

Combatting Human Extinction: Biblical Archetypes and Environmental Apocalypse in  
Contemporary Dystopian Fiction

By

Elizabeth Hurley

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**ABSTRACT**

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This project examines through recreations of Biblical archetypes the cause and effect of environmental apocalypse and potential human extinction in contemporary dystopian novels. The goal of this thesis is, in part, to argue that near-future dystopian fiction is speculative, since the fictional reasons behind the downfall are akin to Anthropocenic (that is, pertaining to the age of the Anthropocene, the contemporary world where humans have severely altered the Earth) environmental and ecological concerns. In examining *The Year of the Flood* (2009) by Margaret Atwood, *Parable of the Sower* (1994) by Octavia Butler, and *The Maze Runner* (2009) by James Dashner, this project seeks to make conclusions regarding appropriate human ecology in the age of the Anthropocene, the role of technology as either a cause of or a solution to dystopia, and the role of religion in influencing society. First, in the opening chapter examining *The Year of the Flood*, I analyze Atwood's message about the Anthropocenic destruction of nature. As this author shows, environmental apocalypse can only be resolved by a Biblical flood to eradicate humans and replace them altogether. The second chapter examines Dashner's text and his assigning of narrative settings to conventional Biblical spaces. This paralleling presents the idea that the future is heavenless because of extreme climate obliteration. Finally, the third chapter of this project considers what happens next by analyzing Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. I suggest that the hope for the future of humanity is to transcend Earth to colonize Mars, following Elon Musk's hasty

push for a civilian Mars colony. Overall, I contextualize the pinnacle problems that cause a state of dystopia according to these authors with contemporary environmental anxieties, such as the effects of human intervention in sustainability of species, climate destruction due to natural phenomena, and alternative methods for sustainability of humankind. The importance of this project is to use these speculative texts as a point of reflection. Then, readers can imagine the possible consequences of continued environmental destruction and the effect they might have on the survival of humankind. These authors identify the contemporary anxieties about the future and exaggerate them in their novels to question: What might happen if these problems were left unsolved? Thus, these texts serve not only as speculations but also as forms of activism for reconsidering human ecology and conserving the environmental in the age of the Anthropocene.

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## Introduction

Scott Pruitt, the newly appointed head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under President Donald Trump's administration claims that the climate change "debate" is simply "a political bumper sticker." In doing so, he reduces years of research on the subject to a hoax. Reporter Natasha Geiling states Pruitt's words: "There are scientists that agree, there are scientists that don't agree, to the extent of man's contribution and whether it is even harmful at this point" ("Trump's EPA Pick"). The ambivalence on the issue of climate change in the age of the Anthropocene, that is, the age when human activity has significantly altered Earth's environment, from Pruitt alarms scientists and environmentalists alike. To clear up the ignorance behind Pruitt's rhetoric, Geiling points to studies publicized by NASA, which states that 97 percent of scientists believe that climate change is real and that it is primarily driven by human activities, most notably by the burning of fossil fuels ("Scientific Consensus"). Regardless of published fact from one of the nation's most respected agencies, President Trump's administration still has doubts about the impact and severity of climate change. Trump has already failed to protect the environment by permitting the building of the Dakota Access and Keystone XL Pipelines, both of which have been hot-button issues in the media recently. Protests against the building of these pipelines raise concerns of not only environmental injustice against Native American people but also the commitment to the fossil fuel industry and thus a push away from renewable sources of energy (Blackmon). The disrespect to the Native Americans is particularly galling because their situation is seemingly dystopian: the environmental injustice being committed against them is the latest crime in the long colonial history of the US, where the Native

Americans have been exploited and robbed of their land.<sup>1</sup> For many environmentalists, Trump's administration continues to threaten the environment with an agenda that clearly exacerbates the scientists' worry the consequences of continuing to destroy the environment. Priutt's appointment to the EPA and Trump's commitment to the construction of the pipelines bring the Earth closer to environmental apocalypse and make scientists and concerned citizens even more alarmed.

This notion of "apocalypse" has interested not only scientists, who use empirical data to predict future trends, but also writers, who imagine where these trends may lead. While an ecologist may look at population trends of a species of animal to consider the threat of Anthropogenic destruction, science fiction writers examine the trends in political, societal, humanistic, or environmental flaws to describe a future world wherein those flaws are exaggerated. Oftentimes these worlds are negatively perceived and so belong in the subgenre of *dystopian* fiction. But, the worlds depicted in dystopian fiction are often not far from reality. In fact, many of the issues driving a dystopian world—themes such as political corruption, disease, disenfranchisement, drugs, violence, or resource depletion—are often just exaggerated forms of issues occurring in the present or have occurred in recent history. According to critic Kay Sambell, dystopian stories "...warn humans about the dangers of some current trend" (Sambell in Miller). Take, for instance, George Orwell's famous *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), where the dystopian world is centered on themes of censorship, surveillance, and nationalism. The anxieties in Orwell's dystopian world is

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<sup>1</sup> Protests have erupted against the environmental injustice committed against the Native American with the building of the pipelines. The pipelines, if constructed, would run through sacred Native American land. The building would further marginalize the Native American people and disrespect Native American religion and beliefs. In one article on the issue, an activist for Native American rights states, "Native Americans have a divine mandate to take care of this Earth.... That [they] have a divine mandate to take care of [the] environment" (D'Angelo). Inherit stewards of the land, the Native American people are still being exploited, but this time by the ancestors of the colonizers. This idea of being divinely appointed to take care of the environment will be explored in the first chapter of this project as Atwood shows through the God's Gardeners.

though to be derived from anxieties surrounding the Cold War, which started just years before Orwell's book publication. Today, an example of a hugely successful dystopian story is Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008), where teenagers are forced to fight to the death on television. Laura Miller of *The New Yorker* identifies the societal flaws that Collins highlights in her dystopian. Miller calls the book an "indictment of reality TV," and thus the novel paints a picture of what the world would look like if violence and dehumanization in the media were to overtake modern society ("Fresh Hell"). Masked by hyperbole, dystopian novels point to underlying issues in the contemporary world and explore the possible futures where these problems are left unresolved. Paralleling the fictionalized issue to the contemporary issue behind its hyperbole causes readers to ponder where the fictional world could become a reality. Are the authors using their platforms of literature to send a message to the general public? What is that message? And how can readers respond?

The three novels examined in this project, *The Year of the Flood* (2009) by Margaret Atwood, *Parable of the Sower* (1994) by Octavia Butler, and *The Maze Runner* (2009) by James Dashner, explore notions in environmental apocalypse based on contemporary anxieties, especially in light of the Trump administration. The authors use their respective novel not only to fictionalize and exaggerate contemporary concerns but also to provide a point of reflection on the trajectory of the environment and humankind. These novels outline near-future dystopian worlds where nature and the environment are in peril and where religion is either totally absent or is the only solution for preserving humanity. These novels, unlike *The Hunger Games* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, turn to Biblical archetypes of catastrophe and salvation to not only show the cause of dystopia but also to find the solution.



The first chapter of this project analyzes Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* to propose that the Biblical archetype of Noah's Flood (in Atwood's book is a deadly pandemic) is not the sole solution to save the Earth from destruction by humans. Atwood introduces a third-party powerful human and suggests that the reversal of environmental damage is entirely within human ability; therefore, humans do not need to rely on a divine figure, on one God or another, to resolve the environmental crisis. The dystopian world Atwood describes is one where technology taints the purity of the natural world through genetic splicing and commodification. Contrasting, Atwood presents the "God's Gardeners," a cult that values the purity of nature and worships an *Old Testament* God. The Gardeners believe that a "Waterless Flood" will rid the Earth of the people who are technologically corrupting it. Regarding themselves as a "plural Noah," the Gardeners are ready to protect those worthy of salvation from extinction. The flood deviates from the Biblical archetype because it is instigated by a human instead of by God; Atwood thus argues that humans take agency in determining their own fate. The chapter employs traditional literary criticism, some ecocritical notions, such as the idea of "virginal nature," and historical and religious concepts of *human ecology*<sup>2</sup>. I also parallel events and themes in Atwood's text with contemporary advances in gene splicing and de-extinction methods that are nearly identical to those fictionally represented by Atwood. One way in which Atwood's novel exaggerates

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<sup>2</sup> *Human ecology*: This term, which I use throughout the project, connects most pointedly to the Romantic sense of the term "ecology." Hannes Bergthaller cites the critic John P. O'Grady's conception of the term to mean a "a continuation of Romantic critiques of modernity. Such critiques saw a hubristic, domineering rationality pitted against an original, organize unity encompassing both man and nature" ("Housebreaking"). In Romantic thought, society is inherently flawed because of its removal from nature, where humans must reconnect with nature and achieve a transcendental or morally superior place. Bergthaller continues to define this Romantic thought of ecology: "The idea there is a stable and knowable natural order within which human beings have their proper place" (ibid). This key point highlights the thought that there is a "right" or correct space for humans in the universe. In this project, the term human ecology is used when discussing this rightful place somewhere within or between the natural/animal world and God/heaven. The novels examined in this project address human ecology in the age of the Anthropocene in order to reexamine that rightful space where humans belong in the universe.

contemporary examples is with the “pigoon,” a species of genetically modified animals *in the Year of the Flood* wherein a pig has human tissue genetically implanted so that it can grow organs for transplantation. Contemporary journalists have reported on pigoon-like efforts occurring in the scientific world, thus bringing to light ethical issues of human ecology at the intersection of technology and nature. The purpose of this paralleling is to show that these dystopian worlds are not as far from present day. I contextualize Atwood’s novel at first by introducing the “Sixth Mass Extinction,” a biological phenomenon currently alarming scientists where large numbers of species are becoming extinct mostly because of human activity. I later juxtapose the Sixth Mass Extinction with the Gardeners’ reverence for recitation of extinct species, questioning if the flood is successful, will humans suffer the same fate?

What would happen if the Earth suffered near-total annihilation? The second chapter of this project examines James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* to suggest that the future world is not likely to be better than the current one. This text chronicles a group of boys and one girl who are forced to solve a seemingly impossible maze designed by mysterious creators. The novel takes place in two planes—the experimental maze space and the outside world. I argue that Dashner uses these spaces to parallel Biblical archetypal space heaven, hell, and purgatory to reorder them for the future. In the novel, the Earth has been decimated by solar flares, which I read as an extreme indictment of climate change and global warming. The literature serves as a criticism against climate change disbelievers like Trump and Priutt a presents a world where scientists are inadvertently forced to save humankind from extinction. Additionally, I analyze how the novel employs Biblical archetypes such as “God the maker” and prophetic figures in order to expand on issues of human ecology. Employing ecocritical

themes, such as the “machine in the garden” and further drawing on Biblical archetypes, Dashner displays a world where humans are dislocated and subjected to a traumatic life. When combined with Dashner’s reshuffling of Biblical spaces, I conclude that Dashner suggests that environmental apocalypse will cause hell on Earth.

In response to an Earth where life is no longer sustainable, humans must find a place to go so that they can evade extinction. The third chapter of this project looks at Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* to consider what will be the future of humankind if Earth is unfit for survival because of environmental apocalypse. Butler’s novel follows Lauren Olamina, a young black girl from near Los Angeles who migrates northward after her home and family are destroyed by violence and fire. During her migration, she preaches lessons from her new religion—“Earthseed,” which believes that God is “Change”—to gain supporters. One of the fundamental teachings of Earthseed that I examine in this chapter is the belief that “heaven” belongs in outer space, and I thus propose that Butler presents a tangible space, that is, that outer space is a tangible, real, accessible goal. Thus, Butler calls for space colonization in order to escape Earth that is depleted of natural resources. Along with examining the ways Butler constructs this argument through her writing, I identify moments of ecocritical thought, such as Butler’s “retreat into wilderness” motif, and the postcolonial thought of “westward expansion,” which I extend to explore specifically as *space expansion*, and the idea of humans being at a development or evolutionary state that is post-Earth. Furthermore, I contextualize these Earthseed beliefs and ecocritical readings to Elon Musk’s plans for Mars colonization in contemporary society. Ultimately, Butler considers where humans should flee were the Earth to devolve to a place where it can no longer support human life.

In this project, I argue that the tools of dystopia used in these novels can be closely paralleled to contemporary issues at the junction of technology and nature, which the authors use to warn about future consequences of human technology and science. By analyzing these three novels, I argue that dystopian fiction can be recognized as falling under the genre of *speculative fiction*, defined as fiction that may include elements or events that speculate or predict the future. I prove that these near-future worlds are not necessarily unrealistic: they might become reality if the corruption portrayed in the novels overtakes society. Therefore, to avoid a dystopian fate, readers must discover the authors' main concerns as warnings revealed by the texts.

## Chapter One

### **The Sixth Mass Extinction: Are Humans Next? The Downfall of Humanity in**

#### **Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009)**

“The Holocene is gone. In the Anthropocene [humans are] are [the] permanent global stewards of sustainable human nature,” warns Erle Ellis, a geologist from the University of Maryland at Baltimore (“Forget Mother Nature”). By placing the responsibility of taking care of nature on humans’ shoulders, Ellis reminds the inhabitants of Earth that the sustainability of the human species is at stake. But with the desire for the advancement of technology and science in contemporary society, humans have industrialized. With the concomitant withdrawal from nature into civilized, technological spaces, humans have become disconnect from the environment. This detachment from nature has not gone unnoticed. Scientists and journalists have remarked that although humans have had a significant effect on the condition of the environment. The mass apathy towards the environment and push towards technological and scientific developments has highlighted many issues in the Anthropocene, such as an infiltration of technology on the natural world or a lack of respect for the lives of animals. One major environmental concern today is the “Sixth Mass Extinction,”<sup>3</sup> which some geologists, like Ellis, attribute to humans’ exploitation in the natural world. Journalists, like Jeremy Horace of *The Guardian*, bring the fact of an ecological tragedy to the general public in order to encourage reflection about the relationship between humans and nature, human ecology, and environmental activism, which

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<sup>3</sup> The “Sixth Mass Extinction” refers to the current natural phenomenon where a large number of species of animals are becoming extinct. Although extinction is not an unusual phenomenon in the history of the Earth, the Sixth Mass Extinction is unique in that many scientists regard the Anthropocene (that is, human intervention and manipulation of the natural world) as a major cause—so much so that some species may not have gone extinct naturally or without human influence. This event will be expanded on later in this chapter and put into conversation with the conclusions I draw from Atwood’s text.

the public notices in campaigns such as “Save the Bees.”<sup>4</sup> Contemporary mass environmental activism arguably began with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), which exposed the environmental harm in pesticide use and sparked opposition by the public, leading to the ban on DDT for agricultural use. The legacy of Carson’s text in terms of the power of a book to spark activism is also motive for many science fiction writers, whose projections of dystopian worlds often reflect or exaggerate the flaws in contemporary societies.

One such science fiction writer is Margaret Atwood, whose *The Year of the Flood* (2009) depicts a near-future world in which the natural world falls victim to technological manipulation by a group of people known as the “Pleeblanders.” The Pleeblanders’ world is rife with genetic splicing and commodification of animals. Against the Pleeblanders stand the “God’s Gardeners,” a pantheistic/Judeo-Christian cult whose members adopt Transcendentalist and “crunchy-granola” contemporary environmentalist thinking<sup>5</sup> in order to live as one with nature. Atwood allows readers insight into the Gardeners’ and Pleeblanders’ respective worlds through Toby, who escapes her abusive life in the Pleeblands and finds solace in the world of the Gardeners, and Ren, who grows up in the Gardeners’ commune only to escape to the Pleeblands as an adolescent. Supplementing the narratives of Toby and Ren are hymns and sermons from Adam One, the leader of the God’s Gardeners.

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<sup>4</sup> “Save the Bees” is a campaign used by environmental organizations like Greenpeace to alert the general public of the consequences of pesticide use in the killing of honeybees. Greenpeace notes, “Seventy out of the top 100 human food crops—which supply about 90 percent of the world’s nutrition—are pollinated by bees” (Greenpeace). Public attention to the honeybee crisis has manifested in videos, petitions, and articles circulating through social media as well as donations for conservation purposes in exchange for bee-related merchandise. Similar to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1964)’s message to limit the use of chemicals by big-daddy corporations, Atwood includes the honey bee as an essential and sacred creature in the God’s Gardener faith in conversation with the activism that Greenpeace and others are calling for.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, articles on “anti-vaxxers” and “paleo-diet” such as Rebecca Robin’s “The Looming Battle Against Anti-Vaxxers” or Sheila Viers’s “The Problem with the Latest Popular Diets,” both of which are cited in their entirety at the end of this project.

These hymns reveal the central ideologies of the Gardeners and their devotion to both a Biblical God figure and to historical environmental activists. Adam One reveals that the Gardeners' purpose is to restore Earth to the natural state of balance that this novel's God ostensibly intended. However, this restoration is only possible through human extinction set forth by a third-party radical, Glenn, who acts as a divine figure. Atwood uses these plot devices to state that the reversal of natural destruction by humans is within human ability. Furthermore, she ultimately comments on the futility of relying on a God to reverse what today scientists would likely refer to as *Anthropocenic destruction*.<sup>6</sup>

Atwood first establishes Pleeblers' world of ecological failure, wherein technology is used as a weapon against nature. Honoring technoscientific development and casting aside religion, the Pleeblers manipulate the natural world to fit their needs. One such example of this is the "pigoon," a creature that has human stem cells implanted into pig DNA to grow new human organs. The pigoons are used for replacement organs for humans, as the novel states, "in the future [people would] be able to get [their] very own pig made, with second copies of everything" (Atwood 221). The creation of the pigoon represents the Pleeblers' manipulation of nature for human benefit. Atwood presents the issue of "playing God," where nature is perceived as building blocks that humans can piece together as they please. Humans are therefore superior to the natural world since they can control and manipulate it for their benefit. The pigoons, however, are not totally fictionalized. The idea of nature being building blocks for humans is seen in the advancement of "synthetic

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<sup>6</sup> As alluded to earlier, the "Anthropocenic destruction" mainly consists of the human manipulation of nature that has put other species at risk of extinction. Examples of this include the victims of the Sixth Mass Extinction, like the Pyrenean ibex, a subspecies of ibex native to the Pyrenees mountains in Northern Spain, Andorra, and Southern France. The subspecies was declared extinct in 2000 because of poaching and habitat eradication, examples of Anthropocenic destruction (Zimmer). While some species become extinct because of natural causes, such as diseases, most of the species going extinct during the Sixth Mass Extinction are directly or indirectly connected to human manipulation of nature, be it poaching, urbanization that destroys natural habitat, pollution of the air or oceans, or effects from Anthropocenic climate change.

biology.” This term refers to the intersection of biology and engineering where genes can be built or changed to create or manipulate creatures. An example of this is the development of the “spider goat,”<sup>7</sup> a kind of goat that can be used to farm spider silk. More specifically, Atwood in fact models her fictional pigoon on the current efforts by scientists to use pigs to grow human organs,<sup>8</sup> which Jareen Imam from *CNN* refers to as “the premise of a science-fiction movie” (“Human Organs”). However, through Atwood’s narration style, she urges readers to criticize the pigoons, and by extension, the pigoon-like efforts in contemporary society. Her novel is largely through the perspective of the Gardeners, who attack the farming of pigoons as “bad, because of having to kill the pigs” (Atwood 221). Masters of ecologically ethical natural living and advocates of equality of all species, the Gardeners do not approve of pigoon creation. The Gardeners focus their attention on the symbiotic relationship that should dictate the relationship between humans and nature. As they proclaim, “Why do we think that everything on Earth belongs to us, while in reality, we belong to Everything?” (Atwood 63). Atwood astutely sets up the dichotomy between the Pleeblanders and the Gardeners through this phrase. That is, the Pleeblander’s creation of the pigoon illustrates the former portion of this phrase, while the Gardeners live to fulfill the latter. Atwood uses this logic to show the rift in Pleeblander and Gardener practices when it comes to the ethical debate on whether technology or humans should interfere with nature. For both groups, the justification behind why they should or should not interfere with nature

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<sup>7</sup> The spider goat is created by implementing spider silk protein gene into the brains of goats. Spider silk has proven to be extremely useful, especially in the field of medicine. However, spiders are naturally cannibalistic and cannot be farmed for their silk. With the use of synthetic biology, scientists created spider goats where the silk element appears in their milk. Afterward, the element can be extracted and spun into silk. This commodification of genetically altered animals illustrates the idea that humans can “play God” and manipulate nature at will and for their benefit (“Horizons: Playing God”).

<sup>8</sup> These real-life pigoons are created by “taking human stem cells [...] and using them in a pig embryo and injecting it into the uterus of a pig” (Imam). The purpose of these real-life pigoons is to grow organs for humans who risk death by waiting on organ donor lists.



is based on their ideological beliefs. For the Pleeblers, the creation of the pigoon affirms the idea that humans are superior to animals, and so have a right to manipulate nature. The Gardeners, by contrast, reject such an ideology and instead value a natural life at one with nature. More than the pigoon, the Pleeblers are downright cruel to animals, which the Gardeners vehemently oppose.

In order to determine the human being's place in the world, the Pleeblers use their technological dominance, while the Gardeners look to scripture. Atwood uses this contrast to reflect present day anxieties over the dynamic nature of survival and extinction in the wake of the Sixth Mass Extinction. The two opposing ecological ideologies between the Pleebler and the Gardeners Atwood uses to question which force—religion or technology—is most destructive of nature, and which can save it. Ecology, as described by Bergthaller, is “the idea there is a stable and knowable natural order within which human beings have their proper place” (“Housebreaking the Human Animal”). But the inconsistency between the Pleeblers' and Gardeners' idea of human beings' ecological status in the world is what further causes natural disorder. In the Pleeblers' world, technology serves as a way for humans to manipulate nature for their benefit. While the pigoons illustrate a scientific useful version of this ideology, the jellyfish bracelet, an accessory with live jellyfish that the wearer must feed, is an example that is even crueler. Amanda, a pleeb who eventually turns Gardener, informs Ren, a Gardener child, that some kids purposely do not feed the jellyfish. Amanda says, “they [the jellyfish] eat each other [...] it's like a miniwar in there, and after a while there's just one jellyfish left, and then it dies” (Atwood 73). Through the commercialization of the lives of animals, Atwood expands the issue of “playing God.” The lives of helpless jellyfish are in the hands of the wearer, who

perceives the bracelet as a disposable accessory. In opposition, Atwood places the Gardeners who are disturbed by the Pleeblers' manipulation of nature and follow scripture to determine the placement of humans in the hierarchy of all creatures on Earth. Adam One preaches to the rest of the Gardeners by saying, "[God] made us 'a little lower than the Angels,' but in other ways – and Science bears this out – we are closely related to our fellow Primates, a fact that the haughty ones of this world do not find pleasant to their self-esteem" (Atwood 52). In order to describe the Gardeners' view of ecology, Atwood makes reference to the Great Chain of Being, which is a philosophical and religious hierarchy of all matter and life. St. Thomas Aquinas, a famous 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian philosopher and theologian, determined that the natural world is a hierarchy where God belongs at the top, followed by Angelic beings, humans, and then animals. In the scholastic understanding of the Great Chain of Being, humans take on a great moral significance, since they participate both in the earthly and in the spiritual realms ("The Great Chain of Being"). Humans exist in the limbo state between animals and angels and between Earth and heaven. Because of their intrinsic tie to Earth, humans ought to "acknowledge that [they] are a part of nature and behave accordingly" (Bergthaller). The Gardeners subscribe to this notion of ecology, accepting that they are a part of nature and must behave as such. The Gardeners regard themselves as being nearly celestial beings as appointed by God, but at the same time, they are biologically closer to animals. By subscribing to the notion of ecology as per the Great Chain of Being, the Gardeners accept that humans are part of nature and must behave as such, cultivating themselves in order to behave in a "natural" way (Bergthaller). By contrast, the "haughty ones" to whom Adam One refers, the Pleeblers, are unwilling to accept their animality. Through the creation of genetically manipulated animals like the pigeons and the

commercialization of animal lives like with the jellyfish bracelet, the Pleeblanders reject their ecological space designated by the Great Chain of Being. Instead, they wish to act as “angelic beings” that exercise divine control over other creatures and refuse to accept that humans are also a part of nature. This rejection disrupts human ecology and natural order. Attentive to the disruption and dedicate to fixing it, the one Gardener, Glenn, attempts to restore the rightful natural order by eradicating humans and creating a replacement species (more on this later). While the Pleeblanders’ and Gardeners’ ideological beliefs can be examined in their actions and sermons, respectively, their homelands contrast with their beliefs.

Atwood parallels the ideological imbalance between the Pleeblanders and the Gardeners in the occupation of their physical spaces. First, Atwood presents this division through the physical spaces that each group occupies that further exemplifies the strife in ideology in her dystopian world. Then, Atwood shows that the physical place that each group occupies coincides with their ideological beliefs. On the ground level dwell the Pleeblanders, living in the dirty, violence-ridden Pleeblands formally known as Willow Acres, but referred to as “Sewage Lagoon,” because “a lot of shit ended up in it” (Atwood 30). Conversely, the Gardeners create the Edencliff Rooftop Garden, a self-sufficient compound with fresh fruits and vegetables, storage units for honey and mushrooms, a Wellness Clinic, Classrooms, and abandoned apartment buildings in which they live, repurposing and recycling all they can (Atwood 42). Atwood uses the physical location difference, that is, the Gardeners occupying the rooftop space while the Pleeblanders dwell on ground level, to parallel each group’s ideological beliefs. That is, the Gardeners are devoted to God and live according to their virtues of naturalness, vegetarianism, and

kindness. In opposition, the general masses of the Pleeblanders subscribe to no religion or spirituality, choosing instead to belong to gangs,<sup>9</sup> and to rely only on technological manipulations of nature. When contextualizing the Great Chain of Being in terms of physical locations, one can fairly assign animals and humans to Earth's ground, while angelic beings occupy a space above them, closer to heaven. The Gardeners' occupation of rooftops reflects their enlightened and spiritual state that elevates them closer to heaven, suggesting that they tend more towards the classification of angelic beings than animals in a physical sense. Meanwhile, the Pleeblanders, although regarding themselves as God-like beings who can manipulate nature at will, occupy the ground space, implying that, ironically, they are on the same physical level as animals. While the spaces reflect differences in ecological understanding, they do not correlate to archetypal spaces. Neither the Edencliff Rooftop nor the Pleeblands satisfy the Biblical archetypes of heaven or hell. Edencliff Rooftop, instead, is a sanctuary that is *closer* to heaven, employing its Biblical namesake of a lush paradise of worship and community of multiple Adams and Eves. The Pleeblands, similarly, do not satisfy the conventional Biblical notions of a "hell"—a fiery pit of moral corruption, without escape. Instead, readers observe the Biblical archetype of hell in both Butler's world of drug addict arsonists and Dashner's scorched Earth. The Pleeblands, by contrast, are distinctly grounded. Sewage Lagoon brings to mind a humid and grimy place of decay instead of an eternal fire. The implications of bringing to mind rotting waste in a sewage, instead, steers

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<sup>9</sup> One such example of a gang is the Jelacks, to which Rebecca, Toby's co-worker at SecretBurger, belongs. Rebecca says, "Us Jelacks, we're [the] kinds of folks you don't want to mess with. He [Blanco, Toby's abuser] knows I'd get the Blackened Redfish onto him, and they're one mean gang. Plus maybe the Wolf Isaiahists. Way too much grief!" (Atwood 35). In addition to the gangs, the Jelacks and the Blackened Redfish, Rebecca reveals that the Wolf Isaiahists, who are seemingly portrayed as a religious cult akin to the God's Gardeners, are also regarded as a gang by the Pleeblanders. Is it then fair to believe that the Gardeners are a "gang" too? I argue no, since the Wolf Isaiahists seemingly live within the Pleeblands along with the other gangs and unaffiliated people. The Gardeners, by principle, are pacifists, unlike the Wolf Isaiahists, who are evidently militant and otherwise abrasive, as evidenced by their feud with the Lion Isaiahists.

readers completely away from these Biblical notions of otherworldly space. Atwood plants the Pleeblers, and by extension the readers, in the ground, wherein decay is highlighted in order to remind the readers of the natural laws of the Earth. Atwood places both the Edencliff Rooftop and the Pleeblers inside the Earthly dimension, despite each place's respective association to a Biblical sphere. In doing so, Atwood purposefully presents the oppositions in her novel as oppositions that also exist in contemporary society. Since the spaces resemble Earthly spaces, the strife between the Pleeblers and the Gardeners resemble the strife between unethical scientific manipulation of nature and environmental activism. Through this juxtaposition, Atwood prevents humans from assuming a totally divine or totally victim status, and instead argues that human hands can produce this seemingly divine catastrophe. That is to say, humans create the world in which they suffer. In order to combat this, the Gardeners are strict about their way of life. In order to fight against the perceived cruelty of the Pleeblers, the Gardeners live pledge to live naturally.

Atwood makes narrative choices that cause readers to perceive the Gardeners as superior to the Pleeblers, in order to promote the idea that humans must return to a "natural" way of life. The Gardeners' natural way of life involves a commitment to sustainable food sources, repurposing and recycling of materials so as to eliminate waste, and belief in equality of species, all of which resemble a new-age Transcendentalist thinking. Embodying Emerson's point of self-reliance and Thoreau's removal from society, the Gardeners combat the Pleebler world of unethical technological manipulation of nature as Transcendentalists combatted the industrialized way of life. Thus, the Gardeners, despite their new names for futuristic items, are not entirely revolutionary in their beliefs. Purposefully, Atwood correlates the Gardeners' rebellion against the Pleebler ideology

and the Transcendental rebellion against industrialization. Another narrative choice that prioritizes Gardener ideology is Atwood's restricted view into the Pleeblers' world. The novel is constructed through narrative arcs from Toby and Ren, supplemented by sermons and hymns from Adam One that give readers a more profound look into Gardener beliefs and help construct the divide between the Pleeblers and their world and the Gardeners and theirs. While Toby and Ren both spend time outside of the Gardener realm, their experiences in the Pleeblers are dangerous as they are subjected to harassment, violence, and prostitution. One Pleebler character to whom the readers are introduced is Blanco, Toby's abusive boss. Blanco is described as fat, balding, with "a full set of arm tattoos: snakes twining his arms, bracelets of skulls around his wrists and arteries on the backs of his hands so they looked flayed" (Atwood 36). Atwood uses the imagery of snakes and skulls, cultural and Biblical symbols of the devil<sup>10</sup> and death,<sup>11</sup> to establish Blanco as the novelistic villain. The act of tattooing symbolizes conquering of the thing that is depicted in the tattoo, since it is permanently inked on the skin and thus becomes one with the person's body. So, Blanco's tattoos of what represents evil and mortality symbolize his, and by extension the Pleeblers', mockery of Biblical notions of evil and the desire to conquer death. Without overtly positive or encouraging examples of Pleeblers and by restricting the view of the world outside of the Gardeners, Atwood intentionally promotes the Gardener agenda and

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<sup>10</sup> Biblically, snakes are associated with the devil. Eve is deceived by the devil in the Garden of Eden into eating the forbidden fruit, thus violating God's command and committing the original sin. In this fall from good, "Genesis" states, "The serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made" (3:3). When reading Atwood's text with such attention to its Biblical undertones, Blanco's snake tattoos and abusive personality allows readers to associate him with the devil.

<sup>11</sup> In the Bible, Jesus's site of crucifixion is attributed to skulls. In the book of "Luke," as well as in "Matthew," "Mark," and "John," there is mention of "a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull)" ("Matthew" 27:33). The real name of the place is omitted in "Luke," "And they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him" ("Luke" 23:33). In both versions, the image of the skull is used to symbolize Jesus's death but also more poignantly to allude to the sin of crucifying the Son of God. Again, by reading Atwood's novel with attention to Biblical allusions, Blanco's skull tattoos recall the Biblical significance of the skull as attached to the place where Jesus is crucified. (Note: Golgotha is also known as Gagulta or Calvary).

discourages the Pleeblander way of life. In doing so, Atwood seemingly attacks the contemporary counterparts to Pleeblanders' technological manipulation of nature. Atwood highlights a natural "Gardener" way of life that moves away from technological manipulation of nature and towards a Biblical, simple way of life. In doing so, Atwood suggests that the contemporary scientists who might engage in similar "Pleeblander" practices, like the developments in real-life pigoons or the farming of spider-goats, will cause the downfall of moral humanity and an imbalance in the natural world.

Due to the dispute between the placement of humanity in the world and the Pleeblanders' technological domination of nature, the world has fallen out of natural order, resembling the Biblical archetype of renewal from the story of Noah's Flood. Atwood changes this archetype of God unhappy with His creation of humanity and so chooses to, with His all-powerfulness, destroy man and start afresh. *The Year of the Flood* flips this normal archetype into one where humans, who throughout the novel are given the ability to seemingly "play God" in different ways (like the Pleeblanders' creation of new species and the Gardeners' physical position closer to the sky), assume the role of God in this archetype to wipe humanity clean and start afresh. Adam One preaches:

[God] knew something had gone very wrong with his last experiment, Man, but that it was too late for him to fix it. 'I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite every thing living, as I have done,' say the Human Words of God in Genesis 8:21. (Atwood 90)

Since God decides that He can no longer reset the Earth, as it were, the Gardeners expect the next cycle of purge to come from human hands—which eventually comes with Glenn's biological warfare. While the Pleeblanders had previously assumed the role of a God-like figure, they are passive in the extinction of humanity due to their lack of religious following

as a whole. The Gardeners, however, with their close relationship with scripture, realize the archetype and carve themselves a role in Atwood's all-human production of this Biblical cycle of destruction and renewal.

In the mortal cast of this Biblical archetype, Glenn plays God, successfully releasing a purge that causes near-extinction of humankind, while the Gardeners assign themselves the role of Noah. Adam One preaches, "We God's Gardeners are a plural Noah: we too have been called, we too forewarned. We can feel the symptoms of coming disaster as the doctor feels a sick man's pulse" (Atwood 91). As the "doctors" of the world, one expects the Gardeners to *cure* nature of the Pleeblers' destruction. That is to say, one might expect the Gardeners to breed natural species of pigs to outnumber the number of pigeons. Instead, the Gardeners interpret this as the need to cure humanity of the ethically diseased Pleeblers, prioritizing this need over their constant lament over loss of life (mostly animal, but humans as well). The cure they thought of previously—a natural life of groundedness and unity as God had intended—is not enough anymore. Instead, the plural-Noah Gardeners are charged with the responsibility of determining which species will survive the purge and repopulate the Earth, as Noah does after the flood. However, since the purge is released biologically, the Gardeners are unable to preselect the humans who will survive, and so are forced to leave this responsibility to chance, hoping that animals will be spared at the very least. Instead, this God-like role of determining who will survive is awarded to Glenn, who, in addition to creating the purge virus, creates a race of humans worthy of living on Earth.

Glenn both destroys the faulty humankind and replenishes the Earth with a new species of humans who will, allegedly, be better caretakers of nature. Although Atwood's



earlier publication *Oryx & Crake* (2003) tells the story of Glenn (also known as “Crake”) and his creation of the Crakers, Atwood allows readers a peek into the Crakers at the end of *The Year of the Flood*.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the novel, after surviving the Waterless Flood, Toby and Ren meet the Crakers, who state, “Crake lives in the sky. He loves us” (Atwood 411). Although not an extensive look into this new species of humans, it seems as though they worship a human divine figure: Glenn, their creator. Their religion echoes the Gardeners’ worship of historical figures, insinuating that humans can be regarded as God-like figures. The Crakers resemble a sort of “natural android:” they respond more as animals than humans, yet they are still technologically constructed. When Ren is approached by male Crakers who want to mate with her, Toby explains, “They smelled you [...] They smelled the estrogen. They thought you were in season. They only mate when they turn blue. It’s like baboons [...] [That feature] is supposed to make life simpler. Facilitate mate selection. Eliminate romantic pain” (Atwood 412). These highly efficient, biologically driven new species of humans are seemingly devoid of the human nature that readers collectively understand. Or, the Crakers are devoid of human emotion and instead are devoted to their creator and to animalistic rituals, such as mating. This is Atwood’s way of suggesting that a technologically created human species might be more similar to animals than to humans. Ironically, this contrasts to the pigeons, which the Pleeblanders intend to make more human than animal. Toby is forced to kill a pigeon out of fear after the purge and observes its companions gathering around the dead one and bringing flowers, whom they seem to be mourning. Toby reflects, “But pigs? Usually they’d just eat a dead pig, the same way they’d

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<sup>12</sup> As many critics and Atwood herself have pointed out: *Oryx & Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, although released sequentially, are not prequel/sequel, but instead, meant to tell the same story from different perspectives. That is to say, the events that happen in *Oryx & Crake* happen alongside the events in *The Year of the Flood*.

eat anything else. But they haven't been eating this one. Could the pigs be having a funeral? Could they be bringing memorial bouquets? [Toby] finds this idea truly frightening" (328). The pigs, which turn out to be pigoons, exhibit human behaviors and rituals that surprise Toby. Instead of reverting to their animalistic tendencies of eating the carcass, their human DNA causes them to behave more like humans and express empathy or grief for their dead comrade. Atwood mentions that historically, humankind has had trouble dealing with animals exhibiting emotions akin to human emotion. This is because humans "alone had [souls], situated inside the machine[s] of [their] bod[ies]" (Atwood, "Rachel Carson, 50 Years On"). The thought of humans as the only creatures with souls was a popular notion in the pre-20<sup>th</sup> century. Even after scientists (and pet owners who witnessed animal emotions) disproved this thought, humans clung to the idea that they were "fitter" than animals just by virtue of intelligence and "uniquely human emotions." Meaning, "nature would have to give way eventually to a fully 'humanized' environment" (ibid). These historically rooted observations play into the Pleeblander thought of humans' place in the Great Chain of Being as superior to animals. In other words, if humans are the only creatures with souls, then they are inherently superior to soulless animals. However, the pigoon display of human emotion contradicts the previously accepted theory. These emotions are not seemingly human emotions displayed by animals in some sort of imitation, but instead, are the true "uniquely human emotions," since the pigoons are altered with human genes. The pigoons are "humanistic animal" hybrids, meaning they are psychologically human yet biologically animal. By contrast, the Crakers are "animalistic human" hybrids, since they are psychologically animal yet biologically human (or at least, human-like). Hence, Atwood suggests that creatures that appear human-like might not necessary think or behave in the

most human-like way. The hybridity of humans and animals, however, complicates humans' space in the Great Chain of Being. Do pigeons or Crakers belong in the human world between animals and God, or do they belong in the category with all animals? In other words, does humans' psychology or biology determine their space in the Great Chain of Being? This debate seemingly derails the concept of the Great Chain of Being and replaces it with the "Chain of evil" a phrase coined by Garrard (103). Doomed by their nature of hybridity, the pigeons and the Crakers are forced outside of the natural order. However, after the Waterless Flood, both the pigeons and Crakers inhabit the Earth. Thus, Atwood suggests that, although removed from the natural order, these hybrids inherit the Earth. Since humans create them both, they are intended to replace the previous creatures and to steward the land better than those previously. Being outside of the natural order might allow them immunity to the cyclicity of extinction, and so they might be able to live eternally without destroying the environment. Comparing these hybrid creatures with contemporary examples, it becomes clear that genetic manipulation of creatures is the ultimate effort to stop extinction.

Atwood's presentation of both the pigeons and the Crakers as futile efforts for conservation of species is in directly conversation with contemporary efforts. One such effort where scientists use technology on animals in the hopes to continue the species occurred in 2000, when Celia, the last living Pyrenean ibex, was captured briefly to have her DNA extracted and frozen before her death. This extraction was then used by Alberto Fernandez-Arias from the Aragon Hunting Federation to clone Celia and became the first instance of a method known as "species revival" or "de-extinction" (Zimmer).<sup>13</sup> When

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on de-extinction, refer to these sources: Paul Rincon's "Fresh Effort to Clone Extinct Animals" or Adam Rutherford's article on synthetic biology, "Playing God," both of which are cited at the end of this project. Both of these sources and other similar sources explore themes like the ones examined in this

interpreting both the ethics of de-extinction in light of the Anthropocene, this effort can be read in several ways. One way suggests that these scientists' effort was noble since the Pyrenean ibex was a clear victim of the Anthropocenic harm intrinsic to the Sixth Mass Extinction period, and their extinction was largely because of habitat destruction by humans and poaching. Thus, the revival of their species acts as an apology, in a sense, for the direct human cause on the species' decline. However, one can also argue that the scientists' interference equates them to the status of a divine figure with permission and ability to decide the fate of a species. Connecting this contemporary example to the novel, the Pleeblers stand in for the scientists, able to technologically manipulate nature at their leisure. The difference between the two, I argue, lies in the purpose. In present day, the efforts of the scientists to clone Celia were to sustain the species in the ecosystem so as to maintain balance in the natural world. That is to say, there exists a ripple effect in the natural world once one species becomes extinct, and de-extinction efforts seek to mitigate the risk one species' extinction may have over other species' sustainability. The Pleeblers, by contrast, technologically manipulate nature in a way that is inherently useful yet wasteful (why does *every* citizen need a pigoon with replacement parts?), and is disposable and materialistic.

In addition to active measures in de-extinction, scientists are taking preventative steps to protect species from extinction in the future. Following Celia's cloning, two scientists Bryan Clarke and Ann Clarke from the University of Nottingham founded the "Frozen

Ark”<sup>14</sup> Project, which collects, preserves, and stores tissues and DNA from endangered animals “for use both in conservation programmes and to enable society to benefit itself and all life on Earth” (“Frozen Ark”). The project serves as an insurance, so to speak, whereby endangered animals’ tissue is frozen so that if they might be revived were they to become extinct in the future. Like with Celia, many critics (typically from outside of the scientific world) are unclear on the ethics of the project. These enemies of the project, as Ann Clarke herself states, criticize that those involved are “playing God” and its Biblical tribute to Noah and clever logo of an ark floating on double-helix ocean waves become sacrilege (“Frozen Ark’ Collects Animal”). Due to the similarities in the biological conservation industry at the intersection of technology and nature and the paralleled issues raised in Atwood’s novel, I argue that these similarities are not coincidental. As I will argue more in depth in the conclusion of this project, Atwood and the other authors mentioned in this project are directly affected by the events occurring in the world around them. That is to say, I argue that Atwood’s influence for the Pleeblanders’ and Gardeners’ debacle on issues of “playing God” and technological manipulation of nature and animals, like the pigeons, are in direct conversation with contemporary debates. Thus, one is permitted at least in part to read Atwood’s text as a speculation of the future where the consequences that lead to dystopia left untreated. By reading and considering the contemporary parallel examples alongside Atwood’s text, readers are allowed to consider more deeply Atwood’s message. Upon realizing the contemporary instances of conservation of species and counter-efforts to trauma of the Anthropocene, readers are able to fill in the gaps of Atwood’s message. That is to say, when realizing the ways in which humans are currently attempting to “fix” the world and

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<sup>14</sup> Frozen Ark is not the only project to freeze DNA for conservation purposes. Another project is “Revive & Restore,” whose website includes TEDxDeExtinction videos, two of which are delivered by Fernandez-Arias and Zimmer. See the works cited at the end of this project for more information.

comparing it to Atwood's message in how to "fix" the world, the commonality becomes clear: humans *can* help.

By suggesting that the cure for natural destruction and ecological disorder is within human ability, Atwood gives hope for readers living in the Anthropocene facing the Sixth Mass Extinction. Although some consider the term Anthropocene as a "pop culture" buzzword, others point out, "If humans were to go extinct tomorrow, then [their] impact on the biosphere would be recognizable as an epoch boundary—like the boundary between the Pleistocene and the Holocene" (Autin in Stromberg, Williams in Hance). Human beings' influence on Earth's biosphere has been so drastic that plants and animals are facing the Sixth Mass Extinction in Earth's history. Previous Mass Extinctions were thought to be caused by various planetary phenomena, for example, the meteorite impact that has driven dinosaurs to extinction.

However, the Sixth Mass Extinction differs in that human beings have played a massive role in the extinction of many species via poaching, destruction of habitat, and pollution, among other reasons, rather than the cause of extinction being attributed to a random, natural incident. Exploring the future of a world in which humans cause extinction, Atwood sets *Year* in only what can be analyzed as a post-Sixth Mass Extinction period, since the normally natural animals are replaced with genetically engineered ones, thanks to the Pleeblers. From there, Atwood shifts the roles in the extinction equation, making humans the victims instead of animals. Since Atwood herself classifies her work as "speculative fiction," and critics agree, some elements of *The Year of the Flood* can parallel seemingly similar elements in present day. As touched on earlier, the jellyfish bracelet of the Pleebler world is an exaggerated form of the minx coat—both use animal life as

commodity, yet Atwood's version boosts the ethical concern since the animals are still alive. Thus, Atwood's novel is both an insight into a future society and as a call for activism.

Atwood uses her platform—dystopian speculative literature—to give hope that humans have the opportunity to right their wrong. As discussed, Glenn's role in human extinction implies that humans are in control of restoring and renewing Earth's natural world. Scientists agree, as Mark Williams, geologist from the University of Leicester, states, "Humans are the problem, but they are also the solution" (Hance). This thinking is precisely what Atwood is calling her readers to consider. The importance in adapting Biblical archetypes to mortal reality forces her readers to take action. No longer are they excused to wait for divine intervention in the saving or destroying of the natural world. This is in part expected since the Gardeners worship historical figures like Rachel Carson and Terry Fox, both of whom have been elevated to the status of Saint and receive dedicated sermons highlighting their contribution to the planet, contemporary environmental activism, or perseverance in the face of strife. Atwood urges her readers, who stand peeking between their fingers at the devastation of the Sixth Mass Extinction, to consider repeating the following prayer that Adam One delivers to the remaining Gardeners in the midst of the purge:

Dear Diplodocus, dear Pterosaur, dear Trilobite; dear Mastodon, dear Dodo, dear Great Auk, dear Passenger Pigeon; dear Panda, dear Whooping Crane; and all you countless others who have played in this our shared Garden in your day: be with us at this time of trial, and strengthen our resolve. Like you, we have enjoyed the air and the sunlight and the moonlight on the water; like you, we have heard the call of the seasons and have answered them. Like you, we have replenished the Earth. And like you, we must now witness the end of our Species, and pass from Earthly view.  
(Atwood 424)

Like other sermons from Adam One, this one passage is lengthy, repetitive, and condemning of humankind. Readers may choose to cast aside some of Adam One's sermons since often

they seem foolish, with childlike language, exclamation points, and silly songs. However, this particularly sermon is poignant in that Adam One recounts some extinct species in the midst of the Waterless Flood. Thus, Atwood urges her readers to consider adding “Humankind” to the end of the list of extinct species.

In order to avoid following in the same footsteps as the Passenger Pigeon, human beings must reevaluate their position within the structure of the universe. In Atwood’s article “Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, 50 Years On” for *The Guardian*, Atwood reflects on the influence and reception of Carson’s book, specifically by her entomologist father, all of which influenced *The Year of the Flood*. She recalls that before Carson:

Nature was an ‘it,’ an impersonal and unconscious force; or, worse, malignant: a nature-red-in-tooth-and-claw<sup>15</sup> bent on afflicting humanity with all the weapons at its disposal. Against brute nature stood ‘we,’ with our consciousness and intelligence. We were a higher order of being, and thus we had a mandate to tame nature as if it were a horse, subdue it as if it were an enemy, and ‘develop’ it as if it were a female bustline [...] We could then exploit nature’s resources, which were thought of an inexhaustible. (“50 Years On”)

Identifying this shift in the human-nature relationship that came with environmental activists such as Carson, Atwood acknowledges that nature changed from being an impersonal “it” to a personable “her.” Mother Nature takes care of humankind, and in return, humankind is responsible for taking care of Mother Nature. Carson’s text and its general suspicion of corporate mutilation of the “naturalness” of food sparked a reversion back to that virginal, un-tampered-with nature that was lost through industrialization. Atwood’s novel models this shift, wherein the Pleeblers regard nature as that “it” force that can be manipulated as desired, while the Gardeners push for the perception of nature as Mother Nature, which must be protected and revered. Atwood suggests that this shift back to nature as “it” is

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<sup>15</sup> Atwood uses this famous description originating from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, which is “still widely used to describe the ruthless way that (capital-N) Nature daily dispenses with individuals and, over eons, with species as well” (Weiss).



characteristic of the Anthropocene as shown through the Pleeblers' exploitation. By juxtaposing the Pleeblers with the Gardeners, Atwood suggests that the world can only avoid catastrophe and humans can only avoid extinction if humans follow the footsteps as the Gardeners: to recognize nature as caretaker and take care of it in return. If humans fail, the world that follows might become a living nightmare.

## Chapter Two

### Welcome to Hell on Earth: Reimagining Biblical Spaces in James Dashner's *The Maze*

#### *Runner* (2009)

The debate between scientists who publish detailed evidence of the presence and severity of climate change and political disbelievers who ignorantly fail to institute environmentally friendly policies causes many global citizens to fear for the future of the environment. Those who are pessimistic about the future of the environment without serious alterations to conservation policies, especially in light of President Trump's campaign promises, often paint a bleak picture of what lies ahead. Even before his presidency, Trump was vocal about his disbelief concerning climate change and global warming. In December 2013, he tweeted, "Wow, record setting cold temperatures throughout large parts of the country. Must be global warming, I mean climate change!" (Trump). The sarcastic tone with which Trump mocks this scientifically proven impending catastrophe has not changed since he entered the Oval Office, and his stance threatens the policies that have already been in place in order to monitor and address efforts to care for the climate. Global warming and the greenhouse effect are key issues in the discussion of climate change, and scientists have noticed the overall rise of Earth's temperatures over the years. Partly because of his concerns related to imminent environmental crisis, James Dashner creates a dystopian world where the Earth is decimated by solar flares. In his 2009 novel *The Maze Runner*<sup>16</sup> he chronicles the

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<sup>16</sup> At the time of this writing, few scholars have studied *The Maze Runner* and there is a definite lack of relevant literary criticism on the novel and especially in comparison to Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *Parable of the Sower* (1994). This is perhaps due to *The Maze Runner*'s recent release, although this is unlikely since *The Year of the Flood* was released in the same year and has gained much attention from critics. Another possible reason might be that the attention from Hollywood and conversion into a blockbuster saga (like *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent* [2011] series, both of which are dystopian novel trilogies-turned-movies) has discouraged literary scrutiny. Book reviews on the novel exist but usually lack serious analysis of the text and often compare the novel with its movie counterpart. For these reasons, this chapter will be absent of direct literary criticism on the text when compared with the previous and following chapters.

life of Thomas, one of a group of adolescent boys who live in an artificially created maze and are being tested for their persistence and will to live. Dashner employs Biblical archetypes such as humans “playing God,” while reshuffling Biblical spaces such as heaven, hell, and purgatory. In doing so, Dashner considers what is left of the Earth *after* an environmental apocalypse, similar to the one described in Atwood’s novel. Overall, Dashner’s more symbolic representation of environmental dystopia differs from Atwood’s in that the environmental collapse is more catastrophic and more extreme because it impacts the entire biosphere and not just one species. Therefore, I examine Dashner’s text more symbolically than Atwood’s. Dashner assigns his narrative spaces, the experimental “Maze” and the world outside, to conventional Biblical spaces of heaven, hell, and purgatory. Through his novel, he shuffles and reorders the spaces to present a world where salvation means entering hell, since heaven does not exist. Overall, I conclude that although Dashner’s novel is not explicitly connected to contemporary environmental concerns, his book speaks to the general feelings of anxiety about the future of the environment. In the end, Dashner recasts Biblical spaces to provide a bleak picture of the world—one that purposely calls readers to either submit to this imaginary world or to adopt the boys’ persistence. The novel can be read as a call for persistence in fighting for environmental justice, conservation, and a hope for a better world.

Dashner establishes the despair of life in “the Maze” that propels the boys into working tirelessly to solve the maze and find their way out. The boys cling to the possibility of rescue, as one of the leaders of the group tells Thomas: “Every lovin’ second of every lovin’ day we spend in honor of the Maze tryin’ to solve somethin’ that’s not shown us it has a bloody solution [...]” (Dashner 38). The boys are persistent even though they have been

unsuccessful in solving the maze for two years. An added challenge is that the maze changes pattern every night. “The Runners,” or young men whose job is to run the maze every day to memorize the paths and to create maps, work the hardest of all. They hope that this work will eventually reveal an exit that would signify salvation for the boys. The boys’ life of ritual, faith, and devotion resembles a religious life. “The Maps,” the records of the changing pattern of the maze made by the runners, serve as religious chronicles that the boys study with the hope of finding salvation. Therefore, the maps seem like sacred texts. Similarly, “the Map Room,” which houses the copies of the maps, is a sacred and protected place like a house of worship. However, it is specifically important to note that while the boys have religious rituals during their life in the maze, they are *not* worshipping “the Creators,” the mysterious people who designed the artificial maze and glade and who selected the boys to participate. Instead of worshipping the creators, the boys worship the maze. Dashner suggests that human beings, no matter how powerful, are not worthy of being worshipped. This conviction is similar to Atwood’s in *The Year of the Flood*. Atwood’s text suggests that Crake, the creator of the Craker replacement species, is not worthy of being worshipped as a divine figure because his idea for the way the world should be actually causes total downfall of humanity. Similarly, Dashner portrays the creators as “playing God.” The creators are manipulative and inflict suffering on the boys and “the Grievors,” beasts that live in the maze with the boys. They are able to interfere with the artificial place and they boys’ lives at will. Through their power over the boys and the boys’ lack of agency in choosing their fate, the creators assume a God-like position. In other words, the creators’ selection of the boys and infiltration in their peaceful world cause the maze system to be a limbo of uncertainty.

Moreover, the creators' cruelty becomes psychological and physical torture. The monstrous griever threaten the boys with painful stings and cause a state of uneasiness amidst the peaceful glade. Like the Edencliff Rooftop Garden from *The Year of the Flood*, the glade is a *removed paradise*, in Leo Marx's sense of that the term as "an enclosed world set apart, or an are somehow made to evoke a feeling of encircled felicity" (29). The glade is a paradise in that it is encased, protected, and evokes some degree a sense of security for the boys. The safe serenity of the glade, lush and natural with gardens ripe with food, is juxtaposed with the grievers, which are described as "a horrific mix of animal and machine" (39). The grievers emit disconcerting whirling noises, have appendages resembling torture weapons and stingers that cause their victims to undergo a fitful and painful sickness including memories of their past lives (Dashner 39). Since the grievers are partly machine, their place within the artificial natural landscape of the maze is most unsettling. Subjected to the commands and desires of the creators, the grievers are described as "roving robot[s] on an alien planet looking for signs of life" (Dashner 127). Seemingly blind and unable to interpret their surroundings, the grievers, although purposely crafted for this environment, are strangers to it. The grievers' inability to adapt to their surroundings is akin to humans, should they colonize Mars, as Elon Musk hopes (Musk will be addressed in more detail in the third chapter of this project). Although technologically advanced, the grievers are still primal in their environmental adaptation. Thus, their dislocation in the natural landscape creates a world in which, as Marx identifies as a typical dystopian trope, that "tension replaces repose: the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety" (Marx 16). Dashner uses this technique to mix the technological with the nature with consideration to the Biblical archetype of purgatory. The creators situated the mechanical griever in the natural

landscape, akin to the Pleeblander's technological animals in *The Year of the Flood*, in order to highlight these senses of anxiety and discomfort in the equally uncertain purgatory space. In both *The Year of the Flood* and *The Maze Runner*, humans make creatures that can suffer and then place them in a space where they inevitably suffer. Dashner displays the power and cruelty of God in creating humans who suffer like the grievors. Marx's comment on the sense of dislocation that is evoked by the grievors in glade resembles the sensation that the boys, particularly Thomas, feel upon entering the glade for the first time. Fresh out of "the Box," which supplies the glade with new members every month, the boys are unable to remember anything of the previous life aside from their names. Thomas and Teresa are anomalies in that Thomas remembers more than the rest of the boys, and Teresa triggers the ending of the maze trial, their exceptional abilities render them prophet-like, which I will explore later in this chapter. Not only does the placement of the grievors and the boys in this artificial yet natural-appearing space add to its purgatory-like classification, but also the boys' difficulty with understanding their pursuit within the maze renders them powerless to choose their own fate. The boys are very young and the creators' torture of them appears even crueler instead of protective.

Interestingly, the purpose of life for Thomas and the boys is not to live fully or to worship a divine figure, but instead, to remain persistent in search for salvation. This purpose is intrinsically tied to the hope for survival, as one of the leaders tells Thomas, their purpose is to "Find our way out [...] solve the buggin' Maze and find our way home" (Dashner 40). Dashner establishes that the only hope for survival and allegorical salvation is to find the way out of the maze. The "home" that the boys want to find is thought of as a nostalgic, far-away paradise of safety, security, and family. Although absent from the boys'

forcibly erased memory, they are able to gain glimpses only when experiencing “the Changing,” a disease transmitted by the griever. Even though getting stung by a griever seems random, it is still part of the creators’ plan; the pre-programmed disease is part of the physical and psychological torture. The changing gives those afflicted some insight into why the boys are in the maze, where they came from, and what lies for them outside. As part of the experience, the only way to gain this knowledge is to suffer through the changing and risk death. One of the boys distrusts the visions of the being the one shown during delirium. He states, “I hope the Changing doesn’t give us real memories—just plants fake ones. Some suspect it—I can only hope. If the world’s the way I saw it...” (Dashner 197). The trailing off at the end of his speech suggests that the outside world is inexplicably disturbing. If he is proven right, then their pursuit to escape the maze and find salvation in “home” would be all for naught. In attempts to cope with this possible devastation, the boys cling to the faint flashes of family in the changing hallucinations, choosing to believe that the outside world is a heaven rather than a hell. The choice in believing in a safe, prosperous world is also seen by the Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood*, who choose to think of the world after the Waterless Flood is superior to the world in which they live despite the catastrophe that ensues to achieve it. Thomas once questions the affect of the changing on the boys saying, “Are they *changed* because they want to go back to their old life, or is it because they’re so depressed at realizing their old life was no better than what we have now?” (Dashner 149). This ambiguity surrounding what came before the maze and what will come after they escape cause the boys frustration. The boys are tortured by wanting desperately to return home yet not knowing or remembering where that home is, what it is, or who waits for them. Regardless, their desire to return to that home parallels the traditional religious quest to

ascend into heaven. Following this religious model, the boys' time in the maze resembles a person's lifetime, the mapmaking and running resemble rituals of worship, the escape from the maze resembles death, and the mysterious "home" resembles the afterlife. Unsure on whether that home is either heaven or hell, then the maze represents the state in between: limbo, or purgatory.

As if the torture from the grievors is not enough, the boys are also subjected to more whims of the creators. For example, they are placed by the creators into the maze via "the Box" in the center of the glade without memories save for their names. The creators rob them of their past and deprive them of agency. By contrast, the creators are the omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient entities, able to spy on the boys via "the beetle blades," lizard-like creatures with cameras in the eyes. Furthermore, the creators interrupt the boys' lives by introducing "Variables," events that disrupt the consistent nature of the glade world. The purpose of variables is to prod the boys to complete the maze faster. With emergence of variables and constant surveillance, the creators control the artificial environment in which the boys are held prisoner. Thus, the creators serve as God-like figures, able to toy with the boys' lives at will.

Following the notion that the creators are God-like figures, the boys are at their mercy of forces beyond their control. Since the creators designed the maze, pre-selected the boys who would participate, and manipulate the environment at will, Dashner follows typical Biblical archetypes of "God the maker." The sudden ending of the experiment, however, follows the archetype of an angry God who is upset with his rogue creation. "God the maker" is able to manipulate the world He created and decide the fate of human, His experiment. In *Genesis* it is written:



The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land.' (6:5)

“God the maker” decides He is unhappy with his creation of humans and so will strike them from the Earth and start fresh again, like a child with a drawing. These humans are portrayed not only as victims of the striking, but also as a prototype of humankind that should be punished for their sinfulness. After this genocide, the species will then be replaced by a new version. Like the Crakers in *The Year of the Flood*, the boys are expected to inherit the Earth as a replacement species. The boys chosen to participate in the experiment are among the most intelligent and perhaps immune to the disease caused by the solar flares terrorizing those living on the scorched Earth. The creators, acting as “God the maker” figures, employ subject the boys to experimentation in order to test if they would be a viable replacement species.

While the idea of a replacement species of humans is also examined in *The Year of the Flood* with Crake’s androids in the previous chapter of this project, Dashner’s novel presents a entirely different version of this Biblical archetype. Instead of a human like Crake producing this new species, the creators use the boys who, readers assume, are “naturally made” and free from genetic or technological manipulation other than the erasure of their memories. However, the creators embody a version of omnipotent entities that is more akin to traditional theological notions considering their omnipotence and omniscience. Given their power, the creators choose to abuse it. Outraged by the boys’ lack of agency, Thomas states, “Somebody sent us here. Somebody evil,” referring to the creators (Dashner 62). By calling these figures evil, Dashner demonstrates that the creation resents the creator. That is, if the glade resembles purgatory, then the boys are being judged to determine who is worthy

of advancing to heaven and who is damned to hell. In order to determine this, the creators force Teresa, the first and only girl to arrive in the glade, to trigger what she names “the Ending,” a time when the once-reliable aspects of the maze are corrupted enough that the boys risk death if they do not complete the maze. Typically, the glade has consistent weather where it “never rains. Ever” (Dashner 43). Although the artificial regularity of the weather is alarming by itself, the boys accept it as a gift from the creators. The consistency allows the boys to try to escape the maze with few distractions. But once the creators introduce the variables that encourage the ending, these consistencies disappear. Instead of perfect weather, the sky turns gray “like the ceiling of a massive room” (Dashner 219). Additionally, The supplies from the creators no longer arrive. The boys’ world begins to collapse. When this occurs, Thomas realizes the nature of their predicament. The suggestion of a massive room highlights the artificial and experimental nature of the space. Before this moment, the narration takes place entirely within the glade, and while the world of the creators is hinted at with the box and the beetle blades, readers are not informed about what else surrounds the maze. Furthermore, readers imagine the creators watching the boys, thus the maze resembles a giant lab and the boys are the rats. From a religious perspective, the creators control the fate of the boys in purgatory. From the boys’ perspective, they are now hyperaware of their imprisonment. Another variable introduced as part of the ending involves the boys’ security. The glade, which is at the center of the maze, is separated from it by four massive walls with openings to allow entrance for the runners. Normally, the openings close at dusk to protect the boys from the grievers that roam the maze corridors at night. Once the ending is triggered, the creators make it so the gates never close. Then the grievers, acting entirely under the control of the creators, come inside and kill one boy a

night until the boys solve the maze or all die. In order to expedite the process, the creators also turn the purgatory into a hell: either the boys win and escape the maze, or they die. However, it is revealed in the second book of the trilogy, *The Scorch Trials* (2015), that the world outside of the maze is even more of a hell than the maze is and certainly less hospitable than the expected heavenly “home.” Thus, even the “winners” of the maze are not rewarded with salvation or ascension but instead are thrown into a situation that is even worse.

It is only when the boys realize that the world outside is not as it seems do they come to think of the maze as a heaven in its own right. In *The Scorch Trials*,<sup>17</sup> the world has suffered from decimation from solar rays and is overrun with diseased people called “Cranks.” Upon escaping the maze, the boys are forced into another round of experimentation by a government agency called “WICKED,” which employs the creators. The agency’s purpose for the experiments is to ensure the survival of humankind. Continuing the next stage of tests, the boys are to enter the scorched world outside. To reach this place, first the boys are forced to travel down a corridor in total darkness, dodging several life-threatening variables, until they finally reach a staircase. At the top of the staircase, one of the boys finds a trap door in the ceiling. Attempting to open the door, the boy, “Cried out as he covered his eyes with his hands—a blinding, searing light shone down from above [...] Brilliant orange burst through his fingers and eyelids, and a wave of heat—like how wind—swept down” (Dashner, *Scorch*, 84). The first impression of the outside world, which the boys strived tirelessly to reach, is one of pain and hopelessness. However,

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<sup>17</sup> This chapter uses elements from *The Scorch Trials*, the second book in *The Maze Runner* saga, in order to contextualize the events discussed in the first book. In discussing the search for “home” or Biblical salvation analyzed in the selections from *The Maze Runner*, this chapter looks ahead to *The Scorch Trials* in order to resolve questions about of what that next space consists.

the ascension up the stairway to a bright light resembles the Biblical notion of climbing the stairway to heaven. In the boys' case, that ascension leads to in hell. Thomas describes the scene of the scorched Earth as:

A flat pan of dry and lifeless earth stretched as far as he could see. Not a single tree. Not a bush. No hills or valleys. Just an orange-yellow sea of dust and rocks; wavering currents of heated air boiled on the horizon like steam, floating upward, as if any life out there were melting towards the cloudless and pale blue sky. (Dashner, *Scorch*, 95)

Barren and desolate, the scorched Earth is not promising for sustaining life. The description of the orange ground brings to mind the reddish hue associated with the underworld or the earthly core, and the dusty ground and lifelessness resembles Mars or other otherworldly landscapes. The endless, flat horizon brings to mind a desert landscape. Regardless of the familiar connections to the landscape, Dashner establishes that this is hell. Devoid of Earthly nature, the prospect for survival is slim. By contrast, the lush paradise of the glade seems heavenly.

The glade, although a prison of sorts for the boys, can be read as a heaven in both its ability to sustain life and also in its juxtaposition with the hellish outside world. Thomas reflects on the glade, "If it weren't for the little fact they were torn apart from friends and families and trapped in a Maze with a bunch of monsters, it [the Glade] could be paradise" (Dashner, *Maze*, 199). The glade, lush, equip with food and friends, can be read as a Garden of Eden. Dashner describes it as "A vast courtyard several times the size of a football field, surrounded by four enormous walls made of gray stone and covered in spots with thick ivy" (Dashner, *Maze*, 5). Lush and green, the open and expansive landscape gives the feeling of freedom and possibilities, while the colossal walls protect the sanctuary from griever attacks at night. Not only do the walls serve as a separation between the boys and the grievors but

also their ivy is used by Thomas to save the life of another boy when the boy is threatened by a griever. Even though the walls give the feeling of a prison for the boys, their protection from the grievers and resourceful ivy is more helpful than hurtful. Additionally, at the center of the glade is the box from which the newcomers and the supplies arrive from the creators. For the most part, the box always sends a new boy to join the rest. When Tersea arrives—the first girl in the glade—the Garden of Eden gains an Eve who is able to communicate telepathically with Thomas. Tersea's shared telepathic ability with Thomas can be read as a reinvention of Eve's creation from the rib of Adam; their unity is still somehow intrinsic to their making. The introduction of a girl to the glade causes it to resemble the Garden of Eden archetype more closely than before. Akin to the societal construction of the God's Gardeners' Adams and the Eves from *The Year of the Flood*, the glade is now prime for eternal human existence. Tersea's arrival ensures that the glade is now even more equipped with all the things necessary for sustained life: the prospect of procreation. Adding to the paradise, the glade is filled with everything the boys need for survival. As Thomas recounts on his welcoming tour of the glade: "Another corner of the compound held gardens—from where he was standing Thomas recognized corn, tomato plants, fruit tress [...] Across the courtyard from there stood wooden pens holding sheep and pigs and cows" (Dashner, *Maze*, 7). The boys in the glade assign jobs to steward the land to pluck weeds, tend the garden, and care for the livestock, employing Erle's idea of human responsibility in the Anthropocene. All of the boys are required to have a job, working together in order to survive. To supplement their efforts, the creators send supplies through the box on a regular schedule. Upon Thomas's arrival, one of the boys explains: "This here's the Box. Once a month, we get a Newbie [a new boy] like you, never fails. Once a *week*, we get supplies,

clothes, some food. Ain't needin' a lot—pretty much run ourselves in the Glade” (Dashner 49). This regularity of support from the creators confirms the idea that the creators arguably are not *actively* trying to kill the boys, and instead are using the boys for experimentation. The juxtaposition of a garden in the glade is alarming; the ability to grow life conflicts with the artificial landscape. Since the glade contains both recognizable plants and animals yet the garden and pens are surrounded by massive, concrete walls, the environment can be read as having a “natural” landscape in an “unnatural” place. To elaborate, the creators’ creation of the glade is unnatural, since they would have had to interfere for this plants to grow on their own. The landscape, however, is natural, containing grass and plants. Although examined earlier, the glade is anything but natural due to its infiltration from the creators and artificial climate. Still, the existence of endless resources to maintain life makes the glade a paradise. The boys are able to survive comfortably seemingly for eternity with help from the creators, who embody the God-like figure in the Biblical archetype, since they created the space and provide all materials for sustenance. While Thomas notices this paradise-like aspect of the glade upon his arrival, his understanding of the boys’ lack of agency causes him and the other boys to perceive the glade as a state of limbo. However, Dashner suggests that the ability to bridge these spaces—purgatory and the space after—permits the sustainability of humankind.

Thomas is the key to bridging these spaces, which grants him the status of a prophet. On his first day, Thomas is already identified as different. In a world where the boys can only remember their names—not their ages, heights, or even hair color—Thomas is recognized. Gally, Thomas’s enemy in many ways, states, “I’ve seen you before. Something’s fishy about you showing up here,” to which Thomas replies, “I’ve never seen

you before in my life” (Dashner, *Maze*, 17). Many of the boys, like Gally, who go through the changing are largely discredited when they speak of relatively crazy ideas and observations. However, Gally’s immediately marginalization of Thomas sets Thomas apart from the rest of the boys and causes a divide in the community. Thomas himself notices his difference from the rest of the boys, for example when he experiences a moment akin to Freud’s uncanny, reflecting, “Suddenly, the Glade, the walls, the Maze—it all seemed .... familiar” (Dashner, *Maze*, 34). The sense of dislocation parallels Marx’s notion of the machine in the garden. Thomas is like a griever: an unnatural creature in a natural landscape whose disturbance causes distress. Both are controlled by the creators either through possession or by reacting to variables, thus lacking their autonomy. Later, the déjà vu leads Thomas to purposely get stung by the griever in order to access his memories, thus victim to the psychological and physical torture from the creators. He realizes that he helped the creators to make the maze. Although pre-selected for experimentation like the rest of the boys, Thomas is different because of his role in helping the boys escape the maze. When the creators send Thomas into the maze, he resembles a prophet-like figure who can bridge the Biblical spaces that parallel the maze and the world outside.

Thomas’s prophet-like role allows him insight into the reason behind why they are in the maze. Dashner uses this to hint towards the idea of humankind solving catastrophe as I argue Atwood does, too. Thomas’s closeness to the creators allows him insight into why the boys are there and how they can escape. Despite trying to prove to the boys that he has information that might help, Gally renounces Thomas. Gally says, “I think he’s a spy from the people who put us here” (Dashner, *Maze*, 157). Gally considers Thomas’s status as a threat to their life in the glade, suggesting that Thomas works with the creators against the

boys. But, following the reading of the creators as God-like figures, Thomas's placement in the maze makes him a prophetic figure. Descended from the space that the divine figures occupy, prophets are meant to guide mortals into following a devote life. Since the boys do not worship the creators but instead the maze, Dashner presents Thomas as having special knowledge about solving the maze instead of encouraging them to praise the creators.

Teresa, who like Thomas has special insight, tells Thomas telepathically, "*The Maze can't be solved,*" but that "*The Creators meant for us to escape*" (300). With insider information, though subjected to the same plight as the rest of the boys, Thomas and Teresa assume the prophetic roles of leading the rest of the boys to the end of the experiment, as per intended by the creators. Teresa and Thomas are used to help the rest of the boys complete their intended task, thus validating the purpose of the experiment. While the boys understand their purpose for escaping the maze as previously argued, until Thomas's and Teresa's arrival, they do not comprehend the creators' intent. Unlike the rest of the boys, Thomas and Teresa are already closer to "winning" the maze since they better understand its purpose. Thomas explains "[The Creators are] weeding us out, seeing if we'll give up, finding the best of us. Throwing variables at us, trying to make us quit. Testing our ability to hope and fight" (Dashner, *Maze*, 301). Thomas and Teresa transcend the rest of the boys. Through helping the creators make the maze, entering the maze themselves, and gaining new information, Thomas and Teresa are now superior to the rest of the boys because they have better chances to win the maze. Without insight from the creators, escape would be impossible; Thomas and Teresa are indispensable. Thomas and Teresa are granted certain immunity to death. Because of their prophetic status, the creators regard them as most valuable and so it would be against their best interest to lose them. Dashner suggests that one must have insight from those who have



a wider scope in order to find purpose in a problem. With this wider scope and with their entrance into the maze while previously helping to devise it, Thomas and Teresa break the barrier between the outside world and the maze. Since the outside world is hell and the maze is purgatory, Thomas and Teresa's prophet-like status allows them to move between these Biblical spaces. Traditionally, prophets descend from heaven to Earth. Dashner recreates this notion by having Thomas and Teresa move from hell to purgatory. In the reshuffling, Thomas and Teresa move from the worst Biblical plane to a better one, whereas traditional prophets move from the best plane to a worse one. Thomas and Teresa do not regress as conventional prophets, but instead, progress. In doing so, Dashner suggests that life on Earth—in hell—is doomed. Without prospect of reaching a better plane, Thomas and Teresa must regress to purgatory. Given that the creators also exist within this hellish space, Dashner highlights the absence of the heavenly space in his reconstruction of spaces.

Dashner uses the transition of the outside world and the glade to rearrange the trichotomy of Biblical spaces. At first, Dashner presents the glade as a purgatory, with an air of anxiety and uncertainty over the griever as “machines in the garden.” Supplemented by the confusion over the boys' real purpose in the maze, the boys set their sights for salvation on an intangible and idealized “home” that stands in as a heavenly space. Thus, the maze becomes a purgatory in which the creators decide the boys' fate. Only if the boys escape the maze are they able to continue to the Biblical afterlife. While typically “winning” purgatory would result in ascension to heaven, Dashner reconstructs these Biblical archetypal spaces by making the winners of the maze condemned to a hellish space, while the “losers” of the maze are killed. Thus, Dashner removes heaven from the trichotomy of Biblical spaces. Instead, the only possibilities are: purgatory, hell, or death. Not one of the possible spaces is

desirable, and the descriptions of the hell space, the scorched Earth, cause the skeptic reader to connect Dashner's descriptions with the flaws in contemporary society.

Dashner's scorched Earth resembles an extreme version of climate change, which Dashner uses to emphasize the need for environmental policy reform. The scorched Earth is dangerous to its inhabitants since the solar flares have caused disease. Upon stepping out into the scorched Earth, one of the boys reflects, "Sun flares, and the whole world burning like hell itself. That'd screw up the climate plenty enough to make crazy storms that pop up" (144). The Sun flares seemingly model a runaway greenhouse effect where the temperature of the Earth's surface has risen high enough for the landscape to resemble hell. While extreme, the climate of the scorched Earth might anticipate a world where current climate change gets out of hand. Scientists from the EPA predict that average US temperatures may increase by 3 to 12 degrees Fahrenheit by 2100; the drastic range considering different pathways the US might take in the future to either reduce or fail to reduce overall gas emissions (EPA, "Future of Climate Change"). While obviously not as drastic as the temperature rise in Dashner's novel, the projection might be the start of a descent into natural catastrophe if left unsolved. In order to prevent such a potentially disastrous future, scientists advocate for movement en masse to more sustainable ways to life, like implementing renewable methods of energy. If the world were to devolve into one resembling Dashner's world, where the natural world has been decimated and humans exist on the brink of extinction, scientists would be the only ones with the knowledge and power on the problem and potential solution. These climatologists resemble the creators who must fix the destroyed world. They differ, though, in that the creators resemble God-like figures while contemporary climatologists maintain their mortality. If the world were to devolve into one

where only scientists have the tools and knowledge to solve the problem, though, this might change. Dashner uses to suggest that in the future, scientists might closer resemble God-like figures, since they will be the only ones with the information to solve the natural disaster. This idea of scientists as divine figures connects to the point made in the previous chapter stating that critics have opposed the practices of de-extinction or the Frozen Ark project with the argument that these efforts give scientists the powers of a God. Unlike contemporary examples of scientists “playing God,” however, Dashner’s model suggests that these scientists would not have a say in their ascension to the status of a God. Instead, they are forced into the position by the drastic decline in climate that renders everyone else helpless. Their intentions are to save humankind from extinction and prevent total planetary annihilation and is merely because they possess the adequate knowledge and equipment to help. Contemporary climatologists are among this group in a preliminary sense: they possess the knowledge and the methodology necessary to predict naturally dangerous events and have studied techniques and practices that mitigate this risk.

By the novel’s environmental apocalypse as a potential future for Earth, readers can better assess what areas of current society might need to be reevaluated. Contemporary climatologists advocate for serious reform in environmental politics, especially when concerning the future of the climate and the biosphere. For example, present day environmental scientists identify global warming as a major threat to the sustainability of the planet and of humankind, as physicist Paul Nakroshis states, “Ignoring the science is done at our peril” (Kaplan). Despite the call for change and cold facts outlining the dangers to humankind and the planet if the climate continues to change as it has, President Trump vehemently speaks out against the EPA and specific Obama-era acts, like the Clean Power

Act (Eilperin and Mufson). Scientists and Trump have butted heads during his rise to power and first few months in office over the policies that should be enacted to prevent humans' involvement in the climate's deterioration. While Trump is concerned about wasted tax dollars on implemented sustainable changes, scientists fear for the safety and health for people in the future were the problems left unsolved. Dashner echoes this sentiment when Thomas comments that entering the scorched Earth requires, "something wrapped around us or we'll get second-degree sunburns in five minutes" (92). Again, although Dashner's version of climate change is extreme in comparison to the projections for the next one hundred years, humans face risk with any type of negative climate impact. Scientists from EPA have considered adaptation plans for human health, such as planting trees and expanding green spaces in cities to reduce the "urban heat island"<sup>18</sup> effect ("Adaptation Overview"). Were Trump and other administrators in the future to continue ignoring the scientists' pleas for limitations on gas emissions, and were the environment to decline more rapidly to total catastrophe, then only scientists would possess the knowledge of preventative measures. Dashner uses this thought experiment to construct *The Maze Runner* world, where, although ambiguous the reason behind the catastrophe, the world has become desolate and inhospitable.

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<sup>18</sup> The EPA defines the "urban heat island" as the effect when built up areas are hotter than nearby rural areas. They cite that a city with 1 million people or more can be 1.8 – 5.4 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than its surroundings. Heat islands have negative effects, like "air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, heat-related illness and mortality, and water quality" ("Heat Island Effect").

### Chapter Three

#### **“Stop the World! I Want To Get Off”: Time for Humans to Move to Mars, Say Elon**

#### **Musk and Octavia Butler in *Parable of the Sower* (2009)**

“[Going to Mars] will be, like, really fun,” states Elon Musk, the tech billionaire and founder of the private space travel corporation SpaceX. Musk recently announced SpaceX’s plans to colonize Mars as soon as 2024 at the 67<sup>th</sup> International Astronautical Congress in Guadalajara, Mexico. To further encourage the public to climb aboard, he promises, “You’ll have a great time” (Mosher, Sundermier, Letzter). With unconvincing informality, Musk encourages civilians with no prior experience or training in astronautics to take a one-way trip to Mars, and with complete transparency, he reminds these brave pioneers that they will likely die on the Red Planet. In order to justify this risk, future Martians, pro-Mars colonization civilians, and Musk and his team promise that those who first travel to Mars will be following in the honorable footsteps of those who bravely set out into the Western wilderness of the US in hopes of expansion. But critics wonder: what is humans’ right to colonize Mars? Many have criticized Musk for his ambition and perhaps naivety in believing that the technology necessary for establishing a life-supporting colony on Mars will be ready in the coming decade. These doubters worry if Mars colonization really is the next step for humankind. Have humans progressed so far that they are ready to stretch their arms into the galaxy and dig their fingernails into the Red Planet? Science fiction writers have long speculated about the future and fantasy of interplanetary travel, and Octavia Butler, a pioneer female African-American writer, is one of them. In her novel *Parable of the Sower* (1994), Lauren Olamina, a young African-American living in Robledo near Los Angeles, guides victims of violence, natural disaster, and poverty to the Pacific Northwest to establish her

religion—“Earthseed.” Earthseed believes that God is change and that outer space is heaven, thus filling the void from Dashner’s novel of where humans can achieve salvation in a damned world. Through her depiction of Earthseed’s principles and beliefs, Butler presents space colonization in a neo-colonial manner, as if it is the next logical step in the evolutionary progression of humans. While the previous chapter of this project displayed a future without a heaven, this chapter examines how Butler’s dystopia reimagines a tangible, saving afterlife. In *Parable of the Sower*, the Earthseed belief that space as heaven is plausible because of the world’s apt technological capabilities and Earthseedian religious support. Although Earthseed believes in the endeavor, many of Robledo’s community members in are skeptical about the benefits of space colonization, and this lack of public will causes them to fail at colonization. Butler uses these three forces—technological advances, religious support, and public will—to predict the timeline of space colonization in order to say that only when these three forces align will humans be able to successfully colonize space. Later in this chapter, I apply Butler’s model to humans’ contemporary efforts by examining Musk’s plan. It is important again here in this chapter to contextualize Butler’s suggestion since her support for Mars colonization in many ways is in direct discussion with Musk and other advocates in current efforts for Mars colonization.

To set the stage of the dystopian world, Butler establishes the opposition of city lights and starlight to describe her world of poverty. Lauren is fascinated with space from a young age, which later develops into being a central belief in Earthseed. As a child, Lauren talks with her stepmother about how the world was when the stepmother was a child:

City lights [...] lights, progress, growth, all those things we’re too hot and too poor to bother with anymore [...] When I was your age, my mother told me that the stars—the few stars we could see—were windows into heaven. Windows for God to look through to keep an eye on us. (Butler 5)

Lauren retorts that there are still city lights, and people still can see the stars, which Lauren admires, but her stepmother says she'd rather have civilization: "The stars are free [...] I'd rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better. But we can afford the stars" (Butler 6). Here, Butler uses the stepmother's comments to contextualize her future world; the stepmother's past most resembles humans' contemporary moment in the early twenty-first century, when city lights are abundant and a sign of technological prowess. However, the city lights in contemporary society is often seen as an obstacle in humans' connection to the natural world because of "light pollution." The stepmother's connection of city lights with affluence, power, and growth is in response to the state of affairs in the dystopian world: there is no choice for city lights since electricity is too expensive to keep them on. In this way, the stepmother's view of the stars is a negative one, since they are the free natural light when she wishes for expensive artificial light. Additionally, the stepmother refers to the stars as "windows for God to look through to keep an eye on us," and so her distaste for the presence of the stars suggests her unwillingness to allow God to watch them. But since the stepmother is married to Lauren's father, a Baptist minister, and is herself religious, this unwillingness may seem to be an unexpected rejection of God. However, her reaction can be read as one of shame, as if the stepmother is embarrassed by the state of disarray to which the Earth has devolved. Conversely, Lauren admires the clarity of the sky and cherishes the ability to see the stars; and so she seems to care less about the previous era of economic and technological success for which the stepmother is nostalgic. The stepmother's discomfort with the limited amount of light pollution reflects the world in which she grew up: where human technology and infrastructure hides the natural world. Lauren's admiration of the stars foreshadows the religion she finds, Earthseed, which preaches the intrinsic

connectedness of the natural world, the divine, and humanity. Butler constructs the past through the stepmother's memory and what she describes is uncannily similar to her 21<sup>st</sup> century readers' world—abundant city lights, occupied urbanized areas, and light pollution masking the stars. Against the industrial yet decrepit Robledo stands the disconnected natural world with its limited and restricted resources and aggressive and savage animals. This representation of the dangerous natural world, which I will expand on later in this chapter, contradicts the serene and healing natural world identified by ecocritics in traditional nature writing to which Butler alludes through Lauren's viewpoint. The stars and outer space transform into this ecocritical ideal of ultimate wilderness and obsession with “purity [of nature]: virgin wilderness and the preservation of ‘uncorrupted’ last great places” (Mason, Szabo-Jones, and Steenkamp). Unlike Transcendentalists, with whom the term “retreat into wilderness” is most associated, Butler calls not for an immersion in forest and solitude but, rather, advocates for an escape from the infected Earth altogether. The adapted ecocritical theory of the retreat into wilderness resembles the desire to return to a pastoral lifestyle, in which daily life involve habitual and harmonious contact with the natural world. On this idea of pastoralism, Leo Marx, former professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writes, “What is attractive in pastoralism is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural. Movement toward such a symbolic landscape also may be understood as movement away from an ‘artificial’ world” (Marx 9). As Marx explains, the call of the wilderness can only be answered with migration towards that wilderness so as to live most freely and naturally, unspoiled by the tainted artificiality of a technoscientific, urban world. I argue that Butler transcends the traditional Transcendentalist; instead of a retreat into *Earth's* wilderness, to the tranquil Pacific



Northwest and thus away from the city lights, Butler expands to a retreat to the *universe's* wilderness—an “escape to space.” With the move away from Earth’s nature and with extension of the Transcendental/Romantic view of nature towards deep space, Butler advocates for technoscientific advancements. Like Atwood, Butler suggests that humans have power to access the seemingly inaccessible parts of the universe. For Butler, it is to establish life in space while for Atwood, it is to extinguish the humans who manipulate nature when they should not. Through juxtaposition of Lauren’s and the stepmother’s generational thinking of technoscientific progress and retreat to nature, Butler establishes the ultimate destination in the Earthseed faith, which is then used to set up the opposition between the hellish life on Earth and the heavenly future in deep space.

In order to justify the need for an “escape to space,” Butler establishes despair for life on Earth that can only be solved with a fresh start. Unlike other science fictions writers who have imagined catastrophic Earth conditions that force humans to colonize space to avoid extinction, like Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968),<sup>19</sup> Butler’s approach to space colonization is unique because she presents it both as an extended part of nature and as a religious salvation. The escape to space, then, serves as the goal in religious and spiritual evolution; humans can achieve religious and spiritual enlightenment and connection with both God and nature, similar to Atwood’s depiction of the progression of

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<sup>19</sup> In Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), life of Earth has been decimated by a nuclear global war, and humans are forced to inhabit off-world colonies. This world is set in earlier additions to take place in 1992, and as it is 2017 now, readers realize that such a catastrophe has not ensued. While Dick’s novel seems to disprove the notion that science fiction is speculative in many ways, which is a notion I argue in this project, it is clear that Dick’s view of the future, although untrue, is a result of the exaggerated anxieties about technological, and in his case, militaristic devastation at the time of his writing. In other words, the cause of apocalypse in Dick’s novel is due to global nuclear warfare, which, during the 1960s was a real threat in light of the Cold War. The inclusion of this brief look at Dick’s text is imperative in understanding this project as a whole. As one objectively identifies the cause of apocalypse in Dick’s novel as an extension of real-life anxieties of the time, and then later considers how the author chooses to address that catastrophe, one can make certain connections between the two. That is to say, the nuclear apocalypse led to off-world colonies, suggesting that in the event of a real-life nuclear warfare, humankind would be decimated, and the only way, in Dick’s (and Butler’s) mind to evade extinction is to repopulate another planet.

human species by climbing up the Great Chain of Being. Butler's regression of nature contradicts with contemporary understanding and preconceptions of what nature should be. Butler uses the presence of dogs to symbolize the decline of society. When Lauren ventures outside of her walled-in neighborhood in Robledo for target practice, she is overwhelmed with anxiety when she encounters feral dogs. During a visit, Lauren witnesses a pack of feral dogs feeding on dead bodies. After killing one dog of a pack and scaring off the others while on her journey to found Earthseed, Lauren laments, "I wish I knew more about [dogs]. I've read books about them being intelligent, loyal pets, but that's all in the past. Dogs are now wild animals who will eat a baby if they can" (Butler 209). Butler uses this betrayal of the "pet dog" to point out the savagery in nature and wildlife when confronted with scarce natural resources. The pet dog, obedient and domestic, can only exist if not in competition with humans for food and resources. Butler also points out the savagery among humans when faced with limited natural resources particularly water. Commercial water stations allow for safe but expensive water, but they are sparse in the world of the novel, and so water peddlers roam the highways selling chemically contaminated water out of old bottles. Butler describes these commercial water stations as "Dangerous places. People going in have money. People coming out have water, which is as good as money" (Butler 201). Lauren describes how the elderly, women, children, and solitary people are most likely victims of theft and violence at the water stations. Butler uses the term "coyote" for those who steal water from others at the commercial water stations, alluding to the regression of humans into animalistic tendencies in the wake of restricted and scarce natural resources (Butler 202). "Coyote" is also a term used to describe those who help Latin Americans cross the border into the U.S. for a fee, and who are known to steal from, rape, kill, or abandon those they

promised to take across. Butler uses this connection to show the extreme hardships of life in dystopian California. Butler transforms the coyote, who exploits those who seek a new life in America, to the coyote who steals one's essential resource for life. Through this comparison, Butler shows the collapse of society, which causes people to give in to savage, animalistic tendencies. However, Butler does not give up all hope. Lauren's observation of the continuation of humanity keeps the door open for life both on Earth and in space. On the journey, Lauren observes, "The Earthquake had done a lot of damage in Hollister, but the people hadn't gone animal. They seemed to be helping one another with repairs and looking after their own destitute" (Butler 257). With the lack of human savagery in Hollister, Butler gives hope for humanity, which is necessary in *Parable of the Sower* since it presents an alternative solution for continued life. Faced with high prices for water along their journey, Lauren and her followers settle for a few nights in a park, where water is accessible for all: "You could go right down to the water, scoop some up in a pot, and take it away. It was free. [...] I suppose we could have been robbed, but no one paid any attention to us. We saw other people getting water in bottles, canteens, pots, and bags, but the place seemed peaceful" (Butler 265-6). The harmony that comes once humans are no longer in competition for natural resources restores the hope in humanity and for life on Earth. It is not that Earth is completely unlivable, as Butler shows; there are still natural resources that available. Butler uses this contrast to point to the fact that the savagery of animals and humans comes only when corporations have privatized and restricted those things that are essential for survival, like water. That is to say, it is not Earth's wilderness that is forcing humans off of Earth in order to survive, but instead, other people—the corporations that are raising the prices of water so high that they make survival difficult. Remaining on Earth is plausible, but at the

price of a regression of species. Similar to Atwood, Butler suggests that this regression is unacceptable, and so in order to maintain an intelligent, progressive, and harmonious species, humans must migrate to space.

Further establishing the despair for life on Earth, Butler points out the absence in her novel of a Christian God, that and lack leads to societal catastrophe. In order to fix this, Butler argues for a reimagining of God, a detachment from Earth, and an escape to space. Outside of Lauren's Baptism and walled-in community is the threat of violent drug addicts who find pleasure in lighting fires, corrupt and privatized police forces, feral dogs, prostitution, theft, rape, and death. Inside of Lauren's "Privatopia" even faith in a Christian God is not enough to keep hope alive, and so Lauren prepares for eventual catastrophe (As cited by Marotta 49). Lauren warns, "Nothing is going to save us. If we don't save ourselves, we're dead" (Butler 59). With such despair for life on Earth, Lauren preaches for a place to start afresh. Her vision for heaven is Mars, which she describes as "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 21). In Butler's California, the natural world is destroyed by man-made fire, and its residents suffer with scarce access to water. Butler counteracts this dry, fiery wasteland by referring to Lauren's Earthseed migration as a "river flooding north" (Butler 223). With this metaphor, Butler argues that faith and community are the only sources of nourishing, life-supporting sustenance that can quench the thirst of the Earth in its drought, both socio-politically and metaphorically. But then, one questions why Butler presents Mars, a planet whose lack of water and rusty red sand most resembles a desert and desolate hell, as an oasis. If anything, Mars's physical geology hints at a potential future for

Butler's dystopian California. Butler uses these similarities to further justify the need for humans' agency and control over nature and society, which Lauren preaches in her Earthseed verses, and so Mars is the quasi-Californian space that permits that future. Lauren promises that Earthseed will provide its followers with "the hope of a heaven for themselves and their children. A real heaven, not mythology or philosophy. A heaven that will be theirs to shape" (Butler 261). Butler not only presents Mars as a potential heaven, but also as a "new Earth," that is, a new place to live and thrive within this lifetime. The compelling element of Mars is its virginity and thus its ability to be manipulated and shaped to humans' desire. This presentation of a planetary nature is particularly ironic when considering the claim I have made in the first chapter, where as readers have seen, Atwood shows how the human manipulation of the natural world in the age of the Anthropocene causes the downfall and extinction of humanity. Butler, like Atwood, demonstrates that the destruction of nature is in large part due to human manipulation. However, Butler presents a possible method of salvation for humans, as opposed to Atwood, who argues that nature is more important to save than humans. This salvation, according to Butler, is to escape the already destroyed Earth and to conquer another planetary body. Butler removes humans from the position at the bottom of the natural chain and promotes them to their evolutionary and theologically argued rightful place at the top. This is in contrast to Atwood's argument, in which humans' fatal mistake is their position at the top of the natural chain, which causes them to fall drastically through a man-made purge. As dominators of the natural world, which now extends to the universe's natural world, humans have the right to change and shape it as they please.

Butler establishes this evolutionary and theological progression through the Earthseed teachings, and so Lauren's religion steps in for Christianity in the narrative of colonialism. I claim that Earthseed's call for space colonization can be read in a similar way as post-colonial theorists have read colonialism throughout history, that is, that wilderness discouraged overcrowding and presents a new challenge for survival. It is important to note that Earthseed's narrative of colonialism differs since it does not involve the colonizing of a group of beings (that readers know of), and so lacks the conventional "white man's burden" trope. Lawrence Buell, a pioneer in ecocritical theory, writes:

What the first European settlers of North America saw as primordial or 'empty' space, and what their descendants persist in thinking of as 'wilderness,' had been somebody's else's place since the first humans arrived millennia before—and much longer than that, if we allow nonhumans to count as 'somebodies.' (Buell 67)

In *Parable of the Sower*, space colonization is similar to the westward expansion and the idea of manifest destiny that follows the trope of the brave pioneer venturing into the wilderness in hopes of conquering some new land. Unlike the historical westward expansion, space colonization does not seek to colonize people. However, as Buell points out, where is the line in the moral and ethical dilemma of colonization? (ibid). The colonization of land includes the colonization of nature, which includes the living nonhumans—plants, trees, animals, etc.—that are victims of the conquests. Butler presents Earthseed's version of destiny as a neo-manifest destiny, in which God has called upon humans to occupy deep space. Butler uses the idea of destiny within religion to argue that space colonization is humanity's next evolutionary step. Lauren informs her Earthseed followers the following:

The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars [...] That's the ultimate Earthseed aim, and the ultimate human change short of death. It's a destiny we'd better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth-skinned dinosaurs—here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities. (Butler 222)

Butler argues that the goal of space colonization is to preserve humanity—the only way to combat extinction is through the removal of the human from the Earth. Because of the heavy focus on Earthseed and its beliefs in this move towards the future, Mathias Nilges, a professor at St. Frances Xavier University, comments:

Earthseed’s teleological narrative of settling in the stars, hence, is not a narrative of ultimate freedom. It is not a narrative that is directed at the stars as a promise of freedom, or at a future built upon the acceptance of change. Instead it is a narrative that channels change in a quite traditional teleological narrative that locates the future in a regressive return to paternalistic structure, most importantly a return to organized religion. (“We Need the Stars” 1343)

While the Christian heaven often promises the ultimate freedom, Nilges points out that with Earthseed this is not so. This is because the Earthseed heaven in space is still a life of sorts. Lauren promises that this is a heaven people will be able to reach during their lifetimes and so will be able to shape. The return to order and the belief in the Earthseed idea of destiny promise humans the ability to arrive at the stage of development that is post-Earth; humans are independent from the cycle of life on Earth and no longer are they subject to the same fate of extinction as the dinosaurs. While Atwood’s similar anxiety about the future of humanity is answered by a forced extinction, Butler offers a more hopeful future—one of escape. That is, humans may avoid extinction and the cycle of Earth-bound nature, if they remove themselves from Earth. This idea of humanity’s arrival at a developmental or evolutionary stage that is post-Earth is further supported by Butler’s recreation of God in the novel. Earthseed is not a traditional westernized religion, but rather, it exaggerates the divine to be an entirely abstract and conceptual force of nature: “God is Change,”<sup>20</sup> according to this

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<sup>20</sup> Believing “God is Change” is pinnacle to Earthseed ideology. The belief of God as a malleability yet unmoving force diverges from traditional Judeo-Christian belief of God the entity, albeit not human. In presentation of this different thinking of God, Butler writes, “All that you touch/ You Change./ All that you Change/ Changes you./ The only lasting truth/ Is Change./ God/ Is Change” (Butler 195). The divine is

text. Butler writes, “My God doesn’t love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love for or loyalty to my God. My God just is” (25). This new concept of God by is in part a rejection of the Christian or other conventionally religious notions, and its more inclusive than those notions—suggesting, that the Earthseed God is a part and in many ways a force of nature, equated in some ways to the spiritual beliefs of karma or universality, and the lack of loyalty or love for the Earthseed God further removes this divine type from being depicted or thought of as some human-like being that would receive and reciprocate love. The Earthseed God is not an all-powerful entity, but is, rather, an all-ruling abstract force. As critic Clarence Tweedy argues, “the God of Earthseed is not an other-worldly deity that is heaven-centered; rather, it is a this-worldly faith that serves to repress Lauren’s and her followers’ feelings of fear, shame, and powerlessness with a religion that empowers autonomy and self-agency” (“The Anointed”). Although astute in the observation of the Earthseed God as encouraging agency, Tweedy’s argument fails with the assertion that the Earthseed God is “this-worldly” since it restricts the Earthseed religion in one of its most definitive central beliefs—space as heaven. The Earthseed God, that is, utter faith in the cyclicity and dependability of change, is not restricted to Earth—stars, planets, and the universe change as consistently as does all matter on Earth. Butler continues to define the Earthseed God by explaining that, “A lot of people seem to believe in a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God. [...] A few believe God is another word for nature. And nature turns out to mean just about anything they happen not to understand or feel in control of” (Tweedy 15). By making this notion of the divine synonymous with nature, Butler does

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presented as a natural force that not only affects its believers but is also affected by its believers. Change, instead, is admired because of its cyclicity nature, which is then paralleled in the divine-human relationship. But instead of worshipping an entity God as it is conventionally accepted in traditional Judeo-Christian thought, Earthseed followers respect the cyclicity of the natural force of Change.



not allow humans to be at a development stage that is post-nature, since, as stated earlier, change exists universally, and so does the divine. Instead, Butler suggests that humans are at the development stage that is post-Earth, meaning that humans have evolutionarily advanced so much that they are no longer dependent on Earth's natural world for survival. This distinction is important because it suggests that humans' connections with nature and humans' connections with Earth are separate. Such representations suggest that humans have outgrown or used up Earth's nature and now must climb the ladder of progression into the galaxy. This idea that humans are at the stage of being post-Earth, that Earth is so doomed that humans must leave it and start anew complicates humans' dependence on nature, or at the very least, humans' dependence on *Earth's* nature. This notion of outgrowing or out-using Earth's nature restricts the ultimate freedom paradigm usually promised with heaven (Nigles). The term "humans" as I use it in the phrase "humans' dependence on Earth's nature" signifies humans' biological dependence on nature, that is, humans' need for water and oxygen and other things Earth's nature intrinsically provides people to survive. The term *human*, a single being with necessary biological conditions for survival, contrasts with the more abstract concept of collective humans that forms *humanity*, which signifies the entanglement of societally constructed rules for being. The point of this delineation is to show that Butler uses space colonization as hope for the future of humanity and in the reconstruction of humans' place in nature. By expanding human involvement in nature from Earth's surface to encompass the universe, Butler implies that the biological dependence, that is, the human dependence is also transcendent of Earth's nature. Instead, Butler claims that humans are more evolutionarily advanced than the rest of Earth's nature. Instead of remaining on Earth as victims to the destructive state of dystopia, Earthseed followers follow

a different path, and the purpose of their existence is to transcend Earth. Humans are more apt, not biologically but at least ideologically, to inhabit a new biosphere.

The narrative arc of Mars colonization parallels contemporary efforts. Through criticisms of space colonization from non-Earthseed community, Butler argues that the civilian desire for expansion must be present in order to successfully colonize space. With colonization of any kind comes a moral dilemma. In the historical context of the westward expansion, the moral dilemma manifests in the “white man’s burden” trope, which questions one group’s right to control, kill, and enslave another group (e.g. the controlling, killing, and enslavement of Native Americans in North America). Butler represents the colonial tropes of control by one group over another through the revitalization of paternalistic company towns like Olivar, established and owned by Kagimoto, Stamm, Frompton and Company (KSF), which seeks employees from Robledo. Lauren criticizes company towns:

Anyone KSF hired would have hard time living on the salary offered. In not very much time, I think the new hires would be in debt to the company. That’s an old company-town trick—get people into debt, hang on to them, and work them harder. Debt slavery. (Butler 121)

Butler presents neo-colonialism in the form of monetary enslavement, of the kind that Karl Marx’s anxieties warned about, stressing the dangers of a world where the proletariat are exploited for capitalistic gain. Many critics, like Nilges, decide to read Olivar as Butler’s commentary on capitalist America with special focus on post-Fordism or neo-Marxism, but for the purposes of this chapter, the company towns present paternalism and neo-colonialism. Emery, an Earthseed follower who joins Lauren on her migration northward, reveals that she was sold as a bride to an old man with a farm that eventually was sold to an agribusiness conglomerate where “wages were paid, but in company scrip, not in cash” (Butler 288). The company towns make sure that wages are not high enough to pay the bills, and so “debt

slaves could be forced to work longer hours for less pay, could be ‘disciplined’ if they failed to meet their quotas, could be traded and sold with or without their consent [...] and children could be forced to work off the debt of their parents” (288). Butler shows the regression of society from Corey’s technologically progressive city-light world to the paternalism of company towns, where the conditions resemble the American slave plantations. Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, a professor at the University of Manitoba, argues, “Butler chooses to imagine a historically recognizable and ‘mundane’ form of slavery, that of white slavers owning and controlling non-white slaves. By doing so, she suggests that racism, in its historical, colonial form, has not been resolved and still demands attention” (Joo). Although Joo interprets this neo-colonialism in the form of paternalistic company towns, Butler calls for the continued need for social justice on the issue of racism. Butler uses these notions of slavery and exploitation of the neo-colonial company towns to juxtapose Earthseed’s redefinition of colonialism: to inhabit outer space. That is, while late capitalism continues to colonize and exploit other humans, Earthseed seeks to colonize other planets. Butler uses this opposition to argue for the necessity of technological advances, religious support, and a desire for space colonization. Though, since other beings that humans know of do not exist on Mars and so historical tropes of colonial paternalism are not applicable, space colonization contains a different moral dilemma: the abandonment of the Earth. In other words, how can a community justify abandoning their own planet to conquer another? Lauren believes this pursuit is excusable:

I suspect that a living world might be easier for us to adapt to and live on without a long, expensive umbilical to Earth. *Easier* but not easy. Still, that’s something, because I don’t think there could be a multi-light-year umbilical. I think people who traveled to extrasolar worlds would be on their own—far from politicians and business people, failing economies and tortured ecologies—and far from help. Well out of the shadow of their parent world. (Butler 83)

Through Lauren's beliefs, Butler calls for the cutting of the cord, so to speak, between the Earth and its future colony on Mars or on other planetary bodies, as if the connection might cause the infected society on Earth to poison the new worlds. Although these ideas are founded within the sphere of Earthseed, public opinion is not on the same wavelength. After the death of one of the astronauts on Mars, other Robledo citizens criticize the space colonization efforts, "All that money wasted on another crazy space trip when many people on Earth can't afford water, food, or shelter" (Butler 17). Butler uses the community members' criticisms of space travel to reinforce the need for religious support for successful space colonization missions. The community considers space travel and colonization frivolous. That is to say, just because technology has evolved enough to make colonization of another planet possible, does not mean it is necessary. In this alternative version of neo-colonialism that opposes the historical manifestations of colonial-like tropes, criticisms of the non-religious community reveal the anxieties of the general public in continued space colonization efforts. That is, when Earth is abandoned in hopes of to colonize Mars, what will become of life on Earth? Lee Rozelle of the University of Montevallo writes, "Space-age redemption will come from the heavens, leaving contemporary habitations a mere testing ground. If Earth is only a launchpad, then any limited terrestrial vision should be dwarfed by a more progress-orientated, cosmic sensibility" (73). Abandonment becomes a by-product of colonization. Using the idea of the inevitable launchpad-Earth, of the Earth as a base from which humankind can blast off onto other planetary bodies and thus leave Earth behind, Butler confirms that space is the next logical step in human progression. Having already established this idea using the religious support, Butler also shows that technology is ready for the colonization of space: "That [Anglo-Japanese cosmological station on the moon] has

been detecting new worlds for a dozen years now, and there's even evidence that a few of the discovered worlds may be life-bearing" (Butler 83). Technology in Butler's world is comparable to Earthseed's beliefs. For example, other nations are investing in space exploration, and there are already astronauts on Mars. So, Earthseed's destiny to arrive on and to colonize Mars is not a dream, in fact, it is technologically achievable. However, Lauren's original belief that space is heaven is not (at first) actionable; because, even though the technology is available, public will to colonize space is lacking. Butler suggests that once public will is achieved, then Mars colonization would be achievable and humankind would prove they are evolutionary sophisticated enough to abandon Earth.

Butler suggests that successful space colonization will only occur when religious support, technological advances, and public will align. *Parable of the Sower* presents space colonization as a plausible pursuit because both religious support and technological advances are in place, yet civilian desire is lacking. These three elements can be examined against current efforts for space colonization. For example in SpaceX's efforts for Mars colonization, neither religious support nor technological advances are up-to-speed with Musk's dream—instead, what exists in current efforts is public will. A documentary by *The Guardian* called "If I Die on Mars" features several of the civilians who are applying for and hoping to be the first people to set foot on Mars. One interviewed would-be pioneer wants to go to Mars because it will ensure his legacy, while another believes that natural disasters, disease, and war have made life on Earth unsalvageable and so wants to start anew. However, Musk's efforts for Mars colonization seem to be superficial, and his idealism alarms many. Many of his presentations that document the progression of SpaceX machine building are designed to pique the interest of investors (Lopatto in Stockton). Musk's

idealized plans lack the actual available technology that will help him achieve his goals. For example, he promises that the initial trip to Mars will take only eighty days, even though it takes six to nine months with currently available technology (Wall). It is possible that such technology could be invented in the coming years, especially because Musk has poured millions of dollars into these engineering efforts. Therefore, humanity will still have to confront the launchpad-Earth dilemma, which refers to the fact that if humankind become an interplanetary species then Earth is left behind, abandoned, that Butler examines. Mike Wall writes, “The [Interplanetary Transport System] could be used for many other things, possibly [...] allowing cargo to get from New York to Tokyo in just 25 minutes, Musk said. But for now, the main goal is colonizing Mars” (“SpaceX’s Elon Musk”). Musk advertises Mars colonization by saying that becoming a multiplanetary species will make humanity far less susceptible to extinction; however, these efforts seem to be pursued for superficial reasons (Stockton and Wall). That is, the ability to say humans have actually landed humans on Mars, and so humans have colonized it, as if footprints equal success. In this process, Musk disregards the lives of those new-Martians, who in “If I Die on Mars” fully accept the inevitability of their suicide mission, and turns a blind eye to trying to repair Earth. So, humans’ current efforts show that neither widespread religious beliefs nor technological advances allow for space colonization, but Mars One pioneers and Musk prove that public desire to colonize Mars exists. Butler, however, presents both religious support and technological advances that allow for space colonization, while public desire is lacking. In the end, neither the dystopian world in Butler’s text nor the contemporary world has successfully colonized Mars. And not until these three facets of colonization align will there be a colony on Mars.

## Conclusion

Using Biblical archetypes, in the face of environmental apocalypse, Atwood, Dashner, and Butler raise questions about a potential future world of environmental collapse, a world that includes elements of this one, such as the consequences of the Anthropocene, natural climate destruction, and the possibility for escape through space travel. Each of these novels contains exaggerated versions of contemporary issues and advances at the intersection of technology and nature. Atwood's pigoons, which closely resemble advances in medicine and technology today, Dashner's scorched Earth that is an extreme version of climate change, and Butler's advocacy for Mars colonization compared with Elon Musk's efforts—these dystopian worlds are not as far-fetched as they originally might seem. Atwood, Dashner, and Butler draw elements from contemporary society to project what might happen were they to unfold. In doing so, these authors elevate the subgenre of dystopian fiction from just science fiction to speculative fiction—a term Atwood uses herself to classify her novel. The importance of these scientific elements is that they ground the fiction in fact and provide readers with an opportunity to read these texts glimpses into a future world. As critic Roman Bartosch quotes Lawrence Buell, a pioneer in ecocritical theory, “[apocalyptic narratives and their dystopian environments are] the most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (As cited by Bartosch). Since these elements parallel reality, must humans then consider these dystopian worlds as potential future for Earth?

I argue that these authors do not create totally realistic future worlds but instead have depicted exaggerated versions of a potential future world. As critic Amy Elliot notes, “a dystopia, by its nature, provides a glimpse of the flaws in society, offering an undesirable

picture of what the world could become if problems are not resolved” (“Power of Our Words”). Novels like the ones examined in this project serve as a looking-glass, providing possible realities where the problems depicted in the narratives get out of control. Through religion and technology, Atwood’s world shows problems in human dominance over nature and a disjointed understanding of human ecology that lead from one dystopia to another, and even to the extinction of humankind. Dashner’s world suggests that the future is uncertain and a safe and prosperous future is less likely than a number of catastrophes. Butler’s world shows ecological and social problems bad enough to prompt an escape into outer space; she imagines a salvation in colonizing Mars.

Butler’s approach is tempting, especially considering the severity of climate change, and continual denials of climate change skeptics, which scare scientists and environmentalists. The denialists’ environmental conservation policies, or lack thereof, favor business and commerce instead of protecting the planet. Alarmingly, one of these opponents now heads the agency dedicated to protecting the environment, and as Coral Davenport reports, Mr. Priutt “think[s] there are some regulations that in the near term need to be rolled back in a very aggressive way” (“Trump Plans”). One regulation on the chopping block is the Clean Water Act, enacted by Barack Obama in 2015. The Act “gives the federal government broad authority to limit pollution in major bodies of water, like Chesapeake Bay, the Mississippi River, and Puget Sound” (Davenport). Environmentalists have praised the rule, calling it, as Davenport reports, “an important step that will lead to significantly cleaner natural bodies of water and healthier drinking water” (ibid). Without this legislation, humans can become ill from contaminated drinking or recreational water because of runoff. Such contamination can increase toxins and waterborne pathogens like bacteria, viruses, and



parasites that make people sick (EPA, “Climate Impacts on Human Health”). Metals in the water can also be dangerous. The people of Flint, Michigan live in this dystopia every day. Plagued with contaminated water since 2014, Flint is expected to suffer until “the end of 2019,” says Mayor Karen Weaver, and only “if they receive enough funding,” will they be able to solve the problem by then (Oosting). This water crisis is not dissimilar to the one previously examined in Butler’s novel, but with the technology of Butler’s future world, Lauren and her followers can treat the water with certain pills to make it safe for drinking. Still, the scarcity and contamination of the water in the novel are poignant and comparable to crises like Flint’s. The threat to drinking water is particularly significant because of its necessity for life. If all the available drinking water were uncontaminated or otherwise unsafe, life on Earth would end.

Politicians’ disregard for the EPA as a whole and for the environmental make environmentalists fear legislators such as Trump and Priutt who favor commerce and economic growth over the ability of the Earth to sustain humankind in the future. Trump has considered withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, a momentous achievement, which brought 134 nations to fight for the environment. Annie Sneed reports, “Trump told a cheering crowd, ‘We’re going to cancel the Paris climate agreement and stop all payments of US tax dollars to UN global warming programs’” (“Trump’s First 100 Days”). However, “Such a move would rend a global deal that has been hailed as historic, throwing into question the fate of global climate policy and, diplomats say, the credibility of the United States” (Davenport, “Top Trump”). The possible departure might indicate further vehement anti-environmental policies from the Trump administration.

Trump attacked the EPA as soon as he took office when he took down their website. The EPA website houses data about climate change and predicts changes and their consequences. An unknown source clarified that the Office of General Counsel was “‘Walking through pages on the site’ to see what was legally removable, and what legally needed to remain” (Heavey, Simpson, and Volcovici). Environmentalists had previously worried that “Trump will censor scientists or delete government data about global warming” (Follett). The potential censorship or restriction of scientific information prevents education of the general public about the consequences of climate change. The result is ignorance of the importance of environmentally conscious policies and general methods to promote sustainability. It is no wonder, then, that these dystopian novelists imagine a future world wherein the environment is sacrificed and humankind lies on the brink of extinction.

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