

# Beyond A New World in Space

## Critical Astral Frontiers in Octavia Butler and Adam Garnet Jones

**José Dorenbos**

*Utrecht University, the Netherlands*

**África López Zabalegui**

*Utrecht University, the Netherlands*

**Luna Njoku Domínguez**

*Utrecht University, the Netherlands*

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores two contemporary literary visions of space settlement to gauge their potential within an emancipatory feminist and antiracist imaginary of the future. In doing so, it engages with the broader question of whether literary interplanetary dreams are necessarily tied up in a colonial rhetoric of violent expansion, or if they can also be organized to serve the interests of oppressed and underserved groups in an Anthropocene context.

The text examines and compares two recent narratives of space settlement, the one found in Octavia Butler's 'Earthseed' series and Adam Garnet Jones' short story 'History of the New World.' Based on a comparative close reading of both, this paper argues that both stories frame the project of resettling in space as a hopeful alternative to life within a collapsed natural world and the precarious socio-political framework that has arisen from it, albeit with distinctly different outcomes. This comparison focuses specifically on the organization of such utopian extraplanetary societies and the roles they fulfill in the present. Crucially, this paper considers how both stories evaluate the possibility of choosing not to leave for the astral frontier.

### KEYWORDS

Utopianism, Postcolonialism, Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, Octavia Butler.

### INTRODUCTION

The wonders of the universe, I learned, could not shield me from the fractures in the world around me

—Kimberley D. Mackinson. 'Do Black Lives Matter in Outer Space?'

Dreams of leaving the earth and settling on far-off astral societies, though not new in any sense, have acquired something of a fresh urgency in the Anthropocene. As the specter of destructive environmental collapse asserts itself into the collective field of vision ever more clearly, the idea of starting over on a yet untouched planet seems like an increasingly tempting alternative to facing the consequences of human-made climate change on earth. Yet as resonant as this vision of a flight from earthly nature and its collapse is, putting the human project on the first ferry to Mars

is still easier imagined than done. This contemporary waystation—between envisioning life on Elon Musk’s martial colony and the hypothetical, yet presupposedly inevitable future in which this will happen—provides a generative moment for considering the historic roles played by such utopian imaginaries in the collective imagination and questioning the assumptions that sustain them.

In the field of literature, the concept of space settlement refers to the speculative creation of off-world communities in alternate universes or on different planets. Typically explored within science fiction, the space settlement is concerned with the migration of humans into the cosmos in search of new worlds to inhabit. Stories of this kind engage with the successes and hardships of human life on other planets, not only as a creative or imaginative exercise but also as a critical one, holding a mirror to the earthly societies from which these dreams originate, as per Darko Suvin’s paradigmatic characterization of the genre (Suvin 1972).

This article envisions space settlement in a twofold relation to hegemonic and colonial power. It argues, first, that speculative stories of life in outer space contain an inherent risk of continuing the historical expansionist rhetoric of Western imperialism because they can reiterate the terms of colonial discourse and broaden the scope of possible new lands to discover, colonize, and settle on. Nonetheless, discarding any and all imaginations of space settlement does a disservice to their inherent radical potentiality. A space of latent possibility, astral frontiers can facilitate the utopian visions of many communities, including those historically and structurally underserved, a point already extensively made by many scholars of Afrofuturism, such as Lisa Yaszek, Kodwo Eshun, and Alondra Nelson. In their work, Afrofuturism denotes a mode of cultural production that harnesses Science Fiction tropes such as space travel to both apprehend the structural alienations suffered by Black diasporic communities, and envision a future in which things are otherwise (Yaszek, 42; Eshun; Nelson). This text thinks and reads with them through visions of space settlement to draw out the nuanced navigations between these currents of repeated exploitation and limitless potentiality. How can creative inquiry ensure that space truly is *for* everyone, moving beyond the way that it has been on Earth?

The aim of this paper is to explore the use of the space settlement in two postcolonial speculative literary fictions, to question if and how the device can be reframed beyond the colonial narrative. It wonders in what way the astral frontier can be imagined when disruptive climate change becomes acknowledged as an undeniable reality. By comparing Octavia Butler’s *Parable* series and Adam Garnet Jones’ short story ‘History of the New World’, this paper examines if and how literary dreams of space settlement can work through their embeddedness in colonial rhetoric to

facilitate the construction of something more ethical and ecological. In order to explore the latent potential of speculative writing on space settlement to work against the established and pervasive rhetoric of European colonial violence, one must acknowledge that the comparison between a real colonial rhetoric and a speculative one is inevitably disanalogous. Nonetheless, this acknowledgment is not intended to ground a disconnection of the speculative from the historical, in the sense that any project of dreaming into the future should always be informed by a critical reading of the past.

## POSTCOLONIAL UTOPIANISM IN SPACE

Traditional science fiction accounts of space settlement have shaped our vision of outer space as a place where, due to technological and scientific developments, earthlings can travel, settle, and establish new homes - at times against the interests of other galactic beings. This imaginary is deeply rooted in the rhetoric of colonial settlement and exploitation, which touts a worldview of unproblematic expansion. Indeed, Greg Grewell identifies a ‘colonizing impulse’ infusing classical science fiction. He argues: ‘The science-fiction industry has essentially borrowed from, technologically modernized, and recast the plots, scenes, and tropes of the literature of earthly colonization – but without, except in rare cases, questioning, critiquing, or moving beyond’ (Grewell 2001, 26).

According to Greg Grewell, classic science fiction generally projects earthly dreams and wishes into outer space according to three main models. He names these models the explorative, the domesticative, and the combative. In the explorative model, the subject matter is the ‘discovery’ of foreign, new worlds and the possibility of contact with the beings inhabiting these lands. The project of the space colonist is usually the focus, justifying the galactic invasion as a necessary step of a humanist project of perfectibility, in which capital ‘M’ Man is the sole architect of his environment. The domesticative model describes all the space incursions aimed at establishing a home for earthlings in space, expressed in narratives such as Andy Weir’s *The Martian*. Lastly, the combative model involves the conflict between civilizations battling for existence or for territorial matters, and can be seen in films like *Independence Day* or *Star Wars*, as well as in Ursula le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest*.

Grewell’s typology supports the assertion that a colonial ideology underpins the literary device of space settlement in classic science fiction. ‘What ought to be called “universal science fiction,” the science fiction of space, a space that has been and is still being inscribed by the efforts of colonizers’ (Grewell 2001, 29). Space is often treated as an unconquered blank slate upon which

a future can be projected, leading the future to be overdetermined by white neoliberal ideologies of technological progress. The vocabulary of space settlement, with its connotations of new worlds, discovery, and invasion, is loaded with a clear colonial heritage that reinforces the parallelism and continuity with the colonial mindset. As Grewell defends, one of the reasons for this is its grounding on the same notion of Otherness (Grewell 2001). The process of the construction of the Other from outer space is analogous to the way the Other was constructed in colonial enterprises. What happens, then, when the Other is the one who writes?

Restricting the interpretation of space settlement as a literary device that entails exclusively a colonial ideology would fail to acknowledge not only the possibilities of utopia itself but also the possibilities of literature. The device of space settlement has also been used by several writers to construct utopian and speculative fictions from a postcolonial perspective. The work of the much-lauded science fiction writer Octavia Butler is one such example of this. Butler's work is often read in line with Afrofuturism, as cultural production that focus on the struggles and issues of racialized people in a technocultural world (Nelson, 9). Like her fellow Afrofuturists, Butler embeds her work in the science fiction canon and its conventions, but at the same time articulates critical interventions into the tradition. The two books, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, excellently demonstrate Butler's ambivalent relation to the genre.

The novels follow Lauren Olamina, a teenage girl living in a post-apocalyptic California. The wider world has become uninhabitable due to environmental degradation which has made resources incredibly scarce and exacerbated social tensions. In response to the deeply inhospitable environment, in which safety is guaranteed only to the very rich and powerful at the expense of the collective precarity of everyone else, Lauren founds a community and a religion called Earthseed. The final purpose of Earthseed is to save humanity from Earth and 'take root among the stars', creating a settlement in outer space in order to find the freedom kept out of reach on Earth (Butler 1993, 208).

Following Grewell's typology, the *Parable* series contains both an explorative and a domesticative model of space settlement. However, the trope is reinterpreted at the service of a postcolonial utopian enterprise: the creation of a radically new world without the social injustices and oppressions that prevail on Earth. Butler uses space exploration as a device to create a potential space of freedom, safety, and joy for human beings, 'her implicit statement being that a truly equal, sharing, and caring society among humans may not be possible upon the Earth we have created' (Allen 2009, 1363). Nonetheless, Butler is never purely utopian in her visioning of a just future for everyone, emphasizing the need for struggle and significant adaptation alongside

mutual aid and peaceful cooperation. Space settlement, then, serves as a literary device that enables us to imagine a means of escape and a radically new world that ‘can provide as a prophetic tool for change’ (Allen 2009, 1355), but also as a tool for apprehending the continued operations of colonial rhetoric in future visioning.

Although they mark a critical use of the space settlement, Butler’s novels still belong to the dominant North American cultural production. Examples that use the topic of the space settlement as a utopian device and do not come from a United States literary tradition are much rarer. This fact seems to reinforce the colonial heritage and North American background of the trope. Nevertheless, an interesting case that also responds to the device of space settlement and that can be set in dialogue with Butler’s is the short story ‘History of the New World’, published in *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit & Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. This story, by Canadian Indigiqueer author Adam Garnet Jones, presents the tensions sparked in a family having to decide whether they should leave Earth due to its uninhabitability. It engages directly with the racial elements of this question. It is Thorah, namely, a white Canadian, who wants to flee from Earth and who has a deep trust in technological progress, while her partner Em, an Indigenous Canadian, wants to stay on Earth. Em acknowledges the importance of the racial dimension in their different responses, asserting: ‘Only a white girl could step into a completely unknown universe with the blind faith that everything was going to work out’ (Jones 2020, 36). The notion of progress together with the faith in the technocultural world linked to the white population both sustain the argument of the space settlement as a solution. Yet, simultaneously, both elements have facilitated the destruction of the earth.

Jones’ story presents space settlement as a utopian device, not for those who decide to leave the planet and settle in outer-space, but for those who decide to stay and finally see themselves free from the colonizers. In this way, Jones’s narrative indicates that for some indigenous populations, space settlement constitutes a literary trope with the utopian potential to project the postcolonial dream: the restoration of a past without the colonizer, a free new world to be rebuilt on Earth. This approach challenges Bill Ashcroft’s perspective on the articulation of time in postcolonial utopias. As a leading figure in Postcolonial Studies, he identifies a “tendency for post-colonial resistance to gain its energy from a utopian vision located not in the future but in the past” (Ashcroft 2007, 422). However, Ashcroft overlooks the ways in which space settlements have been used in different postcolonial utopias to reconceive a place in the present and challenge the traditional rhetoric behind space colonization precisely by projecting these ideas onto future-oriented utopian imaginaries.

## Time and history in dreams of space settlement

Within utopian visions, the space settlement is posited as fundamentally far removed, both spatially and temporally. The astral frontier not only figures as the radical geographical out-there, but the work of collectively settling among the stars also presupposes a state of high technological advancement that infuses the trope with inevitable futurity. Nonetheless, visions of space colonization are often considered to be the logical destination of human technological progression, framing the present as a waystation between grounded terrestrial experience and transcendent astral society. This section explores the relationship space settlements hold with time in both Butler and Jones' texts, demonstrating that both writers use time, and especially the notion of futurity, to criticize and re-articulate the idea of space settlement away from hegemonic and colonial power.

Throughout *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*, the idea of space settlement represents one of the propelling forces behind the rhetoric of Earthseed and its community members' struggle for survival. The Earthseed texts assert that the community's 'Destiny [...] is to take root among the stars' (Butler 1993, 20), and the *Parable of the Talents* ends on the suggested realization of this destiny. But taking root among the stars reconfigures the traditional utopian dream of space settlement. Up until the last pages of *Parable of the Talents*, the idea of space settlement is a hypothetical one located in an opaque and contingent future. The technological means for such a venture are already in place at the beginning of the story, but the precarity of life prevents it from being scaled up or even considered a viable project to be supported by any significant amount of national resources. The few politicians who do advocate space settlement echo the assumptions of grandeur and symbolic capital on the international stage that have traditionally motivated space travel. Lauren observes that politicians value space exploration for its association with a glorious past: 'Politicians have been promising to return us to the glory, wealth, and order of the twentieth century ever since I can remember. That's what the space program is about these days' (Butler 1993, 20). She juxtaposes her own understanding of space settlement to the past-oriented one when she asserts: "'Space could be our future" I say. I believe that' (Butler 1993, 20). She argues that 'space exploration and colonization are among the few things left over from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us' (Butler 1993, 20), acknowledging the history of space travel but embracing the possibility of reframing it to fit present circumstances and future dreams.

Lauren and the politicians' understanding of space can be considered as the contrast between a top-down versus a bottom-up one. For the politicians, going to space means perpetuating the Northern American military and financial hegemony of the twentieth century, utilizing the same

tools they had at their disposal then. Settling in space, subsequently, means copying this American society onto the uncharted, unstructured space that is a new planet. For Earthseed and Lauren, the radical open-endedness of space manifests itself as rather an empowering tool for marginalized collectives, a means of escaping terrestrial power structures that have worsened intensely and rendered the lives of gendered and racialized subjects even more precarious. Going to space embodies an escape from what Marlene D. Allen terms the “boomerang” of history, according to which those groups who have historically been disenfranchised always run the highest risk to be disenfranchised again when the next crisis hits (Allen 2009, 1354). In order to escape this boomerang and ‘project the ideas of African American freedom in the future’ (Allen 2009, 1358), Earthseed not only needs to engage with the future of widely facilitated space travel, but must also work through the history of faced oppressions, acknowledging that the past is neither dislocated from the present nor entirely determining of it.

Lauren further diverges from the dominant understanding of space exploration by entangling it with notions of survival and death. Taking root among the stars has a distinct implication of burial asserted at the beginning of *Parable of the Sower* as well as the end of *Parable of the Talents*. It is the news about a dead astronaut wanting to be buried on Mars but being extracted and repatriated against her will that sparks Lauren’s interest in space as a destination (Butler 1993, 19). Her desires mirror the astronaut’s when, after having helped realize large-scale space travel, she requests her ashes be taken to Mars and buried there to help fertilize the crops of the future. In the closing narration, the analogy with burial recurs: ‘The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars, after all, and not to be [...] buried uselessly in some cemetery’ (Butler 1998, 389). Throughout the novel, the vision of space exploration is one that motivates life and gives it a purpose that transcends simply surviving another night and living to see the sunrise. This infuses dreams of space with a strong orientation towards both the future and present and frames the work of creating a safer and more equitable environment in the present as one of securing the future.

Earthseed thus reclaims the utopian dream of space settlement from its normative, dominant, top-down utilization, and reconfigures it as a radical potentiality that motivates resistance in the present. In doing so, the texts demonstrate that space colonization needs not be a perpetuation of the destructive rhetoric of empire and white superiority, but that it can also inspire the solidarity which drives the establishment of the first Earthseed community, Acorn.

‘The History of the New World’ resignifies the idea of space settlement in an inverse direction. Jones locates survival on earth rather than on another planet: the New World, the slightly improved mirror image of earth that people are collectively escaping to. For Thorah, the character

set on leaving for this seemingly better place, the value of the New World lies in its complete disconnection from the terrestrial history or present. Attempting to convince her partner to escape Earth, Thorah argues that ‘Earth is the past, Em. The New World is the future’ (Jones 2020, 32). Thorah considers the present only as a waystation between the written-off Earth and the ‘blank page’ of the New World (Jones 2020, 33), and thus sees no benefit in considering alternative ways of organizing life on earth. Accordingly, Thorah takes for granted the asymmetrical ways in which climate change bears on different groups in the novel, in which refugees are structurally killed at the border or made into indentured laborers, as well as the privileged position she inhabits in wanting to pack up and leave. Em reminds her of this when she argues that, for NDNs<sup>i</sup>, leaving for the New World would run counter to their sustained efforts of ‘returning to the land’ and rebuilding community, language, and culture (Jones 2020, 32).

Em makes a case for staying that is distinctly rooted in an acknowledgment and appreciation of the past and a recognition that the present on earth is not exhausted of possibilities. Thorah, on the other hand, maintains a view of the future as something closed off, only reachable through an interdimensional portal. She also echoes a progress narrative in her framing of the New World as a logical next step, a natural reward for human inventiveness, intelligence, and perseverance (Jones 2020, 29-30).

Both Butler and Jones contrast a vision of space as pure future with one which includes past and present in a continuous exchange of signification. On the one side, both texts associate this first vision with hegemonic power, as something only articulated by highly privileged subjects or institutions and often without regard for the possible harms implied by copying existing societies onto other planets. On the opposite side lie Lauren’s and Em’s conceptualizations. Lauren recognizes the historical complicity of US space exploration in defending hegemonic power but also emphasizes its open-endedness to motivate resistance to structural and historically informed oppressions in the present. Em believes in a similar temporal entanglement, but maintains a view more strongly rooted in an experience of place, which leads Em to conclude that leaving earth still means disconnecting from the past. Rather, Em sees a tangible agency in staying and attempting to make a better life under current circumstances. But the success of the choice to stay and recuperate along with the natural world is contingent upon a large number of people leaving for the New World, and subsequently being prevented from returning to Earth.

Both narratives seek to reimagine the potentials of space settlement from the perspective of marginalised communities, thus highlighting the necessity to deconstruct and reconfigure the ways in which this vision is approached. Detaching the space settlement from technofuturist



progress narratives constitutes a first step. However, it is also crucial to consider how the dominant conception of the space settlement itself must be challenged and subverted in order to make space for its emancipatory utopian potential.

### **The problematics of the ‘New World’ trope**

The question of time and history is deeply embedded within the idea of the space settlement and the language surrounding this utopian imaginary is often imbued with a certain colonial nostalgia. While the desire to colonize space is framed in fiction as a future-oriented project - a distant other-place - conceptions of these space utopias are often underpinned by a certain resemblance to a past marked by Western imperialism and hegemony. As Robert Cowley states, ‘The verb “colonize” has only negative connotations in contemporary usage, and the historical record of colonialism does not provide an inspiring blueprint for the future’ (Cowley 2019, 332). This tension between the history of the past and the utopia of the future raises serious questions about how this colonial baggage can be shed in favor of a more desirable future in space. If space is the place for projections of utopia, the notion that there is ‘space for everyone’ in any imaginative off-world venture must be complicated and questioned.

To explore the utopian potential of space settlement as a literary device, two fundamental clarifications must be made: who constructs the space imaginary and what is the function of this utopian ideal? In ‘History of the New World,’ Jones engages with the real prospect of space colonization as a critique of the Western anthropocentric approach to utopia as an escape plan. Yet, Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* exhibits an awareness of the impossibility of this venture while harnessing a utopian idealism that functions as an incentive for survival against exploitation and marginalization. A dialogue between these contrasting narratives reveals the potentialities of space settlement for humanity and the tensions which need to be addressed before such a utopian endeavor can be truly considered.

Central to the space settlement debate is the question of who has authority over this imaginative venture and to what extent their intentions can be considered globally representative. Discussions of space colonization (in literature and otherwise), mostly emerge from the American context and are largely shaped by historical experiences. Grewell, for instance, draws attention to the ways in which science fiction is largely unable to imagine utopian conceptions of space colonization outside of the terms on which Euro-American colonization was premised (Grewell 2001, 26). As a result, much of the dominant vocabulary surrounding human presence in space is deeply contradictory to the concept of utopia as a space for ideal social betterment and inclusivity. Bill Nye, the chief executive officer of The Planetary Society, exemplifies this in the organisation’s

2019-2024 strategic framework, 'Space for Everyone'. He asserts the idea that their mission for exploration of worlds beyond Earth is 'an open, welcoming community with space for everyone,' yet in the same breath he draws on the history of 'our' ancestors as explorers who 'ventured far from home, climbed over the next hill, and sailed beyond the horizon' to encourage the drive to shape humankind's future in space (The Planetary Society, 2019). Nye's vision of humanity's role in space is inscribed with Western colonial attitudes which view space as an untouched territory up for grabs: a new world. This understanding of off-world space as a clean slate for humankind is echoed by Robert Zubin, the president of the Mars Society. In his article titled 'Why We Earthlings Should Colonize Mars!', Zubrin refers to Mars as the 'New World' and advocates for the terraforming of this planet as an extension of the settlement and colonization which are 'inherent in the human spirit' (Zubrin 2019, 306). For him, space colonization, much like the European colonization of the Americas, represents an opportunity for people to 'make a mark, or to make a new start...[or] to create a society according to their own principles' (Zubrin 2019, 308).

The vocabulary employed by these space advocates draws upon the utopian ideals of inclusivity and social transformation while blatantly ignoring the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed who were made to suffer for the utopian endeavors of Western civilization. The conception of space as a place for everyone is thus contradicted by comparisons with European colonization, which indicates the necessity for a serious reimagination of space settlement as a utopian vision for the future. Jones is starkly aware of this problematic approach to space colonization and raises questions about inclusivity and representation throughout his work.

Jones picks up the reference to Mars as the 'New World,' and uses it to position the fictional colonization of an alternate universe as a mere extension of Western colonialism rather than a drastic reimagination of the possibilities of humankind. What draws the Canadians to this new world in Jones' story is not the possibility of a *different* world but the reproduction of their own world onto a clean slate. Throughout the narrative, Jones deliberately makes use of terminology that is reminiscent of the colonizer's, referring to the 'Trans-Dimensional Migration' committee as 'the first pioneers' and describing new discoveries as the 'bounty of the New World' (Jones 2020, 25;27). Jones positions Thorah, a white, Canadian liberal, as the embodiment of the dominant Western tradition who embraces the possibility of colonizing space as a 'blank page', claiming, 'we can make our story there, anything we want' (Jones 2020, 27). Her use of 'we' refers, here, to the desires of her entire family, yet her own utopian vision fails to acknowledge the positions of her partner and child, Em and Asêciwan, Two-Spirit Native Americans. Thorah does not account for 'the elderly, the sick, the undocumented, the paranoid, and the working

poor’ – or the NDNs – who she implies are not worthy of consideration as they prepare to abandon the planet in search of a better future (Jones 2020, 27).

Jones contrasts Thorah’s use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ with Em’s assertion that ‘Only a white girl could step into a completely unknown universe with the blind faith that everything was going to work out,’ drawing attention to the disparity between the positionalities of the two characters (Jones 2020, 29). The reader is forced to consider how the utopia of space colonization, when premised upon normative Western ideals, can be exclusionary and alienating to those who are not warranted the privilege of reaching beyond their means. Jones paints a picture of an inhospitable world; refugees fleeing uninhabitable parts of the globe and met with harsh resistance as they attempt to enter Canada – turned away, incarcerated, and condemned to enslavement (Jones 2020, 26). The disturbing imagery of families torn apart and indirectly murdered by government neglect presents a dystopic vision of the future but is in actuality drawn from the reality of contemporary immigration policy. While those who can afford it begin to flee to an alternate universe, NDNs are left rebuilding their communities, restoring the cultures and languages which had been repressed by European colonization (Jones 2020, 26-27). These communities, only just recovering from this oppression, are evidence that there is much to be done before we can conceive of an inclusive utopia beyond this planet. Western imperialism which is deeply embedded in notions of space colonization challenges the assertion that space is for everyone, and Jones’ narrative forces readers to take a step back and reconsider the implications of this venture.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler identifies these limitations and utilizes this struggle as the driving force for Lauren’s utopian mission to ‘take root among the stars’ (Butler 1993). Lauren is attuned to the present conditions, which make her desire to take Earthseed into space an impossibility, yet Mars symbolizes for her a future towards which the Earthseed community can orient itself. While she is aware of the political and economic utilisation of the prospect of space colonization, she does not abandon all hope. ‘Mars is a rock—cold, empty, almost airless, dead. Yet it’s heaven in a way. We can see it in the night sky, a whole other world, but too nearby, too close within the reach of the people who’ve made such a hell of life here on Earth’ (Butler 1993, 21). Unlike Thorah, Lauren employs the use of ‘we’ here not to exclude the marginalized members of society, but instead to collectively position them against the structures of power which have contributed to the declining conditions on Earth.

Butler, thereby, reappropriates the utopian notion of space colonization and grants agency to those who wish to make the world a more hospitable place, a place for everyone. Settling in space thus marks not merely an escape from the Earth, but also represents an opportunity to escape the social

conditions that have produced its degradation — ‘far from politicians and business people, failing economies and tortured ecologies’ (Butler 1993, 79). With heaven symbolizing the utopia par excellence, Lauren’s comparison of Mars to heaven suggests that any conception of this Earthseed space colony must be markedly better than life on Earth rather than a mere transposition of the current conditions onto a new environment. Yet, embarking upon such a utopian venture requires Lauren to build a community from the ground up, fostering notions of solidarity, inclusivity, and trust. Thus, *Parable of the Sower* utilizes the notion of the space settlement as a device that guides Lauren through the transitional phases of constructing a utopian imaginary while acknowledging the difficulties of such an endeavor. As Lauren herself states, ‘I don’t know how it will happen or when it will happen. There’s so much to do before it can even begin. I guess that’s to be expected. There’s always a lot to do before you get to go to heaven’ (Butler 1993, 80).

Before space can truly be *for* everyone, the off-world utopia must be reimagined and defined *by* everyone, freeing the concept of the space settlement from the Western imperialist perspective through which it is traditionally conceived. As Grewell asserts, ‘Earthlings are still very much acting out colonial impulses, designs, and fantasies - in what still appears to be a colonial age...the term *postcolonialism*, given the continued proliferation of colonial narratives, even if projected into the universe, never has been an accurate descriptor. The galactic colonists are here, still’ (Grewell 2001, 39-40). Yet for scholars such as Cowley, precisely these negative connotations attached to colonialism might nudge us towards a more grounded postcolonial approach to utopian projects, ‘which urges us to avoid reproducing the logic of empire in the framing of our theorizations and critiques’ (Cowley 2019, 332). Approaching an alien environment necessitates prior consideration of how we can avoid falling back on the same canonical tropes of domination over other worlds, and the reformulation of the space settlement to represent a departure from this top-down mindset. Thus, any transcultural approach to the notion of the space colony requires an active resignification of what, and most importantly, *who* this utopia represents before it can take shape.

## CONCLUSION

In science fiction literature, the trope of space settlement is deeply entrenched in the rhetoric of Western colonialism and cannot be fully understood without an acknowledgment of this influence. Yet, it also holds the potential to be resignified as a direct attempt to decolonize the space imaginary and form utopias that seek to challenge and subvert the hegemonic understanding of the trope. By considering the ways in which Butler and Jones employ the space settlement—

both as a critique and as a way to redefine it, this paper has highlighted the creative potential of this utopian device.

Both texts assume that to really be utopian for marginalized communities, the space settlement must first engage with and define itself against the normative white, western rhetoric that continues to surround it. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren crystallizes her view by contrasting it to that of the politicians and their longing for a return to the twentieth century. In 'History of the New World', the primary conflict surrounding conceptions of space settlement takes place between Em and Thorah. But from this shared point, the texts diverge. Lauren leaves for space with a critical awareness of the risk of perpetuating colonial rhetoric, but with a stronger trust in the possibility to achieve something different. Contrarily, Em writes off the idea of escaping the earth, acknowledging its inherent ties to an exploitative discourse of uncharted worlds and boundless resources. Em, therefore, decides to stay and enact utopia in the attempted recuperation of indigenous culture and the injured natural environment. The disparity in the stories' endings demonstrates a continuing open-endedness which provides a fruitful space for further considerations and shows how the utopian imaginary of the space settlement can take diverse forms.

Nonetheless, both texts demonstrate that, while limited and selective, visions of space settlement are by no means a dead end for the utopian imaginative drive. When employed with a critical lens and transcultural appreciation, it holds immense potential to offer utopian alternatives to the terrestrial here and now. What the two examples signal, beyond their specific literary contexts and the utopian and science fictional frames this text has placed them in, is a broader need to critically acknowledge how speculation on the future might reinforce the ontologies of violent exclusion that continue to pervade our thinking. Both Butler and Jones present a thought-provoking and prefigurative anti-racist politics in which the project of imagining utopia manifests itself distinctly through community and care within Black and Indigenous groups, rather than through top-down exercises of institutional or discursive power. Butler and Jones thus highlight the essential and continued political valency of utopian dreaming, not only in an Anthropocene context but also far beyond, be it against the grain, the rising tide, or the forces of gravity.

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<sup>i</sup> This term is a shorthand for Indigenous peoples in North-America to refer to themselves. It is a shortening of 'Native Indian' or 'Non Dead Native', and is adopted here from Adam Garnet Jones' use of the term. We do not mean to claim this term to characterize Jones or other Indigenous people to any definitive end, but rather only to respect Jones' self-identification.