of economies and state management of resources

similar religious-ethical vocabulary, making science more religious, transcendent, and ethical than the religious conservatism he saw opposed to it. To accomplish this appropriation of ethical authority, Sagan dualistically maps the myriad subjectivities of the 1980s U.S. by grouping them into a simple progressive/antiprogressive, modern/antimodern opposition

While seemingly disparate phenomena, the prominence of the new Christian Right and the proliferation of astrology magazines indicates the development of a broader interest in religion and the supernatural developing in the 1970s. This interest largely took the form of the private consumption of religious cultural products, but suggested to many the reappearance of religion in American public life. Since the most prominent religious voices in American politics were aligned with politically right causes, American civil religion seemed—at least in prominent debate—to be aligned with cultural and economic conservatives. The combination of populist and non-denominational religious rhetoric coming from political conservatives in the late 1970s and 1980s did not do away with the secular demand for citizen allegiance to the state above any religious identification. Instead, it linked this citizenship with religiously-inflected positions on private, gendered behaviors and state spending policies. To Carl Sagan and other writers committed to liberal progressivism—the continuous improvement of living standard through technology, the helpful actions of benign state administration of human needs—this link between conservatism and intense religious profession represented a political and philosophical challenge, and, just as importantly, a professional threat. At the same time, the religious elements of Sagan’s aspirational subject suggest a spiritual underpinning to all the subjectivities at play in Sagan’s maps. Science, in other words, was never purely non-religious, nor was American society at large. The aspirational subject embraces secular-religious fluidity but reorients the

for the care and edification of citizens. It also is meant to connect Sagan with broad positions of the American left during the 1970s and 80s, most notably including opposition to nuclear arms proliferation.

religious toward sanctifying science and liberal progressivism. It bridges religious feeling and scientific progressivism while combining elite skill and social positioning with populist preference for a sanctified yet everyday individual. By embracing and articulating some of the religious qualities of modern science, Sagan constructs and normalizes the aspirational subject by seizing religious and ethical authority from American conservatives and reorienting it toward politically progressive ends.

Privileging science in the face of a widespread suspicion of elitism involved delicately constructing an alternative elitism while critiquing popular movements that might challenge that alternative elitism. For Carl Sagan and many of the religious conservatives he often opposed, the popularity of non-western spiritual traditions helped establish a boundary between proper and improper orientations of the personal conscience. In his non-fiction books, television series, and other appearances, Sagan establishes the groundwork for the aspirational subject by addressing beliefs and practices that he defines as damaging to “progress.” The definition of the aspirational subject relies on a strong belief that all people have a natural curiosity. According to Sagan, however, naturally curious people without the benefit of scientific education continuously turned to revealed religion, mythical stories, and pseudo-science to satisfy this curiosity. Much of Sagan’s writing indirectly addresses this curious but mislead subject.⁷ The subject Sagan constructs in his texts relies heavily on a progressivist binary between the modern, enlightened, secular subject and a subject simultaneously pre-modern and anti-modern. Sagan constructs the opposed, anti-modern subject largely by addressing pseudo-scientific practices like astrology. A supposed surge in popularity of non-Judeo-Christian “religious” and mystical formations caused

⁷ There are countless incidents of Sagan’s disappointment at encountering people interested in pseudo-science throughout his books. He narrates a notable example in the preface of *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (1995) in which an excited cab driver tries to engage Sagan in a conversation about alien abductions.

concern in diverse publishing quarters. As popular science publications appeared more frequently, so did periodicals related to astrology. Some scientists worried about the blurring of distinctions between actual sciences (conducted through experimentation) and non-provable pseudo-science, and that those unclear distinctions led to massive confusion among American readers. Sagan wrote and spoke publicly about this “problem” many times, perhaps not recognizing the permeable distinction between belief and entertainment for people who followed horoscopes or had their palms read. In *Cosmos*, *Contact*, and several other venues, Sagan’s concern with popular astrology rested in his fear that lack of public understanding of science represented a threat not only to scientists but to progress generally.

Sagan connects the public prominence of the religious right with the popularity of astrology and other pseudo-science, seeing it all as a shift away from a Euro-Enlightenment subject as societal norm. However, writers representing a basically “Christian right” point-of-view also worried about popularity of what they called “the occult.” In the bestselling book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), prominent Christian-nationalist Hal Lindsay opens with concern for the misled souls at a party he is attending having their palms read instead of looking at the beautiful stars outside, testaments to the glory of the true God (Lindsay 2). He goes on to read the popularity of astrology (to which he adds divination and devil worship) like he reads everything else: as signs of the coming apocalypse. Sagan, Lindsay, and similarly disposed writers for public audiences offered theological, cultural, and philosophical arguments against astrology. Some scientists devised tests for astrology and published findings; social scientists did some of the valuable work of studying how astrology actually worked among its followers⁸. A concern with Satanism filled newspapers and sweeps-month specials on local television news

⁸ See, for example, Shawn Carlson, “A Double-Blind Test of Astrology,” *Nature* 318.6045 (1985): 419-425, and Robert Wuthnow, “Astrology and Marginality,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 1976 15(2): 157-68 .

programs, even receiving comment from President Reagan, and eventually culminating in 1989 with Bob Larson's controversial bestseller *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth*, a book pervaded by worries over youthful interest in heavy metal music and ouija boards that featured largely invented descriptions of Satanic ritual and theologies of a religion that didn't quite exist as such.

Sagan is at his clearest as an explicator when he describes the differences between scientific and nonscientific theories. His simple explanation of the differences between astrology and astronomy, for example, clarifies and historicizes the divergence of the two in a clever discussion of the scientific development of Johannes Kepler's theories of planetary motion ("The Harmony of the Worlds"). In multiple venues, Sagan addressed the theories of Immanuel Velikovsky. Velikovsky (1895-1979) was a Russian-American psychiatrist who in 1950 published *Worlds in Collision*, a book that put forth some theories to explain ancient myths of various cultures.⁹ Sagan gives very clear explanations for why Velikovsky's thesis is not scientific—why, for example, it is physically impossible that Venus could have been ejected from Jupiter, or why the Earth would not have begun to rotate again after it had stopped. Sagan explains the popularity of Velikovsky's arguments primarily in terms of false comfort and complacency: they make people feel connected to the universe. In this answer, Velikovsky's argument is simply an extension of a longstanding tradition of fallacious defenses of old stories. He links this also with millennialist religious formations—if God will step in, there's no need for

⁹ The Velikovsky theory most frequently critiqued by Sagan and other scientists was that, sometime in the 2nd millennium B.C.E., the planet Venus was ejected from the atmosphere of the planet Jupiter and moved toward the inner solar system. It passed by Earth several times, causing natural disasters alluded to in several legendary texts, including the bible. The plagues visited upon Egypt in the book of Exodus, according to Velikovsky's theory, fell from the Venusian comet—including frogs, locusts, darkness, etc. Further, the petroleum found in the ground in the Middle East was dropped from the proto-Venusian body as it passed by Earth—it seeped into the ground. At one point, a near collision caused the stopping of the Earth's rotation represented in the biblical book of Joshua when the sun stands still, as well as the earthquakes that caused the walls to fall at the Battle of Jericho. See Velikovsky, *Worlds in Collision* (1950).

people to fix things. This relies on a progressivist dismissal of old beliefs: old beliefs of all kinds stand in the way of progress, and are held by lazy and or undereducated minds. The problem lies with their standing in the way of liberal progressive goals.

While some of Sagan's critiques incisively identify problems with individual arguments, his critiques show a somewhat unscientific lack of curiosity about what motivates individuals and groups to practice religious rituals and profess religious beliefs. Instead, he relies on a condescending straw man that views the falsely believing individual as a failed enlightenment subject—individual and curious, wanting to understand, but lacking epistemologies and skills, and therefore easily tricked. Further, Sagan assumes that the popularity of astrology and pseudo-scientific publications like Velikovsky's indicate a serious and nearly unshakable commitment on the part of readers and consumers to the systems employed in both; in other words, the popularity of horoscopes and palm readings indicates an enormous public with a nearly zealous commitment to them. He underestimates, in other words, the extent to which astrological publications, Velikovsky's books, and even his own arguments function in multiple roles for readers and viewers: as sources for guidance and understanding, and as sources of entertainment and semi-serious identity enactment.

In *Cosmos*, Sagan follows his thorough explications of problems with pseudo-science and other damaging cultural formations with explanations of scientific approaches to the same problems—for example, of individual connection to the cosmos. Sagan makes this transition by rhetorically lending sacred significance to the move from pseudo-science to scientific theory, bringing the viewer to the special understanding that science imparts. In “The Harmony of the Worlds,” the third episode of *Cosmos*, after a thorough debunking of astrology, Sagan argues that astrology “pretends to satisfy our longing to feel personally connected with the universe,”

and that “we are connected; not in the trivial ways that the pseudo-science of astrology promises, but in the deepest ways. Our little planet *is* under the influence of a star--the sun warms us; it drives the weather; it sustains all living things. Four billion years ago, it brought forth life on Earth. But our sun is only one among a billion trillion stars within the observable universe, and those countless suns all obey natural laws, some of which are already known to us.” As Sagan speaks these words, a series of filmed scenes and technical diagrams appear on the screen. While they are not still pictures, the form follows a montage more than a film sequence—the images do not describe a process, but show a series of moments associated with the overall theme. Sagan describes neither a technical process nor specific scientific laws; instead, he suggests that making physical laws “known to us” makes the special “deepest” relationship achievable. Science not only describes the relations among people and the universe—it makes possible the proper experience of those relations.

Defining material relationships in spiritualist terms—connection “in the deepest ways”—lets Sagan attach a sacred significance to the scientific study of quantifiable phenomena. This particular argument is a representative example of this rhetorical move throughout *Cosmos*, but the framing of the series particularly seals this as an affective orientation that directs individual wonder toward commitment to scientific investigation. At the opening of the first episode, “The Shores of the Cosmic Ocean,” the camera pans over majestic waves crashing on cliffs as dramatic music swells in the background. From a long distance away, Sagan appears, walking toward the edge of a cliff, and his voiceover begins: “The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be. Our contemplations of the cosmos stir us; there is a tingling in the spine, a catch in the voice, a faint sensation—as if a distant memory—of falling from a great height. We know we are approaching the grandest of mysteries” (“Shores”). After a brief introduction of the series,

Sagan flies in a “spaceship of the imagination” through the universe, through the Milky Way Galaxy, and to Earth, his facial expressions registering delighted awe. Framed by the narration and scenes of the first episode, the recurring scenes throughout the series connect the practice of science not just with understanding, but with a sublime sense of wonder at “mysteries” in a religious sense.

The mystic ecstasy of scientific investigation is often connected throughout with a duty of cosmic significance to deploy science for the general progress of the human race. At the very end of episode one, “The Shores of the Cosmic Ocean,” immediately following the condensing of all of cosmic history into a calendar¹⁰, Sagan declares: “We are the legacy of 15 billion years of cosmic evolution. We have a choice. We can enhance life and come to know the universe that made us, or we can squander our 15 billion year heritage in meaningless self-destruction. What happens in the first second of the next cosmic year depends upon what we do” (“Shores of the Cosmic Ocean”). A seemingly secular combination of scientific and political rhetoric (implied condemnation of nuclear war), this statement suggests a teleology (a fifteen billion year history leading to this moment), a concept of collective agency (with historical, even cosmic, significance), and a Protestant conception of stewardship. Sagan combines these with a sense of wonder and responsibility before the cosmos to argue for a subjectivity that aspires to a spiritual, personal connection to the universe. He develops this idea throughout the rest of *Cosmos*, culminating in the last episode, “Who Speaks for the Earth?”, an hour long consideration of the

¹⁰ In the “Cosmic Calendar” segment (also found in Sagan’s earlier book *The Dragons of Eden* [1976]), Sagan condenses the approximately 15 billion year history of the universe into a viscerally comprehensible format, one Gregorian calendrical year. For example, on Sagan’s cosmic calendar, the Big Bang occurred at 12:00am on January 1st; the Milky Way Galaxy formed on May 1st; life appeared on Earth on October 2nd; modern day humans made their earliest appearances at 10:30pm on December 31st. While Sagan is careful to explain in other parts of the program—and in other publications--the processes by which almost all of these events happened, and he is careful to emphasize the inherent randomness of evolutionary processes, the randomness is over-ridden by a pervasive undercurrent of progressive evolution, the idea that the turning of time on the cosmic calendar leads inexorably to those final seconds of December 31st—leads, in other words, inevitably to the current state of human civilization and culture.

folly of nuclear armament and nationalistic conflict first aired just one month after Ronald Reagan's election as President of the United States.

In addition to modeling the proper affects of the aspirational subject as the host of *Cosmos*, Sagan also provides a bridge between individual emotional reactions to the universe and the broader missions of science. Embodied in Sagan himself, the aspirational subject translates individual reactions into the manipulation of political and market institutions. Sagan effects this translation through the construction of a charismatic individual authority that negotiates relations among academic expertise, widespread anti-elitist attitudes, and a publishing industry newly oriented toward mass production. Carefully balancing his academic authority with personal charisma, Sagan took on a pastoral role in an unwritten religious formation. He advised, interpreted, and narrated according to a set of beliefs and goals, and, in doing so, lead a group of followers in various contexts. This charismatic but non-institutional authority in many ways imitated a Protestant tradition of anti-elitist and anti-institutional, yet powerfully authoritarian, leadership. This leadership grew out of Sagan's access to the natural laws of the universe just as a charismatic preacher's authority came directly from God.

Widespread rejection of powerful institutions in favor of dedicated and strong individuals was a powerful, recurrent feature of entertainment and politics around 1980. In *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (1995), Jane Feuer uncovers the "curious mix of elitism and populism" in the television of the Reagan era. In a clever reading of several samples of a new genre—the "trauma drama," dramatic made-for-T.V. movies based on true stories of horrifying things happening to everyday people—Feuer reveals a curious pattern: in each program, individuals are failed and or/abused by police, government, and corporate institutions. Through an indomitable spirit and sheer force of personality, these individuals fight back, uniting

with other like-minded private citizens to oppose powerful institutions (Feuer 21-22).¹¹ This is populist due to its rejection of powerful institutions, but elitist in its clear separation of especially strong individuals from the weaker individuals they organize and empower. While Feuer does not focus on religion, I would note that each of her examples relies on a basically Protestant conception of the private conscience driven to act. They enshrine the individual conscience as the place of political action and cultural creation. Individual citizens do not work through established institutions; they work to overcome those established institutions and form new ones through the force of their personalities and commitments. No doubt driven in part by disgust with economic recession and the military failures of the 1970s, this rejection of institutional power pervaded the political rhetoric of the resurgent American right. Ronald Reagan gave this sentiment voice in his campaign for U.S. President, and enshrined this sentiment in his first inaugural address. For example:

If we look to the answer as to why, for so many years, we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here, in this land, we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on Earth. The price for this freedom at times has been high, but we have never been unwilling to pay that price. It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government.

Reagan's rhetoric here mostly follows the same themes as it did through his campaigns and presidency. Combining rejection of institutions with American exceptionalism, Reagan suggests his own aspirational subject here: everyday American individuals who aspire to be special, and, through their place in American history, already are special.

¹¹ Examples include: *M.A.D.D.* (1983), the story of the founding of Mothers Against Drunk Driving; *Adam* (1983), the story of *America's Most Wanted* host John Walsh's mission to found the Center for Missing and Exploited Children following the murder of his son, and *Friendly Fire* (1979), the story of a family's failed attempts to get the truth about their son's death in Vietnam.

The rejection of institutionally elite subjects—such as scientists working at major universities, benefitting from federal funding—posed a few problems for scientists like Sagan committed to Euro-Enlightenment progressivism. The threat to the material resources scientists needed to carry out research was obvious and real during the Reagan administration. Less obviously, however, the populism that made special people out of non-elite citizens challenged the long-standing cultural authority of scientists. According to James Gilbert in *Redeeming Culture*, the 1940s, 50s, and 60s had been a period in which, due to the recently won WWII, the proliferation of consumer goods, and the Cold War need for weapons and espionage technology, scientists enjoyed a widespread public admiration (Gilbert 5-6). Sagan’s answer to the increasing prominence of this challenge lies in a newly oriented defense of empirical science and progressivism. He in part appropriated the religious rhetoric, arguing that through science, one attains a spiritual relationship with the cosmos. This affective relationship is furthered in Sagan’s description of the methods of science as “natural:” “Thinking scientifically is as natural as breathing,” he declared in an interview with Judy Klemsrud (Klemsrud, “Behind the Bestsellers”). He further described people’s curiosity through lamenting that people often turned to religious fundamentalism or pseudo-science like astrology to find answers to deep questions, reading it as a confirmation—albeit an unfortunate one—of the natural connection of humans to the cosmos (Sagan, *Demon-Haunted* 1-2).

Further, the dissolution of *détente* in the late 1970s created uncertainty about the sources of funding for science, fear of nuclear hostilities, and hope for new international cooperation and peace. This precarious moment caused real economic changes in the way scientific research was conducted, while it simultaneously drove a public demand for expert commentary on such big changes. This situation escalated with the election of and immediate policy changes implemented

by Ronald Reagan, who increased funding for weapons research while cutting federal support for non-military science expenditures. This meant that a fairly long-standing and well-funded space program—a program that had included the Apollo moon landing missions and unmanned explorations of Mars, Venus, and some of the outer planets—was suddenly reduced to trying desperately to complete the space shuttle project (which was new in the late 70s and early 80s). Cuts to exploratory funding made news frequently in the early 1980s, as people expressed doubt about the space shuttle (Wilford “For Nasa”) and lamented the end of a “rich era in study of the planets” (Wilford, “A Rich Era”). At the same time, accelerated proliferation of American nuclear weapons spurred a massive, transnational public debate about disarmament.

Sagan’s engagement in this public debate, together with fear for non-military science and hope for new peace between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., played a constitutive role in the formation of the aspirational subject. Shifts in the cultural meaning and the economics of science demanded direct political and cultural engagement from scientists. Further, the global significance of the destructive power of nuclear weapons required that much of this political engagement address the well-being of the whole world, which came into conflict with the largely nationalist rhetoric of nuclear arms supporters. Sagan’s aspirational subject combined advanced knowledge, technical expertise, and political commitment to advocate for the global, political importance of science. Moreover, Sagan’s public, personal engagement through various media suggested a need for power among *scientists* rather than a more abstract *science*. The technical expertise paired with personal commitment of conscience helped to bridge the gap between interested members of the public and the esoteric operations of scientists. Sagan constructed this cosmopolitan, mobile, pacifist subject against a diametrically opposed subject committed to parochial nationalism, xenophobic suspicion, and Cold War era weaponry. The transcendent

terms in which Sagan phrased his arguments were contrasted with the small, mundane concerns of the politically right arguments he opposed.

By providing the public with access to seemingly esoteric subjects like science, government, and history, Sagan and other field-crossing experts provided broad narratives for a public desiring to understand their present circumstances in broader terms. While they took their roles seriously, an interesting formation emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s that slightly reoriented the way they performed them. While the issues they addressed were serious, demand for entertaining delivery of content drove changes in news and information oriented media. This can be seen most obviously in the idea of writing a novel instead of a nonfiction book, in the use of special effects, and in ratings-oriented news programming like the CBS magazine show *60 Minutes*, which first aired in 1968 and became profitable in the 1970s. The grandiloquent style of Sagan and others helped make this a kind of relatively passive entertainment rather than participation in political dialog. Eventually, this televisual-entertainment bled into immediate political and military discussions. An American 1983 made-for-TV movie called *The Day After* broadcast on ABC focused around a fictional account of nuclear bombardment. This sort of disaster movie has long been a popular genre—but following it in a bit of network synergy were heavily advertised panel discussions on ABC-affiliated radio stations and on *Viewpoint* with Ted Koppel, the last of which featured a panel discussion with Henry Kissinger, Robert McNamara, Elie Wiesel, William F. Buckley, and Carl Sagan (“After You View”). A week later, ABC ran a nationally-televised simulation called *The Crisis Game*, in which prominent public figures like Edmund Muskie (former senator and former Secretary of State under President Carter) and James Schlesinger (former Secretary of Defense and former CIA Director) played roles of president and cabinet in a simulated Soviet invasion of Iran (Corry).

While neither Sagan nor any other public scientist was directly involved in this latter event, this blending of politics, science, and entertainment demanded a new role for personality in scientific leadership. The entertainment quality of simulation requires no particular expertise, but can make use of it as a vague measure of prestige. Sagan's scientific expertise, together with his carefully-constructed media persona, becomes a kind of currency tradable for prominent voice. He need not be an expert on international relations, for example, to offer "the scientific perspective" on the consequences of international relations or domestic policy. By connecting his scientific authority with his media-friendly expertise, Sagan developed the ability to move across fields and advocate on many issues. During the 1980s and particularly around the 1984 presidential election, this is exactly what Sagan did, appearing nearly everywhere as a spokesman for liberal political causes around nuclear disarmament and the environment, but eventually branching out even further. In December of 1983, for example, the *New York Times* featured a short, somewhat condescending piece about longtime ERA activist Sonia Johnson running for the Citizen's Party nomination for U.S. President. When asked about potential running mates for her, Johnson gives three interesting answers: Dr. Benjamin Spock (a popular writer on infant care and anti-Vietnam War activist), John Lewis (Civil Rights Movement activist and later U.S. Congressman), and Carl Sagan ("A Feminist Campaign for the Presidency"). By 1983, Sagan's work on nuclear disarmament had secured him a temporary place as an icon for the American left. He leveraged this to campaign for Democratic presidential candidate Gary Hart, appearing at university rallies across the Northeastern U.S. (and especially before the New York primary) (figure 2; Barbanel). Sagan frequently met in the 1980s with Soviet scientists to urge cessation of hostilities in a transnational manner (Lewis). When international dignitaries visited the U.S. officially, they sometimes met with Carl Sagan—

including French Culture Minister Jack Lang in November of 1984 (Freedman), and even Rajiv Gandhi in July 1985, who met with Sagan after addressing the U.S. Congress (Weinraub). Sagan continued to write against nuclear armament, to speak against the militarization of space in the Reagan Administration's Strategic Defense Initiative¹², and to speak for other left causes, including appearances at Live Aid (Fein) and at nuclear test protests in Nevada, where he was arrested twice in 1986 and 1987 (Applebome; Lindsey). He became a sought after commentator; *Foreign Affairs* even began in 1986 to advertise that Sagan would be writing regularly for the publication in much the same way *Scientific American* had fifteen years earlier ("The World Doesn't Fit"). Sagan even became a reference in social debates, making appearances in the laudatory quotes of self-help books ("What Will They Do?") and getting a mention in a made for television drama about "a family's crisis of faith" (Sagan being a sort of catch-all name to represent commitments to empirical science and secular humanist politics) (O'Connor, "Schoolbreak Special").

Sagan's notoriety developed during shifts in multimedia publishing in the 1970s, and reached its peak between 1979 (when his television series *Cosmos* first aired) and 1985 (when his novel *Contact* was first published). The proliferation of popular science in media combined entertainment-driven methods of production, including state-of-the-art television effects, dramatic reproductions, and basic scholarly commentary. Additionally, in October 1979, Dava Sobel, a *New York Times* science writer, noted a proliferation of science in media—new magazines founded, new television series conceived, fiction and non-fiction science books creeping into the *New York Times* bestseller list. The *New York Times* reported on this popularity

¹² Commonly called "Star Wars," the SDI was a space-centered anti-ballistic missile laser system that would intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles launched from Soviet bases at U.S. targets. The development of such a system (not undertaken in earnest until the George W. Bush administration in 2001) violated the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty, and so represented a hawkish foreign policy move away from the relative warmth of détente.

four more times over the next ten years. Sobel attributed this popularity to baby-boomers “reaching magazine buying age.” She argued that a generation young when the Soviet satellite Sputnik was launched (1957), U.S. astronauts landed on the moon (1969), new consumer products seem to grow directly from visible scientific “space age” research, and nuclear research yielded the benefits and dangers of atom bombs and nuclear power plants had a non-specialist’s curiosity for scientific research (Sobel). This interest in science specifically was no doubt fed by continued public discussions of budget cuts and nuclear proliferation immediately preceding and during the Reagan era. Additionally, concerns over new relations with the Soviet Union and other monumental international shifts helped to create demand for broad metacommentary from experts in various fields, including science and religion.

Public interest in science and changes in the structure of book publishing suddenly offered immense personal and professional incentive to scientists to publish for a general audience. Carl Sagan notes this professional interest in a 1977 interview with Boyce Rensberger in which he admits somewhat self-deprecatingly that part of the impetus to publish is “naked self-interest”—if people do not understand science, scientists will not be funded (Rensberger). Sagan legendarily benefited from his writing and television; he and Ann Druyan, his chief collaborator and third wife, enjoyed an enormous house in Ithaca, and Sagan drove a high-end Porsche (with license plate “Phobos”) around the Cornell campus (Scientific American). An unkind reviewer subtitled Sagan’s *Cosmos* series “The Selling of Carl Sagan,” observing that Sagan’s personality dominated the information presented in the series, and that Sagan’s own production company, Carl Sagan Productions, co-produced and profited from the series both immediately and in the long term (O’Connor “Cosmos”). Indeed, as a self-marketing tool, *Cosmos* and Sagan’s books paid off enormously late in 1980, when Simon & Shuster granted

Sagan a two million dollar advance on a future novel, one of the largest publishing advances paid up to that point (McDowell “Sagan Sells”).

Sagan’s self-marketing, his television appearances, and the 1980 advance for the novel that would become *Contact* (1985) entered debates about changes in the publishing industry and the author-as-subject at several points. Peripherally, Sagan’s deal with Simon & Shuster became a useful example in stories on the small number of authors making large sums of money on books. Just as importantly, however, Sagan’s deal with Simon & Shuster exemplified a change in relations between authors and publishing houses. When Sagan signed his novel deal with Simon & Shuster, he was halfway through a four book contract with Random House. Sagan’s representative, the Meredith Agency, claimed that this deal was for four *non-fiction* books, and the novel did not count (McDowell “Sagan Sells”). The details of this contractual conflict between Random House and Simon & Shuster occasionally made their way into the news. Three years later, in “Bold Ideas of the Meredith Agency,” McDowell used Sagan’s deal as an example of the Meredith Agency’s tendencies to leverage authors in bottom line oriented publishing. McDowell claims that in the past, an authors tended to spend his or her career with a single publishing house once having written a successful book. Sagan’s contract represents a new type of publishing competition, one that not only enriches a select group of highly-popular authors and their agents, but one in which publishing becomes big business and principles and producers compete for profits, and negotiating an author’s share becomes far more fraught.

In and of themselves, these changes in publishing demand attention, but coupled with television and film publishing, these changes suggest a shift in popular orientation for intellectual labor, one that helps effect a shift in Enlightenment subjectivity in the early 1980s. Sagan’s “aspirational subject” combined scientific expertise, scholarly accomplishment, and institutional

prestige with media savvy, widespread accessibility, and ability to connect specializations with popular concerns. The first three in this combination rely on accomplishments that are both impressive and easily explained to non-specialists. For Sagan, this involved the prediction that the planet Venus was exceptionally hot, driven by a “run-away greenhouse effect.” For popularizers like Stephen Hawking and Kip Thorne, this involved mathematical and observational accomplishments around the exotic and popularly exciting topic of black holes. Despite extraordinarily light teaching loads, their continued appointments at highly recognized universities—Sagan at Cornell, Thorne at Cal-Tech, and Hawking at Oxford—built an institutional prestige that transcended the academy and appealed to a non-specialized public. The second half of the recipe relied on new televisual technologies, including home video recording and cable television.

Sagan’s series *Cosmos* combined special effects, staged story-telling, scientific information, and liberal politics of the late 70s. Sagan’s style of delivery was both mocked and credited with the immense success of the series. The successful model, however, had been copied from equally successful British series—*Civilization* (1969), an argument for the importance of art in the cultural evolution of the western world narrated by art historian Sir Kenneth Clark and complete with special effects and reenactments, and *The Ascent of Man* (1973), a series about evolution hosted by noted British mathematician and biologist Jacob Bronowski. Popularization became a special art form with leading practitioners in production. Marshall Ledger describes the balance of popularization in the March 1981 *New York Times* article “The Ascent of Adrian Malone,” a profile of the producer of *Cosmos* and other similar series, including *The Ascent of Man*. Ledger writes, “Malone’s special talent is translating any subject, no matter how abstruse, into not only concrete but also human, emotional terms.” The

writer describes Malone's collaboration with Marlon Brando on a series about Native American history with a hint of awe that Brando finds Malone worthy of his project. Talking to Ledger, Malone describes the importance of this "human" element: "I deal with the history and the making of ideas, and at the heart of its synthesis... You deal with, say, Copernicus. Do you do the Copernicus theory? Yes, you do. But surely you need to know about the man, about his times, about what Copernicus means today, if anything at all. The circle grows wider and wider." He suggests that the history of science "told as a human story" "lets the audience appreciate the magnitude of scientific achievement" (Ledger).

While Malone's and Sagan's focus on individual people in human dramas did not go unquestioned¹³, it both rereads past scientists as new, field-spanning geniuses and constructs a multiple competency for the host of the television series. Malone's comments on Copernicus find an analog in the treatment of Johannes Kepler in Sagan's series *Cosmos*. "The Harmony of the Worlds," the third episode of the series, presents Kepler as a brilliant scientist caught up—often consciously—in the Protestant-Catholic, Enlightenment-reactionary conflict of his time, turning him into a historical agent who, despite the slowness with which his Laws of Planetary Motion spread, had an immediate agency. The series makes links between past scientists like Kepler and current scientists frequently, but the most common link made lies between these scientists and Sagan, as he stands, dressed in brown tweed jacket, in recreations of the Library of Alexandria in Egypt, at German sites associated with Kepler, and in various bucolic environments. From there, the thrust of the series—from the history of science to the present of politics and science—is easily made, for Sagan now has the authority not just to comment cogently on scientific theories, but on nearly everything. His mobility between locations—seemingly instantaneous—on the

¹³ The *New York Times* featured articles in 1981 and 1982 questioning whether academics on television were reliable or serving the broader purposes of knowledge production (Zoglin)(Denison), and even Sagan worried during production that Malone's techniques obscured important scientific facts(Ledger)

television series mimics his mobility between topics and authorities in his speeches and writings; a subject of multiple competencies, he bridges the gap between readers and the complexities of history, politics, and the natural and social sciences. The same link is made again and again in his books, but it is the subject constructed on television that makes this possible.

THE ASPIRATIONAL SUBJECT OF THE FUTURE

In his nonfiction work in print and television, Sagan situated himself and his mission within a long history of science and Euro-American progressive advancement. Manipulating the cultural economy of expertise, Sagan made himself a cultural icon. In *Contact*, his one work of fiction, Sagan articulates a vision of a future world growing beyond the cultural and social problems of his present. In *Contact*, Sagan imagines the development of the aspirational subject as the leader of the human race into a future that realizes the promises of Euro-American enlightenment. *Contact* centers on Dr. Ellie Arroway, an astronomer and director of a Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project at a radio telescope array in New Mexico¹⁴. The novel begins with Ellie's early life, touching on the death of her beloved father and her generally scientific mindset. One day at the New Mexico observatory, the astronomers detect a signal coming from near the star Vega. Recording the signal and decoding it turns into an international effort. The alien message contains instructions for building a machine, the function of which is not clear, but it involves a large number of new technologies. The World Machine Consortium—made up of scientists and officials from most countries of the world—contracts with an

¹⁴ “SETI” is the name given to any project that involves searching for signs of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. Most of this occurs through radio astronomy. The U.S. government helped fund official SETI projects in the 1980s, but most SETI work has been funded by other sources.

immensely wealthy and morally ambiguous industrialist named Hadden, who helps them build three machines in the U.S., the U.S.S.R., and Japan. The World Machine Consortium determines that scientist-representatives from the U.S., U.S.S.R., India, China, and Nigeria will sit in the machine when it is activated. Opposition to building of the machine takes several forms, mostly from American religious leaders. The novel contains a number of rancorous discussions between scientists and religious leaders. The U.S. machine is sabotaged before construction is complete, resulting in the death of the American scientist-representative; Ellie is chosen to go in his place. The Machine takes the international scientist team through a series of “wormholes” to a giant station at the center of the galaxy, home to an infinitely advanced, multi-species alien civilization. The five scientists disembark onto what appears to be an Earth beach, and each, after entering a door, converses with an alien. Each alien appears to each person in the guise of a loved one or relevant character. When they return to the Machine, the scientists reappear on Earth at the same instant they had left, and their recording equipment has failed to record anything. Very few believe their story, and the scientists are all accused of having faked the message and the machine. Eventually, the Machine Consortium announces that nothing happened at activation, and swears them all to secrecy. At the end of the novel, Ellie’s mother dies, and she finds out that her beloved father was not her actual father—her hated stepfather was. Using a computer program, she then discovers a message hidden in the number Pi. The novel ends, then, with the dissolution of a long-cherished personal belief and the discovery that the universe was intentionally designed.

In *Cosmos* and Sagan’s non-fiction books, the affective orientation of the aspirational subject comes through in fragments. Through *Contact*’s protagonist, Ellie, Sagan thoroughly develops the affects that give the aspirational subject its power, giving special attention to the

“sense of wonder” at the cosmos. This wonder provides motivation for her actions and returns throughout the novel as a central subject of dialog among Ellie and the other characters in public, private, and even intimate moments. The novel opens with descriptions of Ellie’s childhood curiosity; in one of the first passages of the novel, Ellie clandestinely disassembles a broken radio:

“Guiltily, she let herself into the spare room. The old Motorola radio was on the shelf where she remembered it. It was very big and heavy and, hugging it to her chest, she almost dropped it. . . . With her tongue between her lips, she removed the screws and exposed the innards. As she had suspected, there were no tiny orchestras and miniature announcers quietly living out their small lives in anticipation of the moment when the toggle switch would be clicked to ‘on.’ Instead, there were beautiful glass tubes, a little like light bulbs. Some resembled the churches of Moscow she had seen pictured in a book. The prongs at their bases were perfectly designed for the receptacles they were fitted into” (5-6).

After young Ellie fixes a broken vacuum tube, the tubes all begin to glow, and static comes from the radio. “Glancing toward the closed door with a start, she lowered the volume” (6). Ellie finds a station and listens to a radio story about “a Russian machine that was in the sky endlessly circling the Earth. Endlessly, she thought” (6). After listening to the announcement about Sputnik (which dates this scene to late 1957), Ellie, “fearful of being discovered,” puts the radio away, emerges from the room “a little out of breath,” and starts when her mother walks by her (6). This two page passage early in the novel establishes several crucial elements of the scientist-subject Sagan constructs throughout the novel. First, inborn intellectual curiosity that needs little stimulation from other people: at less than ten years old, Ellie wants to look inside machines to know how they work. Second, innate intelligence: by simply looking at the insides of a radio for a few minutes, she is able to understand at least basically how it works and fix it. The third element lies in a fairly complex affective dimension to this curiosity that makes it into a “sense of wonder.” This is seen in the guilty pleasure she gets by clandestinely working on the machine in a “spare room” with the door closed, emerging “a little out of breath” as it ends. The narrator

gives no indication that Ellie's family directly discourages her curiosity, but she "sneaks away" nonetheless, which suggests a clandestine, solitary quality to her explorations. Her mother and stepfather express dismay occasionally in the early parts of the book that some of her interests are not gender appropriate, and a math teacher is annoyed at her questions (10-11), but the disassembly of the radio happens before her stepfather or math teacher enter the story. It is the solitariness that is crucial here; these curiosities are not so much forbidden as private, personal matters of pleasure. This solitary pleasure is echoed in the next page when, on a family vacation in rural Wisconsin, Ellie escapes two hated cousins and lies on her back on the ground, looking "up at the brilliant spangled sky, her heart racing" (7). Alone, thrilled, she tries to picture the Earth from a cosmic perspective: "the world only looks flat...Really it's round. This is all one big ball...turning in the middle of the sky...once a day. She tried to imagine it spinning, with millions of people glued to it, talking different languages, wearing funny clothes, all stuck to the same ball" (7; ellipses in original). She thinks about the Earth's rapid spin, and "gratifyingly, she was overtaken by the giddy sense that she had better clutch the clumps of grass on either side of her and hold on for dear life, or else fall up into the sky, her tiny tumbling body dwarfed by the huge darkened space below. She actually cried out before she managed to stifle the scream with her wrist. That was how her cousins were able to find her. Scrambling down the slope, they discovered on her face an uncommon mix of embarrassment and surprise, which they readily assimilated, eager to find some small indiscretion to carry back and offer to her parents" (8). Her sense of solitary pleasure here connects to two things—discovery and a sense of cosmic proportion, of tininess before the vastness of space. In a variation of the nineteenth-century sublime, the individual's smallness before something so large does not alienate, but causes pleasure and incites awe.

Later conversations Ellie has with other characters root Ellie's sense of wonder in a Protestant tradition resistant to institutional religious authority. Ellie makes an argument for the religious quality of her sense of wonder to her lover, Presidential Science Advisor Ken der Heer, after the alien Message has been received. Lying in bed, Ellie and Ken discuss the distance between language, feelings, and reality, as Ellie explains that talking about her late father makes her only a little sad, but thinking of him to herself makes her very sad. This interesting moment acknowledges language as a system of signs not directly coinciding with reality; however, it also suggests that reality exists separate from language, and that individual affective perception allows access to it—as does empirical investigation. Ellie immediately transitions to thinking about the possibility of heaven, with “nice moms and dads floating about or flapping to a nearby cloud. It would have to be a commodious place to accommodate all the tens of billions of people who had lived and died since the emergence of the human species. It might be very crowded, she was thinking, unless the religious heaven was built on a scale something like the astronomical heaven. There'd be room to spare” (152). Ellie continues on to talk to Ken about large numbers—the vastness of space, the number of possible intelligent beings in the galaxy, the number of stars in the universe, and other quantifiable but viscerally intimidating numbers. Her transition ties the individual person to the vast cosmos through an affective connection that helps remedy any possible insignificance of the individual; before the vastness of space, the “tumbling tiny body” is not lost. Instead, a sublime, mystical, unquantifiable connection is forged specifically through attempts to quantify. Ellie opens an encyclopedia entry marked “Sacred or Holy” and explains to der Heer:

The theologians seem to have recognized a special, nonrational—I wouldn't call it irrational—aspect of the feeling of sacred or holy. They call it 'numinous.' The term was first used by... let's see... somebody named Rudolph Otto in a 1923 book, *The Idea of the Holy*. He believed that

humans were predisposed to detect and revere the numinous. He called it the *mysterium tremendum*. Even *my* Latin is good enough for that.

In the presence of the *mysterium tremendum*, people feel utterly insignificant, but, if I read this right, not personally alienated. He thought of the numinous as a thing ‘wholly other,’ and the human response to it as ‘absolute astonishment.’ Now, if that’s what religious people talk about when they use words like sacred or holy, I’m with them. I felt something like that just *listening* for a signal, never mind in actually receiving it. I think all of science elicits this sense of awe (153).

Continuing, she reads a section that suggests that “man is now in a new situation for developing structures of ultimate values radically different from those provided in the traditionally affirmed awareness of the sacred” (153). In a long tradition of Protestant theological development, Ellie seamlessly leads to an anti-clerical yet nonetheless religious conclusion:

I think the bureaucratic religions try to institutionalize your perception of the numinous instead of providing means so you can perceive the numinous directly—like looking through a six-inch telescope. If sensing the numinous is at the heart of religion, who’s more religious would you say—the people who follow the bureaucratic religions or the people who teach themselves science? (153-54)

This moment establishes the relationship between individual people and the cosmos as one of spiritual-affect, and suggests science as a method for *access*, much like religious education in some traditions or rituals in others. Tying this to an intimate moment—a conversation had as Ellie and Ken lie in bed together—suggests that proper affective relations with the universe also underlie interpersonal relationships. Ellie’s rejection of “bureaucratic religion” first signals a recurring argument in *Contact*; it suggests that science provides the proper method for accessing a universal “numinousness,” and that science, despite its imbrication in the politics and culture of modernity, resists “bureaucracy” in an anti-authoritarian way. In an almost Lutheran fashion, the argument here rejects intermediaries, suggesting that “bureaucracy” is a kind of fraud, whereas, while there may be authorities of science, the true authority lies not in individual persons but in the scientific method, which is accessible to everyone.

Two additional elements in the novel suggest that the aspirational subject's religion fulfills American religious tradition: appropriation of the eighteenth-century Euro-American concept of "natural religion," and equation of the twentieth-century proliferation of technologies and scientific discoveries with "religious conversion." The epigraph to chapter sixteen features a passage from William James' 1902 work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "The God whom science recognizes must be a God of universal laws exclusively, a God who does a wholesale, not a retail, business. He cannot accommodate his processes to the convenience of individuals" (*Contact* 277). This passage recalls similar sentiments from *Poor Richard's Almanac* and other eighteenth-century publications, using metaphors of commerce and suggesting that the laws of science are immutable—ordained by God or otherwise. The second can clearly be seen in Ellie's musings. She considers the Japanese neologism "Machinado," The Way of the Machine—a word meant to signify the spreading perspective throughout the world that tended to view the human race as united, bound by common purpose and facing a common future (315). "Something like it had been proclaimed in some, but by no means all, religions. Practitioners of those religions understandably resented the insight being attributed to an alien Machine. If the acceptance of a new insight on our place in the universe represents a religious conversion, she mused, then a theological revolution was sweeping the Earth" (315). In this sense, an international secularism becomes a final religious conversion, which fulfills some earlier religious beliefs and practices for those progressive enough to see it.

This religious conversion imagines a creator-god in the monotheist tradition, but this God bears no direct relationship to individuals or groups. Instead, the mechanical processes of creation set in motion by this God invites these affective relations between individual and universe. The part of the novel that most clearly addresses the source of creation comes during

Ellie's conversation with an alien at the center of the galaxy. The alien in the guise of her father tells her that when his civilization emerged into the galaxy "a long time ago on many different worlds," they found networks of "tunnels" through space that had already been constructed: "various ages, various styles of ornamentation, and all abandoned" (366); he confirms as Ellie questions him that no trace remains anywhere of the "galaxy-wide civilization" that had built the tunnels. Ellie quickly transitions to asking the alien about the myths and religions of his civilization, and asks whether they "feel the numinous:" "I want to know about your myths, your religions. What fills you with awe? Or are those who make the numinous unable to feel it?" (367). The alien responds by suggesting that human beings make the numinous, too, and confirms that the aliens feel it. He locates the alien sense of the numinous in just one place—mathematics. He suggests that messages of some kind lie within transcendental numbers.¹⁵ The alien explains the message: "Well, eventually—let's say it's in the ten-to-the-twentieth-power place—something happens. The randomly varying digits disappear, and for an unbelievably long time there's nothing but ones and zeros" (367). The ones and zeros, he explains, cannot be random, because they contain an eleven-dimension "picture" of sorts. Ellie objects, "Mathematics isn't arbitrary. I mean pi has to have the same value everywhere. How can you hide a message inside pi? It's built into the fabric of the universe." "Exactly," the alien answers (368). Through this imaginary scenario, the alien suggests an answer to a frequent objection made by skeptics of revealed religion, including Ellie herself earlier in the novel to Palmer Joss, a Christian preacher: "imagine your kind of god—omnipotent, omniscient, compassionate—really wanted to leave a record for future generations, to make his existence unmistakable to, say, the remote descendants of Moses. It's easy, trivial. Just a few enigmatic phrases, and some fierce

¹⁵ A transcendental number—something the book discusses multiple times—is a number that neither repeats nor terminates, but continues forever. The best-known example of this is pi, the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of a circle. Pi is 3.14159... and on and on, neither repeating nor terminating at any point out to infinity.

commandment that they be passed on unchanged...such as ‘The Sun is a star.’ Or ‘Mars is a rusty place with deserts and volcanoes, like Sinai.’ Or ‘A body in motion tends to remain in motion.’ Or... ‘The Earth weighs a million million million million times as much as child’” (163). The alien’s talk with Ellie confirms that such messages do exist—the hidden message he talks about in pi confirms that the universe was intentionally designed by something akin to a creator-god. In the very last pages of the novel, Ellie’s confirms that a pattern does lie deep in pi: “there it is, written small, the artist’s signature. Standing over humans, gods, and demons, subsuming Caretakers and Tunnel builders, there is an intelligence that antedates the universe” (431). The kind of god revealed here, however, mimics gods of revealed religion only in limited ways. This is God-the-engineer, not God-the-ethicist, God-the-father, nor even God the Creator—this God requires nothing and demands nothing.

This construction—god the designer who reveals himself through mathematics—takes two strange turns in the novel: one immediately after the alien has revealed the presence of these messages to Ellie, and another near the end of the novel when, with the aid of a computer, Ellie discovers the pattern hidden inside pi. As Ellie stares in amazement at the alien’s revelation, he continues: “It’s even better than that...Let’s assume that only in base-ten arithmetic does the sequence of zeros and ones show up...Let’s also assume that the beings who first made this discovery had ten fingers. You see how it looks? It’s as if pi has been waiting billions of years for ten-fingered mathematicians with fast computers to come along. You see, the Message was kind of addressed to us” (368). Ellie confirms that the alien isn’t *really* talking about pi specifically and that they don’t have ten fingers. Leaving aside for the moment the Message from God to the aliens echoing the Message from the aliens to Earth, we see a strange kind of hierarchy. Base-ten mathematics are the western mathematics that prevail in worldwide science

and in most contemporary civilizations on Earth.¹⁶ The base ten number system of the west—appropriated in antiquity from mathematics practiced in Arabia—is thus naturalized and equated with the whole world. The alien explains that there is some mathematical message for their civilization that seems to be designed in a similar way. This suggests either one of two things: first, that biological evolution throughout the galaxy would allow very few biologies that would lead to intelligence; OR, second, that a vast array of intelligent biologies may be possible, but that messages would only be present for a finite number of them—unless each infinite transcendental number contained a message. Either messages are placed by creator-gods for specific civilizations with specific biological attributes, or only a small number of biological attributes are possible within the chemical composition of the universe. The hierarchy implied in the first possibility is clear—and human beings—or beings with similar biological configurations—occupy a special place in a teleological and evolutionary universe.

Simultaneously, however, the novel suggests that the mathematical nature of these messages from the designers reveal themselves in a democratic way. Unlike institutional religion, which always includes some type of authority, these divine revelations are available to anyone: “In whatever galaxy you happen to find yourself, you take the circumference of a circle, divide by its diameter, measure closely enough, and uncover a miracle—another circle, drawn kilometers downstream of the decimal point. There would be richer messages farther in. It doesn’t matter what you look like, or what you’re made of, or where you come from. As long as you live in the universe, and have a modest talent for mathematics, sooner or later you’ll find it. It’s already here. It’s inside everything. You don’t have to leave your planet to find it” (431). In

¹⁶ It’s been suggested in a number of sources—including *Contact*-- that the ten fingers and ten toes on human beings make this system particularly amenable and natural for people’s brains. The alien makes this connection casually, suggesting as much in this hypothetical message in pi. However, plenty of number systems have arisen on Earth that are not base ten—even Roman numerals defy this logic to some extent.

this, the novel's final statement, is found the strongest statement of the novel's politics. It suggests that science and mathematics hold democratizing power: science and mathematics work in tandem with democratic government to undermine old dogmas, unseat tyrants, and enshrine individual rights. The kind of western privilege required by this subject, however, is not buried very deeply in. The mathematical concept of pi is fairly elementary, and, while not universal, requires in theory only "a modest talent for mathematics." However, Ellie arrives at this secret message in pi not with mere calculation, but calculation carried out by computer technology.

Both the knowledges and the affects that the novel hopes for require the use of modern technologies. This is how the novel addresses the vertiginous quality of postmodernity, and why the spiritual-affective religious quality of Sagan's narrative of science is so necessary. That is, the intellectual argument of *Contact*, *Cosmos*, and all of Sagan's other publications remains basic: scientific methods and the modern technologies produced by those methods yield superior results in knowledge production than pseudo-scientific and dogmatic institutional systems. The methods of science deliver certain types of discoveries when used properly. However, the liberal universalism that underpins Sagan's philosophy comes up hard against the historical and cultural specificity of western modernity; it's hard to argue that these methods and technologies are universal when they arose recently and remain unavailable to some extent to all but the most privileged subjects with extensive western educations. Sagan solved this contradiction partly by advocating public scientific education—knowing that access wasn't universal, he sought to sustain and expand access. In this sense, he acknowledged that science was in some way restricted, if not necessarily culturally situated. The religious-affective dimension of his argument, however—the sense of wonder and discovery, the personal joy, and the relations between individuals and the cosmos—circumvents the privilege problem by suggesting that,

while the technologies yielded by science are necessary tools, they are essentially secondary to the creation of a specific kind of subject, one who manipulates those tools as a kind of worship and ritual. The combination of religion and mathematics at the end of the novel, then, allows an affective connection between cosmos and individual, and between individuals, denied by the fragmented and vertiginous quality of modernity. Math becomes simultaneously the great leveler and great unifier, a narrative that is also a process.

THE CENTER OF SPACE AND THE END OF TIME

Sagan's presentation of mathematics as a universal concept across culture and history helps set up the over-riding temporality of the novel, a progressive historical timeline on which civilizations occupy different points. The affects of the aspirational subject help to establish the continuity of this line of progression. Sagan expands human history, however, into the history of the universe in a way that allows him to imagine the end point of progressive history. In *Theory of the Novel*, Lukacs famously called novels "the epic of a world abandoned by God," creating a questionable but useful temporal distinction. In old epic poetry, Lukacs argues, the gods were "immanent," that is, part of characters' immediate experiences, present as identifiable forces and even as characters. The presence of the gods lent a divine meaning to all of the characters' experiences. "Meaning" in the broadest, historical sense, was immediate and experienced. The novel, Lukacs suggests, is a form of epic writing in which the gods and grand meanings are *not* immanent: "The novel... is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, and yet which still thinks in terms of totality." (Good 176). Instead, characters strive to find that "totality," to

collapse the metaphysical with the experiential, to make meaning “immanent” (176).¹⁷ Lukacs’ argument provides a useful temporal distinction between two categories I will call here the “historical”—the time in which broad narratives assemble and great works are recognized--and the “immanent,” or the everyday and immediate experiences of characters. The novel’s protagonist, Ellie, tries through science and affective contact with “the numinous” to confront the vastness of what Jameson calls “the world system,” or the interconnected and opaque networks of late capitalism (Jameson, *Geopolitical* 10). The “numinous” for Ellie involves understanding relations among the laws of science, the realities of the vast cosmos, and her own everyday experiences. To get there, however, Ellie must negotiate both temporal levels described by Lukacs—the experiential and the historical--as she navigates personal relationships and the political formations of the world formed by the historical legacies of European imperialism and the Cold War. The book signals this in her discussions with the Russian scientist “Vaygay” Lunacharsky about the Soviet and American systems and the Vietnam War (112), in her musings on the political grievances of African-Americans demonstrating in Washington (92-93), and in the reoccurring imperial metaphors the book employs to describe space. This novel, however, employs a third temporal category that branches off of the historical, a category I am going to call “the geological.” “Geological time” includes the entire sweep of cosmic history from the creation in the “Big Bang” to the present day; it is the time in which stars live and die, in which life evolves through many stages on Earth and elsewhere, and in which, importantly, the vast multi-species alien civilization Ellie and the other four scientists encounter operates. Using Jameson’s conception of the postmodern as the era in which the relations between individuals and systems cannot be represented easily, we can read Lukacs’ “historical time” as a double

¹⁷ Lukacs uses the term “immanent” in the tradition of theology; the “immanent” forms of God are those that dwell within the universe as opposed to outside of it.

category: it represents both the time of grand narratives, in which everything relates together to lead toward an eventual end, and it represents the time in which the causes and effects of history blur—that is, in which we cannot quite represent and understand how the current situation of the world came to be. The geological time I am reading in *Contact* closely relates to but is distinct from both—it is perhaps the grandest of narratives, for it involves all of existence and all of the time in which there has been existence. It does not directly involve a creator-God in the sense of revealed religion, but it involves intelligences through which the universe is created and cultivated, processes through which it operates, and hints of grand teleologies that remain only partially accessible. Both the temporal and spatial maps of the galaxy in *Contact* utilize metaphors of empire to understand the Earth's position in the civilizational systems of the galaxy.

According to Lukacs, attempts to represent the meeting between historical and experiential times help define a novel. *Contact* largely bypasses the division between historical and immanent by bringing in geological time, a time with operations so vertiginous that they can only be glimpsed through scientific knowledge and the proper affective orientations of the aspirational subject. In *Contact*, geological time encompasses processes that remain just out of the realm of the understandable, but the glimpses of it provided by both scientific processes and Ellie's encounter with the alien at the center of the galaxy function as a quasi-religious revelation, a brief contact with the unreachable sublime that does indeed govern the seemingly infinite processes of the universe. Through Ellie's revelatory encounter with the God-like alien, the book presents the object of aspiration for the aspirational subject: to lead human civilization to become like the alien civilization, a civilization that has achieved the end of Euro-American progressive enlightenment. It does so by representing the aliens as infinitely wise and powerful

through Euro-American scientific methods of technological and cultural development. The spatial and temporal maps in the novel effect this through consistent nineteenth- and twentieth-century racial and imperial metaphors. The subjectivity that remains—a white liberal individual universalized through contact with the rest of the universe—relies largely on a quasi-religious form of enlightenment progressivism. In *Contact*, the development of this “geological time” and a spatial map that places Euro-American subjectivities at its center accomplishes this mystification.

The presentation of religion becomes clearly temporalized when we place it in context of the novel’s over-riding imperial logic and discussions of cultural “backwardness” compared to alien civilizations; through this, the novel suggests that modern mankind has not grown beyond religious dogmatism, but should continue to move in that direction. The aspirational subject—the scientist or other secular specialist with wide-ranging interest and media access—crucially advocates for and demonstrates the possibilities of growing into new cultural phases. The aspirational subject partially bridges the gap between backward and nonwhite mankind and the metropolitan aliens. The “backwardness” of humankind as compared to alien civilizations comes up again and again in the novel, and indeed, in all of Sagan’s work. In a 1973 article coauthored with Frank Drake on extra-terrestrial intelligence, Sagan writes: “Since we have achieved the capability for interstellar radio communication only in the past few decades, there is virtually no chance that any civilization we come into contact with will be as backward as we are” (Drake and Sagan). Sagan’s assertion here relies partly on a fairly straightforward scientific argument: if many civilizations on planets throughout the galaxy develop radio broadcast technology, they will do so at different times, and a civilization would broadcast for a long time before Earth scientists discovered it. In other words, if Earth scientists made contact with broadcasters

elsewhere, it would be very unlikely that *both* species were relatively new to radio technology. However, this relies on a narrow conception of the progressive advancement of technologies: that all surviving civilizations eventually develop radio technology, and that that technology continues to “improve” or “advance” in basically the same way that radio technology has evolved on Earth. Given the complex formations influencing the development of radio on Earth—commercial interests, scientific accidents, etc.—this is a big assumption.

The assumptions, however, are pervasive and key to Sagan’s temporal map and broader cultural politics. The argument about the “backwardness” of mankind recurs with reference to both culture and technology throughout *Contact*. After a long passage on worldwide cultural repercussions of the alien message, the narrator notes a “decline in many quarters of the world of jingoist rhetoric and puerile self-congratulation” and a widespread curiosity about the universe (181). The narrator goes on to quote an American editorialist as suggesting that “mankind has been promoted to high school” (180). This musing on the “backwardness” and imminent “advancement” of mankind at first seems to suggest a humbling, or a reconsideration—part of a broader argument about the careful skepticism and intellectual humility demanded by the scientific method. It also suggests hope for a cosmopolitan ideal based on a new identification as “human” (as opposed to “alien”) and an ecological sense that all people are connected and share the world. It seems to argue that science in and of itself does not necessarily demonstrate any kind of cultural superiority (as evidenced most clearly by the jingoism and hyper-nationalist paranoia at the heart of nuclear armament). The narrator, however, uses imperialist metaphors and cognitive maps to imagine this united human race as it relates to alien races; the maps make the united human race peripheral in a colonial sense, comparing the aliens again and again to those living at an imperial metropole. Through its maps and its subjectivities, the novel racializes

the human race as nonwhite while holding up the multi-species alien race residing at the center of the galaxy as white.

By making the history of Earth a metaphor for the galaxy (and vice versa), the narrator makes civilizational comparisons a key to understanding the cultural positioning of human civilization. In assuring politicians that the aliens sending the message are unlikely to attack the Earth, the scientist from India, Devi Sukhavati, states, “It is unlikely in the extreme that beings on a planet of the star Vega are exactly at our level of technology. Even on our planet, cultures do not evolve in lockstep. Some start earlier, others later. I recognize that some cultures can catch up at least technologically. When there were high civilizations in India, China, Iraq, and Egypt, there were, at best, iron-age nomads in Europe and Russia and stone-age cultures in America” (191). Sukhavati’s temporality inserts extra-terrestrials into a progressivist reading of Earth history; the idea of “levels of technology” expressed in terms of iron-age, stone-age, space-age absorb any hypothetical aliens and signal that they are at some level just like peoples of the Earth—that is, they are simply a more “advanced” form of human civilization (no matter how often scientists such as Sagan warn that alien beings would not likely be anything like human beings).

Sagan’s work splits this progressivist model of cultural evolution in two, with Earth civilization poised between the two; the two halves are “before,” where religion, nationalism, war, and unthinking pollution reside, and “the future,” where science and spirituality combine, nations fall away, war ceases, and everyone approaches ecology thoughtfully. Earth, in Sagan’s view, is moving from the former to the latter. The novel imagines Earth as post-imperial; while the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are superpowers, other nations are quite powerful as well in the sharing of the message and the building of the machine—China, India, and Japan, for example, wield

considerable power. The scientists themselves do not pay much heed to national distinctions—science is limited by, not a part of, international relations. Science, it seems, knows no politics in the governmental or partisan sense. International differences and large inequities in standards of living persist on *Contact's* Earth, as do signs that organization and modernization are not quite complete. This includes the diplomatic difficulties that the scientists face in sharing the message, but it also includes the ways that the novel imagines information and news travelling to scientists around the Earth: “By bicycle, small truck, perambulatory mailman, or telephone, the single paragraph was delivered to astronomical centers all over the world. In a few major radio observatories—in China, India, the Soviet Union, and Holland, for example—the message was delivered by teletype” (72). Technological variation persists; electronic networking remains limited to metropolitan areas, but some kind of networks do interconnect the world. No one, however, seems to be totally dominant.

While the Earth is post-imperial, the galaxy, it seems, is not. The novel imagines the galaxy as being organized and governed like a modern Euro-American empire, and the analogy rises both directly through imagining the Earth as geographically peripheral, and indirectly, through comparison of the Earth's incomplete modernization to a fully regularized landscape of a truly advanced civilization. Throughout the novel, characters speculate on the motivations of the aliens who send the message and the instructions for building the alien machine to Earth. In a particularly telling answer to the alien motivation question, Ellie's friend Vaygay, the Soviet scientist, offers a telling reply:

“I'm amazed you don't see it. The Earth is a... ghetto. Yes, a ghetto. All human beings are trapped here. We have heard vaguely that there are big cities out there beyond the ghetto, with broad boulevards filled with droshkys and beautiful perfumed women in furs. But the cities are too far away, and we are too poor ever to go there, even the richest of us. Anyway, we know they don't want us. That's why they've left us in this pathetic little village in the first place.

“And now along comes an invitation. As Xi said. Fancy, elegant. They have sent us an engraved card and an empty droshky. We are to send five villagers and the droshky will carry them to—who knows?—Warsaw. Or Moscow. Maybe even Paris. Of course, some are tempted to go. There will always be people who are flattered by the invitation, or who think it is a way to escape our shabby village.

“And what do you think will happen when we get there? Do you think the Grand Duke will have us to dinner? Will the President of the Academy ask us interesting questions about daily life in our filthy shtetl? Do you imagine the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan will engage us in learned discourse on comparative religion?

“No, Arroway. We will gawk at the big city, and they will laugh at us behind their hands. They will exhibit us to the curious. The more backward we are the better they’ll feel, and the more reassured they’ll be.

“It’s a quota system. Every few centuries, five of us get to spend a weekend on Vega. Have pity on the provincials, and make sure they know who their betters are” (209-210).

Vaygay uses an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century European imperial analogy to locate Earth on the spatial and temporal map of the novel—the Earth is peripheral, and its people “backward.”

The analogy continues later as the five scientists travel inside the alien machine through tunnels

in space. In the first trip, the machine moves through a tunnel from Earth to the space near the

star Vega. Ellie and the others are surprised that they cannot see any planets or alien spacecraft,

and Ellie wonders, “is a delegation from the provinces so unremarkable that no one had been

assigned even to note their arrival?” (335). The machine in which they ride finally passes an

alien device—an unmanned array of radio telescopes. Xi, the Chinese scientist, compares the

telescopes to “watchtowers of the Great Wall. If you are limited by the speed of light, it is

difficult to hold a galactic empire together. You order the garrison to put down a rebellion. Ten

thousand years later you find out what happened. Too slow. So you give autonomy to the

garrison commanders” (335). He goes on to compare the tunnels from one star system to the next

to “imperial roads. Persia had them. Rome had them. China had them. Then you are not

restricted to the speed of light. With roads you can hold an empire together” (335-36). Vaygay

and Xi imagine the galactic empire as a pre-modern type of empire—ancient in the case of

Rome, Persia, and China, and fairly old in terms of the Russian and French empires. Earthlings are provincial imperial subjects.

A sudden shift occurs in the imperial metaphor, however, only a few pages later; the novel still imagines the galaxy as part of an imperialist geography, but it becomes a modern, seemingly benevolent empire that imitates the rhetorical strategies of the U.S. empire in the late twentieth century. The analogies change slightly as the machine takes them through several other tunnels and past other stars. Whereas Xi spoke of “imperial roads” and Vaygay earlier of “droshkys,” Eda, the Nigerian scientist, says, “I think this is an underground...a Metro. A subway. These are the stations. The stops” (338). The shift to an urban metaphor is subtle, but it sets up a different kind of travel networking, a more modern one that still preserves distinctions between center and periphery, but changes their nature to something more like a city and suburbs. They wonder why, through all the subway stops, they do not see any signs of habitation. Ellie and Devi speculate that the aliens do not want them to be scared by seeing alien beings: “There’s some sort of ethic of noninterference with primitive planets. They know that every now and then some of the primitives might use the subway...so you let them ride only on subways that go to the sticks” (340-41). This “ethic of noninterference” represents the kind of enlightened imperial thinking found in other science fiction of the late twentieth century; it supposes an extraordinarily powerful but benevolent empire, one that swears noninterference so that other cultures might “develop” into something similar to the empire.

When the scientists arrive at their destination, they find an imperial metropole infused with the spirit of late twentieth-century liberal multiculturalism. This spirit comes through specifically in its abstraction. As the space vehicle arrives at the center of the galaxy, they encounter an amazing looking spaceport: “And swimming into her field of view as the dodec

rotated was... a prodigy, a wonder, a miracle... On its surface were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of illuminated doorways, each a different shape. Many were polygonal or circular or with an elliptical cross section, some had projecting appendages or a sequence of overlapping off-center circles. She realized they were docking ports, thousands of different docking ports—some perhaps only meters in size, others clearly kilometers across, or larger. Every one of them she decided, was the template of some interstellar machine like this one... It was a democratic arrangement, with no hint of particularly privileged civilizations. The diversity of ports suggested few social distinctions among the sundry civilizations, but it implied a breathtaking diversity of beings and cultures. Talk about Grand Central Station! she thought. The vision of a populated galaxy, of a universe spilling over with life and intelligence, made her want to cry for joy” (341-42). “Diversity” here is expressed in terms of size and shape, and inferred from docking ports—in other words, it’s diversity in size and shape as accommodated by the master engineers of the alien race, filtered through a technological paradigm and expressed in the same terms in which the aliens’ cultural superiority is always expressed throughout the novel: engineering achievement. Actual encounter with otherness does not occur—it is merely suggested by the docking port doors.

Even this brief contact with something other quickly disappears in favor of something far more familiar. When the doors of the space vehicle open, the five scientists find themselves on a simulation of a beautiful Earth beach. Eventually, a door appears that seems to lead to nowhere, clearly inviting them to step through. Ellie, however, hesitates—she worries aloud to the others about “jumping through alien hoops” (352) and about the possibility that they were captured as specimens in an intergalactic zoo (353-54). She admits quietly to herself, however, that she fears she will feel revolted at the sight of a being so wholly other: “Another intelligent being—

independently evolved on some distant world under unearthly physical conditions and with an entirely different sequence of random genetic mutations—such a being would not resemble anyone she knew. Or even imagined...she worried that she would be unable to confront—much less win over for the human species—an extraterrestrial being” (355). This passage suggests a natural instinct for revulsion at otherness. This idea sits at the heart of this brand of liberal multiculturalism; it suggests otherness as something to “overcome” through intellect. At the same time, in this case, it makes a connection between God and the aliens responsible for this trip by imagining them as infinitely different than human beings.

The novel keeps this dramatic otherness, however, located in the abstract, as the alien Ellie meets is not at all unfamiliar; in fact, the alien takes the form of her dead beloved father, and the “advancements” of alien culture look remarkably like the advancements of Euro-American modernization extended into space. Early in the novel, Ellie looks out the window of an airplane at the landscape of the U.S. and wonders what it would signify to an extraterrestrial observer: “There were vast areas of the Midwest intricately geometrized with squares, rectangles, and circles by those with agricultural or urban predilections; and...vast areas of the Southwest in which the only sign of intelligent life was an occasional straight line heading between mountains and across deserts. Are the worlds of more advanced civilizations totally geometrized, entirely rebuilt by their inhabitants? Or would the signature of a *really* advanced civilization be that they left no sign at all?” (91). Later, the shapes Ellie sees in the spaceport provide examples of exactly the “geometrization” she expects from advanced civilizations. The comparison between the alien base at the center of the galaxy and a later version of a modernized and mechanized Earth continues in the details of the plot and even in subtle throwaway lines. As their space vehicle docks in an opening of the giant spaceport, Ellie says aloud, “well, it isn’t Bridgeport” (342).

This offhand reference to Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is a joke partly because it references the yankee Hank Morgan's travel backward through time to Camelot only in a kind of reverse; rather than transported to a cultural landscape awaiting modernization (a modernization that eventually leads to mass death in *Connecticut Yankee*), Ellie and the others have been transported *forward* in time to see the results of completed modernization, a modernization so complete that it not only networks the world, but the entire universe.

The aliens have technologies so advanced as to be indistinguishable from magic, including a nearly divine power over nature and culture. They mimic cultural paradigms, appearing as loved ones to the scientists and speaking their languages with ease. They do so not through careful study, but through an instant cognitive access. Ellie realizes that they probed her mind while she was on the simulated beach in order to create her father (358). The height of the divine power of the aliens comes, however, in the most grand engineering project of all time as described by the Ellie's dad-alien. Ellie looks up in the sky to see a gigantic, supermassive black hole at the center of the galaxy; large quantities of matter flow into it. She asks the alien if the mass of the matter she sees going into it goes anywhere, and he tells her it goes to Cygnus A, a very bright object in the sky putting out energy in jets of superheated gas.¹⁸ Ellie, incredulous, asks, “you're *making* Cygnus A?” The alien answers her, “Oh, it's not just us. This is a... cooperative project of many galaxies. That's mainly what we do. Only a... few of us are involved with emerging civilizations” (364; ellipses in original). Ellie expresses astonishment, asking, “There are cooperative projects between galaxies?...Lots of galaxies, each with a kind of Central Administration? With hundreds of billions of stars in each galaxy. And then those

¹⁸ Cygnus A is the brightest source of radio waves in the sky. “Cygnus” identifies it as belonging inside the constellation Cygnus (a Northern Sky constellation often called “The Northern Cross”), and the A signifies it is the brightest source of radio light in that constellation. A very bright source—whether it is visible light, radio waves, ultraviolet waves, X-rays, etc—signifies a high amount of energy being produced by something. See Seeds, *Foundations of Astronomy*.

administrations cooperate. To pour millions of suns into...Cygnus A? The... Forgive me, but I am astonished by the scale. Why would you do all this? Whatever for?" The alien's answer comes in two parts, and is telling:

"“You mustn't think of the universe as a wilderness. It hasn't been that for billions of years,,’ he said. ‘Think of it more as...cultivated.’

““But what for? What's there to cultivate?””

““The basic problem is easily stated. Now don't get scared off by the scale. You're an astronomer, after all. The problem is that the universe is expanding, and there's not enough matter in it to stop the expansion. After awhile, no new galaxies, no new stars, no new planets, no newly arisen lifeforms—just the same old crowd. Everything's getting run-down. It'll be boring. So in Cygnus A we're testing out the technology to make something new. You might call it an experiment in urban renewal. It's not our only trial run. Sometime later we might want to close off a piece of the universe and prevent space from getting more and more empty as the aeons pass. Increasing the local matter density's the way to do it, of course. It's good honest work.”” (364; ellipses in original)

The alien frames the explanation¹⁹ with two statements that serve to anchor this project squarely in human terms. “The basic problem is easily stated. Now don't get scared off at the scale,” suggests that this basic project echoes the kind of massive engineering projects undertaken at various times on Earth, including the building of modern communication and travel networks in and construction achievements of ancient empires—like the building of the Great Wall of China. Calling it “good honest work” identifies it with a working-class sense of useful production. The

¹⁹ The alien's explanation refers to cosmological theory. At the beginning of time, all matter and energy exploded outward from a single point; this event is referred to as “The Big Bang.” Observations of distant galaxies confirm that the universe is still expanding from that initial explosion, as almost all galaxies move away from ours, and the farther they are away, the faster they move away. Theoretically, if there were enough matter in the universe, gravitational attraction among matter would force the expansion to halt, and eventually all the matter in the universe would come back together in what's called The Big Crunch. Current theories suggest, though, that there is not enough matter in the universe to halt the expansion; theoretically, this means that concentrations of matter in the universe (galaxies) will continue to move further and further from each other. As all stars burn out over eons—perhaps trillions of years—galaxies become dark and lose all usable energy; this means no new stars, no new planets, and no life of any kind—just cold and infinite disorder. What he is telling Ellie about, then, is a gigantic engineering project to recover what would normally be unusable matter and energy and to put it in the empty space created by an expanding universe—to renew, in other words, the arrangements of matter and energy that lead to the formation of galaxies, suns, and planets billions of years ago. See Thorne, *Black Holes and Time Warps*, and Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*.

fact that this is cooperative work between “central administrations of galaxies” suggests a model for Earthbound cooperation between nations and cultures that imitates a kind of bureaucratic rather than democratic Earth empire, complete with “central administrations,” “garrisons,” and “imperial roads.” The end of the cooperation, moreover, is not so much democratic as aesthetic; the cooperation happens in engineering enterprises for the beautification of the universe. The problem with the deadness of the expanded universe lies in “boredom,” and the solution lies in “a kind of urban renewal”—a project of modernization to deal with the effects of modernization, or, in this case, to deal with the inevitable effects of geologic evolution over time. Just as cultures evolve in historical time, the universe evolves in geological time. The cooperating alien races over a group of galaxies, then, pull off the ultimate engineering project, and, in so doing *become gods*—they control not just individuals in experiential time, nor cultures in historical time, but the universe in geological time. “You’ve been pouring matter into Cygnus A for the last six hundred million years?” Ellie asks. The answer she receives suggests an even longer time scale: “Well, what you’ve detected by radio astronomy was just some of our early feasibility testing. We’re much farther along now” (365).²⁰

The imperialist logic of the novel lies in the execution of control over nature, but it is clearly coupled in the book with racial hierarchies. Ellie muses, “there was a hierarchy of beings on a scale she had not imagined. But the Earth had a place, a significance in that hierarchy; they would not have gone to all this trouble for nothing” (365). The engineering achievements of the aliens confirm what the novel has emphasized all along—that the human race is relatively backward. The problem lies in the expression of that backwardness. Through Vaygay’s and Xi’s imperial metaphors, and through the very cultivation of the universe by the wielding of western

²⁰ Cygnus A is 350 million or so light years from Earth, so what is observed from Earth would have been the state of Cygnus A 350 million years ago. The alien’s reply suggests they have been working on it for something more like one billion years

scientific knowledge and technology, the aliens—despite being multi-species, multi-galaxy, and diverse in an abstract sense—represent the acme of Euro-American civilization. Humankind—with its dogmatic religions, incomplete modernization, and relative newness to empirical science—become, in contrast, non-European—that is, black and brown. The conversations Ellie’s companions have with their respective alien-family members are not presented; it is only to Ellie, a white American, that this is a relative shock, and it is only her understanding of it that can be represented within the novel’s imaginative space.

The religious dimension of the vast project—and the civilizational-evolutionary attitude it requires—becomes clear when the alien moves from his description of the cultivation of the universe to telling Ellie about the mysterious presence of messages in transcendental numbers. He begins by revealing that the tunnel system the five scientists travelled through was not constructed by the alien civilization—it was found by them already constructed, but with no sign of the civilization that constructed it. Coupled with his description of the messages in transcendental numbers, the implication becomes clear: that the universe was created by an intelligence akin to that of a western God, but one described as an engineer. These creators, in other words, are yet another step above the aliens in technological evolution—they engineered a universe. The cultivation of this universe, then, becomes a project in religious stewardship. While the numinous Ellie described earlier can be contacted through scientific discovery, it is through technological manipulation of nature that one enacts experience with the numinous. This brings together experiential and historical time, but it suggests that eventually, geological time collapses into it. The ends of modernization and scientific discovery are linked in spiritual-aesthetic enterprise. This injects a benevolent stewardship into a basically capitalistic logic; it is, in other words, the very ideology of the late twentieth-century American empire.

A NARROW CULTURE WAR

Contact's cognitive map locates the Euro-American subject imbued with Protestant affects at the center of agency and of creation. In concert with the more overtly religious Euro-American subjectivity discussed in the next chapter, Sagan's work helped to frame the public and political discussion of religion in the postmodern era in a largely binary way, between conservative Christianity or liberal secularism, with little room for alternative fusions of modernity and faith that would ideally be possible in a thickened post-secularism. Nonetheless, the aspirational subject described in this chapter had an effect in the development of a broader post-secularism. Sagan's narratives on the purpose and proper execution of science influenced a generation of American scientists to think about the broader political and cultural importance of their work—even for scientists engaged in somewhat esoteric areas of research. Further, Sagan's deployment of a media-friendly charisma—a charisma also seen, I would argue, in such figures as President Reagan—contributed to a shift in public debate to \mass media. This, perhaps more than Dr. Sagan's specific political or religious arguments, set the terms for public discussion around religion and politics in the 1990s. A conflict over religion and politics becomes a “culture war” waged through personalities competing for followers rather than alternative modes of being negotiating working and continuing relationships.

A careful study of Carl Sagan's work deconstructs the boundaries between 1980s American Civil religion and secular science, suggesting that the most powerful and persuasive arguments connecting secularism, science, and liberal politics grow from the same intellectual soil as Protestant conceptions of the self. This dissolution, nonetheless, can leave secular differentiation of public and private spheres relatively intact while bringing religion into more

urgent focus. The next chapter engages an intensely religious text, yet finds in it a very similar desire to privilege a “rational” white male subject. The two chapters together suggest that a relatively confined number of ideologies undergirded the most prominent voices of the religious-secular cultural conflicts at the end of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 3

‘LET THEM REACH THEIR OWN CONCLUSIONS:’ SECULARISM, CONSUMERISM, AND FAITH IN *LEFT BEHIND*

The *Left Behind* series had much to offer readers in the late 1990s: spectacle, accessible spirituality, and passionate characters protecting their loved ones. The series sold over 60 million novels between 1995 and 2005, and at one point in the early part of the 2000s, four *Left Behind* novels occupied the *New York Times* bestseller list at the same time. The franchise also includes three films, several children’s books, graphic novels, record albums, video games, board games, and multiple interactive websites that feature both content and online fan communities. A novelization of a nineteenth-century Christian interpretation of the bible called “premillennial dispensationalism,” *Left Behind* offered an evangelizing message to American readers in the form of an accessible, enjoyable story that combined genre elements from science fiction, action, and domestic novels. While the novels were widely read as signs of renewed interest in religion among American reading audiences, the deployment of religion in the novels received relatively little detailed examination. The novels seem to have a non-secular message: they argue strongly that Christian faith should structure personal lives and drive public policy. Nonetheless, the novels remain deeply invested in secular modes of being that separate the private religious orientations of individuals from the institutional apparatuses of state and market. *Left Behind* blends religious narrative and secular commitment to articulate an alternative version of American secularism.

The series responds forcefully to the political economy of the post-Cold War United States, and explicating the series’ broader cultural politics requires situating it within the historical circumstances of its beginning. When Germany unified in 1989 and the Soviet Union

dissolved in 1991, a quasi-official narrative infiltrated American discourse on the future of liberal democracy, market economics, and American world leadership. Propagated in newspaper commentary, the rhetoric of U.S. economic policy, and advertising, this quasi-official narrative was characterized on the one hand by unbridled optimism for a free world and on the other by deep anxiety at the possibility of new competitors for U.S. business interests. While not all went as far as Frances Fukuyama in declaring history as a process at an end, commentators argued in op-ed columns in major newspapers, television interviews, and full length books over the meanings of this supposedly new international environment of unprecedentedly permeable boundaries. “Business sections” of major newspapers provided a particularly prominent arena for discussion of national “competitiveness” in the “new global economy” or “global village;” in them, writers argued (often vaguely) for changes to American corporate business models and for new government economic policy to fit the new realities of the post-Cold War world. Simultaneously, political scientists and operatives argued over the roles that the U.S. government and U.S. cultural products would play in an environment with such permeable cultural boundaries. The very economic conditions that resulted in the collapse of the Soviet bloc—new communication technologies and the permeation of Western market paradigms in Eastern Europe—posed threat as well as opportunity in the collective American imagination. Immediate economic worries included large American companies transferring manufacturing jobs to areas of the world without labor and wage protections.

These and other factors came together to produce what Timothy Melley has called “agency panic,” or “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else or that one has been ‘constructed’ by external, powerful agents” (Melley vii). Melley locates agency panic in various discursive

places, including in humanistic responses to post-structuralist theory, as these responses tend to reclaim bourgeois agency from the post-structuralist sense of “constructedness” (40-41). Judith Butler suggests that the “forces” that construct the subject in post-structuralism receive, rhetorically, a “godlike” agency to determine the conditions that give rise to subjects (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 6). *Left Behind*’s story clearly provides an example of this humanistic agency panic; the novels’ characters oppose the dark forces that threaten to enslave the world for demonic ends in surprisingly effective ways. They resist “constructedness” both materially and discursively, giving godlike agency to God and the divinely demonic forces that oppose Him, but not to untraceable forces. *Left Behind*’s response to agency panic, however, eschews the traditional fundamentalist solution of withdrawal into protected enclaves—private schools, churches, and other institutions occupied exclusively by like-minded Christians. The series’ characters confront the interconnected modern world in a complex formation of personal, private cultivation and public engagement. In form and content, the series makes claims on the modern world for the primacy of Christian subjects—a relatively new procedure for fundamentalists, who since the 1925 Scopes trial, tended to deal with a corrupt, non-Christian world through withdrawal. Melani McAlister has argued that the *Left Behind* series—including the novels, films, children’s books, video games, and online fan communities—occupy integral roles in a mainstream marketing of evangelical culture (McAlister 775). At the same time, the series sets aside special passages with dialog wherein characters work out family relationships; the novels “respond most intimately and intensely” to shifts in domestic and gendered norms, as Amy Frykholm has argued (Frykholm 19).

In insightful studies, Frykholm and McAlister have thoroughly explored the domestic and international politics of the series. In this chapter, I want to explore the space between these two

related dyads—private and public, domestic and international. *Left Behind's* response to “agency panic” in the post-cold war period involves an engagement not only with the private and public spheres, but with the relationship between the two spheres. The series represents neither an attempt to force religion into the public sphere nor a retreat into a private sphere. Indeed, the novel seems invested in securing the separation between the two spheres, which, according to Ben Stahlberg and Jose Casanova, undergirds much of the power of American fundamentalist discourse (Stahlberg 110-12; Casanova 228). This chapter argues that the *Left Behind* series constructs a counter-secular political economy characterized by simultaneous investment in a normative nuclear family-centered private sphere and a publically privileged mobile Christian subject. This counter-secular politics maintains secular differentiation of public and private spheres by making clear distinctions between internationally mobile, active subjects who fight the antichrist and contemplative, relatively stationary subjects who provide narrative support to international and domestic missions. The series sutures the private/public, domestic/international dyads together through a commitment to a strategically deployed commitment to modernity. This commitment comes out through the characters’ pride in the rational processes they pursue to understand scripture, their privileged mobility, and their enjoyment of modern consumer comforts. Attaching these modern attitudes to religious fundamentalism allows the novels to reclaim the modern public sphere for a seemingly anti-modern religiosity. In doing so, the stories simultaneously reinforce the privilege of the Euro-American enlightenment subject and attach Christian fundamentalism to that subject.

Attaching sacred significance to the American privileged subject offered no direct answer to post-modern agency panic; in fact, in many ways, it exacerbated it in order to dramatize its threat. At the same time, the same globalization discourse offered opportunities for the

enrichment and security of that same white American middle class. The first section of this chapter examines the discourses of “competition” in business-related journalism. Writings on global business obliquely yet pressingly addressed the favored position of the American middle classes. Suggesting possibilities for production and consumption in newly opened markets, business journalism attached an urgent need to embrace modern economic realities of globalization as a way to conserve American prosperity and security. *Left Behind* responds to exactly the threat and opportunity of these globalized discourses, suggesting that privilege can be maintained if properly deployed, thus conserving the bourgeois family, economic privilege, and, ultimately, the truth of God. The conservation of all three of these elements relies on the series’ complex positioning of its protagonists across the private and public spheres. The next part of the chapter uncovers the series’ construction of a rational, private subject by examining how the characters read and interpret scripture, each other, and the world. The first three novels in the series have two parallel story lines; in the first, characters learn to be good Christians and good family members. In the second, the characters learn of and oppose the evil conspiracies of the antichrist. Eventually, the story assigns clear roles to characters: either they interpret and teach, or they act with each other and against the antichrist’s evil regime. Opposition to the antichrist’s regime involves the enactment of a fantasy of military-technological competence. The third section of the chapter examines how this fantasy helps secure the regulated Christian private sphere in the series. In enacting a military fantasy, the characters claim ownership of modern technologies while recapturing an imagined, idealized past of perfect nuclear family relationships. Even technological competence, however, does not provide the characters an unlimited basis for effecting change in the face of a divinely foreordained narrative. The final section of the chapter scrutinizes this idealized past in considering *Left Behind’s* deployment of

utopian genre elements. The series' complex temporality suggests an inexorable movement from idealized past through terrible present to an idealized future, which ultimately suggests a fairly limited role for human agency. *Left Behind* offers hope for divine intervention to help fix modern problems; its greater hope is for a public sphere that operates solely in the service of a rigidly regulated private sphere.

GLOBAL COMPETITION: MODERNIZE OR DIE

Slow, complex changes led to the end of the Cold War, the unfettered expansion of multinational capitalism, and unchallenged American dominance. However, narratives of the basis of Western superiority and the construction of Western subjectivity seemed less and less stable as the dissolution of Eastern European communism appeared increasingly rapid and catastrophic, marked by the bloody Romanian Revolution of 1989, the final dismantling of the Berlin Wall in October of 1990, the failed Soviet coup in August 1991, and the official end of the Soviet state in January 1992. Around the same time, the U.S. government and several allied countries took military action against Iraq in defense of “American interests” in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; this conflict appeared free of the specific Cold War political-military realities that had been characterized as Cold War conflicts (even when they weren't—as in the case of conflicts with the Iranian revolutionary government in the 1980s). President George H. Bush frequently spoke of a “new world order,” reading the end of the Soviet Union and the shifting economic and political alliances as an opportunity to reorder the world toward American economic and political interests. Commentators in nationwide news outlets—many in newspapers and the relatively new twenty-four hour news networks—debated the role of the

U.S. government and the place of the individual American citizen in this international environment. A common thread ran through most of these discussions characterized by a dual dialectic. On the one hand, commentators expressed unbridled liberal optimism brought on by Cold War victory and a tense anxiety over the place of Americans in a new international order. On the other hand, Americans' desire for distinctive and relatively closed national identity tensely met a desire to integrate into and profit from a world with open political, economic, and cultural borders.

A feeling of vertiginous and epochal change exacerbated this dual tension between self-contained nationhood and integration, between euphoria and fear. When the spectacular events of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the 1991 Gulf War were over, the impression of rapid change continued in many areas of public discourse. The word "new" modified an enormous number of nouns in public discourse, particularly as part of intimidatingly abstract phrases like "new world order," "new global village," "newly globalized economy," "newly opened markets," "new business realities," and "new information economy." The pervasiveness of this rhetoric functioned not just to denote change, but to emphasize *epochal change*, the kind of radical break that is felt in the everyday lives of individuals and institutions. What this meant for those everyday lives, however, remained a subject of fierce debate, approached largely in abstract terms within discourses of "progress," "competition," "business opportunity," and "history."²¹ Nonetheless, narratives of individual lives played an integral role in the construction of "globalization" discourse, penetrating stories ostensibly about international relations and

²¹ For example, in the famously controversial *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama argued that "history" in the Hegelian sense of a dialectical process had ended, that liberal democracy and free market economies had triumphed, and warned against a kind of decadence that could possibly set in all over the world as a result (xi-xiii). Fukuyama argued further that within this "worldwide consensus" (xi), free market competition remains a crucial form of the Hegelian struggle for recognition—while this struggle had produced worldwide liberalism, it needed to continue to avoid the decadence and softening of all humankind (144-59). Fukuyama's argument provides a particularly intense example of the dramatic historicization of the Soviet collapse.

economic forecasts. *Left Behind's* similar focus on individual characters within a theological-historical narrative, for example, fits into this focus on individuals in narratives of the “new global economy.” This focus centered the individual, apolitical subject as primary agent everywhere in the world. Particularly, the discourse of “competition within the global market,” which included large American corporations and entrepreneurship, made these boundaries and the individual American subject’s place within them seem precarious. “Competition” flogged “opportunity” while highlighting the disempowerment of the individual worker. The opportunity came with the idea that new consumer markets for American goods in formerly communist countries were opening. The problem here is that those markets, while operating with fewer restrictions, were not entirely new; indeed, the penetration of western goods and culture played a part in the eventual dissolution of the communist governments. The real opportunities for American companies came with the ability to move manufacturing to places with less stringent labor and wage protections, thus saving money but eliminating manufacturing concerns that had long supported American workers and communities.

While the dismantling of the manufacturing-based economy in urban centers also involved lengthy, slow processes, the discourse of competition (with its implicit threat of failure to compete) naturalized an erosion of influence of individual subjects even through the electronic-computer economic boom of the mid to late 1990s. In an October 1992 address to faculty and students of the Olin School of Business and the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Washington University, Tadahiro Sekimoto, president of NEC Corp. (a worldwide manufacturer of computers and home electronic equipment), argued that the “global village” was fact, not metaphor, and that nations and companies had to computerize or they would fail in competition. Sekimoto went further, “I believe that people who can obtain a dominant position in

(computer) materials will take hold of the technology," and "Perhaps it's not overly dramatic to say that the people who can become leaders in (computer) software will gain tremendous leverage in the world of computers and communication" (Flannery 22). Sekimoto issues a familiar warning about the rapidity of change, the necessity of keeping pace with the "new" (as measured by the use of equipment that necessitated altered labor relations), and the relative lack of options for any business or nation—Sekimoto equates the two—that wants to avoid impoverishment.

While industry experts and commentators like Sekimoto remained relatively vague, using phrases like "keeping up with the communication revolution," the implication is one of enormous change to structures of labor and capital, a change that was forced by circumstances from outside the U.S. While the threat was more subtle than that posed by the Iranian hostage crisis (1979-81) or Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1991), the threat from outside occupied a similar place in the collective imagination—it represented circumstances beyond the control of the individual with which the individual would have to contend. The U.S. government at this point became a source of possible help with these private individual struggles, but not as a source of intervention in the systemic causes behind them. In 1992, running for President for the first time, Bill Clinton made "retraining"—a word meant to denote programs that would allow laid off manufacturing workers to learn new computer and high tech skills—a central platform of his campaign, even debating it at length with other presidential candidates George H. Bush and H. Ross Perot (Hershey A14). Moreover, state and federal governments implemented programs meant to encourage "entrepreneurship." Stories about new entrepreneurs in liberalizing post-communist nations stood as feel good examples of opportunities available in the new marketplace. In one *New York Times* story from October 1991 entitled "Capitalism Checks In,

Marxist Ghosts Check Out,” a Russian woman shows an almost American-Protestant entrepreneurial spirit in running a hotel that had once entertained important members of the Politburo in Leningrad (Clines A4). The suggestion constantly made was one of opportunity for enterprising individuals willing to work in a new economy. Whether threatening or exciting, the feeling propagated, however, was one of inevitability; the forces of “the new global marketplace” were natural and unstoppable, and everything else had been reduced to ghostly memories.

Longstanding narratives of Protestant work ethic (insightfully explicated by Max Weber and others) remained active in the idea that the hard work of individual producers could “measure up” in an environment of ruthless and threatening competition; however, simultaneously, the omnipresent impression of uncontrollable, epochal, systemic change worldwide undercut this narrative by suggesting that changes in a nebulous elsewhere affected the individual subject in immanent ways. Weber argues that rational organization of industry and capital in nineteenth-century Europe and America separated inscrutable God from the rational sphere of economics and political governance. At the same time, however, the Calvinist and Lutheran ideas of *calling* and *stewardship* lent labor and accumulation transcendent meaning, leading to an ethics of capitalism that Weber argued dissipated as the spirit of “unrestrained consumption” took hold in the early twentieth century (Weber 32-33). This narrative sanctification of capitalist structures, however, remained in some manner in play for some communities of white Evangelical Christian Americans through the twentieth century, combined with ideas of a free market operating under natural laws that were part of divine creation and distaste for government intervention in the “life-world” (the day to day cultural and economic activities within narratives of tradition and continuity) of Christian communities. Jose Casanova

argues that the perceived “repoliticization” of religion—that is, the recurring entrance of people into public discussions of politics based on religious conviction—occurs in the U.S. largely as a result of real or perceived invasions of the private “Evangelical life-world” by government or market structures. In such a situation, commentators deploy religious discourse to oppose dominant trends in the public sphere (Casanova 145-151). In this case, public discourse around “globalization” suggested a consistent threat to the life-world of White American Christians by suggesting that the structures that had long sustained them may be changing, and by destabilizing the narrative of work that had structured the imaginary relations of subject to the economic systems. While economic changes certainly were not unprecedented, the repetition of epochal change as an idea exacerbated the feeling of dislocation. The discourse of competition on its face fits into this narrative of free markets and stewardship; however, the removal of the feeling of agency from that competitive realm spells a crisis of the narratives of subjectivity. This crisis combined with the narrative of the private, apolitical American-Christian subject and the desire to protect the private “life-world” to elicit responses in many forms, including narrative.

BIBLE, FAMILY, WORLD: THE RATIONAL CHRISTIAN SUBJECT

After the seeming triumph of the liberal capitalist west in the Cold War, threats to American economic and cultural ascendancy seemed almost unbelievable in some quarters. Nonetheless, the carefully manipulated message of panic within American business discourse suggested material and discursive challenges to an American middle class at the same time that the financial and cultural security of this class allowed for the growth of American fundamentalist Christianity. *Left Behind* answers these challenges with a discursive investment in

modernity. Through its protagonists, the series constructs a private subject committed to rational thought and faith together, as two aspects of the same investment. Two of the main characters, Rayford and Bruce, affirm this dual commitment by reading the bible and understanding that authoritative, ancient texts address modern conditions without demanding anti-modern rejections of technologies, consumer comforts, or global mobility. The series' protagonists perform their commitment to Christian faith and rational modernity through mobility, technological competence, rational analysis, and properly oriented family relationships. Moreover, through the characters' movements around the world and self-narrations, the novel marks a clear separation between active, mobile subjects and relatively stationary interpretive subjects. The commitment to the rational seals them together by showing how empirically valid scriptural interpretation enables efficacious public action that protects the sanctity of the private sphere. Situating themselves within biblical prophecy, the characters claim the benefits of economic privilege and modern technologies.

While dispensationalist theologians have written in a variety of venues on a number of theological themes, little gets as much sustained attention as the events of the end times, including the Rapture and the seven year tribulation in which, according to premillennial dispensationalist theology, those who were not Christians when all true Christians were taken by Christ in the Rapture would witness the rise of the Antichrist and the wrath of God poured out on the Earth in a variety of forms. This seven year tribulation between the Rapture and the second coming of Christ makes the premillennial dispensationalist narrative a location for a rich imagining of the near future and working out of contemporary issues.²² The best-selling book of the 1970s, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, warns readers of the coming end times,

²² In *Rapture Culture*, Amy Frykholm estimates over one hundred twentieth-century American novelizations and popular non-fiction books that imagine the international and domestic events of this seven year period (16).

going into exhaustive detail on the international political events that could be expected just before and during the seven year tribulation; the book functions as evangelical mission tract and as cognitive map of the world divided by races and nations. Frykholm suggests that, over the course of the twentieth century, the Rapture book was so popular that it developed a stock narrative with stock characters (Frykholm 16, 120). For premillennial dispensationalist prophecy popularizers, the publishing of novels is a crucial act in a dialectical complex of legitimation that accesses quasi-academic legitimacy of the novel form, claims importance in antiquity of source material, and accommodates mass anti-intellectualism by rejecting secular scholarly methods in favor of models of popularity and intellectual market success. The novels preserve their oppositional stance to postmodern power structures at the same time that they profess commitment to rational, empirical arguments.

The series accomplishes this careful balance between rationality and anti-intellectualism through the characters' relations with reading and writing. Reading and writing occupy a complex and ambivalent position in end times popular prophecy books. In general, dispensationalist writers privilege individual reading of the bible—supposedly without intervening authority of theologians or priests, but with the help of a book or guide that clarifies the theological narrative—above everything else; additional material *may* be helpful in some cases, but is no substitute for scripture. Evangelical writers of a specific political and ideological bent (those produced at Christian academic centers like the Moody Bible Institute), however, offer the long term preservation of Hebrew and Christian scriptures in print as evidence for their absolute Truth, or, at the very least, for their privileged status as containers of wisdom. Hal Lindsey emphasizes that the “writings” of the ancient Jewish prophets “Have been miraculously preserved in the Bible” (Lindsey 19). Josh McDowell, a Christian apologist widely respected in

evangelical publishing circles, writes of the Christian bible's age and preservation—even through efforts to destroy it—in a section on the “uniqueness of the bible” in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (vol. 1). In these defenses, authors like Lindsey and McDowell, while emphasizing the importance of scripture, accord a special place to print as a medium through which truth and salvation can be spread across time and space. While not all print is equal, it's clearly the most serious medium.

Moreover, the idea that the age of scripture testifies to its value reveals assumptions about a dialectical history of print that over time purges untruth and preserves valuable ideas. This model contains several key assumptions rooted in ideas of market-value, conservative Euro-American intellectualism, and mass audience. First, ideas of importance are committed to print—by whom and under which conditions are unimportant. In contrast to a decadent and corrupt media culture of the present, print in the imagined past was a space in which serious discourse took place, and that which was less valuable was simply not preserved. Second, important ideas not only survived in print, but were widely circulated. The bible, for example, was available to all to read, and all *could* read. In other words, anyone without the ability to read or access to books is left out of this model. Third, writing is the location of culture—everything worth noting about a civilization is preserved there. Fourth, while no piece of writing could match the importance of the bible or its “unique” qualities, much writing is serious—especially if it is old.

These assumptions show up in the content of the *Left Behind* series particularly in the second novel, *Tribulation Force*. Bruce Barnes, the new pastor of the church that the main characters attend in suburban Chicago, appearing “inspired” (63), delivers a lengthy sermon on the first of “the four horseman of the apocalypse,” trying to get his audience to see, among other things, that Nicolae Carpathia, the new leader of the world government, is the Antichrist spoken

of in Revelation. At the end, Rayford Steele muses: “[Bruce] had said over and over this was not new truth, that the commentaries he cited were decades old and that the doctrine of the end times was much, much older than that. But those who had relegated this kind of teaching to the literalists, the fundamentalists, the closed-minded evangelicals, had been left behind. All of a sudden it was all right to take Scripture at its word!” (67). This small passage shows signs of all four of the assumptions outlined above. The age of the commentaries—and the scriptural “doctrine of the end times”—imply some measure of permanence. Moreover, they are assumed to have been available and transparent—scripture, after all, should be “taken at its word.” The seeming contradiction between the need for “decades old commentaries” and the ability to “take the bible at its word” transparently becomes more and more of a problem as the books continue, but this problem is sidestepped largely by the authority of the texts and of their interpreters. Bruce and, later in *Tribulation Force* and the novels that follow, Tsion Ben-Judah, possess the “inspiration” to pass on ancient truth that should have been apparent anyway.

Within this respect for ancient authority lies two crucial beliefs: that the Christian bible survives because of divine protection, and that people continue to read it widely because it continues to speak to them. Rather than romanticized representations of individual heroes preserving scripture²³, the books emphasize a tautological logic to legitimate the bible: people read the bible because it is good and true, and we can tell that it’s good and true because people keep reading it. For biblically inspired prophecy books like the *Left Behind* novels, high sales indicate a widespread interest in scripture and in end-times prophecy. “Foundthisbook.com,” a website produced by Tyndale, *Left Behind*’s publisher, features three laudatory quotes for the series; the very first, from *Time* magazine, reads, “. . .among the best-selling fiction books of our

²³ Such hero stories do make up a part of *Left Behind*’s broader religious-historical ethos. *Left Behind* is published by Tyndale Press, named after William Tyndale (1494-1536), an English scholar executed for, among other things, translating the bible into vernacular English.

time—right up there with Tom Clancy and Stephen King.” In this discourse, *Left Behind* serves the dual function of evangelizing—hence leftbehind.com’s boast that thousands have been “saved” as a result of reading the novels—and of legitimizing fundamentalist American Christianity. In the face of negative reception of the novels among secular and some religious critics, the high sales of *Left Behind* indicate a victory in a competition over ideas: it may be an adventure/sci-fi/romance novel, but its contents are worthy of serious consideration.

Left Behind’s multimedia presence represents a special effort to enter a contemporary “competition of ideas.” In “Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular” Melani McAlister argues that the *Left Behind* electronic publishing enterprise (the Leftbehind.com website, the CD-ROM video game, etc.) together with the high tech content of the novels market 1990s U.S. Christian fundamentalism as a modern, contemporary movement free of many of the anti-modern, rural orientations of earlier fundamentalism (783). McAlister’s assertion helps highlight a thoughtful interaction between “ancient” and “modern” in the content and production of *Left Behind*. The very entrance into these marketing structures—efforts to “sell” biblical prophecy and fundamentalist hermeneutics to consumer audiences *and* potential converts—fits in with the specific model of scripture in the fundamentalist model of dialectical history. The power of scripture lies in its permanence; however, this permanence is not indicated solely in scripture’s long preservation but also in its continued relevance, which is indicated by its ability to “compete” if simply presented to mass audiences in the right way. “This millenniums-old account reads as fresh to me as tomorrow’s newspaper,” says Bruce Barnes regarding the prophecies of Revelation (67). Marketability and success, then, mark scripture’s modern-ness, its contemporary relevance. By marking a continuity between ancient and modern through these elements of the novels and through the efforts at contemporary field entrance, *Left Behind* begins

to collapse historical and immanent; the characters and the entire series of cultural products enter into relations that mark their immediate involvement with dialectical history as a process and with the forces that make history unfold, which, as divine and demonic, usually remain consigned to a transcendent realm. The characters' reading of scripture and commentaries, however, begin to collapse the distinctions between historical and immanent.

Descriptions of the act of reading the bible and related materials in the novel itself speak to the power and importance of text in the premillennial tradition. One of the more frequently employed words in the novel is "stunned;" characters often "are stunned" by something they have read or heard that comes out of scripture. After witnessing a Russian military attack on Israel near the start of the first novel, Buck Williams reads Ezekiel 39-40 and is "stunned" to see the attack and its divine defeat predicted in detail in the ancient text (14-15). When Rayford's wife disappears in the Rapture, he reads her bible; at first frustrated by its lack of clarity, he looks at Irene's notes and asks the pastor at her church (Bruce Barnes) for help interpreting. He is, over and over again, "stunned" by what he reads and hears. These and other recurring examples draw on a longstanding set of evangelical apologetics that seek to prove the truth of biblical prophecy by pointing out prediction that had already come true. The "stunning" of the characters reading the text contains an implicit argument for bible prophecy's transparency—the truth contained in the scripture is obvious. The problem lies not in the opacity and complexity of the dispensationalist interpretations—the problem, the book suggests, lies in the fact that hardly anyone actually reads the bible. "I didn't know any of that was in the bible" says one character after Rayford explains the Rapture and being "saved" to her (377). And therein lies the power and authority of scripture for the characters in *Left Behind*: they are stunned to find not just a narrative that makes sense of what had before seemed to be a jumbled, nonsensical set of

historical and contemporary occurrences, but a worldview that seems to make relatively easy sense out of contemporary conditions. Once having been “stunned” by the scripture, it’s not long before each individual character “accepts Christ”—that is, confesses the specific elements of faith that the dispensationalist theology calls for, including biblical inerrancy, the idea that a person’s deeds are unconnected to his/her salvation, and other elements. Completing this “transaction” (as the novel refers to it several times) empowers the character to evangelize and to operate within a new international environment characterized by the political and cultural consolidation of the Antichrist.

This “stunned” state, followed by the adoption of a narrative that makes total sense of the entire history of the world, reacts against specific postmodern conceptions of self-doubt and powerlessness toward a sublime panoply of historical forces. The “unsaved” in the novel—which includes all of the characters at the beginning of the novel (since the saved have disappeared in the Rapture)—exist in a perpetual realm of floating signifiers, unable to make sense of much of anything. In the face of the Rapture, most have no idea what to make of it, and even those who know it is the Rapture have no idea how to fit it into a broader narrative of the end times. For this, they must turn to the Christian bible and be “stunned” by the revelation of a cosmic, divine plan that divides the universe into evil and good. S. C. Coale in *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* argues that many postmodern novels imagine vast conspiracies that render individuals powerless before their complexity, and that this constitutes a postmodern form of the sublime. In this sense, the unsaved in *Left Behind* exist in a paralyzing state of wonder at the chaos of the world and cannot make meaning in any way. The unsaved who encounters the bible enters a state of “stunned” encounter with the sublime—not only is the universe not chaotic, but it is governed by a long ranging, complex plan, a kind of

conspiracy of God and a conspiracy of evil forces fighting Him in demonic, human, and institutional form. The newly Christian characters, however, quickly understand the only important thing—who is good and who is evil—and are almost instantaneously prepared to choose sides and enter into one of the conspiracies. Far from being wrapped up and in a permanent state of uncertainty, the knowledge of the cosmic truth turns the Christian characters of *Left Behind* into super-agents, empowered by knowledge, technologies, and relatively affluent positions to combat the forces of supreme evil. Through the reading of the bible, and, by extension, the novels that interpret the bible, the reader is given the agency necessary to do nearly anything in the name of good. For the novels, the purpose of reading lies in achieving this clarity through rational reading of ancient authorities.

This totalizing narrative, however, poses several problems for the characters that reading begins to resolve. The narrative at first appears to collapse experiential and historical time; the characters' discovery of the biblical, prophetic narrative not only initiates them into the knowledge that all history has a single direction leading to specific points, but also tells them quite clearly that God predetermined that narrative, and that the historical events of the Tribulation and the second coming of Christ can be neither prevented nor avoided. If these events were fore-ordained at the beginning of time, what good does the knowledge of their coming do for the people who have it? Dispensationalist writers have struggled with this question for the past century and a half, and the answer has usually been some version of "be saved before the Rapture, and you won't have to worry about it." In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey addresses this lack of ability to change the narrative occasionally with a mix of sadness over the suffering to come and barely contained zeal at the prospect of the punishment to be visited on the unsaved. *Left Behind* engages this question differently; the characters

participate in the historical events of the end times rather than simply witnessing them. They engage on a personal level with the antichrist, and they help organize the forces who oppose his rule. They are mobile subjects, connected through networks of travel and communication to believers and enemies through the rest of the world. In this sense, *Left Behind* appears to combine immanent experience with the grand historical, biblical narrative. However, the seeming paradox between predetermined events and characters acting directly and with purpose creates a rupture, and it is here that the divorce between the experiential and the historical, the immanent and the transcendent, runs into its most difficult problem of representation. This split occurs in the novels' initial separation of international and domestic, in the activities carried out by different characters in different venues, and in the acts of reading and interpreting scripture by the different characters. The novels ultimately portray the individual subject of conscience and action as the center of both historical and immanent time. However, this creates a crisis of representation solved only by sacrificing the immanent and splitting characters between actors and interpreters.

The location of subjectivity in private space and in the private conscience happens in the novel in two primary ways: the first is by locating the subject primarily in the suburban family home (of which more later), and the second lies in shoring up the Jeffersonian definition of religion in which religion is a matter of "conscience" formed by "impressions" rather than a matter of rituals, behaviors, or communal interactions. The location of belief in the novels plays the dual role of forming the individual subject and of privileging the connected domestic space—first as the realm of salvation and safety, and later as a realm to be temporarily sacrificed for the sake of protecting it. Through the relations among characters and evangelical theology, the novels construct an ideal and surprisingly flexible definition of proper domestic behavior.

There's widespread consensus among evangelical Christians regarding the process of salvation. Taking literalist interpretations of specific passages from the Pauline epistles in the Christian bible, theologians of this tradition conclude that "man is saved by faith alone." That is, individual faith in Christ as savior—His death and resurrection for the sin of mankind—is the sole determinant of a person's place in heaven. In other words, an individual's actions have no particular effect on salvation. In the novel, Rayford recalls his wife trying to explain this to him, saying that Christians are not necessarily good people, "just forgiven" (4). Bruce Barnes, the new pastor of the former church of Rayford's wife, goes into more detail, saying that new Christians are to do good and "live right," "but not so we can earn our salvation. We're to do that in *response* to our salvation. The Bible says it's not by works of righteousness that we have done, but by his mercy God saved us. It also says that we are saved by grace through Christ, not of ourselves" (*Left Behind* 201). While the novel is very much concerned with the proper performance of salvation in domestic behaviors—Rayford remembers the fastidious housekeeping and proper femininity of his wife Irene, who disappeared in the Rapture²⁴, as being connected with ideas she received about being a good wife at church, and much of his guilt after the Rapture lies in his knowledge that he was a lousy husband and father—it connects these behaviors with the change of *conscience* that occurs after one becomes Christian. Rayford's change is internal first and begins with the act of reading his raptured wife's bible in an attempt to understand how he and his daughter "had missed everything Irene had been trying to tell them...Above all, he had to study, learn, to be prepared for whatever happened next" (*Tribulation Force* 102).

The first three novels of the series, however, leave this studying, understanding, and predicting to two preacher-intellectuals, Bruce Barnes, the pastor of Rayford's new church, and

²⁴ Amy Frykholm offers an extended and insightful analysis of *Left Behind's* gender politics in *Rapture Culture*.

Tsion Ben-Judah, a Jewish biblical scholar commissioned by the government of Israel in the second novel, *Tribulation Force*, to study scripture to discover when the Jewish people—whom the novels place entirely within the state of Israel, erasing the diaspora—might expect the coming of the messiah. Rayford tries to study his wife’s bible himself, even looking at her marginal notes, but finds that passages in scripture “discouraged him because they didn’t seem to flow together, to refer to each other, to have a direction. Language and concepts foreign to him were not helping...he was determined to study and find someone who could explain those passages to him” (*Left Behind* 123). When he goes to Irene’s church and finds Bruce Barnes, Barnes does not give Rayford guidance on scripture, but instead the story of his own personal conscience; that is, Bruce explains how he missed the Rapture, which boiled down to misunderstanding the source of salvation. Bruce’s failure to understand this key theological point of Pauline Christianity is marked by his unwillingness to evangelize and his enjoyment of pornography (*Left Behind* 196-98). While his daughter remains skeptical, Rayford is moved by Bruce’s personal story and later in the evening achieves Christian salvation through a brief, silent prayer that Bruce had taught him. The book narrates Rayford’s internal monologue in detail. He prays the general prayer for forgiveness but confesses several specific sins, the most important of which is pride (*Left Behind* 216-17). For the rest of the novel, he turns his attention toward evangelizing his daughter Chloe, Buck Williams the reporter, and the woman with whom he had earlier sought an affair, Hattie Durham, though all three initially resist his evangelization.

In the evangelizing mission of *Left Behind*, this conversion remains the most crucial move for all people; Rayford’s conversion occurs not so much from reading scripture as from receiving the proper impressions from the network of people around him—his disappeared wife, his disappeared wife’s pastor, and eventually, the church community that he joins. The novel

presents the final consequence and change, however, as one of personal conscience. Through Chloe Steele, Rayford's daughter, the novel sets up a crucial contrast between the new, post-Rapture Christian (Rayford) who surrenders his doubts and embraces the rational truth of the premillennial dispensationalist narrative, and the potential new Christian who holds out, indulging doubts and not simply accepting the obvious truth and "becoming saved." Chloe, like Rayford, is a model potential convert in the novel—she is kindly disposed, analytical, smart, passionate, and generally well-meaning. Chloe represents an attempt by the authors to imagine a young woman and liberal intellectual. She speaks in parodies of detached secular analysis that Rayford calls "pseudosophisticated" (237), speaking of "intellectual honesty" and "plausibility," even telling Rayford in a parody of structuralist criticism that his new faith makes "a lot of sense if you buy into all that. I mean, you have to start with it as a foundation" (230). The novel describes Rayford as analytical as well; he's proud of his detached skepticism, and this pride is one of the first sins he confesses to as he prays for the first time (216).

The novel juxtaposes two different kinds of analysis: one leads the rational, open-minded subject to the conclusion of biblical inerrancy and Christian salvation, and the other makes one doubt the absolute validity of any narrative and prevents the thinker from seeing the obvious truth. Paul Boyer notes a tradition in twentieth-century evangelical Christian apologetics and prophecy interpretation that insists on the scientific nature of prophecy interpretation. The expositor proposes a hermeneutic for interpreting scripture and then tests it by noting all of the prophecies in the bible that have already come true.²⁵ After proving the hermeneutic valid, the expositor then goes on to apply it to prophecies not yet fulfilled (Boyer 293-94). A similar logic leads Rayford to Irene's bible, her former pastor, and the conclusion that the premillennial

²⁵ These prophecies concern important events in biblical history, including the destruction of the first Jewish temple and the Babylonian exile in 587BC, the Maccabean Revolt in the 1st century BCE, the Roman sacking of Jerusalem in 70 CE, and other events referred to in scripture.

dispensationalist narrative perfectly fits the disappearances that have just happened. However, the post-modern, self-aware, skeptical analysis prevents Chloe from simply taking Rayford's word for it and adopting the same belief. Chloe resists for much of the novel, but finally is moved more by her father's sincerity and kind intentions than a careful examination of the same materials and narratives that lead Rayford to his initial conversion.

The information that leads to this proper response by the individual conscience, however, must come from somewhere, and the novel makes an important distinction between the new Christians who will actively fight against the Antichrist and those who move people to conversion, interpret scripture, and predict the future. The interpreting characters provide the rational justification that directs the actions of the characters who actively oppose the antichrist. Of the first three novels, only the first, *Left Behind*, narrates actual personal conversions (though more are referenced obliquely in the later novels). The second two novels focus on intrigue (through the stories of Buck and Rayford) and interpretation and sermons (delivered by Bruce and TSION). The novels present scriptural exegesis as an isolated, obscured act that the inspired interpreter then conveys to an audience in spoken, written, or televised form. The central events of interpretation occur in the second novel, *Tribulation Force*; the first happens in a sermon delivered by Bruce to a packed church sanctuary (63-75), the second is delivered by TSION in a televised revelation that his extensive study of messianic prophecy has led to the conclusion that Jesus was the Jewish messiah (390-97). A textual reading of Revelation regarding the first horseman of the Apocalypse, War, makes up Bruce's sermon. It features a warning of events to come for the listeners. The text focalizes the sermon through Buck and Rayford. Both see that Bruce appears "inspired"—he is disheveled and exhausted as "the spirit of God has weighed heavily on him" (63), but they are impressed by the fluidity of his readings and the age of the

commentaries and biblical text he cites (67). As Bruce lectures on the Antichrist, Rayford sees some audience members take notes and “everyone follow along in a bible” (63-64). Rayford wonders, “would he tell this body that he believed he knew who the Antichrist was...or would Bruce simply tell them what the bible said and let the people come to their own conclusions?” (65). Rayford’s reaction again highlights a central tension in representation of interpretation for the book—putting together these impressive readings has been an exhausting task for Bruce, and the result of extensive study of scripture and commentaries. However, Bruce simply tells “them what the bible said and [lets] them reach their own conclusions.” There is only one correct conclusion, and the reading is simultaneously transparent and difficult. Just as importantly, the text focalizes the entire reaction through Rayford, who already knows the identity of the Antichrist and has already been told by Bruce much of the information in the sermon. The act becomes focused, then, on the authority and impressiveness of Bruce as an individual interpreting subject; his authority comes not solely from the texts he claims, but on his charismatic, extra-rational ability to interpret them. The interpreting subject, then, is inspired and has a personal authority that comes from neither the text (which is supposedly transparent) nor the church community, who will perform their own acts of interpretation to confirm Bruce’s. Reading scripture is an intense act, an immanent act, but one that reveals one foreordained meaning; it is access to the sweep of history, but not an act of agency in and of itself.

The books present interpretation in this way frequently through the first and second books, but near the end of the second book, the story moves away from interpretation and into constant action on the part of the male characters. Tsion’s exegesis delivered on television and carried worldwide by CNN follows much the same pattern as Bruce’s sermon; it reads very much like a condensed version of McDowell’s *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. Delivered by

an Israeli scholar of the rabbinical tradition but strangely confined to the vocabulary of American dispensationalism, the lecture reveals what most of the characters already knew—that Jesus was the messiah predicted in the Hebrew bible and, as far as the book is concerned, this confirms the dispensationalist interpretation of Revelation. Tsion carries out the entire study in isolation and, when he delivers it, “Orthodox Jews” (which evidently includes everyone in Israel who has not already converted to Christianity)²⁶ try to attack Tsion in the television studio. Buck helps Tsion escape, and Tsion goes into hiding in one place or another for the rest of the series. Leaving aside the highly questionable idea that a standard Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible would provoke a violent response from Israeli Jews, this sudden attack and Buck’s rescue of Tsion—a rescue that repeats midway through the third novel, *Nicolae*—signals a shift away from scripture in the novels toward a full embrace of the espionage novel, thriller, and science-fiction elements of the series. While the events of the later novels will follow the premillennial dispensationalist narrative, it no longer needs to be explained from scripture, and the focus can shift to the action orientation of the book. Also marking this shift are the death of Bruce at the end of *Tribulation Force* and Tsion’s hiding in various places throughout *Nicolae*. This is a move in both marketing—it focuses on what for many readers will be the most entertaining parts—and a move in the construction of the subjectivity of the characters. Armed with faith and with foresight, the characters can pursue their fights against the Antichrist, for the way the book sets up reading is limited. Interpretation is an individual, obscured act; the knowledge it brings does not vary, but it can be imparted to others. It is spread, but not constructed, through the networks of readers that Amy Frykholm describes in *Rapture Culture*. Agency on the part of the listeners does not come from participating in acts of interpretation, but in responding to them either wrongly (as in the

²⁶ In “Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular,” Melani McAlister trenchantly observes that, “As it looks to biblical passages to support the ‘restoration’ of Jews to Palestine...the fundamentalist vision of *Left Behind* makes Palestine and Palestinians literally invisible” (776) and “there are no American Jews in *Left Behind*” (792).

violent attacks faced by Tsion and later his family) or rightly, the latter of which involves being, as Bruce tells his congregation, “ready this time. Be ready. I will tell you how to get ready” (67). The act of reading as one of individual agency is echoed in the other acts of the book, which rely on a split between the historical and the immanent, expressed as a split between the personal/domestic and the global/international.

The novels’ active, internationally mobile characters protect a strictly regulated domestic sphere; their ability to oppose the antichrist lies in their proper cultivation of family relationships. They may be in the service of God, but they express this commitment through their determination to protect their own homes and loved ones. Early on, the first novel establishes the primacy of the domestic sphere by locating this proper performance of Christian faith almost exclusively within domestic behaviors; the saved individual’s piety and gratitude expresses itself through gendered behaviors in the private domestic space, which includes the home, church, and, to a limited extent, social contacts in the workplace. The gender politics of the novel have been explicated usefully and in detail by several critics, including Amy Frykholm and Melani McAlister. In a survey of twentieth-century dispensationalist texts, Frykholm argues that changes in gender politics were what the texts responded “most intimately and intensely” to (Frykholm 19). Similar observations have been made by several other critics about this set of texts as well. The domestic gender politics of the novel contribute to the framing of international/domestic opposition. The novel shows “living right” in response to Christian salvation as a way properly to domesticate men and women seemingly in preparation for activism against the centralized, controlled international environment. In so doing, the novel idealizes an imagined past domestic state in which women beautified homes and performed emotional maintenance of families while

men responded in an appreciative, kindly, supervisory role; at the same time, it idealizes strong national boundaries and decentralized, local control of institutions.

It is in the proper domesticization of the characters that *Left Behind* makes its primary post-modern critique. The novel's opening lines suggest a threat to domestic harmony: "Rayford Steele's mind was on a woman he had never touched. With his fully loaded 747 on autopilot about the Atlantic en route to a 6 AM landing at Heathrow, Rayford had pushed from his mind thoughts of his family" (1). Rayford's reverie continues as he thinks about an affair with the young and beautiful flight attendant Hattie Durham and recalls his wife Irene's off-putting religiosity, until it is interrupted just a few pages later by Hattie coming to tell him that people are missing. Frykholm notes that the Raptured wife and left behind husband are stock characters of twentieth-century Rapture novels, and that usually, the wife is taken to heaven by Christ just before the husband is about to wrong her—through cheating, abuse, or some other violation of marital fidelity. Since she is powerless to stop her husband, God must protect her. She becomes powerful in her absence, as her disappearance causes her sinful husband's repentance (Frykholm 30). *Left Behind* follows this stock narrative without variation; Irene's disappearance makes her into a powerful yet ghost-like martyr for Rayford's salvation (just as he is about to wrong her). Through his guilt over the potential affair and his grief at the loss of Irene and their young son, Rayford not only becomes Christian, but also becomes a model for Christian masculinity. He no longer looks for sexual encounters with young women, but focuses on his remaining family member in an effort to be a good father and a good Christian evangelist. In short, he is no longer a wandering pilot, but a patriarch with the ability to lead his family privately and operate in the name of God publicly. It's telling that he begins by convincing Chloe first to become Christian, and then his friends.

The conversion of the remnant of the Steele family privileges the power of a Christian suburban lifestyle enclave in the novel. In their landmark 1985 study of white American individualism *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah et al make a useful distinction between community and what they call “lifestyle:” “Whereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity” (Bellah et al 72). A group of people bound by similar interests, tastes, and values make up “a lifestyle enclave,” which is different than a community, which is made up of people of various types occupying shared spaces and participating in different ways in communal structures. Bellah et al go on to argue that “probably most groups in America today embody an element of community as well as an element of lifestyle enclave” (74). Christians in the book make up a strange kind of aggressive lifestyle enclave. The Rapture signals the “fundamentally segmental” nature of Christians; it marks with absolute certainty who belongs and who does not, which is also marked by specific domestic behaviors. The changes in Rayford and Chloe after their conversions—in the way they treat each other and remember their departed family members—also testify to their suddenly common interests and values.

Left Behind's construction of this lifestyle enclave in the first novel provides a crucial foundation for the construction of active agency in the series. Since the broad, international, historical sweep of the plot is predetermined and prescribed by the premillennial dispensationalist reading of Revelation and other biblical scriptures, the post-Tribulation Christian convert (or “tribulation saint”) has no ability to affect the Antichrist’s reign in the broadest sense; he can neither delay its onset nor bring it to a close faster; he can prevent neither wars nor disasters predicted by prophecy. For most of the novels, most of the tribulation saints

remain quiet, waiting, appearing either in support roles as in the case of most of the women characters—there to either hold down safe houses or be rescued by Buck and Rayford—or to appear occasionally in obscure areas of Israel or Egypt to assist the main characters. The interpreters, as described above, help by laying out the general events to be expected. The main actors, however, need a form of agency that can have some effect on the plots. Since they cannot change the course of history, the jobs of Rayford and Buck become to protect the lifestyle enclave in a dispersed form. After the Rapture, the lifestyle enclave mostly falls apart; the people best suited to maintaining it (Christian wives) have disappeared. Their idealized homes must remain in the idealized past for the novels; the Rapture and Tribulation have disrupted them forever. This environment of domestic christo-perfection, however, is broken up by the need of the characters to fight against the antichrist. To keep the memory and motivation in view, the Christian family in *Nicolae* despite living in different places remain connected by communication technologies. Through this, they keep a virtual, idealized domestic space alive while fighting to protect it.

“THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY:” CHRISTIANS IN A NEW WORLD ORDER

For the series’ protagonists, protecting the virtual domestic space requires an antagonistic engagement with a global environment made possible in the 1990s by the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. *Left Behind* links the ultimate challenge to the white American masculine subject to the end of the Cold War and the final defeat of Russian militarist-communism. The opening chapter of the novel makes this link. Just before passengers on a plane piloted by the chief protagonist notice the disappearance of companions in the Rapture, the novel

focuses on recollections of Cameron “Buck” Williams, a travelling reporter for *Global Weekly*, an American-based newsmagazine. Buck’s flashback serves the dual purpose of establishing the prophetic framework of the novel and providing some brief historical exposition. The novel recalls Buck traveling to Israel to interview a chemist who invented a fertilizer that makes any region, no matter how arid, able to produce high yields of crops. As a result, Israel becomes “the export capital of the world,” “far more profitable than its oil-laden neighbors” (8). For somewhat unclear reasons, Russia and several allies—“Middle Eastern nations, primarily Libya and Ethiopia” (14)²⁷—attack Israel with a massive assault of planes and missiles. In a supernatural feat, the invading force is destroyed by an invisible force without anyone in Israel being harmed. When the battle is over, “the Israelis found combustible material that would serve as fuel and preserve their natural resources for more than six years” (14). Buck recalls being “stunned” when he reads Ezekiel 38-39, which tells of an invasion of Israel by a great enemy from the North with allies from places that contemporary prophecy popularizers identify as Northern and sub-Saharan Africa (15).

This interpretation of Ezekiel by the novel’s authors makes the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the end times simultaneous. While Russia as Ezekiel’s “great enemy of the North” or “Magog” is nothing new—Paul Boyer traces it back to the early nineteenth century (Boyer 154), and it was an especially popular interpretation among U.S. writers in the mid-twentieth century—the way that the novel explains Russia’s desire to invade Israel speaks to an imaginary difficulty with understanding a non-threatening Russia in a post-Cold War world. Further, the novel operates within an imaginative framework of nation-states, military alliances, and spheres of influence developed during the Cold War. By linking the end of the Cold War with the rise of the antichrist and his consolidated international political, economic, and cultural

²⁷ This lack of geographical clarity suggests an unintentional conflation of geography, religion, and ethnicity.

institutions, the novel reacts strongly against post-Cold War liberal free market optimism. Just as importantly for this argument, it marks the cataclysmic quality of the transition and the centering of the individual American subject. The destruction of Russia in the novel does several things, including disposing of the common Rapture-narrative stock character of the satanic Soviet Union and centering the international narrative on Israel, which occupies the most important political and economic place in the world due to its newfound economic wealth and the impenetrable military protection of God. However, it is Buck Williams' reaction—his new belief in God and consideration for biblical prophecy—that the novel focuses on. While thousands of Russian soldiers die in the attack and the entire military balance of the world shifts, it is the impression made by the events on the individual conscience that matters and will matter through the cataclysmic nature of every historical event for the rest of the series.

In the first novel, *Left Behind*, the relationship between historical events and individual impressions is mediated through spectacular military-technological fantasies, like the one Buck witnesses in the Russian attack on Israel. The characters protect their Christian private spaces through the deployment of such military technology in the historical and international arena, wielding weapons and other technologies to advance the biblical narrative while defending their loved ones. While the stories privilege the characters' private lives, their efforts bring them into contact with the official institutions of the antichrist's government—"The Global Community" (GC)—and even the antichrist himself. This contact again raises the question of the nature of the agency of the characters; if they cannot ultimately affect these institutions in the broadest sense, what good is their engagement? *Left Behind* answers this by constructing a fantasy of military-technological competence that removes ultimate consequences from the actions of Rayford and Buck in their capacity as Christian secret agents. This kind of agency can be opened up by

situating the second two novels of *Left Behind* in the public discourse of military technology during the Gulf War. While McAlister's reading of media narratives of "family" and soldier-citizens in Gulf War media representations helps explain the focus on the private, apolitical subject of the novel, the new focus on military technologies in television news during Gulf War coverage helps explain the kind of subjects Rayford and Buck in particular ultimately become.

The key to *Left Behind's* resolution of the historical-experiential agency problem lies in the popular representation of military technologies. T.V. news representations of Patriot Missiles destroying Iraqi Scud Missiles before they could reach their targets paired with footage of U.S. military "smart bombs" (targeted explosives supposedly capable of surgically destroying small Iraqi military targets and eliminating "collateral damage") constructed a narrative of a new military and a new masculinity. Infrared images of small bombs penetrating chimneys and air ducts dominated over any images of blood or rubble. Rather than showing tough young soldiers operating individual guns and engaging in battle field operations, television coverage of the Gulf War focused on young military personnel operating computers in remote places, conducting low-risk warfare. Examining television news coverage of the Iranian Hostage Crisis in 1979 and the Persian Gulf War in 1991 in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, Melani McAlister argues that major network news coverage focused attention away from the historical and political contexts of both conflicts and instead constructed the individual hostages and soldiers as private, apolitical subjects forced unwillingly into conflicts that threaten them but for which they bear no responsibility. The constructed narrative made these private subjects synecdoches for the American nation (McAlister *Epic* 199-200; 237-39). McAlister's privatized subject offers a striking contradiction: the private military subject operates weapons technologies in an antiseptic way, relatively detached from the immediate

effects of their activities. Defending America from attack, this high-tech presentation constructed a masculinity based in part on technological competence. The individual subject capable of defending the nation did so by enacting a violence rendered detached and unreal by technological intervention. Immanent consequences were obscured—historical consequences (mission accomplished, war won) seemed immediate.

Left Behind enters this popular field of military narrative with a similar surgical detachment from human costs outside of the main characters' families. Rayford and Buck construct a fantasy male subjectivity whereby individual private citizens make use of impressive computer, weapon, and transportation technologies to fight against evil and protect their loved ones. In *Nicolae*, Buck orders several laptop computers “virtually without limits” from a member of their church (46). He also orders “universal cell phones” for himself, Chloe, and Rayford; in *Nicolae*, these phones seem to function properly in the middle of the Sinai Desert (264). Rayford's training as a pilot allows him unlimited access to the inner circle of the Antichrist; he becomes Nicolae's personal pilot, flying a newly designed super-plane (*Nicolae* 16) reminiscent of a 757, which Rayford compares earlier to driving a Porsche or a Jaguar (*Tribulation Force* 89). He uses a specially-installed device—how it was installed remains unclear—to listen in on the Antichrist's cabin conversations from the cockpit. Buck rescues Chloe from World War III-related chaos in suburban Chicago, driving on one occasion a “junky old import” (*Nicolae* 74) and in another a “fully-loaded Range Rover” he has just purchased (*Nicolae* 17), but both times off-road and in violation of traffic instructions given by police officers and other authorities. In *Nicolae*, Buck rescues Tsion by driving an old school bus on a high speed chase through the Sinai Desert, ending in a harrowing run to a private Lear Jet at the Cairo airport (*Nicolae* 272-73).

This exercise of power through the high tech partly represents a simple macho fantasy fulfillment popular in the 1990s after the Gulf War.²⁸ However, within it lies an assumed privilege of money and mobility of the upper-middle-class white American crucial for the constitution of this virile international subject. While Melani McAlister reads these technological engagements as part of marketing fundamentalism as a modern force, Linda Kintz sees this largely in terms of the “tender but virile” masculinity of Christian therapy²⁹ coupled with consumerism. Over the course of the first three novels, Buck purchases highly expensive goods and services with surprising frequency, including chartered flights (*Left Behind* 115-20; *Nicolae* 208-09), multiple cars (*Nicolae* 17), high tech computers and cell phones, and “a ridiculously expensive Fifth Avenue Penthouse” for him and Chloe (*Nicolae* 89). The books never make it clear where this money comes from—Buck’s salary as a reporter and later editor of an official Global Community magazine is never discussed directly. Moreover, Buck’s frequent travelling and Rayford’s ability as the Antichrist’s official pilot to travel anywhere makes for an interesting subjectivity; the Christians of *Left Behind* are mobile, privileged subjects defined by their private, apolitical, domestic-oriented quality but almost omniscient in non-domestic arenas. As they move, however, their movements are increasingly tracked by Global Community authorities, and their privilege of movement seems increasingly threatened; Buck must frequently elude authorities and rely on trickery. While the book is most concerned with the intrusion of the Antichrist into domestic space, by the third novel, domestic space all but disappears—we almost never see any of the characters at home—and threats come outside. The increasing intrusion of the Global Community on this privilege becomes the new threat.

²⁸ It’s no coincidence that the first James Bond film in almost seven years was released in summer 1995, right around the time the first *Left Behind* novel became popular.

²⁹ See, for example, *Life on the Edge* (1995) by James Dobson.

The stories of *Tribulation Force* and *Nicolae* connect intrusion in private space to state power. When the antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia, first comes to power, he does so by plotting to become leader of the U.N. He then manipulates the nation-states of the world into ceding all military power to the U.N., which Nicolae renames, the “Global Community.” The plot to install Nicolae ends with his disingenuous refusal to become Secretary-General unless the members of the U.N. agree to a set of improbable international demands only imaginable within the liberal optimism of a post-Cold War world. These demands include the destruction of ninety percent of every nation’s military arsenal (the remainder to be donated to the U.N. for peacekeeping missions), a reorganization of the U.N. Security Council (stacked with his own allies), a move of the headquarters of the U.N. from New York to a rebuilt city of Babylon in Iraq, a treaty with Israel so that he might distribute and control the secret fertilizer formula, and “the establishment of one religion for the world, probably headquartered in Italy” (350-53). Of all the improbable occurrences of the novel, the agreement of the majority of U.N. member nations to Nicolae’s demands most shows the authors’ difficulties in accommodating a set of staple premillennial dispensationalist prophecy conventions in the international milieu of the 1990s. This set of world changes—particularly the last two—offers a monstrous version of post-Cold War hope for a world without rigid borders. The (temporary) opening of many national borders after 1991—to the movement of people, capital, and culture—makes possible the ascension of the Antichrist. The demand to establish one world religion extends this logic to culture. If nations can unite, why can’t religions? The link between national governments and religions implies that member nations of the U.N. could somehow vote for which religions their citizens will practice. It imagines the triumph of a hegemonic secularism in the West and imagines the religious uniformity of everyone outside of the West.

This pairing, however, speaks to the underlying function of the state in an ideal world for *Left Behind*: to protect the private domestic space and the private conscience. For the first novel, a government ceding power over its citizens and a government ruling on what religion its citizens should belong to are basically the same thing. This is emphasized in the prologue of *Nicolae*, which reviews the events of the end of *Tribulation Force*. “World War III” began when the former President of the US, “Carpathia-emasculated” (*Nicolae* viii), leads an abortive rebellion against Global Community and Antichrist authority. The word “emasculated” equates the loss of Presidential and national authority with loss of exactly the military-technological power that the novel privileges again and again. This power must be re-seized by a private, apolitical citizen who stands up to an invasive threat. Rayford muses that he had always thought that American “militias” were full of criminals, but the seizure of power by the Global Community made him think otherwise (20). Published just two years after the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City by militia sympathizers concerned with the increasing intrusion of the federal government into private lives, *Nicolae* makes the *proper* function of government in this novel’s political world clear: a government should protect the inviolability of the private conscience and private domestic space. For the government to invade this space is for it to “emasculate” its citizens; for the government to cede the power of protecting it is for it and its leaders to be “emasculated.” At this point, it is necessary for the virile and masculine private, apolitical citizen to take charge utilizing the same apparatuses and networks that the government *should* have used to protect its citizens.

When this private, apolitical white male subject enters international apparatuses in order to prevent his own “emasculated,” however, he does so knowing that his success can only be limited. The biblical narrative remains fore-ordained; *Nicolae* cannot be stopped, and the course

of God's judgments on the Earth (famine, plague, earthquakes) will continue. This problem of agency finally finds a partial resolution in the genre combination of the series. By setting the entire novel in the near future³⁰, the plot exits historical continuity and instead represents a small but significant non-contiguous distortion of the present. The displacing of the time and the relative lack of exposition set up a clear environment in which the novel's historical consequences do not clearly follow the historical realities of the early 1990s. Further, by constructing a private subject that functions solely within the immanent (with the people around him rather than with institutions), the novel collapses historical time into immanent time, making immanent time transcendent and removing historical time altogether. In other words, the novel confronts an inability to represent a global postmodern system by removing the complex and vertiginous connections of history and of international systems. These complexities get placed into dark, conspiratorial realms that the novels never really explore. The genre mix—near-future dystopia, science fiction, international intrigue-conspiracy-thriller, domestic novel—allows this first through the removal of historical consequences in the theological narrative and removal of vertiginous globality to dark and racialized spaces.

The antichrist seizes world power through two parallel conspiracies: a relatively transparent conspiracy in the west and an opaque conspiracy outside history in non-western nations. The difference speaks to an orientalist Western fear of contamination by the dark and irrational forces of non-Western nations. The Western half of the process begins with currency consolidation.³¹ In the novel, currency consolidation occurs in steps, the first being a move to

³⁰ The temporal setting of the first novel, *Left Behind*, is never stated, though the narrative implies that it is after its initial publication in 1995.

³¹ "One world currency" is a staple of twentieth-century prophecy popularizers, who read several biblical passages to mean that, when the end of the world approaches, the whole world will trade in one currency. Institutions like the European Common Market and the European Union, together with the adoption of the Euro by EU nations, are often seen as eschatological signs. See, for example, Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* and Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*.

three currencies (dollars, Deutsch marks, and yen) and the second to one currency around the time that the antichrist makes his final move to the head of a world government. Two suspicious financiers named Stonagal and Todd-Cothran (both of whom have close and not particularly hidden ties to the rising antichrist and to Israel's newfound wealth) are largely responsible for effecting this consolidation. Throughout the first three quarters of the novel, Buck discovers the details of their conspiracy, which include elevating Nicolae to power in Romania, manipulating world currency markets, and even murdering two of Buck's friends (a Scotland Yard investigator and a low-level bank operative) when they begin to discover the conspiracy. The conspiracy culminates with a closed meeting of the Antichrist with important ambassadors from the U.N.; during the meeting, Nicolae demonstrates his demonic power by shooting Stonagal and Todd-Cothran and then convincing everyone in the room—except Buck, who has recently become Christian—that it was a murder-suicide. While the conspiracy remains closed to most of the world and Nicolae manipulates the unsaved with his demonic power, Buck (as a reporter and Christian) and the reader can understand the conspiracy. The evil forces seeking to dominate the world remain strikingly transparent in the West, as they operate through banks, finance structures, and transparent governments. Scotland Yard agents can find evidence of them, and reporters can investigate them—they're shadowy, but knowable.

For this rational and comprehensible Western conspiracy to succeed, however, opaque events only alluded to in the narrative must occur in the nations of Eastern Europe and Africa. The novel locates the impenetrable qualities of the evil conspiracy in these traditionally marginalized spaces. The novel includes two other important silences located in Romania and Botswana. Brief rumors of an eloquent statesman in the Romanian House of Deputies foreshadow Nicolae's appearance on the world stage; Buck first hears of him from Chaim

Rosenzweig, the inventor of the Israeli fertilizer formula (68-69). A short time later, Buck hears of his ascension to the presidency of Romania in a violation of constitutional rules—Nicolae was not elected according to the Romanian constitution—but his boss quickly assures him that “this is like the old South American coups, Buck. A new one every week. Big deal” (138). Buck remains suspicious due to unconfirmed rumors of shady business practices on Nicolae’s part before he entered politics—he is rumored to have had competitors killed as he made money “when Romanian markets opened to the West years ago” (136-38). When Nicolae comes to New York, assumes the Secretary-General position, and begins to operate within economic and political structures legitimate in the West, his operations becomes investigatable. His Romanian past, however, remains shrouded in the inscrutable workings of an unstable Eastern European governmental structure. In order for Nicolae to become Secretary-General, the current Secretary-General, a man from Botswana named Ngumo, must step aside. Rumor has it that he’s unhappy to do so (349), but he returns to Botswana with the Israeli fertilizer formula to help enrich the Botswanan economy (340-41). While this particular detail of the conspiracy is fairly transparent, Ngumo himself makes no actual appearance in the novel. Returning to Botswana, he exits the narrative into a silent—but assumed to be economically depressed, even starving—nation. By relegating the inaccessible to a silent, racialized other-realm, the novels preserve the illusion of an environment in which the individual white American subject can comprehend and act efficaciously.

Liberated by a transparent realm, the characters of *Left Behind* still face the difficulty of the dispensationalist “end times” narrative; the results of their actions are to some extent determined in advance. Nonetheless, the utopian elements of the end times narrative help create a dual temporality that allows the story to privilege the private realms in which characters can act.

Michael Barkun, Paul Boyer, and Linda Kintz have all usefully explicated the utopian elements of American Christian fundamentalism and the end times narrative in particular; with the final return of Christ, the end times narrative imagines an end to suffering and a worldly, just government (Barkun 18-19; Boyer 318-23; Kintz 9). Even in its final novels, the series never quite imagines the details of this utopia; what Frederic Jameson calls a “utopian impulse,” or desire for revolutionary change that guides action without a complete program (*Archaeologies* 3), nonetheless undergirds the form of the novels. Reading the “original” utopia, Jameson further argues that discussions of temporality tend to bifurcate into two paths of existential experience and historical time, but that utopian fictions and programs “seamlessly reunite the two...and existential time is taken up into historical time, which is paradoxically also the end of time, the end of history” (7). *Left Behind* effects this same collapse in reverse; since the course of historical time is predetermined by the “end times” narrative, and the novel relegates real historical forces to impenetrable (and racialized) spaces of conspiracy, the white male subject operates entirely within the existential, experiential realm. Rather than working to achieve a utopian program, the subjects of *Left Behind* merely protect their own domestic complexes while waiting for Christ to return and implement the utopia for them. In the meantime, the antichrist’s dystopia (a total system implemented for unjust and even demonic causes) cannot be thwarted either; its temporary success is foreordained. The world purpose of the subjects of *Left Behind* is stated fairly clearly—to save the greatest number of souls and to make sure that protected private spaces exist where this evangelization might occur. The consequences of the Tribulation Force’s fight against the Antichrist, then, go beyond themselves; in fact, they sacrifice their own protected domestic spaces. However, the consequences are very much individual and internal for all of the people they are trying to help. The systems of the world

remain inaccessible, not responsible for injustice (since it is always evil individuals that manipulate them), and ultimately unrepresentable.

Left Behind and the premillennial dispensationalist narrative on which it is based only get so far, then, in addressing postmodern “agency panic.” Floating in a realm where unseen, unrepresentable forces act upon individuals and communities, *Left Behind* simply moves these forces into the realm of foreordained events. The series empowers its bourgeois subjects in an almost absolute fashion—but only in the realm of an idealized, self-contained, and whole past not only threatened but ultimately destroyed as the end times come. A fantasy of action remains, based on the wielding of technological competence and economic privilege without long term or systemic consequences. This feeds the cultural logic of late capitalism because it constantly works at differentiation and empowerment of individual subjects but confines this differentiation to the private conscience and the self-contained private space—it is undesirable and even impossible to effect any broader intervention. *Left Behind’s* counter-secular politics fits perfectly within an emergent neoliberal formation of the 1990s that places power within special individuals and relegates broader systems of capital operations to the invisible. Special, charismatic individuals can understand and manipulate parts of the systemic matrix; everything else remains unreachable.

The subjectivity that the series creates seems somewhat surprising given its placement in a broader field of “Christian right” political engagement in the 1980s and 90s. Nonetheless, the series’ characters and stories suggest that basically secular conceptions of the self undergirded even the most aggressive religious-political programs. *Left Behind’s* incandescent popularity dropped off in the novels published after 2002, which may at first suggest a declining interest among the non-evangelical readers that the series appealed to so widely. The popularity of series

like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* that followed *Left Behind* suggests that *Left Behind's* popularity may not have stemmed from audience interest in the bible, as the books' authors claimed, but in audience interest in long running series with speculative genre elements that went beyond mundane realism. In the mid-2000s, *Left Behind's* theological-political picture of the world found a place within a whole other set of similarly quasi-magical pictures of the world. This, however, does not represent a failure on the part of the series. Indeed, the series' waning popularity compared with these other books suggests that it achieved a primary goal: that is, it placed Christian fundamentalism squarely within mainstream cultural consumption in the U.S. While the novels may have offered some specific political-cultural ideas that might be considered radical in some quarters, its overall end involved absorption into a cultural mainstream. Exploration of the revolutionary potential of the post-secular secular requires genuine reimagining of the relationship between vast global systems and individuals. The next two chapters will examine literary engagements with post-secular reimagining of private and public, local and global relations.

CHAPTER 4

‘ONLY A RELIGION CAN DO IT:’ MELANCHOLY AND COMMUNITY IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S ‘EARTHSEED’ NOVELS

I believe the lawless social anarchy which we saw is directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility, and social order in too many areas of our society.

-Vice President Dan Quayle, in a speech to the Commonwealth Club of California, 19 May 1992

[Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack] Kemp's ideas themselves are part of what he likes to call "empowerment," a strategy to circumvent government bureaucracies and use market forces to accomplish social ends.

-“As Los Angeles Smoke Lifts, Bush Can See Kemp Clearly.” *New York Times* 7 May 1992

"I always thought if there was a serial rapist or murderer loose, my business would go up, but nothing beats a race riot," said Sean Collinsworth, the owner of Deadly Forces, a gun training service in Los Angeles. "People are really scared."

-“Business Diary May 10-15.” *New York Times* 17 May 1992

As national office holders in 1992, Vice President Dan Quayle and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Jack Kemp were among many who attempted to explain the Los Angeles riots in April of that year. Kemp’s answer (summarized above) indicates a willingness to understand underlying causes of the riot and offer policy solutions; Quayle’s answer offers vague terms and disengagement. Nonetheless, in conversation, their answers together indicate a dual commitment from the American right to proper regulation of the private sphere on one hand and to “the free market” on the other. Quayle aggressively equates “social order” with “personal responsibility,” but spells out no usable relation between the two (here or elsewhere). Like the

cultural politics of *Left Behind*, Quayle's politics commit to an American subject who, properly rooted in a nuclear family home, can move freely and productively in a world market oriented toward his needs. Kemp's proposed "empowerment" programs operated under the assumption that well-placed public investment could allow more people to cultivate this privileged subjectivity, but they assumed the same normative subject as Quayle's theories did.³² Gun shop owner Sean Collinsworth offers an unwitting, yet chilling, rejoinder to Kemp and Quayle: "the market" can be served just as well by social disaster as it can by Quayle's well-ordered family or Kemp's "empowerment." The subject they both assume can just as well profit from selling guns to scared people as from helping to build a community. Despite clear calls for further examination and public polls indicating support for public action on urban poverty, the Bush administration showed little interest in the underlying causes of the riots.

Published less than a year after the riots, Octavia Butler's novels *Parable of the Sower* (1993), though set in the 2020s, imagines a Los Angeles stricken with exacerbated versions of some of the same social problems: drug use, gang activity, and threatening (rather than protective) police forces. The novel and its sequel, *Parable of the Talents* (1998), make clear connections between the degradation of community in Los Angeles, the discourse of "personal responsibility," and the broader forces of globalization. In doing so, they emphasize exactly the historical and communal responsibilities that *Left Behind* elides. These "Earthseed" novels engage in a dialog with many of the same cultural and historical realities that inform the early *Left Behind* novels. Addressing the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, postmodern agency panic, and neoliberal rhetoric around the nuclear family and "market-based solutions," Butler offers a

³² It's worth noting that as Housing and Urban Development Secretary under President George H. Bush, Jack Kemp enjoyed little influence within the administration or Congress, and few of the programs he championed were implemented. See, for example, Jason DeParle, "As Los Angeles Smoke Lifts, Bush Can See Kemp Clearly." *NY Times* 7 May 1992. A1.

nuanced critique that challenges both neoliberal rhetoric and fundamentalist alternatives such as those offered by *Left Behind*. Through their economically decimated near-future setting, the novels suggest that suburban patriarchy, religious purity, and identification with global capital destroy the very institutions they would purport to protect. Butler's novels instead construct a subject characterized by thoughtful community engagement, redefinition of the family, and ecological awareness. While the novels take place thirty years in the future, the "parable" form of the novels suggests the teaching of lessons for the present. The first novel presents possible future results of the increased power of international corporations and the exploitation of labor: erosion of empathy among individuals and support from institutions. Poor, homeless people prey on each other and on the vanishing lower middle class, while police abuse people and powerful businesses separate family members. The elimination of public institutions directly leads to the breakdown of interpersonal relations.

In imagining a devastated future that grows out of contemporary conditions, the novels offer a fairly standard narrative within the dystopian tradition. However, they also employ the dystopian tradition to critique common twentieth-century modes of opposition to power, including non-violence and communal withdrawal. The characters' thoughtful evaluations of their environments and their actions suggest an evolving, flexible model of social organization based on commitments to communal, sustainable living. While they articulate these commitments within a locally-based community, the Earthseed characters' commitments allow for the spread of communal values after religious zealots destroy their community in the second novel. As leader of her group, the main character, Olamina, bonds her community together through a new religion she has founded, "Earthseed." Earthseed includes a number of principles, but its main contention is that "God is Change," and that adherents should pursue "the

Destiny”—the eventual emigration of small communities to other planets. The revolutionary critique of the novels lies in their post-secular organization of relations among individuals, local environments, and the rest of the world. While *Earthseed* includes specific regulations for adherents, it opens community membership to people with genuinely differing modes of being. It further provides a model for non-hierarchical, dialogic community governance without requiring cultural uniformity among participants. *Earthseed* partially fulfills the promises of what William Connolly calls “a thickened secularism” one that moves beyond Protestant-dominated U.S. secularism and “thickens an intersubjective ethos of generous engagement between diverse constituencies” (Connolly, *Secularist* 3). *Earthseed* provides the regulatory basis for an open, dialogic community that protects individual dignity while eliminating the private sphere-public sphere differentiation on which American secularism rests.

The two novels together imagine a post-secular mode of opposition to neoliberalism. The first novel and the first part of the second novel present a local community without a clear demarcation between public and private spheres. The community’s religion, *Earthseed*, binds the community together by ritualizing the individual experiences of loss and grief. By making these traditionally individual psychologies part of the basis of public cooperation, the characters forge a common purpose that turns past losses into productive futures. Their local community emphasizes sustainable living (against corporate environmental destruction), community responsibility (against the degradation of public services), and a redefined, expanded family (against the rigidly defined nuclear family of Christian fundamentalism). The second novel intervenes in the first by exposing the limitations of local communalist modes of resistance to global neoliberalism. At the same time, the events at the end of *Talents* promise that the affective regulations developed in the local *Earthseed* community can build a “virtual community.” These

story events change the eventual goal of Earthseed; the eventual emigration of Earthseed members suggests the combat of globalization not through localist withdrawal, but through a utopian collapsing of the local and the global in an isolated community on another planet. The novels' vision experiences a representational difficulty in moving from locally-based community to virtual community to the utopian vision of small global communities on other planets. Despite Butler's attempts to find alternative oppositional strategies to a neoliberal assemblage of destructive power, the novels have difficulty imagining the processes by which the near future might lead to the far future. *Parable of the Talents* ends with a representational frustration that suggests the need for further examination of the utopian form.

Olamina's musings throughout the first section of *Sower* describe the devastation of near-future southern California and provide discursive context. In her diaries, she often reports conversations with her family about national political speeches; the short speech passages she repeats eerily echo the rhetoric of 1980s and 90s politicians arguing for a smaller state welfare apparatus. The first section of this chapter situates the *Parable* novels' self-conscious political program within the rhetorical structures of a national debate over economics and urban renewal. The opening third of *Parable of the Sower* intervenes in national discussion over the Los Angeles riots by situating Los Angeles within a broader global context. Through dialog among Olamina's family, the books suggest that political solutions cannot resist worldwide changes in ecology and economy. Neoliberal policies of labor deregulation and the elimination of public services accelerate the destruction of communities, but traditional twentieth-century social liberalism has little power in contemporary conditions. Olamina's father and the other members of their walled community survive through a model of community rooted in African-American Baptist, largely non-violent tradition; through Olamina's narration and the events of the story,

the novel exposes the limitations of these models of opposition. Stuck inside their walls, Olamina notes institutional and personal inertia that prevent efficacious actions as their community falls apart. After that community's destruction, Olamina and her new companions, at first travelling and then living in an area in northern California, can start to explore real alternatives and construct a local community based on shared responsibility and an expanded definition of the family. The second part of this chapter examines the affective economy that underlies Earthseed's communalist commitments. By ritualizing the individual community members' experiences of personal loss, Earthseed creates an affective economy based on a melancholic commitment to translating past tragedy into future determination. That is, the characters' tragic pasts stick them all together and support their commitments to each other. In this way, the novels oppose neoliberal privatization of suffering and instead use suffering to create communal ties that facilitate security and prosperity. At the same time that the melancholic ties among characters cement a strong community, they also open the community to more people and more modes of being.

By the end of *Parable of the Sower*, Earthseed transforms from a set of religious ideals into a thriving community. Relatively isolated in a rural area, the community has largely withdrawn from the dangers of global neoliberalism. Instead, with other local families and communities, Earthseed has built localist models of resistance based on sustainable living and commitment. This model adapts, however, when religious zealots invade Acorn, the Earthseed community, and enslave the population. Olamina splits up the surviving community members, and they spread Earthseed, creating a larger, virtual community focused on the Destiny, or the goal of colonizing other planets. The final part of this chapter considers the limitations of local, communalist modes of resistance to neoliberal globalization. The utopian goal of the Destiny

provides a cohesive purpose for the members of Earthseed and a theoretical means to form a local community without fear of global intrusion. Small group emigration to other planets theoretically collapses distinctions between the local and the global, which in turn provides the basis for a future post-secular community that can escape destructive globalization through a complete withdrawal elsewhere. The end result is a local, communalist ideal characterized with mediated relationships to the global.

RHETORICAL PRESENTS AND MATERIAL FUTURES

In the previous chapter, I considered *Left Behind* in part as an attempt to recapture the relative privilege of the white male subject in the face of challenging discourses of globalization and free market triumphalism. While *Left Behind's* relationship with neoliberal triumphalism remains ambivalent—the novels offer critiques of many aspects of postmodern culture and economics, but do so in largely in the terms and narratives of neoliberalism—the *Parable* novels challenge neoliberal discourses directly, uncovering the long history of abuse in unregulated markets and the devastation wrought by absent social services and inequitable education. Despite the prevalence of neoliberal rhetoric in the 1980s, actual neoliberal policy initiatives remained relatively limited. Challenges to welfare from Presidents Reagan and Bush remained largely on the rhetorical level, though at the state level services degraded, and long fights by women and people of color for equal representation suffered setbacks. Arguing for scaled back public assistance, Reagan employed racialized rhetoric, decrying “welfare queens,” or urban black women supposedly gaming the welfare system in large numbers to steal welfare benefits and live at economically high-class levels off of the federal government. Articles published in major

newspapers like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* offered demographic information on welfare recipients that clearly dispelled this myth, but it persisted nonetheless. The rhetoric of privatization of services grew stronger in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the fall of the Soviet Union was used both to tout the superiority of capitalism over centralized economy and to suggest that “competition” in the global market required lax regulations and low taxes, thus eliminating the ability to provide social services. The Republican Party regained control of the U.S. Congress with a unified program called “The Contract with America,” a program that made specific proposals for eliminating corruption in federal government while promising cuts in social spending.

The *Parable* novels portray a largely fulfilled neoliberal vision by giving form to the contemporary rhetoric of the political right. The setting of the novels suggests a clear connection between the affective callousness of the rhetoric and the breakdown of communal and family institutions. *Parable of the Sower* (1993) opens in the year 2024 in a suburb of Los Angeles. The narrator, a young woman named Lauren Olamina, lives in a walled community with her father (a Baptist minister), her stepmother (a teacher), and three stepbrothers. The walls protect the neighborhood from the desolation outside: grinding poverty, gang violence, crime, a drug called “pyro” that causes people to set fires, and even a growing slave trade. Police and fire services cost per-use fees and are generally ineffective and even abusive (*Sower* 114; 316-16). With the absence of public police protection, private police forces patrol private businesses, free to abuse whomever they like (*Sower* 201; 215-16). Public education no longer exists; Olamina’s stepmother, Cory, runs a small private school for neighborhood children to make income (*Sower* 95-96), and, later, when Olamina and her companions found Acorn, they make their own school a top priority (*Talents* 348). Olamina even writes the responsibility for education of children into

Earthseed's scripture, suggesting a need that has not been supplied by the broader society. Utilities—water and electricity—are unreliable and available mostly at commercial stations (*Sower* 215). Near the beginning of the first novel, a man named Donner is elected President of the U.S. promising to do away with the last vestiges of the welfare state and to “suspend ‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board” (*Sower* 27). The poverty around Olamina's community—street homeless, squatter camps, legions of people travelling on foot up the California coast in the hopes of finding menial work—testifies most to the total collapse of the welfare state and the economy. The only shelters come in totally private communities run by multinational corporations, but Olamina and her father recognize this for what it is: debt slavery in company towns, and even chattel slavery according to people they meet on the highway (*Sower* 118-22; 287). As opposed to Sagan's divine liberal triumphalism at the center of the galaxy and *Left Behind's* demonic centralized world government, the *Parable* novels portray a near future where total decentralization has led to mass impoverishment and, with it, the devaluing of people in an environment of disposal labor and degraded social relationships.

Butler's challenge to neoliberalism responds to many of the same 1990s free-market triumphal discourses as *Left Behind*; however, her vision originates from “outside” of the relatively secure suburban middle class. Aptly reminding that *Parable of the Sower* was published just one year after the Los Angeles riots, Jim Miller argues that *Parable* reproduces some of the classed violence of the riots. In the novel, the homeless poor attack people like those who live in Olamina's community—the downwardly mobile lower middle class who have very little—rather than the absent wealthy actually benefitting from and responsible for the poor

conditions in which the downtrodden majority live. In the riots, poor black residents of Los Angeles took much of their anger out on small businesses owned by African-American and Korean-American residents of the Los Angeles neighborhoods (Miller 350-51). *Sower and Talents* critique both this misdirected violence and the racist rhetoric of much of the national response by situating it within a long tradition of racist rhetoric regarding poverty and violence within communities of color in the U.S. This critique, described in detail below, intervenes in the national conversation around “family values” by redefining the family to encourage strong, family-like ties among community members. Olamina’s narration constructs this “new family” by reinterpreting western religious and ethical traditions; Earthseed’s redefined family requires neither genetic affinity nor cultural uniformity to create strong ties.

RECLAIMING RELIGION AND ETHICS

The interpersonal and institutional affinities of Earthseed form out of the theology of Earthseed, which in turn grows out of a complex dialog with several religious traditions that the novel portrays with varying degrees of sympathy. Olamina learns much from her father, Laurence Olamina, a Baptist minister and pillar of their small walled community. Olamina realizes as a teenager that the walled community will not shelter its residents forever, and begins to tell a friend that they should be prepared to leave. Laurence urges her to stay calm and teach people things they might need to know should they have to go outside the walls—for example, how to grow gardens, practice self-defense, and navigate roads. Laurence admonishes Olamina, “It’s better to teach people than to scare them” (*Sower* 65). He clarifies that this is both a statement of principle and a practical leadership strategy: “If you scare them and nothing

happens, they lose their fear, and you lose some of your authority with them. It's harder to scare them a second time, harder to teach them, harder to win back their trust. Best to begin by teaching'" (66). Laurence further urges constant learning on Olamina's part, too—reading of books and teaching from books. Laurence reveals that he has been doing that with his kids and with other members of the community. This link between authority and pedagogy forms the basis for Olamina's later leadership while travelling homeless through California with her group, and it forms the ethical basis of the Earthseed community. It suggests that authority is an exercise in individual empowerment along with group cooperation.

At the same time, the novel portrays Laurence's faith and his community authority as inadequate in the face of the contemporary cultural conditions. Olamina registers a theological objection early, suggesting that her father's God is a "big king God," a God who is basically like a person and prone to being angry and interfering (*Sower* 14-16). Her main objection, however, lies in her father's determination to "Live! That's all anybody can do right now. Live. Hold out. Survive" (*Sower* 76). While he knows that their small community may come under attack, he forbids any of his family to go outside the walls if not in a large, armed group, even beating Olamina's stepbrother Keith when he does so (*Sower* 99). Olamina's new Earthseed faith teaches, in contrast, that God is change—that change is the only constant in the universe and, in the face of this, people must be self-directed in making their own changes. Olamina's father relies too much on waiting and the strength of his own leader personality. Olamina muses to herself in response to Laurence's imperative to survive: "It isn't enough to just survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. If that's the shape we give to God, then someday we must become too weak—too poor, too hungry, too sick—to defend ourselves. Then we'll be wiped out" (*Sower* 76). Olamina's foregrounding of agency over and

against Laurence's survivalism suggests not so much a spiritual imperative as a necessity for survival, as though Earthseed represents a new adaptation of an old faith rather than a completely new religion.

While Earthseed in *Parable of the Sower* (1993) builds on traditions of secular liberal and African-American Christian activism, Earthseed in *Talents* (1998) contrasts chiefly with destructive Christian fundamentalism. Through this confrontation with American fundamentalism, Butler connects "family values" discourses of the 1980s and 1990s to jingoistic nationalism. In *Talents*, Andrew Steele Jarrett, a Senator from Texas and founder of the Church of Christian America, gets elected President of the U.S. selling a fascist nostalgia for an imagined, pure Christian American past. His rhetoric is of purity and distinction: "Either we are God's people or we are filth," he says in his inaugural address, and further promises to "lash us back to God" (*Talents* 83). The people who eventually attack, capture, and enslave the Acorn, the Earthseed community in northern California, come from an unrecognized group within the Church of Christian America encouraged by Jarrett's rhetoric to convert people forcibly. The men who invade force Olamina and the others to refer to each of them as "Teacher" in an ironic and dark echo of Olamina's own focus on teaching as a productive, just process. Echoing many of the discourses of Atlantic Slavery, the "teachers" act in the name of uplifting people while degrading them through torture, forced labor, and rape, all under the name of Christian "love."

The suffering of the members of Earthseed at Acorn—renamed "Camp Christian" by the Crusaders—emphasizes the destructiveness of the unity that fundamentalism imposes. Marc, Olamina's brother whom she rescues from a slave trader, leaves Acorn before the attack to join Christian America. He eventually becomes Christian America's most famous and popular preacher, and later defends Christian America—though not torture, enslavement, and witch

burnings—on the basis that alliance between religion, government, and corporate money “should have been an unstoppable power to restore the country” (*Talents* 278). Conditions of the economy, however, do not improve under Jarrett; the nation is further bankrupted by a destructive war against a Canadian-Alaskan alliance. Many young men and women are killed for unclear reasons, leaving people disunified and angry (*Talents* 220-21). Fighting in the war, young people are unavailable to help make things better. Traumatized and disillusioned soldiers who return from the war find no employment except in crime; they make the country even more dangerous for the poor and unprotected (*Talents* 268). Upholding the nuclear family, the war destroys families. At Acorn and across the country, Christian Americans kidnap the children of “heathens” and get other people who do not particularly care for them to adopt them. The “teachers” at Acorn not only abuse, separate, and exploit, but the novel makes their ecological destructiveness apparent. They force the Earthseed members to harvest and destroy all of the gardens they have planted (*Talents* 196). Getting the idea that the Earthseed members worship trees, they force them to cut down all of the trees they have planted as memorials to lost loved ones (196). This last action causes a landslide that destroys the unit that controls their torture collars; the people of Acorn kill their captors and escape. After the final battle, garbage blows in the wind everywhere, emphasizing the wastefulness of the teachers (230).

Earthseed’s central premises are formed against and in dialog with the “wait and protect” religion of Laurence Olamina, the patriarchal forcefulness of fundamentalist-nationalism, and the ruthlessness of neoliberalism. Its central premise—“God is change”—rejects the purist ontologies of fundamentalist arguments like the one Marcus makes in his sermon “Christ: the Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever” (*Talents* 274). While it abandons the hope that Laurence and Cory occasionally voice that conditions will improve, it also prepares adherents for the rapid

changes brought on by the dismantled welfare state and disposability of labor brought on by unrestrained neoliberalism capitalism. Many characters with whom Olamina discusses Earthseed object that the God of Earthseed is indifferent and does not care about people at all. One of the Earthseed verses says as much directly: “God is power-- / Infinite, / Irresistable, / Inexorable, / Indifferent. / And yet, God is Pliable-- / Trickster, / Teacher, / Chaos, / Clay. / God exists to be shaped. / God is Change” (*Sower* 25). In this, the very first verse that Olamina writes as a young woman in Robledo, Olamina makes clear that the indifferent God of Change does not signal an empty, meaningless universe in which people exist alone and powerless. The second half of the verse suggests that this indifferent God is liberating; it places the agency of “shaping change” in the hands of people as agents. Further, Olamina emphasizes in conversation that an indifferent God places the responsibility for love and care among groups of people. When Travis, a man Olamina meets on the road from Los Angeles to Northern California who later becomes the first convert to Earthseed, objects that “your stuff isn’t very comforting” and “your God doesn’t care about you at all,” Olamina responds, “All the more reason to care about myself and others. All the more reason to create Earthseed communities and shape God together. ‘God is Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay.’ We decide which aspect to embrace—and how to deal with others” (*Sower* 221). Olamina’s dual emphasis on agency and community highlights Earthseed’s formation of multiple, communal subjectivities that reject absolute distinctions between people.

THEOLOGIES OF EMPATHY AND MELANCHOLY

Olamina’s “hyperempathy syndrome” (a psychological illness that causes her to feel the physical sensations of others around her) drives many of her interactions, and empathy underlies

the intersubjective relations of Earthseed. In so doing, Earthseed builds a post-religious system rooted in Christian conceptions of charity. In *After Christianity* (2002), Gianni Vattimo develops a theory of post-Christian faith that revives the soul- and society-altering mission of Christianity while repairing its legacy of European imperialism. In Vattimo's reading of the Christian tradition, secular historicizing of scripture revives its revolutionary potential (65). Spiritually distilled and historicized, Vattimo argues, the Christian event's revolutionary power lies in *caritas*; alternately translated as "love" and "charity," *caritas* connotes personal and cultural empathy and kindness. This "age of spirit," according to Vattimo can be fulfilled only within the pluralistic networks of the postmodern world. While he offers an impressive theological argument grounded in partially heretical Catholic tradition, Vattimo's discussions in *After Christianity* largely lack an apparatus to implant these virtues within actual institutional and even interpersonal interactions. He offers, in effect, a revolutionary paradigm without a revolutionary program. While Earthseed is not Christian by identification, it enshrines the virtues of empathy and generosity by installing them within the community's rituals and material relationships. Commitment to empathy and dialog underlies the governance procedures, daily life, and interpersonal relations of the Earthseed community.

Earthseed's status as a religion attaches sacredness to these commitments, which in turn moves them beyond simple principles and transforms them into a regulatory regime. Earthseed provides an imaginary example of Vattimo's "weak religion" and suggests that such a religion works by instituting an affective regulatory regime at first into a localized community. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed examines emotions as socially circulating performances that discursively construct the surfaces of bodies and cultural boundaries: "emotions create the effects of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside

and an outside” (Ahmed 10). Further, Ahmed compares emotions to capital in Marx’s description of the creation of surplus value in *Capital*: “through circulation and exchange ‘M’ [money] acquires more value (Marx 1976: 248)...I am identifying a similar logic: the movement between signs or objects converts into affect...Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is the effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value). Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become” (Ahmed 45). The circulation of emotions, in other words—among texts, people, institutions, people’s bodies, etc.—increases their power, discursively draws boundaries between individual and communal subjects, and constructs bodies. In the novels, public institutional breakdown creates a background of danger, mistrust, and fear. For Olamina and her friends, guarded kindness becomes a means of survival. Through self-narration and conversation, the companions add value to acts of kindness, which eventually sticks them together strongly and creates an expanded definition of the family.

This affective economy is rooted in the walled community in Los Angeles, where families take care of each other before Olamina starts to construct her religion. Taking on a long tradition of condescending, racist political rhetoric about the breakdown of the family in urban communities of color, both novels emphasize the importance of “the family;” however, they reject the sole emphasis on nuclear family and blood relations of “family values” rhetoric and fuse the family into a broader community who work together and care for each other. This begins in the walled community of Robledo for the first half of *Parable of the Sower*. The residents set up neighborhood watches together, help each other with security and fire protection, teach each other skills and academics, and even take care of the least-loved members of the small community in cases of emergency (*Sower* 69-75; 148). Near the beginning of *Sower*, several

families baptize their children together (14-15), Olamina describes people as “like cousins” or “like siblings,” and Olamina takes special charge of a young girl who she sees being neglected by her own family (49). Strong inter-family commitments exist at the beginning of *Sower*, but the differentiation between private family space and public institutions remains. Olamina’s father, for example, admonishes his children not to “air family business” in public. After drug addicts destroy the walled community, the elimination of private space intensifies family-like relationships among non-family members. Running from the attack, Olamina finds two survivors: Harry Balter, a young white man whose family had been friends with Olamina’s, and Zahra Moss, a young black woman who had been (unbeknownst to others) the slave of a man in the community. Olamina and Zahra forge a close friendship during the trip. As Clara Augusti points out, on the road, people watch over and take care of other people’s children; in one case, for example, a woman nurses a child who is not her own (Augusti 356-57). Moreover, Augusti also notes that, in many cases, it is the male characters who are primarily responsible for childcare, suggesting reorientation of the domestic made necessary by environmental conditions, dissolving the ideologies that link stringently defined femininity with domestic duty (356).

This interdependent, expanded family helps them all survive on the road and then forms the basis of Acorn’s socio-economic relationships. Ritualized empathy lies at the base of all intersubjective relations at Acorn. Special, communally-acknowledged relationships link families together. Olamina and Bankole formalize their close relationship with Harry and Zahra by naming them “change-brother and change-sister” (*Talents* 159). The relationship includes, among other things, care for one another’s children. Education also lies at the heart of these ritual relations; the gathering place for Earthseed rituals and services is the same as the school room where children are taught each day (*Talents* 348). Church and school are combined, echoing the

Earthseed verse that calls for “learning from God.” Education also underlies the material bases of interpersonal and regional relations. Education is both academic and vocational; as members of Earthseed learn and practice trades—including tool repair, woodworking, furniture making, construction, and even, in Bankole’s case, medicine—they are required to teach their trades to other people, forming both practical networks of skill and merging social and economic relationships in an obvious way (*Talents* 158). Earthseed meetings in the school building center on discussion; once a month, Olamina leads a “looking backward looking forward” discussion (*Talents* 65). Here, the community comes to decisions consensually, and while some people—like Olamina—carry charismatic authority, no specific system excludes or exalts any individual persons. Instead, their system ideally allows for various kinds of participation. The dialogic relationships are made all the more productive by their rejection of inflexible hierarchy.

The revolutionary power of Butler’s Earthseed lies in its rejection of affective “hardness” and its embrace of a protective, but open, bodily “softness” that informs principle and action. Ahmed notes the “hardness” of the body idealized by the British National Front and other racist organizations. A similar “hardness” echoes in the relations among people in the *Parable* novels; rendered poor and suspicious by the destruction of the economic and ecological apocalypse of the early twenty-first century, they remain closed, forceful, violent—or, at the very least, like the community Olamina lives in as a child, walled and necessarily vigilant against outsiders. Olamina’s brother Keith understands the hardness and violence necessary to “be a man” outside of the walls (97), and he carries weapons, takes up with drug dealers, and even kills a man and steals his money (108). He eventually dies a death characterized by a sadistic desire to render him soft, as his eyes are cut out and his body burned in torture (111-13). When the neighborhood is attacked and destroyed, and Olamina and her two friends begin their journey, they could just

as easily mimic this hardness; they could survive by stealing and killing, or, at the very least, they could remain closed to everyone else, hard and unwelcoming. The environment to an extent demands this hardness, and Olamina and her friends remain guarded; when they are attacked on the road, they successfully fend off robbers and rapists. Olamina even kills a man lest his injury cause her to be crippled due to her hyperempathy syndrome (189-90). However, the Earthseed principles Olamina articulates do not turn this self-guarding into a violent hardness. Instead, it performs an affective reorientation that is revolutionary in the environment they find themselves in: Olamina and her friends remain open to others, helping strangers and eventually accepting them as travelling companions. The boundaries of their group remain flexible; they are based on immediate circumstances, not on the pseudo-ontology of racial or religious identification. As they form the settled community at Acorn late in *Sower* and early in *Talents*, their allegiance is to each other and to a set of guiding principles.

On the road from Los Angeles to Northern California, this sense of community remains difficult to maintain for Olamina and her friends. Facing difficult survival and dangers from other people, travelers hesitate to trust others. As she befriends other travelers, Olamina learns that they have all experienced loss of loved ones and of safety. Through Earthseed, Olamina makes these losses into sacred material and builds an affective economy around shared senses of loss. In “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” David Eng and Shinhee Han offer possibilities for melancholia as affective means to build solidarities and activist possibilities among historically under-represented groups in the United States, especially Asian-Americans, African-Americans, and LGBT Americans (Eng and Han 364-65). For the members of Earthseed, mourning rituals offer a means to reconfirm their commitment to principle, each other, and the Destiny. In *Talents*, Olamina also welcomes newcomers to Earthseed by having them participate in

mourning rituals for their lost loved ones. The feeling and sharing of grief among the characters help define their material and discursive relations to each other and to the people and institutions that would seem to oppose them. The principles and rituals of Earthseed add a spiritual effect to the affective relations of Olamina's community. This spiritual attachment functions not only to cement loyalties, but also to connect individual affective relations to community self-definition and, further, to the imagined future "Destiny" of Earthseed on other planets away from Earth. The individual and communal enactment of mourning in particular provides supportive physical and emotional connections, providing both a physical and social openness that help to reorient the inter-subjective values away from dominance and exploitation.

The novels contain a number of distinct events that precipitate personal and communal mourning. For purposes of this discussion, "mourning" signifies the expression of grief over a loss—of people, of comfort, of security, of life. I group them here into three types of expression that overlap to some extent but remain distinct enough to note: interpersonal sharing of grief, ritual community recognition of loss and remembrance of loved ones, and mourning that establishes the freedom and autonomy of the mourners. All three of these types work to establish the basic humanity and worth of people in a social and economic environment that would deny it based on class, race, and sexuality. Late in the first novel, Olamina and the others rescue two sisters, Allie and Julie Gilchrist, from a burning building. Having been abused by their father and others, the sisters are slow to trust others, but travel with Olamina's group for the sake of protection. This protection partially fails, and Julie is killed in an attack by highway muggers. Olamina's description of emotional support offered to Allie in her loss suggests bodily openness in the midst of communal formation:

Her grief and resentment were like a wall against me—against everyone, I suppose, but I was the one bothering her at the moment. And I was alive and her sister was dead, and her sister was the only family she had left, and why didn't I just get the hell out of her face?

She never said anything. She just pretended I wasn't there. She pushed Justin along in his carriage and wiped tears from her stony face now and then with a swift, whiplike motion. She was hurting herself, doing that. She was rubbing her face too hard, too fast, rubbing it raw. She was hurting me, too, and I didn't need any more pain. I stayed with her, though, until her defenses began to crumble under a new wave of crippling grief. She stopped hurting herself and just let the tears run down her face, let them fall to her chest or to the broken blacktop. She seemed to sag under a sudden weight.

I hugged her then. I put my hands on her shoulders and stopped her half-blind plodding. When she swung around to face me, hostile and hurting, I hugged her. She could have broken free, but after a first angry pulling away, she hung on to me and just moaned... She cried and moaned there at the roadside, and the other stopped and waited for us. No one spoke. Justin began to whimper and Natividad came back to comfort him. The wordless message was the same for child and woman: *In spite of your loss and pain, you aren't alone. You still have people who care about you and want you to be all right. You still have family.*" (303-04)

Olamina's comforting of Allie here makes not just a connection of solidarity between the two of them, but shares the grief everywhere among the people and the environment, softening everyone not merely in physical contact but in quiet mutual understanding. Allie's grief at first hardens her—she retreats into herself behind a metaphorical "wall," which crumbles like the old blacktop on which her tears fall. In the situation of loss, and even of decay, "the family" is reformed through affective gesture and bodily openness—the message, unspoken, offers individual support, but also represents a flipping of loss and decay into the forging of interpersonal bonds, ones that suggest that even virtual strangers can communicate individual worth to each other. The others stand quietly, not speaking—but the narrative also does not offer any clue as to their particular thoughts or feelings. The assumption communicated is one of mutual sharing—not of the literal pain, like Olamina shares the literal pain of the tears, but of the loss of someone who is assumed *a priori* to be worth mourning.

The isolated instances of interpersonal connection at moments of grief create a pattern of mutually supportive behaviors, but it is in Earthseed ritual at the settled community of Acorn that the “spirituality” of this arrangement starts to stick not just to the members of the Acorn community, but also to those people who have been lost to the community members—the family members and friends lost on the road and in the past. A chief ritual at Acorn involves planting trees in recognition of lost people. At the end of *Sower* when Olamina and her companions arrive at Bankole’s land in Northern California, they find the remains of Bankole’s sister and her family in the ashes of what was their house. Olamina persuades Bankole to have a memorial event in which they plant oak trees, saying, “trees are better than stone—life commemorating life” (326). Ritualizing this memorial helps cement Earthseed as a legitimate religion with its own customs; more importantly, though, Olamina uses it as a method of sticking the community together by spiritualizing their connections. Olamina resolves at the end of *Sower* to bury both Bankole’s family and, symbolically, everyone lost by the community at any point in time: “most of us have had to walk away—or run—away from our unburned, unburied dead. Tomorrow, we should remember them all, and lay them to rest if we can” (326). Olamina resolves that the new community members can remember their dead any way they would like: “Any words, memories, quotations, thoughts, songs...” (327). The ritual in part helps bring the people together through shared grief, but it does so on the basis of that grief rather than on the basis of rules of ritual; the content of the ritual remains relatively open.

In *Talents*, the mourning ritual takes on an additional function: welcoming new people into the community in a way that reorients, rather than eliminating, social and family boundaries. Early in the novel, Olamina and a couple of the other members of Acorn find an armored truck not far from their land. In the truck, they find the bodies of two adults, and three injured children:

Dan, Karissa, and Mercy Noyer; they had been attacked and robbed by muggers; the parents had been killed, and two of the Noyer sisters had been kidnapped (54-55). When the Noyer kids get healthy again, the Acorn community holds a similar tree-planting service. This service reveals the importance both of shared and personal grief through a mourning ritual that draws a distinct but permeable boundary: “The little girls planted their seedlings under our guidance, but not with our help. The work was done by their hands... We moved Dan’s cot so that he could use the garden trowel and watering can, and we let him plant his own seedlings. He too did what he had to do without help. The ritual was already important to him. It was something he could do for his sisters and his parents. It was *all* he could do for them” (*Talents* 58). Following the tree-planting, Dan Noyer says the Lord’s prayer, and he and his sisters sing songs in Polish they had learned from their mother. Other members of the community quote “from Earthseed verses, the Bible, The Book of Common Prayer, the Bhagavad-gita, John Donne. The quotations took the place of the words that friends and family would have said to remember and give respect to the dead” (58). The ritualized mourning here functions not so much to bring the Noyers directly into the group as to provide the opportunity to mourn in a meaningful way and, just as importantly, to acknowledge the loss they had suffered as being broader than simply personal and past. The open-ness in the community of Acorn through these rituals lies not just in who they will accept, but in who and what they will acknowledge as legitimate and valuable.

The importance of this collective, affective valuing in asserting the humanity of the community members is highlighted when Acorn is attacked and enslaved by Jarrett’s Crusaders. Clearly, the abuse and coercion they suffer denies their basic worth and humanity. When they become free of the slave control collars, the Acorn members who have survived kill their enslavers and flee into the surrounding hills. It is in acts of mourning that they re-establish their

own worth in a similar spiritual-affective arrangement, though not ritualized. The small group of surviving Acorn members warm themselves around a fire, and Olamina and Harry sit together in each other's arms, weeping and moaning in a spontaneous, unritualized act of mourning: "We wept ourselves to sleep like tired children. The next day Natividad told me she and Travis had done much the same thing. The others, alone or in groups, had found their own comfort in cathartic weeping, deep sleep, or frantic, furtive lovemaking at the back of the cave. We were together at last, and yet I think each of us was alone, straining toward the others, some part of ourselves still trapped back in the uncertainty and fear, the pain and desolation of Camp Christian. We strained toward some kind of release, some human contact, some way into the normal, human grieving that had been denied us so long. It amazes me that we were able to behave as sanely as we did" (243). Having had the security and ritual of Acorn taken away, just the act of mourning becomes a confirmation not so much of freedom but of humanity. In this, they have the legitimacy of their grief confirmed and shared by the others. The spirituality of this openness is temporarily denied, but its representation reclaims their humanity. Having had their community destroyed, it is in the openness of their bodies that they reclaim their humanity in mourning.

For the surviving members of Earthseed, mourning plays a further role in cementing the community together as the individual members part company. While grieving in the cave allows them an immediate release of pain, the absence of their children and other loved ones changes the direction of their melancholic mourning. Fearing for Earthseed's safety, Olamina splits the group up after arranging for occasional communication and distributing their kidnapped children's fingerprints. For Olamina and the others, the loss of their community drives a shift of emphasis onto Earthseed's Destiny; Olamina begins to reconsider the means by which such a

goal might be achieved by a community of people scattered around the country. While this shift to the utopian future is often read as a problem in the novels, I read them here as a natural fulfillment of the novels' oppositional affective and material economy. In order to plan for Earthseed's long term survival and achievement of the Destiny, the community needs to split up and grow, creating a network of like-minded individuals and infiltrating institutions while always, consistently working to find the people they have lost. Olamina and her friends create a dual affective attachment—on the one hand, their refusal to process the loss of their loved ones drives their continued communications, and, on the other hand, their commitment to the achievement of the Destiny keeps them united despite their spatial separation. Only in the utopian far future of the Destiny can these two aspects experience a total joining.

AFFECTS IN THE PRESENT AND REVOLUTION IN THE FUTURE

Earthseed's affective revolution helps set up a community of subjects whose openness and sharing with each other constantly confirms their worth. A few legitimate questions about the limitations of this model might be raised, however. On the literal level, it seems that this openness also opens the members of Acorn to attack, as the devastating enslavement at Camp Christian confirms. Just as importantly, Acorn is one isolated northern California community; the local, communalist set up of Acorn offers little for a broader intervention in the global environment of the early twenty-first century. Earthseed's affective economy, however, continues to operate as the community separates and pursues the broader imaginative intervention of Earthseed: "the Destiny," a utopian program of small communities of people on other planets. "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars," reveals Olamina in one

of her earliest writings (*Sower* 77), arguing that it is the Destiny of people to colonize planets outside of the solar system and to spread throughout the galaxy. Olamina defends the Destiny on both pragmatic, immediate grounds and in terms of reinterpreted Euro-American progressivism. She argues that the Destiny provides a unifying goal which people can work toward together, cementing people in communities with a goal that keeps them away from exploitative acquisitiveness, wasteful consumerism, and hierarchical domination. The melancholic economy of Earthseed drives its continued coherence as a virtual community.

Some readers of Butler's utopianism in the *Parable* novels have expressed disappointment over some of the limitations of Earthseed. Tom Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* and Peter Stillman in "Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's *Parables*" both identify two separate strands of utopianism; the first, in *Sower*, critiques neoliberal economic ideology and ends with material communalism in the present at Acorn; the second, in *Talents*, critiques Christian fundamentalism and ends with future separatism in an unspecified elsewhere. In this section, I am going to engage Moylan and Stillman's arguments in order to explore the actual utopian hopes of the two novels and of Earthseed in particular. I reject both the distinction Moylan and Stillman draw between the two varieties of utopianism and the favor they place on Acorn's communalism. While Moylan correctly identifies some of the limitations of the final vision of Earthseed's "Destiny" on other planets, I argue that these limitations come in part from a problem of representation of connections among local and global and present and future. Butler's picture of Earthseed acknowledges that neoliberal economic and political conditions dramatically nullify some traditional methods of left resistance; the struggle of *Parable of the Talents* is to represent new methods of intervention capable of functioning inside an environment that stills seems nebulous.

She accomplishes this largely by combining a non-progressive evolutionary metaphor with the spiritual formulation “God is change” in order to imagine evolving conditions guided by affective relations of kindness and equality rather than self-interest and domination.

The novels’ focus on the Destiny may at first appear to pull back from immediate political intervention. Tom Moylan argues that while *Talents* has a complex and overlapping narrative structure with multiple narrative voices written into it, it “nevertheless confines the political charge of *Sower*’s iconic description [of neoliberal capitalism] and counter-narrative within the frameworks of a family narrative and a science fictional story of humanity’s escape from Earth’s problems by reaching for the stars” (238). Moylan draws the distinction at the end of *Sower*, arguing that, after the everyday and immediate work of surviving together on the road is past, the flourishing of the community “sets aside questions of immediate political opposition in favor of the abstract alternative of a stellar journey” (238). For Moylan, *Sower*’s power and vision lie mostly in its clear-eyed representation of the future possibilities of neoliberal economics, or what he calls “feudal capitalism” (230). In his estimation, narratives of personal relations—like those between Larkin/Asha and Olamina, for example—reduce the incisiveness of the critique, and, while the “abstract transcendence” of the Destiny does offer some critique, its very abstraction weakens it.

Olamina’s continued devotion to the Destiny through the rest of the novel calls for a re-examination of the underlying politics of the Destiny vis-à-vis two important aspects of Earthseed: the theological enshrinement of adaptability and the affective economy that had lent narrative meaning to the community members’ everyday interactions. Peter Stillman offers an argument similar to Moylan’s about the relative weakness of *Talents*, but his conceptualization of Earthseed as a religion and of the religiosity of the narratives offers some more material for

rereading the novels as more contiguous and consistently incisive. Like Moylan, Stillman reads the immediate proximity of people together as a crucial part of the novels' utopian critique, though he sees the local community, Acorn, as a fulfillment of that vision: "Olamina does not look to individualism (and especially not to private property), because individuals on their own are too weak and vulnerable to survive and prosper for long. She wishes to form a small community, but the community cannot be a collection of disconnected people unified primarily by place or property, like her Robeldo neighborhood; rather, the community must be a collective project based on conscious interdependence and agreement of its members, who must know, trust, and be able to work with each other for shared purposes" (Stillman 22). Stillman asserts that later in the second novel—when the community separates after the destruction of Acorn—Olamina abandons this, whereas her daughter Larkin remains in hindsight in support of it (31). Stillman and Moylan both mistake the spatial separation of the community as an abandonment of the communal ideal. On the contrary, the community's separation temporarily virtualizes the community, linking it together by principle and purpose across space. This involves a deferring of material interdependence to the abstract future, a *potentially* troubling element if we assumed that the separated members of Earthseed could not form thoughtful and interdependent connections with others in various locations; the earlier entrance of the Acorn community into the local political economy suggests such connections are possible and even likely.

Further, the key to creating this united, virtual community lies in Earthseed's post-secular tendency to reject the autonomous subject of the liberal Western tradition. It is this post-humanist rejection that ties together the Destiny with Acorn's local communitarianism. Stillman identifies two post-secular elements to Earthseed: first, it accepts the secularity of the world, not bothering to debate the existence of God or figure out how God intervenes in world affairs.

Second, Earthseed “rejects the bifurcation of reason and faith,” combining the two in a way that enables personal and communal action. Further, Stillman argues that, to an extent, Earthseed is post-humanist: it does not presuppose an autonomous subject; Olamina’s agency and understanding are all formed through relations with other people (Stillman 27-28). This post-humanist decentering of the autonomous subject is not extricable from Earthseed’s post-secularism, and, indeed, the secularity of the world, the combination of reason and spirituality (“faith” plays a relatively small role) is inextricable from the intersubjectivity of Earthseed. Further, Earthseed is post-secular in its rejection of a firm distinction between public and private space. The neoliberal economic conditions of *Sower* and the Christian fascism of *Talents* are both rigorously secular in their division of public and private space. In the devastated landscape of *Sower*, the private space of the poor is destroyed, and they are all relegated to a public space which has been abandoned by official institutions and generally culturally denigrated in favor of the closed and largely inaccessible private space of the rich. Olamina and the others—both on the road and at Acorn—decline to reassert this firm division; while private spaces are created, they are part of a general public orientation toward each other, toward decision making, and toward living in general. In this arrangement, individuals paradoxically *regain power* in the private-public space of the community. Earthseed rejects the division between public and private, secular and sacred space; everything is sacred again, but in a way that rejects further the divisions of subjectivity demanded by the Christian Crusaders who enslave them.

While Stillman refers to the deprivileging of the autonomous subject as “post-humanist,” I would argue this is a crucial part of post-secularism and of Earthseed’s revolutionary potential. Tracy Fessenden helps expose the inherent Protestantism at the heart of American secularism in *Culture and Redemption*. In her book, Fessenden traces the processes by which “particular forms

of Protestantism emerged as an ‘unmarked category’ in order to show how a particular strand of post-Protestant secularism...became normative for understanding that history” (Fessenden 6). In other words, an assumed religious neutrality underlying public secularism in the U.S. actually contains Protestant assumptions within it; it centers the individual conscience, making personal “belief” and “faith” the only relevant religious categories. They are public only as part of a public narrative of an individual. Practices, rituals, and modes of being that do not center this individual are relegated to an “irrational”—and therefore inferior—realm of experience, one that could only be centered by non-Euro-American and therefore “primitive” subjectivities. Earthseed does contain some of the hallmarks of this secular post-Protestant subjectivity. However, Earthseed’s emphasis on subjectivities formed *primarily* rather than *secondarily* through thoughtful relationships among people and objects relies on a post-secular move that multiplies possible modes of living and possible relationships. Moreover, unlike the neoliberal political economy of *Sower* and the troubled connection between essential goodness of soul and religious conscience of the Crusaders in *Talents*, Earthseed’s post-secular relations do not just highlight intersubjectivities, but they also allow different kinds of subjects to exist together.

This post-secular stance helps clarify the relation between Acorn (communal and egalitarian living in Northern California) and The Destiny (emigration to other planets), which both Moylan and Stillman read as two distinct Utopian projects. Both critics express disappointment that Olamina turns to The Destiny in the end and mostly abandons the actual practice of egalitarian communal living in favor of something more abstract. Their disappointment makes sense; Olamina speaks constantly of preparing for The Destiny, but never speaks in concrete terms and goals. Acorn and other settlements are supposed to be preparatory, but it’s not always clear how. After Acorn is destroyed, Olamina turns almost exclusively to The

Destiny—but, when The Destiny is achieved at the end of *Talents*, it is after a sudden break in the narrative that takes Olamina from slowly winning converts in their homes in Northern California to, a few decades later, a powerful and wealthy movement building spaceships and preparing colonization teams. The logical progression from one to the other is unclear, and it does at first appear that The Destiny is therefore an abstract, millennialist idea. However, I would argue that Olamina’s chief metaphor—of evolution, not of transcendence—links the two projects together in a discursive formation that keeps the incisive social and political critique of Acorn alive. Further, Acorn’s abandonment is not arbitrary, but dictated by the exact political-economic conditions Acorn would seek to oppose. Traditional oppositional modes of protest here—nonviolent resistance, for example—are all but useless in a privatized media environment and without protections available through legal institutions. The members of Earthseed must scatter or, as Olamina says, they could easily be destroyed without anyone being able to help them (*Talents* 245).

The connection between the two and the move from one to the other rely first on Olamina’s consistent defense of the Destiny on the grounds of its immediate social usefulness. In *Sower*, Olamina tells Bankole that The Destiny offers people “a unifying, purposeful life on Earth, and the hope of heaven for themselves and their children. A real heaven, not mythology or philosophy” (261). She elaborates in *Talents*: “We need the image of the Destiny gives us of ourselves as a growing, purposeful species. We need to become the adult species that the Destiny can help us become! If we’re to be anything other than smooth dinosaurs who evolve, specialize, and die, we need the stars...when we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves. We have these chaotic, apocalyptic periods of murderous craziness” (*Talents* 164). It is in the switch to the evolutionary metaphor—one Olamina uses at

other points in the text as well—that the real change in Earthseed happens, not merely in the move from Acorn to the Destiny. Olamina makes clear in both passages that the *ideal* of spaceflight—the actual millennial vision of Earthseed—has immediate communal value. She suggests even that it contains destructive conflict and gives purpose. But Olamina’s evolutionary metaphor is neither a metaphor of progressive evolution nor of the premillennialism of *Left Behind*: it is literal Darwinian evolution, a conception wherein change has no particular direction. Olamina’s suggestion is that biological evolution tends to move in cycles ending in death, but that thoughtful intervention might prevent such a thing, giving growth a direction. This escapes progressive evolutionism and millennial utopianism, however, because it has no particular end point; change is constant, and everything—including Earthseed—must change.

Further, Earthseed rejects strictly linear progressivist concepts. On Earth or elsewhere, the Destiny enables thoughtful, just relationships among people. The problem of representing the connection between the achievement of the Destiny and the lives Olamina and the others live and endure at Acorn, Camp Christian, and on the road ends up underlining this rejection of linear time; the principles of Earthseed—and how they cause people to treat each other—remain relatively consistent despite changes. Further, the evolutionary metaphor links cultural and humanity-wide change together, suggesting that genetics, culture, and material conditions are all inextricably linked in Olamina’s formation. The evolution of Earthseed and its members happens in response to each other and in response to conditions beyond their control, like the destruction of Acorn. This links the Destiny with the immediate lives of the Earthseed followers because it suggests that, while the Destiny is a future abstraction *and* an important goal, it is a future abstraction that continues to be raised. The “real heaven” among the stars that Olamina speaks of

is not a static heaven of perfection; change and challenge continue, and evolution of the species together with it.

LOCAL COMMUNITY AND GLOBAL ECOLOGY

Philosophically and theologically, the connection between *Acorn* and *The Destiny* remains fairly clear and consistent. Moreover, the affective economy constructed in *Acorn* leads on a conceptual level directly to the achievement of the *Destiny*. Nonetheless, the narrative connection between the two is missing from *Talents* due to a problem of representation caused in part by globalization. While many of the relations highlighted by the *Earthseed* novels are local, the novels reject a simple opposition between the local and the global. Indeed, both times *Olamina* belongs to a community in some degree closed off from the outside, people violently attack and destroy that community. The book highlights *Earthseed*'s global relations through ecology, migrancy, and civilizational progressivism. *Earthseed* and *Olamina* stress the importance of sustainability; at *Acorn*, the adherents learn not just how to grow food and sustain themselves, but also how to manage waste in a long-term way. It is clear, however, that they face an environment already ecologically damaged—perhaps beyond repair—from without. In southern California where *Sower* starts, it has not rained for six years (*Sower* 47-48). In *Talents*, Bankole reports that redwood trees are dying all over California (*Talents* 61). While neoliberal economic devastation requires the people to learn to provide their own needs, ecological devastation requires changes in long-held ways of doing so. While their local sustainability may not save the world, it does suggest a consciousness of their own place within it.

The plot turns of both novels, however, reject a strict localism, and they reject the tendency that Barkun identifies in millennial literature to contrast a righteous microcosm with an evil macrocosm (Barkun 91). The walls of Robledo are destroyed; they cannot keep people in (Olamina's brother leaves before the destruction), and they cannot ultimately keep danger outside. Olamina views this event as tragedy, opportunity, and necessity. While Olamina keeps Acorn relatively open to newcomers (especially those in need who have faced violence and exploitation), Acorn's isolated location and its security measures draw a distinction between the inside and outside. This distinction, however, resembles Amish communities in the present day U.S.; strictly defined and separated according to principles of family and communal living, they nonetheless participate in interdependent material relations with other communities. This poses a problem for Earthseed's communalism: it calls for a total revolution in relational living, yet suggests that, to some extent, the world is unredeemable. It provides and even requires open, adaptable methods of non-hierarchical social engagement for diverse subjects, yet, in order to accomplish this in a violent and unpredictable environment, it requires separations that accidentally end up being hierarchical. Earthseed's sanctification of "change" and "adaptability" rejects hierarchical ontologies, and opens up to both flexibility and consensus. The only seemingly permanent thing in Earthseed that moves beyond very broad guidelines is the Destiny. The Destiny's eventual fulfillment would resolve the tension between the local and global by collapsing the two; a small group alone on a planet would act and think in global and local terms at the same time. While theoretically the group would eventually grow to fill the world, the ecologically sustainable philosophies of Earthseed would also in theory prevent this, keeping a continuing balance between resource availability and population. This social engineering is one implication of the logic of the Destiny; the other is a continuous splitting onto other planets, so

that, after many generations on one place, new “seeds” would scatter and be sown elsewhere. This in theory continues to put off ecological limitations.

When Olamina first begins to preach, she makes clear that The Destiny lies in the indeterminate future. The utopian impulse in *Earthseed* promises to combine the global and the local in the *future*, a time that can never ultimately be represented. Indeed, while the initial launching of *Earthseed* members off the Earth happens in *Talents*, it happens at the very end. This ability to imagine the combining of the global and the local only in a temporal *elsewhere*—the far future or far past, but not the near future—represents the central problem of global capitalism described by Jameson in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. While Jameson suggests that conspiracy literature comes the closest to getting a handle on the problem of vertiginous interconnection, Butler declines to attempt to represent it and instead shows us that quasi-religious commitment both describes and partially constitutes this postmodern problem of representation. *Earthseed* provides far-future goals that combine the affects of spirit and an adjusted progressivism according to values that differ from Euro-American capitalist progressivism. They reject the continuing mastery of nature in favor of a continuous adjustment and refinement of relations with it—in other words, in favor of a subjectivity that, allows for continuous change in impermanent, non-hierarchical, and partially contradictory relationships.

While the Destiny seems to offer the utopian dream of “starting over,” the central metaphor Olamina employs for the Destiny is neither one of rebirth nor of restoration (like that of Christian America), but of maturity, of growing into adulthood for the human species. Over the course of the novels, Olamina transitions this “growing” metaphor into one of evolution in the species-wide, genetic sense. At the same time, she rejects a simple genetic determinism by suggesting that people can, through thoughtful work, move beyond their instinctive evolutionary

tendencies: “we need the image the Destiny gives us of ourselves as a growing, purposeful species. We need to become the adult species the Destiny can help us become! If we’re to be anything other than smooth dinosaurs who evolve, specialize, and die, we need the stars...when we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves. We have these chaotic, apocalyptic periods of murderous craziness” (*Talents* 163-64). The Destiny is a tool of unification more than anything else; however, Olamina’s expression of this represents genetic determinism as a force to be opposed with intentional social evolution. There is a process of selection implied in her metaphor; however, it is not Darwinian natural selection. According to Olamina, natural selection dictates that human beings should eventually die out, destroyed by their own inherent tendency to fight and dominate each other. Instead, Olamina’s metaphor subtly implies *social* selection and inevitable loss of some people according to natural processes. The biblical Parable of the Sower helps explain this; Butler’s novel quotes the version from the King James Version, Luke 8:5-8: “A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold.” The suggestion is that when Earthseed scatters to the stars, some seeds will fall on rocky soil; in other words, some communities will not survive. Some, on the other hand, will. This keeps the idea of Darwinian selection in place, but removes the element of competition inherent both in natural selection and in nineteenth and twentieth century social Darwinism and in late twentieth century neoliberalism. Isolated on their own planets, small Earthseed communities would have to work hard *together* to

survive, but not *against* anyone else. In this task, they escape the evolutionary cycle—grow, specialize, die—and the hierarchical behavior Butler suggests lies inherent in human nature.

The conflation of the global and local that the *Destiny* imagines is crucial for the escape of the evolution-extinction cycle; however, Butler's characters remain rooted in the present. In both form and content, the novels make clear that the utopian dream of starting over can only be realized in dialogic relationship with the present and the location of Earthseed adherents. The epistolary form of the first novel—it is composed entirely of Olamina's diary entries—establishes the temporal rootedness of the novel, as each date establishes a temporal context for events. Moreover, as Olamina reports political, nationwide, and worldwide events, she links her local environment with global conditions. As she and her companions walk from southern to northern California, Olamina roots each reported event according to location, naming roadways and towns and describing conditions that differ among them. These contextualizing details may not be strictly formally necessary for telling the story, but, in including them, Butler signals inescapability of time and place for the travelers. The importance of this rootedness is further emphasized and realized in *Talents*, when the diary entries are edited and compiled by Olamina's somewhat hostile daughter, Larkin Bankole AKA Asha Vera. Larkin/Asha provides her own comments and pieces of writing from others, including Bankole and Olamina's brother Marcus. Each criticizes Olamina in some way. This dialogic form echoes Earthseed's call for dialog, but it also reminds that, while Earthseed is composed of broad verses that have the feel of universalism, they come from specific, contested situations.

The dialectic between rootedness and scattering, between old and new, is played out by Olamina after the escape of the Earthseed members from slavery in *Talents*. Olamina splits the group up to look for kidnapped children and as a means of survival, suggesting that if they are all

in the same place, they can easily be destroyed (*Talents* 245). They work out a system of communication to stay in touch, but they mostly go separate ways. Olamina eventually resolves to go to Oregon to look for her brother, and she goes with a new travelling companion, a non-Earthseed member named Belen Ross. Together, they survive on the road by doing odd jobs for people, which gives Olamina a chance to proselytize. It occurs to her that, rather than gathering people into communities, she and other Earthseed adherents should visit people in their homes and create a network of believers who work toward different, though ultimately unified, ends. Olamina's new adherents are composed both of the homeless and downtrodden with whom she has worked so long, but also wealthy people who "long for something to do" (344). Olamina's narrative ends rather abruptly after she and Belen have secured several converts. After that, the book suddenly jumps to the future, when Earthseed is a powerful movement with money it has secured from wealthy patrons and a lawsuit against Christian America. This change in strategy signifies a final renouncing of present, strict localism. Without an embrace of total rootlessness, it signals a need for global networks existing within global conditions.

Olamina's door-to-door missionizing and the later portrayal of Earthseed as a decentralized movement with wealth and power suggests that, at some point in the founding of this religion, direct political and social engagement on a mass scale is necessary. This requires encouraging people to live according to principle and to engage in dialog; however, it also requires political favors, wealthy patrons, and an engagement within the politics of hierarchy, even if from a critical standpoint. The jump in the narrative—from Olamina just recovering from the destruction of Acorn to the settled, well-established movement—provides a formal signal of a problem with Earthseed. In a neoliberal environment characterized not only by the degraded welfare state and power of corporations but also by the firm power of longstanding racist,

patriarchal, classist structures, the novel has a hard time sustaining a movement made up of diverse people with values contrary to those of neoliberalism and fundamentalism. In the decentralized environment of Post-Soviet world economics, the progression from largely localist ecological policies and non-hierarchical management to success of the Destiny is hard to see. *Talents* neglects to try to represent it.

In doing so, it may accidentally lend credence to the powerful narrative of inevitability that undergirds much of neoliberal policy in the late twentieth-century U.S. At the least, it seems to accept this inevitability as part of its representative politics, and tries hard to imagine a way to resist such a formation. Non-violent resistance in the tradition of her father's Baptism, for example, relies on a news culture non-existent in 2020s California. News mainly comes in contemptuous "news bullets," and access to better journalism costs a good deal of money (*Talents* 78). Despite the proliferation of media in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, access under the economic system described in the *Parable* novels is strictly limited to wealthier patrons and cut off from the unprivileged and migratory. Given this lack of access to communication and media, a centrally-located communal religion makes sense; however, when the risks of locating everyone at a place like Acorn are revealed by the devastating Camp Christian episode, the members stay in communication by using "drop locations" at parks and untraceable pre-paid cell phones (266). The extent to which Earthseed can become a virtual, rather than a material, community is limited, but Olamina and the others make do and eventually build a successful movement largely by bypassing and expanding available institutions rather than seizing control of them.

In addition to adjusting the definition of community in response to contemporary political and social conditions, Olamina must adjust her own thoughts on egalitarian communalism and

leadership. Her new companion, Belen Ross, suggests that some degree of personal charisma and even demagoguery are necessary to build a movement, a notion Olamina at first rejects and later comes to make her own (319-20). Olamina's own development as leader of Earthseed involves an abandonment of rooted place; Larkin points out near the end of *Talents* that Olamina never really had a home after the destruction of Acorn, but spent all her time travelling around (353). The immediacy of community and family are what ultimately have to be abandoned, though the consistent emphasis on time and place in epistolary format remains. In the name of revolutionized relations, Olamina performs a move reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin: she writes herself out of rooted place for the sake of rooting Earthseed as a concept and its members as people. The end result of her embracing of personal charisma and demagoguery is not the transformation of Earthseed into a fundamentalist or even transcending, millennialist movement; the end result is a kind of sacrifice of Olamina herself for the sake of everyone else's material dignity and worth. Olamina signals throughout the novels—through the tree-planting rituals, the diaries, and the other record-keeping enterprises—that textual production lends dignity to individuals, confirms their presence and worth. In writing herself and everyone else she comes into contact with, Olamina eventually makes herself to some extent disappear in favor of the movement, growth, and revolutionary flourishing of Earthseed as community, Earthseed as a religion, and the Destiny as a real, material, rooted goal that represents a birth, not a transcendent rebirth. Unlike the centering of an individual, leader-subject for people to aspire to as in the case of Carl Sagan, this is a kenotic centering, a demonstration of sacrifice and absorption into broader communal aims and subjectivities. *Talents* writes Olamina out of the center as it writes the rest of the Earthseed community into its Destiny.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF INTERVENTION

The final formal consequences of the two books and in the evolution of their invented religion is to suggest a mode of being that ends in the kenotic rejection of individual achievement in favor of individual dedication to communal good. *Earthseed* offers post-secular modes of being wherein roots are purposefully formed in the material and virtual environments of neoliberalism. In this sense, the distinction between the immediate and the future, the local and the virtual, fall away, and modes of being are offered in which both meet in principle in the present, and, in material reality, in a future in space. The second novel's difficulty in narrating the progression of the local to the global, however, reveals a broader discomfort with some of the requirements of making a global intervention. Throughout both novels, Olamina's determination and leadership provide a common thread through the series of tragedies that befall the *Earthseed* members. The second novel, however, also offers an additional commentary from Olamina's adult daughter, Larkin, who had been kidnapped when *Acorn* was destroyed by Christian American zealots. The opening lines of the novel come from Larkin about Olamina: "they'll make a god of her," she worries, musing on her late mother's tendency toward single-minded obsessions (*Talents* 7-8). Larkin blames Olamina for having not kept their family safe when Larkin was a baby, and she expresses a never-resolved skepticism for *Earthseed*'s theology and utopian program. For Larkin, the personal price of Olamina's "world fixing," as she calls it (103), is too high.

The personal costs for Olamina become obvious throughout *Parable of the Talents*. Larkin's narrative, however, provides merely an individual caution over personal costs; the inability of *Talents* to narrate the chain of events that lead to *Earthseed*'s eventually successful

movement reveal a deeper discomfort. While the ecological destructiveness and erosion of public good that stem from global neoliberalism are untenable, the post-secular affective economy and utopian goal of Earthseed seems to retreat from a genuinely global intervention. That is, in Earthseed's new human future, most of humanity remains, doomed, on an unredeemable Earth. This tension—between incomplete intervention, disaster, and abandonment—haunts the *Parable* novels both in form and content. Olamina presents a fairly complete utopian program with Earthseed, and that totality undercuts Earthseed's commitment to change, adaptability, and, most of all, dialogic openness. Earthseed's totality comes up against its post-secular enshrinement of dialog. The next chapter takes up this ambivalence directly and explores some ways to resolve this tension between utopianism and intervention through skeptical questioning of strong commitments.

CHAPTER 5

‘DWELLING ON ULTIMATE PURPOSES:’ COMMITMENT AND ECOLOGY IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S *MADDADDAM* NOVELS

At an April Fish Day gathering, the God’s Gardeners—a religious group of post-Christian deep ecologists³³ living in the slums of a U.S. east coast city in the near future—hear a sermon from their leader, Adam One, titled “On the Foolishness Within All Religions.” In a message combining annual celebration, the moral equivalence of people and animals, and self-deprecating acknowledgement of personal imperfection, Adam One argues that *playfulness* is a quality of God the creator, imbued in people and some animals (foxes, crows), all of whom were created in God’s image. Adam One concludes his sermon with a prayer to God, asking, “help us to accept in all humility our kinship with the Fishes, who appear to us as mute and foolish; for in Your sight, we are all mute and foolish” (197). The group follows Adam One’s sermon with a hymn, asking God’s forgiveness for greed and vanity and celebrating April Fish Day’s “[puncturing] of pomp and puffed up pride” (198). Sermons and hymns begin chapters throughout Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Year of the Flood* (2010), and each one grounds the theology of the God’s Gardeners in the life of the community through a rhetorical ritual. Located near the middle of the novel, the April Fish Day message affirms the zealous commitment of the Gardeners to deep ecology’s moral equivalence of people and animals while suggesting the need for religious humility in linking those principles with everyday actions.

Situated within the God’s Gardeners broader communal practices, “On the Foolishness of All Religions” at first seems to suggest a tension: the group has a zealous commitment to deep

³³ “Deep ecology” describes philosophical positions that recognize the inherent worth and moral equality of all living beings without regard to utility. For more, see Frederic L. Bender, *The Culture of Extinction* (2003); George Sessions, ed., *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (1995).

ecology that borders on the fanatical, yet Adam One cautions against self-righteous attachment to specific dogmas. The sermon and hymn provide examples of what John McClure has called the “partial” quality of post-secular religions. McClure identifies two related features of post-secular partiality: “partial re-enchantment,” which includes possible encounters with the supernatural and divine, and “partial commitment,” which describes characters’ skeptical, adjustable commitments to religious ideals (especially in relation to secular progressive projects) (McClure 7-11). Adam One’s sermon reminds the Gardeners to recognize humbly their own limited authority vis-à-vis truth and holiness, yet situates it within the broader social beliefs of the group. The God’s Gardeners practice a religion characterized by commitment to secular progressive goals (e.g., environmental justice) and a combination of scriptural interpretation, supernatural belief, and secular science. At the same time, the Gardeners practice some elements associated with what Slavoj Žižek calls “genuine fundamentalist” traditions (Žižek 68); they have tried to withdraw from a destructive consumer capitalist society and create their own relatively isolated, strictly local communities full of people who live in ecologically sustainable ways. Their religious and environmentalist commitments seem at first not to involve direct engagement with the environmentally destructive system they oppose; they do not lobby legislators, participate in protests, or advocate eco-sabotage. Their function, Adam One says later in the novel, is “to bear witness...and to guard the memories and genomes of [extinct species]” (*Flood* 253) while they wait for “the great waterless flood,” an ecological disaster that will destroy most of sinful humanity and allow the Earth to heal while the remaining people live in ecological harmony (47).

Adam One’s sermon seems to posit partiality as an affective orientation for personal commitment: that is, “partial commitment” describes a religious humility expressed as a

willingness to re-evaluate beliefs and behaviors. Affirmed in rituals like the April Fish Day celebration, this humility does not remain confined to individuals; it circulates and helps produce a general openness to interactions within and outside of the God's Gardeners. However, in the MaddAddam novels, *Year of the Flood* and its preceding novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), partiality goes beyond individual interactions; it helps produce a post-secular mode of representation, which enables the construction of useful maps of relations among individuals, communities, and a broader globalized postmodernity that defies representation. The last chapter considered how Butler's Earthseed tried to address the problem of limited local intervention and impossible global intervention, concluding ultimately that *Parable of the Talents* finally relegated the problem to the far future, a time when the local and global would be identical. The MaddAddam novels take up a similar challenge; they explore possibilities for local and global interventions through secular science, environmental terrorism, personal friendship, and religious community. Ultimately, character actions lead to global catastrophe and other more minor failures, revealing paralyzing limitations with nearly every method of total intervention in opposition to the consumer complex. Nonetheless, this broad exploration of possible interventions allows the novels to explore partiality as a rhetorical strategy for political interventions that reject totalizing programs and atomized consumer individualism.

Both novels test the possibilities of religious partiality by bringing grand religious ideals into confrontation with the discourses of the late twentieth-century American environmentalist movement. The central difficulty for the characters in both novels lies in understanding how their local actions fit into a broader, global network of relations dominated by destructive consumer practices and corporate power. For some characters, this appears as an individual problem of survival as they work to maintain stability against disasters and forced mobility. For others, this

conceptual trouble again and again thwarts political programs for environmental activism. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), Ursula Heise challenges the local/global binary in American environmentalist discourse, suggesting that environmentalist discourses that glorify the local tend toward disconnected withdrawal rather than efficacious engagement that confronts the subtle and various connections among regions, nations, and people (6-8). For Heise, the danger of an uncritical celebration of local rootedness lies in its false atomization, which obscures “how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world” (21). Atwood’s MaddAddam novels use partiality to create an embedded localism that rejects this naïve celebration of the local and exposes the limitations of global interventions. Instead, the events of the story privilege the construction of short term communal goals constructed with precariousness and global interconnections in mind. For the novels’ characters, partial commitments help facilitate long-term interpersonal connections in a global cultural environment that thwarts strong ties. Further, the dialogic form of the two novels creates a partial, open mode of representation that shows interconnections among characters and locations without attempting a total representation; that is, the novels leave open connections in their plots that allow for the presence of obscured but crucial parts of the assemblage. Post-secular partiality provides both an affective tool for individual characters and a broader mode of representation for imagining political intervention.

Both novels expose the disparate effects of both global capitalist and global environmentalist modes of being, suggesting that both occupy crucial roles in a single (mostly destructive) assemblage. At the same time, they dramatize the precariousness of local community in the face of moving people and recurring incidents of destruction. The celebration of the local turns instead into a relationship of memory and even exile. The characters confront the loss of

the local and bridge the cognitive gap between immediate experience and global system through skeptical performance of religious rituals and partial commitment to religious ideology. The task of this chapter, then, is to discover how three related environmentalist discourses come together: local, global, and theological. The dual-novel form, the partial commitment of the characters, and the near-future apocalyptic temporality imagine a post-secular environmentalism that rethinks the relations among religious and ecological commitments. The novels simultaneously challenge simple belief/unbelief, local/global, and individual/communal binaries; they present an ethical model wherein strong inter-personal ties and de-centered narrative allow for diverse and historically traumatized people to move forward together. Partial commitment combined with strong interpersonal commitments provide the means by which trauma strengthens commitment and opens new ethical possibilities.

The first novel, *Oryx and Crake*, presents a picture of a corporate-dominated near future from the perspective of the relatively privileged few people who work inside the “corporate compounds.” Narrated through Jimmy, the sole survivor of a world-ending plague and the close friend of the man who created the plague, the novels expose a part of Crake’s reasoning for the creation of the plague and his new race of genetically engineered, non-hierarchical people, the Crakers. Crake executes a global intervention in designing a perfect ecological system free from destructive humanity. Nonetheless, similar theological conceptions of the free, rational individual underlie both Crake’s intervention and the global capitalist system he seeks to oppose. The first section of this chapter reveals *Oryx and Crake’s* world system and eventual catastrophe as illustrations of the triumph of a Protestant bourgeois subject; that is, in the novel’s world system, a successful intervention is only possible through catastrophic individual design. The novel exposes the problematic logics of secular rationalism as a basis for opposition to the

neoliberal disintegration of public ethics and environmental destruction. The intervention, however, is rooted in a subjectivity that fulfills, rather than subverts, the individual consumer subject of the biotech consumer complex.

The Year of the Flood intervenes in the first novel's story by exploring and partially undermining several possible counter-narratives against the strict rationalism and neoliberal consumerism of *Oryx and Crake*. The novel presents the same events as *Oryx and Crake* from the perspective of people mostly outside of the secure corporate compounds. In this way, *Year of the Flood* creates a dialog with *Oryx and Crake* that exposes interconnections among people in various social strata and among various ideologies of resistance. The second section of this chapter examines the complex interactions among post-secular, partial commitment and multiple forms of environmentalist commitment. Through partially undermined counter-narratives of faith, the characters in *The Year of the Flood* participate in seemingly counter-hegemonic modes of living that achieve harmonious ecologies. For Ren (one of the novel's protagonists), ambivalent, ritually-oriented memories enable personal interconnections to cross (but not transcend) disparate places and class positions. The story of Toby, the other protagonist, dramatizes the exploitative nature of corporate consolidation of places and people into consumerist wealth extraction systems, but it also offers some rethinking of methods of withdrawal from the same forces of consolidation. Toby's development as a member of the God's Gardeners reveals the usefulness of partial commitment as an individual strategy of survival; more importantly, her story reveals the impossibility of resistance to a corporate-consumer system under the guise of local withdrawal or placeless mobility. Instead, Toby's own crossing of social strata suggests that partial commitment provides the basis for individual and communal renegotiation of relationships with local and global ecologies. The final pages of the

novel suggest an open, embedded, immediate localism that rejects long term, total, utopian solutions in favor of short term survival. I argue, however, that these final pages more dramatize the representational problem of moving beyond the global-local binary; in order to get beyond the binary, the global must be temporarily collapsed into the local. That is, Crake's intervention, for all its disaster, is a necessary forerunner to the collapsed globality. The end of *Year of the Flood* suggests new possibilities for ethical relationships among people and environments, but leaves open the question of how such new ethical relationships might be sustained in the long term.

THE SECULAR SCIENTIST PLAYS GOD

In both novels, characters narrate their lives leading up to an apocalyptic world-wide plague. They describe a stratified mid-twenty-first century U.S. society. Inside secure corporate compounds, highly-trained bio-engineers design genetically-engineered consumer goods, such as medicines, cosmetic treatments, and sexual aids. Outside the compounds lie "the pleeblands"—unsecured, decayed cities and suburbs containing customers, organized crime, and cheap, disposable labor for corporations. The public sphere has all but disintegrated; corporate interests dominate widely available media, no one participates in local or national government, and a coalition of corporations run the only police force, which protects corporate interests rather than public good. This corporate police force (the "CorpSeCorps") hunts down corporate spies, runs organized crime in the pleeblands, and generally operates as its own quasi-criminal business. Signs of environmental injustice lurk everywhere; a refugee from catastrophic storms in Texas, Amanda, for example, reports that relief efforts seem focused on keeping people in disaster-

ravaged southern states from moving northward as refugees (*Flood* 85). Overpopulation and pollution suggest little hope for environmental justice or ecological recovery. The disaster that finally eradicates this order is designed by a young scientist nicknamed Crake, who, using the apparatuses of one of the biotech compounds and the CorpSeCorps, designs and distributes a plague that kills most people on Earth. He also uses genetic-manipulation technology to create a new human race, the “Crakers,” supposedly devoid of the tragic human flaws of hierarchy and imagination.

The society Atwood paints in the MaddAddam novels, like that Butler presents in the *Parable* novels, imagines one possible iteration of the triumph of neoliberalism; while Atwood focuses on the prevalence of consumerism rather than the disposability of labor and breakdown of communal institutions, both series portray the privatization of public institutions, the disposability of individuals, and the triumph of immediate personal gratification as a primary value. Stephen Dunning argues in “*Oryx and Crake: Terror of the Therapeutic*” that the novel’s consumer society and its ultimate disastrous plague suggest that great risk accompanies the abandonment of longstanding, religious narratives (Dunning 2). In reading both the corporate-consumer system and Crake’s attack on it as parts of the same ideology, Dunning provides a valuable insight; they grow out of the same individualist approach that divorces the mind from the material world, seeing all materials as means for the achievement of intellectual designs or the gratification of bodily desires. However, Dunning misses the narrative that drives the corporate system and its ultimate destruction, a narrative that vibrates between two poles: atomized individual consumer freedom on the one hand, and disenchanting quantification on the other. Both of these poles lie embedded in a deeper secular ideology that elevates the individual, rational conscience above any context in which it is embedded.

In destroying the human race and designing a new one, Crake executes an environmentalist intervention seemingly based on scientific logic. He designs the new people so that they will never destroy the ecosystems of the Earth, and he destroys the present human race that has damaged those ecosystems. Nonetheless, Crake's intervention lies in the design and execution of an individual, genius mind. While Crake articulates motivations lying in environmentalist deep ecology, his rejection of grand ethical narratives and insistence on working largely alone construct an individualism very similar to the atomized individualism that drives the corporate consumer system Crake wishes to destroy. In *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Jose Casanova describes secularism in part as privatization; that is, religion becomes mostly a matter of personal choice, to be practiced as an individual chooses (Casanova 35-36). Tracy Fessenden argues that this privatization marks American secularism as specifically Protestant; it relegates religious practice not just to the non-civic spaces of churches and private homes, but to the private conscience of the individual, thinking, enlightened subject (Fessenden 3-4). In *Oryx and Crake* and *Year of the Flood*, privatized religious affiliation extends to privatized ethics; that is, lacking any public sphere for activist intervention, a private individual can only make ethical intervention based on what he or she consumes. While Crake's re-creation of the world seems to thwart this relegation, it similarly imagines an individual subject of conscience executing solitary interventions.

The MaddAddam novels present a society dominated by commercial interests that relegate ethics to the private, individual conscience. While there are organizations who organize around non-consumer-driven concerns with justice, they at first appear almost totally cut off from anyone who works for the corporations. Inside the HelthWyzer compound, Jimmy and Crake watch news of "coffee wars," a South American conflict in which coffee producers engage

in combat with representatives of the Happicuppa coffee company, who have developed a coffee plant that will put local coffee growers out of business. However, for Jimmy and Crake, the violence remains an abstract topic of conversation; Crake thinks about the ecological, but not immediate, human, implications of the wars (178-79). For Crake, environmental injustice is part of a historical reality, and ecology lies outside of it, something that is violated by it. As they watch armies massacring rebellious peasants, Crake argues, “those guys should get whacked...

“not because of the dead peasants, there’s always been dead peasants. But they’re nuking the cloud forests to plant this stuff.”

“The peasants would do that too if they had half a chance,” said Jimmy.

“Sure, but they don’t have half a chance.”

“You’re taking sides?”

“There aren’t any sides, as such.”

Jimmy’s objection here suggests a familiar kind of apathy; the destruction of the forests is inevitable, and all sides are morally equal in their willingness to destroy. For Crake, however, the cloud forests exist outside the peasants’ livelihood or the conflicts; the injustice lies not in the power imbalance, but in the destruction of the forests. For Crake here, justice can only be harmed by the presence of people, and so people become a small factor in an abstract equation of ecology.

Oryx and Crake contains suggestions throughout that sustained critiques and oppositional organization still exist in the largely privatized society. However, no public sphere exists to support activism; corporations dominate the few public venues left, and corporate-sponsored police and or organized crime control most other spaces. Eventually, some members of the God’s Gardeners and related environmentalist groups are killed in CorpsSeCorps raids. The possibilities for non-violent resistance remain completely absent, and any actual intervention can come only in the form of out-and-out criminal acts with varying effectiveness. Crake’s plague and re-creation of the human race seem like radical solutions, but grow out of the same

ideological ground as the destructive system he would seek to oppose. Crake's apocalypse has little to do with restoring a public sphere or creating a culture wherein people might relate to each other in a different way; his intervention lacks a resemblance to political revolution in the historical sense. Crake himself appears as much enthralled by the atomized consumption of culture as the other young characters in the novels. Jimmy and Crake's relationship consists mostly of shared consumer experiences--watching pirated television together like executions, "animal snuff films," assisted suicides, and especially salacious pornography (*Oryx* 82-87). At one point, the novel succinctly paints the relative lack of intimate contact between them as they watch television and play video games while sitting back to back, high on marijuana, looking at separate screens (86). Jimmy can only understand Crake's thinking through offhand musings and, later, Crake's explanations of the Paradise Project (292-308). After the plague has been unleashed, Jimmy can only understand Crake's motivations by sorting through remembered offhand comments and what little Crake had explained directly.

Crake explains the purposes of the BlyssPluss pill (the sex aid/contraceptive pill through which he distributes the plague worldwide) and the Crakers in a mix of discourses, including the prevailing bio-consumer discourse and the discourse of environmental activism. He constructs this mix of discourses through an empiricist's insistence on quantifiable data combined with corporate profit logic that he follows even as he rejects it. Crake explains that the corporations have been inventing illnesses and spreading them so that they can then sell people treatments for the same illnesses: "Axiom: that illness isn't productive. In itself, it generates no commodities and therefore no money. Although it's an excuse for a lot of activity, all it really does moneywise is cause wealth to flow from the sick to the well" (210). Crake goes on to explain that, after having cured everything, a biotech company must, in order to stimulate growth, create new

illnesses. It is this logic that Crake will follow in distributing his world-changing plague; in fact, when the plague hits, members of the police force call Crake, assuming he will want a bribe to distribute a vaccine for the plague (338-39), not understanding that Crake is actually attempting to bring the very system that would sustain such a bribe to a dramatic end. Crake's insistently empiricist eco-activism sees the material, but not the ethical, dimensions of the unsustainable consumer culture of the *MaddAddam* societies, and redresses them solely in terms of quantifiable data.

Crake constructs a discourse of intervention that equates efficient function with positive morality. Determining an ethics of intervention based in his own calculations, Crake nonetheless obscures the moral problems of his intervention behind the obscured morality of scientific calculation. This paired with Crake's individual actions reveal his disaster-intervention not merely as the triumph of a destructive variant of the dialectic of enlightenment, but as a twisted fulfillment of the enlightened Euro-American secular subject. Armed with genius, determination, and a sense of personal authority located in his expertise in the biotechnological system, Crake becomes God, capable of creating and recreating the human race and the Earth. The story clearly lends divinity to Crake by self-consciously paralleling Crake's project with the Genesis creation story. Crake explains his design of the Crakers as correcting genetic contradictions in the human makeup—eliminating, for example, aggression, the need for agriculture, and even the creation of culture that could one day lead to conflict. He creates the race of “Crakers” in the Paradise Dome. Rather than expelling Adam from paradise, Crake imprisons MaddAddam (a group of eco-saboteurs) in the Paradise Dome and forces them to help with his invention. Crake wants to eliminate the problems in humans that lead to destroyed ecologies and conflicts; he is particularly concerned with culture, music, art, and stories, all of which he reads as unnecessary

and ultimately destructive from an evolutionary perspective (361). However, like God in Genesis whose creation disobeys commandments through desire and temptation, Crake ultimately fails in his attempt to eliminate curiosity and culture as mere genetic factors. In part through Jimmy/Snowman's accidental interventions, the Crakers develop both music and an odd, pre-differentiated culture. They think of Crake as their creator, and often ask Jimmy for stories about him. Jimmy, having assured them that Crake has a plan for them and wanted to keep them safe, and that Oryx also demanded that they behave according to certain eco-ethics, accidentally creates a mythology around himself, Crake, and Oryx. Jimmy's creation story appropriates the near-eastern chaos-order combat myth with a hint of the language of environmentalism: "In the chaos, everything was mixed together...there were too many people, and so the people were all mixed with the dirt...The people in the chaos were full of chaos themselves, and the chaos made them do bad things. They were killing other people all the time. And they were eating up all the Children of Oryx [animals], against the wishes of Oryx and Crake...And then Oryx said to Crake, *Let us get rid of the chaos*. And so Crake took the chaos, and he poured it away...And this is how Crake did the Great Rearrangement and made the Great Emptiness" (103). While Jimmy feels disgusted at his own story, the Crakers read Crake's plague as a clearing away to make room for them and the animals.

The over-riding characteristic of this story is not its falseness; indeed, it portrays some recognizable truths about the world before the plague. Despite Jimmy's anger at Crake and at himself for telling stories he knows to be untrue, his telling emphasizes the hastily-produced quality of the stories; as a result of his hastiness, Jimmy accidentally produces beliefs in the Crakers that he wishes he could revise. Some of these are merely practical: Jimmy had instructed the Crakers to bring him one cooked fish per week as per Oryx's instructions, but later regrets

not asking for more (101). He generally regrets creating a mythology around Crake as a benevolent creator, knowing as he does the great crime Crake has committed. He consoles himself that making Crake into God was a kind of spite, as Crake had intended the Crakers to be incapable of developing religious beliefs (104), believing that God “is a cluster of neurons” that could be eliminated through genetic manipulation (157). Just as Crake’s grand designs have failed, Jimmy’s grand narratives fall short even of his own purposes; infallible stories produced and used by fallible people, they highlight the relative arbitrariness of the production of narratives. Contingent, they nonetheless resist alteration and carry long term consequences.

These hastily produced yet persistent narratives produce long-term results that link the local environment of the Crakers with a wider geography in the future. In a horrifying culmination of a long tradition of progressivism, Crake becomes a rationalist, engineer-type version of God: with intention and long-term foresight, he creates a race of people with a specific biological and, by extension, moral, makeup. Like God in Genesis, however, his moral design appears to be a failure and leads to a relatively similar result: rather than a steady group of garden-tenders, he leaves a small culture capable of expanding, driven by curiosity, and culturally evolving. Despite their eating of wild plants, non-monogamous mating rituals, and comically large penises, the Crakers present some of the same problems and powers of the human race just destroyed: invention and para-dominant structures. While Crake self-consciously designs them to be non-hierarchical and non-aggressive, one of them—a man Jimmy calls Abraham Lincoln—becomes a group leader and spokesman. Discussions among the Crakers precede any of their actions. A community structure develops that forms a culture, one accompanied by cultural production as the Crakers build a Snowman idol and sing in a strangely animistic attempt to summon Jimmy while he has been away (360-61). This fast cultural

evolution and the appearance of hierarchical structures suggest that, while the Crakers fit fine into a local eco-system, they will expand and, possibly, dominate and destroy just as the original human race did. Crake's attempt at a designed global solution to long term sustainability gives only the certain promise of short-term, local sustainability. Despite genetic safeguards, the Crakers seem to possess the same creative and destructive capacity as original humans.

DEEP ECOLOGY, LOCAL FAITH

So far, I have read *Oryx and Crake* as the story of a triumphant secular-consumerist cultural economy, ending in a secular, global apocalypse. One could read the novel as straightforwardly revealing a set of the pressing dangers of corporate manipulation of biotechnologies and consumer desires. *The Year of the Flood* offers differing perspectives on the same conditions. In high postmodernist fashion, the novels uncover a dynamic politics of representation and the difficulty of unifying narratives neatly. However, the novels reject fragmentation in favor of incomplete, open, and nodal narratives that dramatize interconnection but eschew hierarchy, exposing global power centers while exploring alternative arrangements without metaphysical power centers. This de-centered quality calls into question the desirability of global intervention and the effectiveness of local intervention. Further, *The Year of the Flood* at first glance seems to privilege local communities that, having withdrawn from the destructive global-capitalist system, enable ecologically sustainable living and biologically ethical, communal model of living. The God's Gardeners, the religious group in *Year of the Flood*, are eventually revealed to be complexly interwoven with people and institutions outside their

community. Through these complex interconnections, the two novels suggest gradual, partial methods of environmental activism within equally partial methods of representation.

In *Partial Faiths*, John McClure identifies “the valorization of ‘prefigurative communities,’ or ‘communities of contrast,’ as a key feature of post-secular fiction. These communities “are founded in and seek to foster dispositions that reflect a sense of human limitation and historical caution...dedicated to local forms of survival, self-transformation, and face-to-face service, and while they testify against systematic forms of injustice, they have no strongly articulated political agenda” (20). McClure describes these features as belonging to “communities of contrast,” not necessarily to religiously-centered communities; these communities, however, are subjects of post-secular fiction. In many ways, the God’s Gardeners fit this description; they in some sense “reflect a sense of human limitation.” Using some of the discourse of deep ecology prevalent in the U.S. environmentalist movements of the latter half of the twentieth century, the God’s Gardeners recognize animals as moral equals to people, recognize extinct species as *metaphysical* losses, and try to withdraw from a destructive commercial-global system in favor of sustainable agriculture, scavenging, and, in the long term, survival of the coming ecological disaster they call “the great flood.” This withdrawal involves no political agenda in the form of participation—indeed, the opportunities to engage in democratic participation are relatively limited, and the Gardeners set aside active resistance in favor of waiting for the environmental disaster they call the Waterless Flood. Further, the God’s Gardeners’ theology represents an example of what McClure refers to as “partial re-enchantment”—believing in God and even scripture, the Gardeners nonetheless embrace the insights of modern science, especially evolutionary theory, in a form something like a post-Christian pantheism. Their emphasis on “the spirit” as a non-quantifiable but nonetheless real

and world-reforming quality of people and animals mimics the Christology and church-world relationship spelled out in the Gospel of Luke and its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles.

The God's Gardeners represent one of the few strongly articulated modes of resistance to the biotech consumer complex of the novels; further, they work to create a local survival possibility in the pleeblands, or the spaces outside of the corporate compounds largely dominated by organized crime. When Toby—one of the two main characters of *The Year of the Flood*—is relentlessly sexually abused by Blanco, the mob-connected supervisor of the *Secretburgers* restaurant where she works, the God's Gardeners, having heard of Toby's abuse, contrive to rescue and conceal her. They further welcome her into their community without requiring much of her at first. Toby slowly becomes an important part of the community despite having doubts about their eco-theology and social organization, and despite remaining relatively uncommitted to their political agenda.

The Gardeners' welcoming of Toby despite her doubts and the communal relationships they form with each other represent a significant departure from the world outside described by the characters both in *Oryx and Crake* and *Year of the Flood*. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy and Crake, despite being best friends, rarely talk to each other and require little from each other. Jimmy has trouble relating to his mother, father, and step-mother, and, while engaging many times in relationships with women, never sustains a relationship for very long, an inability he sometimes worries about but more often uses in a self-narration to attract more women (*Oryx* 191). Oryx, a woman who works with the Crakers and in unknowingly distributing the plague, describes being sold into slavery as young girl. She recalls selling flowers to tourists and, later, being filmed in child pornography, needing constantly to trade on her charm and appearance to

the point that she questions mockingly whether she has any genuine will of her own (*Oryx* 141-42). Amanda, a young woman who joins the Gardeners briefly (and, coincidentally, a later girlfriend of Jimmy's), talks frequently of "trading" in both material and sexual senses; when her closest friend, Ren (the other main character of *Year of the Flood*) thanks Amanda for anything, Amanda always says "you'll pay me back," suggesting that "giving things for nothing was too soft" (*Year* 324).

The characters mediate interpersonal relationships unapologetically through the logic of commodity trading; nonetheless, the Gardeners articulate an alternative community in which people teach each other, help each other, and plan for the future together. In this way, the God's Gardeners are not unlike *Parable's* Earthseed; they construct an alternative affective economy that helps orient relationships away from commodification. Moreover, the God's Gardener theology represents a departure from other popular religions. Two groups, the Wolf-Isaiahists and Lion-Isaiahists, disagree over how to bring about a world-changing apocalypse. Like the God's Gardeners, they hope for a divinely-driven end to a destructive order; however, both sects believe in actively bringing about this end in some way. The Lion-Isaiahists, for example, commission one of the biotech corporations to create a Liobam, a cross between a lion and a lamb, because lions and lambs will lie down together in the kingdom of heaven (94). The other two groups that receive prominent mention are the Petro-baptists and Known Fruits, both of which are officially sanctioned religions because they more-or-less endorse the power of the corporations; the Known Fruits, for example, confess a version of the early twenty-first century "wealth gospel," reading wealth as a sign of divine favor (39).

Rejecting divinely prescribed genetic manipulation and the promise of wealth held out by the corporate-consumer order, the Gardeners re-place God at the metaphysical center of the

universe. This involves worship and other practices, but, more importantly, it provides a divine basis for the sustainable bio-culture and community living relationships of the God's Gardeners. While the God's Gardeners look to scripture as a guide, their interpretations reject literalism and embrace modern science. Adam One, their nominal leader, argues that the group should "affirm our Primate ancestry—an affirmation that has brought down wrath upon us from those who arrogantly persist in evolutionary denial. But we affirm, also, the Divine agency that has caused us to be created in the way that we were, and this has enraged those scientific fools who say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' These claim to prove the non-existence of God because they cannot put Him in a test tube and weigh and measure him" (51). In a variation of the eighteenth-century Anglo-American "Natural Religion," the Gardener acceptance of modern science does not preclude enchantment—that is, the presence, power, and even direction of the divine outside or through laws of physics. What this makes possible for the Gardeners is a divinely-inspired ethics that can drive scientifically-enabled actions.

The God's Gardeners' love of nature and rejection of consumer culture come together in an underlying love of creation based on the idea that all of nature is created in God's image (*Flood* 231). Just as the Gardeners preach deep-ecological identification with animals as moral equals, they also eschew the biotechnological body alterations ubiquitous in the consumer culture, especially among women. The God's Gardeners further reject consumerist religion that provides comfort or sanctification for the fulfillment of individual desire or consumption. Instead, their religious ideals demand commitment to creation and to other people. In some ways, the separation of the God's Gardeners from dominant cultural practices echoes familiar forms of religious fundamentalism found, for example, in American Amish communities. Nonetheless, their attempts to fish for converts and, as it is later revealed, their continued connections to

people inside the pleeblands and even in the corporate compounds will call this separation into question. Eventually, they will reject the commodification of the body, the spirit, and even of everything on the Earth, but they will work for this rejection in broader connection with others. The God's Gardeners' counter-culture maintains material and interpersonal connections with the dominant corporate system, and these connections call into question the possibility of localist withdrawal from ecologically damaging global systems.

ABSURDITY AND WEAKNESS: STRATEGIES FOR VIRTUAL CONNECTION

Like Earthseed in Butler's *Parable* novels, the God's Gardeners represent exactly the kind of "community of contrast" that McClure suggests that post-secular fiction "valorizes." The MaddAddam novels, however, present a problem: while the God's Gardeners allow *The Year of the Flood* to give the reader a "tour of the sewage system," as Atwood has elsewhere referred to it (Dvorak 125), and hence to highlight another set of problems with the secular-corporate-consumer complex presented in *Oryx and Crake*, the God's Gardeners are somewhat less than valorized; despite the safe-haven they represent to someone like Toby, *Year of the Flood* holds up their general practices and theologies for mild to moderate ridicule. Through its skeptical approach toward the God's Gardeners, the novel simply takes McClure's "contrast" one step further: rather than provide religious counter-narratives with God at the center of the metaphysical universe, *Year of the Flood* presents some caution about narratives all together— hegemonic or oppositional, secular or religious. Through their localist practices, global interconnection, and apocalyptic theology, the Gardeners help dramatize the frictions and possibilities of religious counter-narratives.

Year of the Flood, in other words, extends post-secular critique to these “communities of contrast” themselves, revealing the complex interconnections among communities of contrast and the broader dominant cultures they would seek to resist. The novels illustrate a model of post-secular interaction in a de-centered way. In *Why I am Not a Secularist*, William Connolly explores some of the limitations of American secularism, arguing that secular institutions and models of being lend prime legitimacy to a relatively narrow, largely Protestant set of interactions with the world. Connolly argues for a “post-theism” characterized by “de-centering;” that is, instead of replacing God with man at the center of the metaphysical universe or trying to recapture a pre-secular order, Connolly explores the simultaneous co-existence of multiple modes of being interacting in the same temporal and spatial places (3). The novels imagine this through two main means: absurdity and interconnection. In the first, troubled people, grotesque consumer products, and horrifying logics highlight structural hubris and moral bankruptcy. In the second, the story reveals connections among the God’s Gardeners, corporate compound workers, and the “pleebmobs,” or organized crime of the pleeblands. The combination of the two together help articulate an alternative ethics wherein characters can use their own loss and trauma to facilitate lasting but flexible commitments to each other, to places they occupy, and to broader ecologically sustainable modes of being that fit into a global vision.

The novels use absurd humor as part of post-secular undermining; the mockery of beliefs, institutions, and practices calls for reconsideration rather than abandonment. In “Margaret Atwood’s Humor,” Marta Dvorak enumerates classical comedic elements in the logic of the *Oryx and Crake* society (117-18), reading the grotesque elements of the consumer system and the stylistic understatement of the prose as a satirical pattern that exposes the underlying absurd logics of the system. Jimmy’s school, the Martha Graham Academy, replaces its long time motto

ars longa vita brevis with “our students graduate with employable skills” (*Oryx* 188). The novel mocks subordinating classical humanistic education to personal and corporate financial well-being in a fairly straightforward way, quietly suggesting a cause for a lack of an intellectual culture to counteract the wild embracing of bodily desire. Genetically engineered, hyper-intelligent pigs grow human tissue, and Crake’s newly created human race mate according to cycles with giant blue penises and polygamous mating rituals. These absurdities alone reveal the problems of consumeristic desire unchecked by critique and commitment and the limitations of utilitarian ideology and scientific methods to check such desire. However, the absurdity extends naturally into the experiences of the characters in *Year of the Flood*, revealing how systemic circumstances dictate the terms of individual lives. As children, Ren and Amanda covet odd biological consumer goods like biological implants and “second skins”—a kind of biologically bonded animal costume. Toby works at a restaurant called *Secretburgers*, so called because it’s not clear what is in the hamburgers they sell (33).

The God’s Gardeners are not immune from such absurdity. Shortly after arriving, Toby questions her old *Secretburgers* friend, Rebecca, about the Gardeners’ bizarre preoccupation of the coming “waterless flood” that will restore ecological order to the Earth (47). The Gardeners beliefs disturb Toby, as do some of the unofficial rules about clothing and hairstyles spread unofficially: “When Toby asked why, she was given to understand that the aesthetic preference was God’s. This kind of smiling, bossy sanctimoniousness was a little too pervasive for Toby” (*Flood* 46). The humorously irritating quality of Gardener life reaches a theological point later for Toby, when, attending a meeting for the leadership of the group, she witnesses a theological crisis: why, if God created people to live in ecological harmony as equals with the rest of the life on Earth, do people have teeth evolved for eating meat? Despite the Gardeners’ acceptance of

Darwinian evolutionary theory, this question is phrased in terms of the biblical Adam—why would the first man have carnivore’s teeth? (240). When Toby questions Adam One, the group’s leader, whether such a question were necessary, Adam One gives an answer that subordinates the group’s theology to the group’s deep ecological commitment: “‘The truth is,’ he said, ‘most people don’t care about other Species, not when times get hard. All they care about is their next meal, naturally enough: we have to eat or die. But what if God’s doing the caring? We’ve evolved to believe in gods, so this belief bias of ours must confer an evolutionary advantage. The strictly materialist view—that we’re an experiment animal protein has been doing on itself—is far too harsh and lonely for most, and leads to nihilism. That being the case, we need to push popular sentiment in a biosphere-friendly direction by pointing out the hazards of annoying God by a violation of His trust in our stewardship’” (241). Adam One’s answer interestingly brings together theological distinction, pragmatic leadership, popular evolutionary psychology, and ecological commitment. An answer that combines theology and modern science and features pragmatic theology without denial of its truth, the answer is distinctly post-secular. It also remains slightly pedantic, and, while Toby accepts it in the short-term, she sees Adam One’s explanation as at least somewhat deceptive.

Adam One’s strategic theology and Toby’s partial commitment combine to form what Gianni Vattimo and others have referred to as “weak religion.” In a dialog in *The Future of Religion*, Vattimo, Santiago Zabala, and Richard Rorty define “weak religion” as a political-philosophical position that withdraws from the enjoyment of what Rorty calls “power and grandeur,” embracing instead a consistent “pragmatism” that acknowledges that “‘Being’ is not what is already there but, on the contrary, what happens in everyday dialog among humans” (Rorty et al 56). While it is difficult to discern the starting point of productive dialog around

“ontological difference” (56), Vattimo and Rorty suggest a more self-conscious version of Adam One’s argument, arguing that differing approaches to ontological questions produce differing social and individual effects. Adam One is not so much concerned with the essence of a real, biblical Adam as he is about the effect an imagined biblical Adam would have; the ontology of the *designs* of God have sociological, and therefore ecological, effects.

For Vattimo, “weakening” potentially allows movement away from what Rorty calls “power and grandeur” to realize the frailty and incompleteness of people and of narratives. Adam One’s discussion with Toby suggests a consciousness of human limitation and an intention to treat theology as a rhetorical device to support communal formation. Nonetheless, for Adam One, “dialog” is temporary, and the self-undermining itself only a pragmatic means to power (however well-intentioned). He may be interested in a limited self-undermining, but Adam One’s own moral authority trumps communal dialog. Other events and characters in the novel take up this undermining in direct and indirect ways. After many years, it’s discovered that a Gardener the kids call “Burt the Knob” has been using Gardener resources to grow large quantities of marijuana, which he moves through semi-official black market channels run by organized crime and the CorpsSeCorps (150). Burt further is exposed as having molested his step-daughter, Bernice (later one of Jimmy’s college roommates), for years (289) and having used herbal drugs to keep his wife, Veena, in a zombie-like half-consciousness that the other Gardeners mistake for a depression they call “lying in a fallow state” (150-51). A split in the group comes later in the novel when a section of it, led by Ren’s step-father Zeb, leaves to perform more radical acts of eco-sabotage, designing (with, it turns out, Crake’s help) biological agents to do things like dissolve highways and damage dams. Zeb’s breakaway group, “MaddAddam,” uses biotechnology in eco-sabotage operations. While the God’s Gardeners’

relative lack of hierarchy suggests a democratic structure, it also allows for criminal activity and even abuse at the hands of someone like Burt, or a semi-violent turn embodied in a character like Zeb.

Among the God's Gardeners, as in the broader consumer society, democratic community structures provide few checks on dangerous behavior. An oscillation between two structures characterizes the novels; on one hand, morally bankrupt corporate-consumer culture remains nearly inescapable and destroys the environment and people. On the other, a non-corporate alternative whose loose organization model and esoteric deep ecology-theology, despite its pragmatic motivations, ends up sliding away from the life-affirming and sustainable relationships it would seek to cultivate. In both, basic human rights are left behind. The novel, however, rejects simple bourgeois individualism in favor of embedded interpersonal relationships. Rejecting the simplistic notion that interpersonal friendship transcends context, the novels suggest that the characters' weak commitment and weak religion secures relationships among people devoted to short-term sustainability and long term hope. Weak commitment does not disintegrate into simple bourgeois friendship because it is never completely set aside in favor of something else; instead, it facilitates strong relationships and provides a model for further moving forward. Rejecting neoliberal atomism, *Year of the Flood* suggests that strong yet open interpersonal ties can form the basis for broader, open communities that are always in process.

Short-term sustainability and strong interpersonal connection remains difficult to achieve in an atomized consumer culture lacking a democratic public sphere. The novels suggest that these possibilities exist through a post-secular ethics of interpersonal and public engagement. The de-centered, dialogic form of the two novels together makes de-centered and post-secular representation possible. The two novels allow the representation of an inter-connected set of

places and mobile people by highlighting inter-personal connections, the crossing of personal narratives at temporal and spatial nodes, and the non-hierarchical significance of character experience. The novels present simultaneous narratives of at least three different characters, and, while they all come together at various points in the stories, no one character's story is given prominence over the others. The resulting "dual narrative" presents a set of interpersonal, ideological, and material connections embedded both in shared real space, virtual space, and memory.

The Year of the Flood's characters intersect the story of *Oryx and Crake* in a way that constructs a relatively tight social network while highlighting the mobility of the characters across places and broader networks. Jimmy's recollections make up the entire first novel, *Oryx and Crake*. His father works as a corporate scientist, and his mother remains idle until one day she steals information and disappears into the pleeblands. As Jimmy grows up, he has troubled, brief relationships with women who receive only brief mention. The second novel picks up several of these briefly mentioned characters who appeared only to advance the plot of the first, and some more is revealed about Crake's secret connections to people outside the corporate compounds, including the God's Gardeners. Two of Jimmy's briefly-mentioned girlfriends, Ren and Amanda, play integral roles in *Year of the Flood*. Jimmy's militant vegan college roommate who burns his leather shoes, Bernice, grew up in the God's Gardeners with Ren and Amanda. It was the God's Gardeners to whom Jimmy's mother fled after having stolen privileged industrial information from Jimmy's father. For all their mobility and global ambitions, the characters occupy a relatively tight set of social connections, though the novel implies that the networks extend far beyond the narrative.

Interconnections among a relatively small number of characters within a vastly complex set of networks fits into what Frederic Jameson has referred to as “the geo-political aesthetic,” a narrative pattern featuring lone characters battling ominous and threatening conspiracies that remain always partly beyond the characters’ understanding. In an earlier chapter, I read *Left Behind* as a post-Cold War attempt to represent the world as playing out a cosmic conspiracy wherein well-placed Euro-American men might assert dominance. However, *Year of the Flood* focuses on the characters within these networks not necessarily as counter-actors to vast global conspiracies, but as survivors, movers, tricksters, and limited resisters within the network. The novel highlights the personal advantages of partial commitment while suggesting limitations in the possibility of intervention. In this section, I am going to proceed through a series of readings to explore the connection between the de-centered set of crossing narratives (embedded within difficult-to-grasp networks) and the partially religious commitment of the characters. The connections among characters and novels present a narrative wherein no one locality—character or setting—is privileged above another, but at the same time, no one locality is subordinated to the global. The globe becomes a set of interconnected, differing local environments. Characters traverse these connected local environments through commitments that keep them grounded while allowing them the flexibility to meet new realities.

Through a combination of youthful rebellion, committed friendship, and skeptical ritual performance, the character Ren addresses forced movements among locations, family relationships, and class strata. Ren recalls her experience while trapped after the plague in a locked area of the animal-themed strip club where she works in New York; she had been in the room, quarantined, after having been bitten by a customer (7-8). As a small child, Ren lives in a corporate compound; her father works as a biotech engineer. While she is still very young, Ren’s

mother, Lucerne, runs away with her with Zeb, a member of the God's Gardeners and an eco-terrorist largely responsible for maintaining networks of resistance against the corporate system. Ren grows into a teenager with the God's Gardeners, and eventually helps persuade the Gardeners to take in Amanda, who becomes her closest friend. Eventually, angry with Zeb for his secrets and frequent travel, Lucerne leaves Zeb and takes teenage Ren back to her real father in the HelthWyzer corporate compound where he works. Here, Ren has a sexual relationship with Jimmy and a friendship with Crake, and eventually becomes a student at the Martha Graham Academy. Her father is kidnapped by a rival corporation overseas, and her mother abandons her financially, forcing her to leave school. She gets a job at the AnooYoo Spa, where Toby (her old Gardener teacher) works in disguise. After a brief reunion with Amanda in which she realizes Amanda's new boyfriend is her old boyfriend, Jimmy, Ren leaves the spa and gets a job as a dancer at Scales and Tails, the animal-themed strip club in the pleeblands not far from where she used to live with the God's Gardeners. She is in "the sticky zone," or quarantine area, when the plague hits, and is trapped there until Amanda, having driven through chaos all the way from Wisconsin to New York, rescues her.

Ren's story throughout the novel focuses on her own psychological experience of moving among locations and across classes. Much of the alienation Ren experiences moving among places involves her relationship with material goods. Moving back and forth between corporate compound and pleebland, Ren's story suggests unofficial connections among the seemingly separated social strata of the *MaddAddam* society. As Ren moves from place to place, she must develop strategies to face alienating losses of connection. As a child, when her mother takes her away from the HelthWyzer compound, Ren misses the comforts of her compound life: "I wanted my real father, who must still love me: if he'd known where I was, he'd surely have come to take

me back. I wanted my real house, with my own room and the bed with pink curtains and the closet full of different clothes in it. But most of all I wanted my mother to be the way she used to be, when she'd take me shopping, or to the Club to play golf, or off to the AnooYoo Spa to get improvements done to herself, and then she'd come back smelling nice" (65). She misses her father, but mostly, she misses the consumer products and physical comforts of living within the most privileged section of the stratified consumer society. Relationships Ren develops with the Gardeners ultimately allow her to adjust. Often despising her mother, she develops partial attachments to the other Gardener children and some of the Gardener teachers. Ren's initial loss of her HelthWyzer home centers on a non-committed, non-social longing for creature comforts.

Her adjustment to life with the God's Gardeners, however, does not include *abandonment* of her desire for consumer goods, but the mediation of this desire through teenage resistance to Gardener ideology. Befriending Amanda represents an act of ambivalent rebellion against her mother and, to some extent, Gardener doctrine. Ren's mother immediately rejects Amanda, adding to Amanda's appeal for Ren. Adam One and the other Gardeners welcome Amanda as a new convert, and they are especially glad to rescue her given that she has no parents (78); nonetheless, what attracts Ren to friendship with Amanda appears to be Amanda's access to consumer goods and tough, individualistic attitude. As a teenager, Ren perpetually feels embarrassed by the drabness of Gardener clothes when encountering other kids. Upon first meeting Amanda, Ren envies Amanda's access to consumer goods despite Amanda's far less secure circumstances: "I must have seemed pathetic to her, with my orphanish clothes and chalky fingers. She held up her wrist: there were the tiny jellyfish, opening and closing themselves like swimming flowers [inside Amanda's bracelet]. They looked so perfect" (*Flood* 73). Ren is further enchanted when she learns that Amanda stole the bracelet. Ren's description

of her clothes as “orphanish” offers a striking parallel: while Amanda is the orphan, the two share a similar position vis-à-vis dominant consumer ideology. That is, their material circumstances cut them both off from easy access to consumer goods and the status that accompanies them, and through some act of rebellion—against corporate ideology in Amanda’s case (theft) and Gardener principle in Ren’s (coveting of biotech decoration)— they both seek to renegotiate the terms by which they interact with the dominant culture. While the terms by which they renegotiate this interaction may be somewhat counter-hegemonic (theft and desire), the mediation of their rebellion through the coveting of consumer commodities ultimately places them both within consumer-corporate ideological orbit. The same applies to the para-gang activity and drug use they engage in with Shackie and Croze, two teenage Gardener boys.

Later, Ren remembers the kids’ counter-rituals as a way to maintain connections across multiple places. Ren and Amanda make up joking code words and special door knocks in part to have something counter to the adults, and in part making fun of the secrecy of some of the Gardener leaders, including Ren’s step-father, Zeb. In Gardener school, the kids make up somewhat cruel songs about their teachers, Toby and Nuala, who they call “the dry witch” and “the wet witch,” respectively. The kids’ songs make Nuala cry and Toby institute a steady discipline; the songs and other counter-rituals seem like little more than childish cruelty and acting out. Later, when the kids are young adults and Ren lives separately from all of them, she recalls these moments as times when she wishes she had not acted cruelly, yet nonetheless smiles remembering her relationships with the other kids. When Amanda and Ren enjoy a brief reunion while Ren works at the spa with disguised Toby, they confirm their maintained connection through reminiscence:

“Remember how we used to say, *Knock knock, who’s there? You and me and Bernice?*” I said. The beer was creeping up on me.

“Gang,” said Amanda. “Gang who?”

“Gangrene,” I said, and we both snorted with laughter, and some of the beer went up my nose. The I told her about running into Bernice, and how she’d been as crabby as ever. We laughed about that too. But we didn’t mention dead Burt.

I said, “What about the time you arranged that superweed treat for me with Shackie and Croze, and we all went to the holospinner booth, and I threw up?” We laughed some more. (*Flood* 300).

Amanda and Ren’s conversation seems to follow a fairly typical pattern of reminiscence: memories flow one into each another, contemporary gossip mixes with old conflict, and painful subjects are intentionally left out. Their conversation, however, occupies a number of intersecting contexts that make Amanda and Ren’s reunion significant. Ren and Amanda have not met since Lucerne removed Ren forcibly from the Gardeners (204-05); Lucerne reintroduces herself and Ren by lying about being kidnapped and brainwashed, and threatens Ren against telling the truth by threatening Amanda: “Before our psychiatry sessions, she’d squeeze my shoulder and say, ‘Amanda’s back there. Keep that in mind.’ Meaning that if I told anyone she’d been lying her hair off she’d suddenly remember where she’d been imprisoned, and the CorpSeCorps would go in there with their spray guns, and who knew what might happen?” (211-12). While Ren partly reintegrates into the corporate compound, her continued friendship with Amanda represents a partial rejection not just of her mother’s orders but of the desire for corporate compound comfort that her mother has embraced.

Moreover, Amanda and Ren’s memories, while perhaps typical of children growing up together, exist in an ambivalent relationship to the place at which they occurred: the Gardener rooftop compound in the pleeblands. Ren often recalls lessons learned from Adam One, Toby, and Zeb. While the children do not embrace Gardener beliefs and practice, their commitment to each other includes a commitment to the other Gardeners and to the places where their friendships formed. For Ren, this means a continued rejection of eating meat, the practice of

meditation and other techniques taught by the Gardeners, and the memory of lessons learned from Gardener teachers. During her time at HelthWyzer as a teenager, she longs for a return as though from exile. She temporarily finds solace in her relationship with Jimmy, but when she learns of Jimmy's simultaneous sexual relationships with several women, she suffers a fairly dramatic heartbreak that will continue to haunt her through the rest of the novel as part of her longing for a return to a time of her connection with him. Ren's longing for return to the Gardeners makes up an important part of her more general longing for connection with people in a stable place.

Ren's memories of the Gardeners, however, change shape after her reunion with Amanda at an unexpected node of connection: she learns that Jimmy is Amanda's boyfriend, and suddenly abandons hope of connection or return to any former state with Jimmy at HelthWyzer or Amanda at the Gardener rooftop: "I went back to the AnooYoo Spa feeling totally dumped out and hollow. Then, just after I got back, I almost ran right into Lucerne... I think she recognized me, but she blew me off like I was a piece of lint... It was like being erased off the slate of the universe... At that moment I understood I couldn't stay at AnooYoo. I needed to be on my own, apart from Amanda, apart from Jimmy, apart from Lucerne, even apart from Toby. I wanted to be someone else entirely, I didn't want to owe anyone anything, or be owed anything. I wanted no strings, no past, and no questions asked. I was tired of asking questions" (300). Ren leaves AnooYoo and gets her job at Scales and Tails, trying to escape all connections. Her account suggests that the relation between memory and present possesses the potential to antagonize. Ren presents the two events—her mother ignoring her and Amanda and Jimmy unknowingly removing her from her two most important relationships—as actions upon her when she says "it was like being erased" and "I felt dumped out." This personal crisis followed by a self-directed

promise to abandon past beliefs, hopes, or realities is a mainstay in post-secular fiction; it is the character's *lack of success* that dramatizes the partial commitment and inescapability of embeddedness of individual characters.

Her promise to herself, in other words, remains impossible to fulfill: while Ren enjoys success at Scales and Tails and feels a sense of community with the other dancers and the owner, Mordis (who later dies protecting her from a violent attack), memories of the past suffuse her life and even end up centering her as she sits in quarantine. Her memories of the Gardeners and her confrontation with the past sit alongside one another, both representing an ambivalent mix of joy, longing, fear, and hope for her. The memories provide Ren no imaginary escape, but they do offer her a way to understand her own position vis-à-vis her location and a broader world. Stuck in the sticky zone just before the final epidemic begins, Ren tries to address her boredom with meditation she had learned from the God's Gardeners, remembering simultaneously Adam One's admonition: "without the light, no chance; without the dark, no dance. Which meant that even bad things did some good because they were a challenge and you didn't always know what good effects they might have. Not that the Gardeners ever did any dancing" (279). Adam One uses traditional Christian dualism of light versus dark, but suggests a sort of wholeness that in and of itself doesn't suggest partiality so much as a totalizing vision, one which Ren subtly undermines with the memory that the Gardeners did no dancing. She tries to meditate, opening "up your inner eye, your inner ear," but she hears and sees only what's in her environment, and "none of this was spiritually enlightening" (279). Ren's inability to meditate signals a lack of split between body and spirit; Adam One's holistic dark/light co-existence suggests the possibility of total differentiation of a whole, but Ren is unable to embrace this differentiation.

Ren's slight skepticism and general inability to use Gardener *method* does not prevent her from using her Gardener experiences as a method of self-centering; her ambivalent longing for past people and places suggests the importance of loss and hope for passing her time. When the plague hits, Ren remains stuck in quarantine, but the rest of the Scales and Tails club has emptied. Ren worries that everyone else has died and that she will soon die, unable to escape from quarantine and having no food and water. She uses Gardener recitation rituals combined with her own memories to mitigate her feelings of loss:

You create your own world by your inner attitude, the Gardeners used to say. And I didn't want to create the world out there: the world of the dead and dying. So I sang some old Gardener hymns, especially the happy ones. Or I danced. Or I played the songs on my Sea/H/Ear Candy, though I couldn't help thinking that now there'd be no more new music.

Say the Names, Adam One would tell us. And we'd chant these lists of Creatures: Diplodocus, Pterosaurus, Octopus...Komodo. I could see all the names, as clear as pages. Adam One said that saying the names was a way of keeping those animals alive. So I said them.

I said other names too. Adam One, Nuala, Zeb. Schacie, Croze, and Oates. And Glenn [Crake]—I just couldn't picture anyone so smart being dead.

And Jimmy, despite what he'd done.

And Amanda.

I said those names over and over, in order to keep them alive. (315)

The Gardener prayer ritual of “keeping extinct animals alive” through name recitation provides Ren with a partial way to understand her loss. She has no way of knowing whether the people she names have died or not, so her recitation includes both memory and hope, one mixed with regret and loss as she considers Jimmy, who had hurt her romantically, and the rest of the people whom she has not seen for years. Her ritual recollection of them mitigates neither her loss nor her predicament; nonetheless, the confirmation that they are alive—even if only in word—connects Ren's present to her past. Her recollection facilitates a virtual connection to the past that hopes for unification of the fragmented process by which she moves from one place to another. The different locations and differing social positions Ren occupies becomes embedded in a broader set of connections and paths of the people she has loved.

EMBEDDED LOCALISM: FAITH WITHOUT PURPOSE

Ren's traumatizing movements dramatize damage done to her ability to connect to others; the logic of market competition infects interpersonal connections, reducing even the strongest personal ties to quantified and commodified terms. In the novel, characters form strong ties to other people and places through temporary, always disrupted locality. The disruption highlights the impossibility of permanently local, undisturbed interpersonal relationships. Memory and partial ritual help to keep these relationships strong despite mobility and a consumer culture that would make them impermanent. *Year of the Flood* moves beyond the interpersonal and into broader cultural critique through the story of Toby. Toby's narrative reveals the complex connections among local areas and global networks, simultaneously dramatizing the disastrous effects of global consolidation and the vulnerability of atomized individuality. Toby's development over the course of the novel most clearly reveals the potential of partial religion and embedded localism. Toby's ambivalent, shifting relationship to the God's Gardeners allows her to withdraw from corporate-consumer ideology while also eschewing absolutist commitment to theological principles and violent, totalizing actions. This ambivalent, flexible commitment to people and practices prepares Toby to survive the apocalyptic plague and facilitate the survival of others as well.

The description of Toby's childhood home at first seems idyllic, avoiding direct confrontation with an ecologically destructive global consumer system. "They'd been living in the semi-country, before the sprawl had rolled over that stretch of landscape. Their white frame house had ten acres of trees around it, and there were squirrels, and the first green rabbits. No rakunks, those hadn't been put together yet. There were a lot of deer; they'd get into her

mother's vegetable garden. Toby had shot a couple, and helped to dress them; she can still remember the smell, and the slither of shining viscera. They'd eaten deer stew, and her mother had made soup with the bones" (25). The image is not merely rural, but pre-lapsarian; it comes *before* most genetically-created animals have become wild (rakunks), before urban sprawl has destroyed this particular forest, and before wild animals had almost all disappeared. The vegetable garden and venison eating suggest an ecological relationship that operates without much mediation by the corporate-consumer system. The story continues to describe an invasion and the tragic dissolution of Toby's family. Developers offer to buy the land from Toby's father; when he refuses, they buy up and develop the land around it. The interconnection of the businesses at work becomes apparent when Toby's father is fired from his corporate job. Her mother, a manager at a HelthWyzer store selling "supplements," falls mysteriously ill, and the family goes into debt unsuccessfully treating her, even after pulling Toby out of college, selling their house at a loss, and moving into an unpleasant, over-developed suburb. (The reader is meant to recall Crake's revelation to Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* that biotech corporations have created illnesses in order to profit from their treatment). After her mother dies, Toby's father shoots himself with an illegal gun. Toby buries him and the gun in the house's backyard and disappears, knowing that the corporate police force, the CorpSeCorps, will arrest her to enforce her father's debt (possibly even pressing her into sexual servitude) (*Flood* 24-29).

The tragedy of Toby's youth describes a movement from protected "semi-rural" environment to over-developed suburb; the family house, however, clearly already lies within the broader system. Toby's parents both work for corporations connected to suburban sprawl and shady business practices. "Green rabbits"—an animal created through genetic engineering—co-exist in the land with squirrels and deer. The story of Toby's family lies within a broader story of

consolidation of corporate power as different business concerns and para-police organizations quietly work together for mutual enrichment and power. “Already, back then, the CorpSeCorps were consolidating their power. They’d started as a private security firm for the Corporations, but then they’d taken over when the local police forces collapsed for lack of funding, and people liked that at first because the Corporations paid, but now the CorpSeCorps were sending their tentacles everywhere” (25). The image of the CorpSeCorps sending influence into various areas suggests a centralized intelligence invading local areas. In the absence of a local public sphere embodied partly in such organizations as police, the CorpSeCorps are able to consolidate and therefore homogenize local areas. The interconnections among these areas already exist through ecology and the movement of capital; the CorpSeCorp consolidate and re-orient these connections toward wealth extraction.

The relative geographic isolation and the unmediated ecological relations of Toby and her family offer little protection from corporate consolidation. On pragmatic grounds, the novel rejects naïve celebrations of the local; even the edenic quality of Toby’s pre-suburban sprawl existence crumbles under close observation, for they are already interconnected. Trying to escape the power of the CorpSeCorps, Toby takes shelter in a rootless anonymity. “She’d burned her identity and didn’t have the cash to buy a new one—not even a cheap one, without the DNA infusion or the skin-colour change—so she couldn’t get a legitimate job: those were mostly controlled by the Corporations. But if you sank down deep—down where names disappeared and no histories were true—the CorpSeCorps didn’t bother with you” (30). Toby’s lack of means in this society severely limits her options, and she lives among always endangered illegal immigrants (deporting them is too expensive, so the CorpSeCorps simply shoot them [30]) above a clothing manufacturer that sells furs from endangered animals (30). She makes money by

selling what little she has to market—first her hair and then her eggs, though an unsterilized needle ends her ability to sell the latter (32). “After getting the news, she’d blown her hoarded egg-donation money on a drug-fuelled holiday from reality. But waking up with various men she’d never seen before had lost its thrill very quickly, especially when she’d found they had a habit of pocketing her spare change” (33). Toby has no particular connection to a place in this phase of her story; more importantly, she has no connection to any person, and, as a result, people take advantage of her. Having been expelled from the partial security of middle class life by a combination of design and misfortune, Toby escapes to a faceless anonymity, but finds it even more dangerous—and even less escapable—than her life with her parents in the suburbs. Toby’s lack of opportunity takes a dangerous turn when she gets a job at the organized crime-run fast food restaurant called SecretBurgers, so-called because it’s a secret what is in the hamburger meat. “During the glory days of SecretBurgers, there were very few bodies found in vacant lots” (33). As a SecretBurger employee, Toby faces relentless, inescapable sexual abuse at the hands of the manager, Blanco, a former strip club bouncer connected with “the pleebmobs,” crime organizations who “paid the CorpSeCorpsMen to turn a blind eye” (33).

In the face of the abuse, Toby reopens her relationship with past memory, longing again to be connected to her parents and the place where they lived. “Ever since her family had died in such sad ways, ever since she herself had disappeared from official view, Toby had tried not to think about her earlier life. She’d covered it in ice, she’d frozen it. Now she longed desperately to be back there in the past—even the bad parts—because her present life was torture. She tried to picture her two faraway, long-ago parents, watching over her like guardian spirits, but she saw only mist” (38). Toby’s picture here highlights her isolation and rootlessness in both spatial and temporal terms; she longs for the past, and she pictures her parents “far away.” Toby’s memory

here serves neither a comforting purpose (her degradation at Blanco's hands is all the worse for her memory of a secure, loving place) nor a hope for the future (Toby's inability to believe that her parents "watch over her" makes sense given that her parents could not protect her when they were alive). Her memory highlights the extremity of her powerlessness brought on by isolation. Toby's suffering dramatizes the terror of being alone and placeless.

Toby's place-centered security in her parents' home fails to save her from the broader exploitation of corporate consolidation, and her efforts to disappear simply open her to a more brutal form of exploitation. Blanco, the fast food manager who abuses her, reveals both the sexual violence inherent in the system and the exploitative power allowed by connection to organized crime. Rebecca warns Toby of Blanco's habit of choosing a single, unprotected woman from the SecretBurgers' employees and abusing her relentlessly and exclusively.

Rebecca mentions that she is immune from his attentions because she has connections to gangs, but

"Toby had no such backups. She kept her head down when Blanco was around. She'd heard his story. According to Rebecca, he'd been a bouncer at Scales, the classiest club in the Lagoon. Bouncers had status; they strolled around in black suits and dark glasses, looking suave but tough, and they had women swarming all over them. But Blanco had blown it big time, said Rebecca. He'd ripped up a Scales girl—not an illegal-alien temporary, they got ripped up all the time, but one of the top talent, a star pole dancer... Lucky for him he had friends in the CorpSeCorps or he'd have ended up minus some body parts in a carbon garboil dumpster. As it was, they'd stuck him in the Sewage Lagoon SecretBurgers Outlet. It was a big comedown and he was bitter about it—why should he suffer because of some slut?—so he hated the job. But he figured the girls were his perks." (35-36)

Blanco's backstory reveals an unofficial hierarchy and the assumption of sexual violence. His demotion punishes not violence, but violence perpetrated against a woman with some status (though a status conferred primarily by talents related to sexual performance); the violence against "illegal-alien temporary" women is assumed, even necessary as substitutes for violence perpetrated against women with some institutional protection. Blanco's position at SecretBurgers

merely surrounds him almost exclusively with unprotected women. Unconnected to a specific place or to any people, Toby suffers a set of connected exploitations and imprisonment, though, like the “illegal-alien temporary” dancers, the pairing of sexual and economic exploitation underwrites the very environment. Toby’s friend Rebecca leaves SecretBurgers and joins the God’s Gardeners. Rebecca—Toby’s one friend—persuades the Gardeners to rescue Toby from Blanco, knocking him down while they secret her away (41-42).

Partial commitment and embedded localness come together to form what I am calling “partially local ecology” in Toby’s development as a member of the God’s Gardeners. Toby’s reaction to the God’s Gardeners oscillates between gratitude and skepticism, forming an ambivalence that never leaves her even as she develops deeper commitments to Gardener practices, beliefs, and people. With them, she finds immediate rescue from her sexually abusive and violent boss and marginal material security among people who seem basically well-intentioned. Upon arriving at the Gardeners’ rooftop garden, Toby experiences a complex feeling of gratitude and something like the presence of the divine:

The garden wasn’t at all what Toby had expected from hearsay...She gazed around it in wonder: it was so beautiful, with plants and flowers of many kinds she’d never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different.

She found herself crying with relief and gratitude. It was as if a large, benevolent hand had reached down and picked her up, and was holding her safe. Later, she frequently heard Adam One speak of “being flooded with the Light of God’s Creation,” and without knowing it yet that was how she felt.

“I’m so glad you have made this decision, my dear,” said Adam One.

But Toby didn’t think she’d made any decision at all. Something else had made it for her. Despite everything that happened afterwards, this was a moment she never forgot.

Toby’s sense of the quasi-divine (“as if a large, benevolent hand has reached down and picked her up”) suggests a sudden, partial openness to the possibility of something beyond the everyday market forces that have made her suffer. For the first time, the invisible forces that affect her

life—that made her mother sick and allowed her abuse at Blanco’s hands—have brought her somewhere that seems safe. Toby’s direct thoughts aren’t portrayed, but the text stops short of declaring an actual prayer of gratitude; it is only “*as if* a large benevolent hand had reached down and picked her up.” Toby’s feeling of connection to the natural-like surroundings of the rooftop garden echoes the partiality of her feeling of gratitude to God. She feels the life of the garden as something benevolent and connected; nonetheless, this natural environment exists as a self-conscious creation of a group of people.

Newly arrived, Toby’s immediate feeling of connection to the garden suggests a reclaiming of connection to a rooted place, a connection characterized by relative security and relatively unmediated relation to nature. Her integration with the Gardeners themselves, however, remains a slow process both in terms of social relationships and the skills necessary to work in the garden. Toby finds them sanctimonious and bossy (46) and lacks commitment to their “deep ecological” beliefs in the moral equality of people and animals. Toby further questions the God’s Gardeners’ apocalyptic predictions of the coming ecological disaster (47). Her friend Rebecca suggests that the Gardener beliefs hold relatively little importance compared to their general security and reliability: “‘They are good people,’ was all she’d say. ‘What comes just comes, so what I say is, *Relax*’” (47). Never abandoning her skepticism, Toby nonetheless participates in all of the rituals of the God’s Gardeners, learns skills from them—for example, in bee keeping, the use of herbal medicines, and the growing and preservation of food—and even takes her place as “Eve Six” on the council of “Adams and Eves” who lead the God’s Gardeners.

While she has limited commitment to Gardener ideology, Toby’s reaction to the garden and her joining of the group at first suggests a favoring of a withdrawn localism. While the Gardeners live in the middle of a decayed suburb and occasionally look for converts, their

interaction appears only local; they look for converts on streets nearby, they pick through garbage piles and dumpsters for salvage, and they sell crops they grow at a local market. Nonetheless, Toby eventually learns that the Gardeners function in a worldwide and extensive network of environmentalist resisters. A few years into her stay with the Gardeners, Blanco learns where Toby hides and attacks the rooftop garden with some associates; Toby uses her skills as a beekeeper to use bees to chase them away (254-55). To protect her from further attack, the Gardeners put Toby in one of their “truffle cells” (secret places of protection), altering her appearance with the same biotechnology the Gardeners disdain. Toby becomes “Tobiatha,” a dark-skinned, dark-haired version of herself, and works secretly at the AnooYoo spa. In this position, Toby not only hides, but becomes a crucial node in a network of resistance that passes stolen corporate information and hides people who have perpetrated acts of espionage against the corporations.

Toby’s participation in the network of resistance remains partial on several levels; she has only limited knowledge as to the group’s actions and never learns how her own actions contribute to any ends. Toby learns that members of the resistance network sometimes hold positions of institutional importance; for example, on the AnooYoo board of directors (263). Occasionally appearing in disguise, Zeb, one of the God’s Gardeners, brings her information and small tasks to complete in service of broader aims. Toby occupies both sides of a God’s Gardeners schism; one side, led by Adam One, advocates continued peaceful means and awaiting “the waterless flood.” The other, led by Zeb, forms a broader group of active resisters, MaddAddam, who use gene-splicing technologies to perpetrate bioterrorism against roads, dams, and other ecologically destructive edifices (270). Toby facilitates both; she remains in partial contact for some time with the God’s Gardeners (until, chased away by the CorpSeCorps, they

have to abandon their garden and hide), and she carries messages for MaddAddam. Toby never fully understands, however, how the tasks she completes serve any broader goals, or even what those goals are. Toby reads the secret online MaddAddam message boards, where people with codenames (including Crake) exchange coded messages. She has only a vague sense of what the messages signify, and she remains mostly a spectator. As MaddAddam is the group that eventually creates the plague and the Crakers, Toby has a peripheral role in bringing about the waterless flood, but does so unwittingly.

For the second time in the novel, Toby disappears to hide from a threat; this second time, she has the interpersonal and institutional support of a network of friends. Toby's commitment to her associates in the Gardeners reinforces her commitment to Gardener belief and ritual; the Gardener religious practices help hold her social relationships together even disconnected from their original spatial context. Later, when she survives alone after the plague at the ruins of the AnooYoo spa, Toby will maintain connections with the people she has lost through performance of Gardener ritual and adherence to Gardener belief. Like Ren, she remembers advice on meditation and on basic physical survival, and she questions whether the Gardener teachings apply in her current context. Watching vultures and other carrion birds fly around the spa she shelters from the plague in, Toby remembers the Gardener teaching about vultures: "*Vultures are our friends...They purify the earth. They are God's necessary dark Angels of bodily dissolution. Imagine how terrible it would be if there were no death!* Do I still believe this? Toby wonders. Everything is different up close" (3-4; italics in original). The Gardener theologies around death seem comforting in the abstract; they focus on death as part of a necessarily natural, and therefore morally good, process of life. For Toby here, however, they remind of the plague and of her total isolation, an isolation that holds a danger similar to that of her earlier isolation, as she

is open to attack from any other desperate survivors of the plague. Gardener teaching helps her prepare: “Even when she’s sleeping, she’s listening, as animals do—for a break in the patter, for an unknown sound, for a silence opening like a crack in the rock. When the small creatures hush their singing, said Adam One, it’s because they’re afraid. You must listen for the sound of their fear” (5). Faced with new circumstances, she must re-evaluate some of the ethical stances she has developed through Gardener participation, but many of the same lessons and practices facilitate her physical and emotional survival.

Alone after the plague, Toby’s recollection of Gardener teachings at first mostly remind of her loss and loneliness. Eschewing fanatical devotion, Toby adheres to Gardener practice in a way that recalls her past connections with people even as she tries to forget them. Toby continually tries to tell herself that the others must have died in the plague, and that remembering them will only cause her pain that will interfere with her survival. As she walks through the hallways of the abandoned spa where she worked, she considers her survival as something apart from her life: “‘Who lives here?’ she says out loud. Not me, she thinks. This thing I’m doing can hardly be called living. Instead I’m lying dormant, like a bacterium in a glacier. Getting time over with. That’s all” (95). Her attempts to explain her survival according to Gardener narratives yield equally depressing results. “She spends the rest of the morning sitting in a kind of stupor...Paralyzing rage can still take hold of her...It begins as disbelief and ends in sorrow, but in between those two phases her whole body shakes with anger. Anger at whom? Why had she been saved alive? Out of the countless millions...She ought to trust that she’s here for a reason—to bear witness, to transmit a message, to salvage at least something from the general wreck. She ought to trust, but she can’t” (95). Confronted with the realities of Gardener prophecy, Gardener ideology—to which Toby had never been fully committed—appears inadequate, esoteric, and

inaccessible. Even as Toby tries to remind herself that “it’s wrong to give so much time over to mourning,” she cannot help but miss the others, and even contemplates using her knowledge of herbal medicine to end her life (96).

It’s unclear whether Toby would be better served by a less skeptical commitment to Gardener ideology, but it seems that Gardener narratives collapse with the absence of people—either present or alive in memory. Late in the novel, when Toby is reunited with Ren, Zeb, and others, her partial commitment provides the basis not only for the renewal of social ties, but for her to lead others in surviving. When Ren arrives at the AnooYoo spa, having been beaten and raped by criminals recently escaped from prison, Toby immediately goes to work caring for her. Her initial ambivalence about their survival remains, however, as she thinks about poisoning sick Ren with mushrooms:

Toby considers the Powdered Death Angels. Just a little, in Ren’s weakened condition. Put her out of her misery. Help her fly away on white, white wings. Maybe it would be kinder. A blessing.

I am an unworthy person, Toby thinks. Merely to have such an idea. You’ve known this girl since she was a child, she’s come to you for help, she has every right to trust you. Adam One would say that Ren is a precious gift that has been given to Toby so that Toby may demonstrate unselfishness and sharing and those higher qualities that Gardeners had been so eager to bring out in her. Toby can’t quite see it that way, not at the moment. But she’ll have to keep trying. (357-58)

Toby’s imagining of Ren dying as “flying away” recalls her own ambivalence at being alive, but, more importantly, Toby vacillates between ethical models that demand different kind acts. Both are well-intentioned, and Toby does not have a complete commitment to either one; she sees commitment as a goal reached through action. Toby later enacts the competing form of mercy in a somewhat less ambiguous manner. Nursing Ren back to health, Toby goes with Ren in search of Amanda, Shackleton, Croze, and Oates, all of whom have been attacked and kidnapped by the two escaped criminals. Finding Blanco injured and ill beyond treatment in a building, she gives

him water laced with the same Death Angel mushrooms, finally eliminating him as a danger to her well-being (381-82).

Toby's two different methods of treatment for Ren and Blanco do more than simply mark a difference between friend and enemy; they portray the flexible partiality of Toby's Gardener commitments. Poisoning Blanco is both selfish and kind; it ends both Toby's and Blanco's suffering at the same moment. This flexibility repeats in the final pages of the novel, which add a temporal dimension to the novels' consideration of embedded locality and partial faith. Toby's partial commitment to Gardener ideals allows her to lead a diverse group of survivors in a precarious, immediate situation that eschews long term design in favor of partial gratitude and immediate survival. Having rescued Amanda from the violent criminals who have captured her and met a feverish Jimmy and begun to treat him, the survivors (including the two criminals, tied up to a tree) sit around a fire, eating a soup that Toby prepares. The image provides a localized, literary interpretation of what William Connolly calls "an interim future:" "By interim future, I mean one close enough in time and shape to enable us to think about its possible details, even if the image is apt to be disturbed in by surprising events" (Connolly xiii). In a chapter entitled "Is Eco-Egalitarian Capitalism Possible?", Connolly describes a set of possible, interim treatments for immediate social, ecological, and political problems. This includes redress of grievances related to environmental justice without resorting to a far future vision the implementation of which would involve nearly unimaginable and revolutionary changes (93-118). *MaddAddam* imagines an interim state not so much as a political-economic exercise like in Connolly's work, but by portraying the destructiveness of utopian designs for a future. *Year of the Flood* ends with the survivors of the apocalypse *surviving* rather than building or planning for the future. It

suggests a limitation to imagination—that the very decentering that post-secularism demands requires a hesitation to say for certain how things *should* end up.

The final passages of *Year of the Flood* provide a final illustration of the partiality and incompleteness of the religious beliefs of the participants. Many of the characters of the two novels are united after the plague and sit around a campfire. Toby has rescued Ren and Amanda from two criminals, Jimmy sits with a high fever uncertain of recovery, and the two criminals sit nearby tied to a tree. Ren confesses to a delirious Jimmy that he had, many years ago, broken her heart, though she is glad he is alive and with her now. Amanda sits, hopefully recovering from the brutal abuse she had recently suffered at the hands of the criminals. Nearby, the Crakers—the genetically engineered, anti-hierarchical super-people created by Crake to survive the plague—approach the fire, singing. The image is one of survival mixed with tragedy, and hope mixed with precariousness. No particular path seems clear; no utopian vision—not even Crake’s—governs the future of the characters.

At the same time, the apocalypse has also failed to provide a new beginning. Ren is still haunted by abuse at the hands of the captured criminals (394), Jimmy still suffers the infection and the memory of his best friend’s destruction of the human race, and Toby still emerges from her own set of tragic circumstances. Ren and the others worry over the presence of the dangerous criminals, but by the end of *Year of the Flood*, no one has decided what to do with them. Toby, relying on the survival skills she has learned from the Gardeners, makes soup over a fire and forces the battered, broken group to eat, saying, “This is not the time for dwelling on ultimate purposes. I would like us all to forget the past, the worst parts of it. Let us be grateful for this food that has been given to us” (430). The strong presence of traumatic memories—in Ren’s interaction with Jimmy, in Amanda’s scars of abuse, in the presence of the violent criminals—

requires that we step back from it as a literal suggestion; it is clearly impossible. It cannot even function as an ideal.

Toby phrases her admonition in temporal terms, but her expression possesses a spatial element that moves beyond their immediate local context to suggest a global, ethical orientation. The impossibility of “forgetting the worst parts of the past” aside, arguing that it “is not the time for dwelling on ultimate purposes” suggests a focus on a present moment and, with it, a focus on immediate place. The impossibility of temporal divorce—a forgetting of the past—stands alongside the impossibility of disembedding their local location from the broader global networks in which it exists; while Toby suggests that the survivors put off concern for the broader world and the future, the past and the world are present. Instead of their immediate place offering an abandonment or escape from global interconnection, it offers a reductive locality—a local place that dramatizes the challenge of global history and global interconnection. While they now survive in this local environment, while the networks that the Gardeners traversed, MaddAddam made and utilized, and Crake appropriated have been destroyed by the plague, their signs are also here. They have here the traumatized and somewhat diverse remnant: victims of the corporate system, criminals who have taken advantage of its shadows, and disaffected members of it (Jimmy), all connected in some way with Crake, the destroyer of the world. A diverse and historically traumatized group with old and new antagonisms toward each other sits together, eating, declining to figure out right away how they will deal with each other. Toby’s statement neither provides a nihilistic reminder of the impossibility of “starting over” nor urges a simplistic notion of new beginning. Instead, Toby offers a humble hesitation over “ultimate purposes,” a suggestion that an immediate grand design cannot ultimately address the present circumstances.

The best that can be hoped for is a focus on an immediate, interim state—one that provides the opportunity to heal and form new relationships out of the old. It is, oddly enough, this lack of “dwelling on ultimate purposes” that characterizes the novels’ form. Their form and content confronts the reader with the limitations not only of understanding but of planning long term futures and ultimate purposes. This incompleteness and focus on the near future—on the interim between catastrophe and new order, for example—requires an approach where multiple modes of being are part of the desolate and recovering meal around the fire. There are two important suggestions being made here. The first lies in form: the multiple narration offers an ethical way of representing a multiplicity of belief systems by showing how characters with differing and overlapping belief systems are all embedded in a complex world characterized by capital and cultural interconnections. The second is one of politics: the novels suggest that *partial* commitment can drive productive, just action without hardening into unself-conscious dogmas that end up themselves helping produce brutality and injustice. American secularism’s hardness and lack of self-consciousness keeps it closed to a small set of subjectivities and possibilities.

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