From Bradbury to Butler: Los Angeles Science Fiction and the Aerospace Industry

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Los Angeles is famous, and infamous, for many things—the Hollywood movie industry and Skid Row, surfing and smog, freeways and traffic, palm trees and urban sprawl. But while the city is often conceived of as a science fiction space itself, as a utopia or dystopia, so far little has been made of the fact that Los Angeles has also been the site of production of both hard science and science fiction, and even less of the relationship between the two. The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society is the oldest active science fiction club in the world, and the city has been home to many prominent writers of the science fiction genre. Los Angeles was also home to the aerospace industry for almost a century. Moreover, science fiction and aerospace share a long, but under-recognized, history in Los Angeles, one that is reflected in the works of Ray Bradbury and Octavia Butler.

Although Los Angeles’s relationship with the aerospace industry dates back to almost the turn of the century, it was during World War II that it truly became the aerospace capital of the world. In his essay, “The Urban and Environmental Legacies of the Air Industry,” Wade Graham notes that “by 1940 aircraft manufacturers employed more people in Southern California than any other industry; by 1941 nearly half the region’s manufacturing jobs were in the air business and 13,000 new industrial workers arrived in Los Angeles every month” (250). This trend continued in the post-war period, as the air industry rebounded from a decline in military demand for traditional aircraft by transforming itself into the aerospace industry, producing missiles, satellites, and spacecraft, to meet the needs of the Cold War. In “Lost in Aerospace,” J.D. Waldie notes that “by 1965, fifteen of the twenty-five largest aerospace companies in the nation were concentrated in California. Most of them were in Los Angeles County” (38). Such a concentration had significant consequences on the region, impacting its economy,
politics, urban development, and even geographical make-up. Graham argues that the aerospace industry was drawn to California not due to advantages such as temperate weather as is commonly believed, but despite its disadvantages, primarily because of “the availability of a nearly endless supply of open land for building manufacturing and testing facilities, ancillary businesses, and worker housing, allowing the industry to create its own urban forms, including entire communities, from the drawing board” (248). The aerospace industry’s need for open land away from urban centers and the housing needs of its ever increasing workforce played a major role in the now notorious layout of Los Angeles County. Graham continues, “The postwar Los Angeles that emerged was a regional city, with its nodes sown from the principal aircraft plants and grown into surrounding purpose-built communities . . . linked by an emerging system of freeways—again, primed by federal funding—and serviced by regional shopping centers surrounded by enormous surface parking lots built by developers” (252). Los Angeles as it is known today, as a decentralized city covered in concrete, dissected by freeways, and surrounded by ever-sprawling suburbs, owes its make-up in large part to the aerospace industry.

The presence of the aerospace industry in the region had an equally significant impact on the region’s culture. While the 2012 publication *Blue Sky Metropolis: The Aerospace Century in Southern California* signals an emerging critical interest in the role of the aerospace industry in the development of the region and includes, among other topics, an examination of its promotion of Cold War consensus culture and its relationship to the Hollywood film industry, there has so far been little critical work on the relationship between the aerospace industry and science fiction literature produced in Los Angeles. The works of Ray Bradbury and Octavia Butler are representative of the science fiction produced in Los Angeles during the emergence and eventual decline of the aerospace industry as a dominant force in the region. While the careers of both authors overlap, the works of each belong to distinct periods in the history of the science fiction genre.

Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* was published in 1950 and was groundbreaking at the time because of its use of space travel (via technology that would
not be invented for another decade) and the colonization of Mars as a metaphor for the hopes and fears middle-class Americans entering the Atomic Age, whose technologies both promised a better, or at least more convenient, future and threatened nuclear destruction. The novel was also influential to those working in the aerospace industry, who sought to make Bradbury’s fiction a reality. In his biography of Bradbury, *The Bradbury Chronicles*, Sam Weller recounts when Bradbury visited the Johnson Space Center to meet the astronauts who would shortly be travelling to the moon as part of the Apollo missions (the technology for which was manufactured in Downey, CA). He writes, “When someone in the room announced that Ray Bradbury was present—Ray Bradbury, the author—at least half of the astronauts looked up, alert, scanning the room excitedly. . . . As young dreamers with imaginations fixed squarely on the stars, many of them credited Ray, and specifically *The Martian Chronicles*, as an early inspiration” (276-77). *The Martian Chronicles* is still considered one of the most prominent examples of what is called the “Golden Age” of science fiction, whose era dated from the late 1930s to the late 1950s and which saw the cultural emergence of science fiction from pulp magazines to a literary genre in its own right. This era was defined by the fact that industries like aerospace were increasingly turning science fiction into scientific reality and was thus characterized by a focus on human interaction with and achievement through advanced technologies rather than the technology itself.

Octavia Butler, whose *Parable of the Sower* was published in 1993, has been associated with the Afrofuturism movement, which is characterized by examinations of race and gender issues through the lens of science fiction. In contrast to *The Martian Chronicles*, *Parable of the Sower* focuses on the ramifications of rampant technological development on those who are left behind. *The Martian Chronicles* promotes individual heroism and transcendence through technological agency and responsibility, while *Parable of the Sower* depicts the survival of communities that lack such agency, are denied transcendence, and suffer the consequences of technological irresponsibility. If Bradbury and his era of science fiction can be represented as the exploration of the new frontiers of space and technology, Butler’s work is an examination of those who remain grounded on Earth.
The works of Bradbury and Butler are representative not only of different periods in the history of the development of science fiction as a genre, but also of Los Angeles’s history as well. Their respective novels, produced over forty years apart, can be viewed as bookends to the “space” era of the aerospace industry in Los Angeles, each providing a unique chronological perspective of Los Angeles during the Cold War: Bradbury looking forward from the beginning of the Cold War, and Butler looking back from its conclusion. *The Martian Chronicles* came out at a time when rocket ships were only an idea, when the aerospace industry was just beginning to transition from the production of airplanes for the recently-ended Second World War to the rocket and missile technology needed for a nascent Cold War. *Parable of the Sower* was published after man had been to the Moon and came back, and at a time of high racial tension in Los Angeles, which had exploded in the Los Angeles Riots just a year before the book’s publication. These tensions had been exacerbated by the end of the Cold War, which saw the rapid decline of the region’s aerospace industry, whose workforce consequently suffered massive layoffs. Graham writes, “The next South Los Angeles riots, in 1992, also roughly coincided with a wave of white flight, and crucially, with the post-Cold War defense contradiction. Beginning in 1989, tens of thousands of defense jobs were eliminated in the region. . . . By 1992, more than seven hundred manufacturing plants left or expanded outside the state. Between 1988 and 1993, 800,000 California jobs vanished, half from Los Angeles County” (263-64). While their novels ostensibly take place in the future, Bradbury and Butler were heavily informed by what was happening in their own times. Their works reflect the ways the emergence, subsequent domination, and eventual decline of the aerospace industry transformed the social, political, and cultural landscape of Los Angeles, and they bear witness to the hopes and eventual disillusionment of the region’s promised future under the aerospace industry’s influence.

The aerospace industry emerged in and promoted a culture of technological optimism in Los Angeles. However, this faith in technology-based industries like aerospace to provide a never-ending supply of jobs and transform the city into a utopian “Tomorrowland” was underlined by a politically and economically conservative culture. In *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, Mike Davis outlines the early
history of what would become the aerospace industry, focusing on the founding of Cal Tech as the hub of the region’s “technostructure” and the progenitor of the aerospace industry (55). In doing so, Davis connects aerospace with another of Southern California’s (in)famous trends: “boosterism.” The city’s political and social elite wooed the aerospace industry to the region with promises of cheap land in exchange for the technological development and manufacturing jobs the aerospace industry would provide. However, Davis also shows that the aerospace industry, even in its earliest manifestations, carried with it the “reactionary” ideologies of its supporters, including anti-unionism and racism. He references “Cal Tech’s chief booster” Robert A. Millikan’s claim that the marriage of the business interests of the boosters with science-based industries like aerospace would reproduce “Aryan supremacy on the shores of the Pacific” (56). Davis’s history of the aerospace industry in Los Angeles, while brief, is instrumental in demonstrating that from its very inception, the technological optimism and faith in the aerospace industry promoted by the boosters went hand-in-hand with the region’s political, economic, and cultural conservatism.

Peter Westwick, in his introduction to Blue Sky Metropolis, expands on both the dual influence of the aerospace industry’s presence in Los Angeles and its cultural impact. Like Davis, he cites the region’s boosterism as a major force behind the aerospace’s move to Southern California, pointing out that the industry was supported by almost all of the region’s most influential individuals and institutions, including “newspaper publishers, real-estate developers, and Hollywood moguls,” as well as local universities (3). However, Westwick notes that these groups were also instrumental in creating the myth that the aerospace industry would turn the region into a technological utopia, as well as in reinforcing the region’s conservative politics and culture. He adds, “[I]n its resistance to unions, its welcoming of Aviation Oakies, and its adaptation to the Cold War defense industry and its security regime, Southern California aerospace both drew on and encouraged conservative political tendencies” (6). The aerospace industry flourished in Los Angeles due in large part to the city’s open-shop policies and anti-union sentiments. The industry also found in Los Angeles a culture compliant with the Cold War’s demands for security, secrecy, and even paranoia. The aerospace industry’s
impact on Southern California was so pervasive that it even skewed the region’s
religious make-up by drawing massive migrations of Southern Protestants to the region
looking for manufacturing jobs. While the boosters saw such conservatism as essential
to the creation of the Los Angeles tomorrow, it ultimately denied this utopian dream to
many of those who were expected to build it. Waldie speaks to the contrasting
expectations and realities of those working in the aerospace industry when he writes,
“They’d been told that the future would be sleek, edged in shining chrome, protectively
enclosing like the cockpit of a jet fighter, and armed for confrontation with the Soviet
Union and its allies. (How a grid of suburban streets, blue-collar lives, and boxy houses
would have fit into that future was never made entirely clear)” (37). Therefore, from its
very beginning in Los Angeles until its almost complete withdrawal from the region,
there were always two sides, two narratives, that defined the aerospace industry: its
liberating promise of a better tomorrow and the confining reality of its conservative
practices. And just like Los Angeles itself, the beautiful mirage of its promise masked
the harshness of its reality. Mihir Pandya, in his essay “Stealth Airplanes and Cold War
Southern California,” uses stealth as a fitting metaphor for this duality shared by the
aerospace industry and Los Angeles, writing,

Stealth—by definition, an invisible presence—serves as a useful icon of the Cold
War aerospace industry in Los Angeles, which seemed absent and present at the
same time. . . . Secrecy fostered two cities laminated to each other, one seen
and the other unseen. The resulting alignments and misalignments—places
where the secret operated quietly, and others where it became public—shaped
the city. One of the ways in which this double consciousness is most routinely
captured is in the ways Los Angeles plays itself. Los Angeles as a cultural
imaginary reveals its fractured character in its films and its fictions: of power
hidden underneath the surface, of violence coupled with fine weather. This union
of purity and danger, which so regularly reappears in and as Los Angeles, was
also a central trope that helped mask one of the largest knowledge production
and manufacturing efforts during the Cold War. (118)
As Pandya shows, in addition to the aerospace industry’s impact on the city’s economy, politics, and urban development, it permeated various aspects of Los Angeles culture. Moreover, this influence was not limited to film and fiction, but includes other forms of entertainment, religion, and even architecture. He also indicates that the cultural impact of the aerospace industry, like its socio-economic impact, was also, perhaps necessarily, dualistic. The aerospace industry promoted what Westwick calls a “culture of expansive imagination and entrepreneurialism” (3). In describing this culture, he borrows Davis’s “sunshine”/“noir” language but challenges the utopian/dystopian dichotomy that is typically used to define Los Angeles, claiming that the aerospace industry simultaneously contained aspects of both. In the final line of his introduction, Westwick, writes, “The builders of the Blue Sky Metropolis sought to slip the surly bonds of Earth, and transcend the failings and foibles of modern society. But aerospace was also, after all, a human enterprise, ever grounded in the realities and complexities of history” (11). The attempt to escape from and the gravitational draw back towards the historical realities of Los Angeles is the central tension in the works of Bradbury and Butler. Although Westwick does not specifically examine science fiction literature produced in Los Angeles, among those whom he lists as “visionaries” of the aerospace industry’s ideology is Ray Bradbury. Butler is not mentioned, either as a visionary of technological futurism or as one of its critics, but she would certainly fall into the latter category. Both Bradbury’s and Butler’s novels address the dual nature of the aerospace industry’s social and cultural influence on Los Angeles. Bradbury addresses the technological optimism associated with the emergence of the aerospace industry, while Butler critiques the consequences of its conservatism. *The Martian Chronicles* can be read as narrative about the region’s dream of a space-age future, while *Parable of the Sower* can be read as a narrative about what happened after it woke up to its present reality.

*The Martian Chronicles* is as much about Southern California as it is about Mars, but to understand the influence of the region on the novel, one must first understand the influence of the region on its author. Ray Bradbury moved to Southern California from the Midwest in 1934. As with many Midwest transplants, he came lured by the promise
of economic opportunity. As Michael Ziser argues in his essay, “Living with Speculative Infrastructures: Reading Our Present Dilemmas in Science Fiction’s Past,” the Southern California region at this time was host to a disproportionately large number of prominent science fiction writers (28). However, Ziser cites technological fascination as well as economic opportunity in accounting for this migration of science fiction writers—Bradbury among them—to Southern California. Bradbury’s career as a science fiction writer took off just as the airplane industry underwent its metamorphosis into the aerospace industry. He and other science fiction writers in Los Angeles witnessed the transformation and rapid growth of the aerospace industry first hand, and could not help but note that the consequent and unprecedented development of the region eerily resembled their own science fiction worlds. As Ziser puts it, “For sci-fi writers, teasing out the implications of an era in which entire new civilizations could be conjured almost from nothing through astonishing feats of engineering and capital was a form of realism. They were writing an eyewitness account of what was the most radical landscape-scale engineering project in the history of the world” (28). Whole cities sprang up as if overnight, in order to meet the insatiable demands of the aerospace industry, particularly housing for its ever-growing workforce.

Meanwhile, Bradbury was forging personal connections with the aerospace industry. While in Los Angeles, Bradbury became an influential member of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society (LASFS). Weller recounts that during Bradbury’s time with LASFS, many scientist would be invited as guest speakers to present on their area of expertise. John “Jack” Parsons, who would become the co-founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratories—an institution integral to the aerospace industry’s decision to locate in Southern California—was among those invited. Weller writes, “Parsons…gave a lecture on space travel well before the technology existed” (85). Moreover, Davis notes that in addition to being a practicing occultist, Parsons was “a devoted science fiction fan who attended meetings of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society to hear writers talk about their books” (59). Among others associated with LASFS were L. Ron Hubbard, the pulp science fiction writer turned founder of Scientology, and Robert L. Heinlein, a Californian and science fiction writer known for his libertarian political views.
Through LASFS, Bradbury was introduced to both the emerging science of the aerospace industry, as well as some of its more unorthodox elements, and was able to contribute to an ongoing dialogue between science and science fiction.

Bradbury’s work reflects both the fascination and uneasiness of a Midwesterner who suddenly finds himself thrust into the unknown world of the metropolis. Rather than write about the adventure and romance of space exploration and conquest as science fiction writers of the earlier pulp era did, Bradbury, especially in his work *The Martian Chronicles*, focused on the struggle to maintain traditional social relations in the wake of momentous changes due to technological progress. This short story collection is paradoxically at once progressive and regressive, hailing a brand new future increasingly defined by technology while nostalgically holding on to the social relations and cultural traditions of the past. While the stories of *The Martian Chronicles* take place mostly on Mars, they can be read as tales about the expansion of postwar Southern California suburbia. Ziser writes, “No writer of the period takes as many pains as Bradbury in detailing the material and psychological consequences of the explosion of residential construction in California after World War II” (29). According to Westwick, between the decades preceding and following the publication of *The Martian Chronicles*, the population of the Southern California would double, in large part due to the influx of workers to fill the needs of the growing aerospace industry. Graham adds that by the mid-1950s, “55 percent of manufacturing jobs in Los Angeles County were in aerospace” (261). Furthermore, in 1950, the same year *The Martian Chronicles* was published, the biggest housing development in America was being planned and built in Los Angeles County to meet the voracious housing needs of the aerospace industry’s workforce: “Platted on 3,500 acres of farmland, Lakewood would comprise 17,500 houses, each 1,100 square feet. . . . Private developers secured $100 million in federal mortgage financing to fund a full-scale industrial assembly line to build houses: at full tilt, it produced one hundred a day, five hundred a week; construction was finished in three years. . . . When the sales office opened, 25,000 people were waiting” (Graham 257). *The Martian Chronicles* reflects both the awe of new technologies to access—or in
terms of real-estate development, build—new worlds, and a growing concern about those technologies passing by the very people whose lives they are meant to improve.

The Martian Chronicles is made up of a series of vignettes, roughly divided into three sections, about the exploration, colonization, and almost complete abandonment of Mars by humans, who treat Mars as a frontier. In the short vignette titled “The Settlers,” Bradbury writes about the first people to settle on Mars: “And when the state of Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, or Montana vanished into cloud seas, and, doubly, when the United States shrank to a misted island and the entire planet Earth became a muddy baseball tossed away, then you were alone, wandering in the meadows of space, on your way to a place you couldn’t imagine” (75). These individuals, mostly white, middle-class men from the Midwest, resemble not only Bradbury himself, but also those who migrated to California looking for manufacturing jobs in the aerospace industry. For them, Los Angeles, not Mars, was the place they couldn’t imagine. Moreover, the settlers regard the Martian frontier as a place of escape. Bradbury continues, “There was a reason for each man. They were leaving bad wives or bad jobs or bad towns; they were coming to find something or leave something or get something, to dig up something or bury something or leave something alone. They were coming with small dreams or large dreams or none at all” (75). Here, Bradbury expresses the belief that the Martian frontier will offer a new start. In both its audience and its appeal, Bradbury’s Martian frontier resembles developing suburbs of 1950s Los Angeles. Like the frontier, the suburbs are located on the outskirts of the city, often acting as a buffer between civilization and the wilderness beyond. As Graham’s article points out, the aerospace industry contributed to the sprawling development of Los Angeles due to its need to escape the restrictions of cramped urban and residential areas, as well as its mostly white workforce’s desire to isolate themselves from “undesirables.” He writes, “Separateness was at the core of the raison d’etre of Lakewood and places like it: even if in twentieth-century Southern California people left the central city following jobs in industry, the movement away from the city was no less a flight from something—not the industry city, as it had been in the East, but other people, especially certain kinds of other people” (Graham 258). The Martian Chronicles reflects what was going on in
Bradbury’s own backyard and the desires of his neighbors to escape their backyards. The suburbs define the farthest edge of the city, and as they sprawl outward, they continually redefine the parameters of the city. Bradbury expresses this desire and movement in the terms of a frontier, but not a Western frontier, civilization having already reached the geographical conclusion of that progression. Instead he substitutes the “high” frontier of space and Mars for the “low” frontier of the West. Reflecting but reorienting Los Angeles’s lateral expansion, *The Martian Chronicles* posits a movement upward—in order to “slip the surly bonds of Earth, and transcend the failings and foibles of modern society” as Westwick puts it—toward a “final” frontier and another planet whose surface visually resembles the desert landscapes in which new suburban housing developments were popping up. This historical lateral expansion of Los Angeles was in large part made possible by the same technology that made the vertical journey possible in *The Martian Chronicles*, technology produced by the aerospace industry.

The development of Mars, like the development of the Los Angeles suburbs, express the paradoxical desire not only to retain older cultural values, but also to escape their historical consequences. Technology, in particular aerospace technology, offered the at first imaginative and then eventually real possibility of such an escape via space travel to new worlds on which new societies could be planted on virgin landscape. Carl Abbott, in his essay “Homesteading on the Extraterrestrial Frontier” expands on the frontier themes found in *The Martian Chronicles*. He also views Bradbury’s work as a juxtaposition of Bradbury’s Midwestern childhood and values against his experiences of “the postwar age of galloping technological change” in Southern California (270). Abbott argues that the central theme of *The Martian Chronicles* is the desire to escape the problems of modern society via a new (“high”) frontier, and the fallout of the confrontation between middle-class American values with that new frontier (240-241). He thus considers it a “homesteading” narrative, whose focus is on “rugged individualism” and “scientific progress” in the face of the challenges of frontier existence (244). This is echoed in the first section of *The Martian Chronicles*, full of vignettes of expeditions made up of mostly military men to Mars—reflecting the
servicemen who returned after the Second World War to settle in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Only the humans who come to Mars in *The Martian Chronicles* discover that they are not the first ones there. The Martians in the novel function similarly to other native populations in both historical and fictional accounts of colonization. They act as foils to highlight the value system of the colonizer. This is literally the case in “The Third Expedition.” In this vignette, the crew of an expedition to Mars meets its demise by being lulled into a false sense of security by the presence of a small Midwestern town on Mars, which in reality is a trap set by the Martians. Bradbury writes, “Well, what would the best weapon be that a Martian could use against Earth Men with atomic weapons? The answer was interesting. Telepathy, hypnosis, memory, and imagination” (47). The fate of the crew foreshadows the subsequent development and eventual abandonment of Mars by humans. What draws humanity to Mars is a desire to escape Earth and its institutions. But what draws humanity back to Earth are those same institutions.

The struggle between freedom and familiarity continues in a series of vignettes about the colonization of Mars. In a scene from “The Night Meeting,” an old man explains to a young passerby that he came to Mars because it is different. He says, “We’ve got to forget Earth and how things were. We’ve got to look at what we’re in here, and how different it is. I get a hell of a lot of fun out of just the weather here. It’s Martian weather” (81). Significantly, the old man gives the same reason for coming to Mars as many did for coming to California: the weather. But the old man’s statement is ironic, in part because he has come all the way to Mars only to be a gas station attendant. Furthermore, this vignette is preceded and followed by two vignettes that describe the transformation of the Martian landscape into “home.” In “The Locusts” Bradbury writes, “And from the rockets ran men with hammers in their hands to beat the strange world into a shape that was familiar to the eye, to bludgeon away all the strangeness . . . they hammered up frame cottages. . . . And when the carpenters had hurried on, the women came in with flowerpots and chintz and pans and set up a kitchen clamor to cover the silence that Mars made . . . ” (80-81). In a vignette following “The Night Meeting,” called “Interim,” Bradbury describes the result of the carpenters’ industriousness from the
previous section, writing, “It was as if, in many ways, a great earthquake had shaken loose the roots and cellars of an Iowa town, and then, in an instant, a whirlwind twister of Oz-like proportions had carried the entire town off to Mars to set it down without a bump . . .“ (108). Again, Bradbury’s language, in its allusion to the *Wizard of Oz* and the Hollywood film industry, connects Mars back to Los Angeles. The new Martian homes are even built out of California redwoods. The humans who colonize Mars make the Martians’ original mirage a reality. They do not heed the old man when he advises, “Enjoy it. Don’t ask it to be nothing else but what it is” (82). Rather than an escape from Earth, Mars becomes its reproduction.

Eventually the pull of those entrenched cultural values that reproduce themselves on Mars drive most of the humans who come to Mars back to Earth. In “The Luggage Store,” a priest and luggage salesmen discuss the news of imminent war on Earth. The luggage salesman tells the priest, “It’s a funny thing, Father, but yes, I think we’ll all go back. I know, we came up here to get away from things—politics, the atom bomb, war, pressure groups, prejudice, laws—I know. But it’s still home there” (Bradbury 153).

However, *The Martian Chronicles* does not end with the return of all humans to Earth. Despite the fact that Bradbury strongly challenges the Martian frontier’s ability to act as an escape and refuge from earthly failures and despite the fact that Earth is completely destroyed by nuclear warfare by the end of the novel, *The Martian Chronicles* ends on a note of hope. Humanity lives on through two families that escape, with the use of hidden-away rocket ships, back to Mars. Only, this time, they erase everything that makes them human. The father has brought with him documents from Earth, which he uses to start a fire. With them, Bradbury writes, “All the laws and beliefs of Earth were burnt into small hot ashes which soon would be carried off in a wind” (203). The father promises his children to show them Martians and points to their reflections in the water of a Martian canal. Therefore, for Bradbury, there does seem to be the possibility for transformation through a frontier made possible by technology. Ultimately, though, it is not the technology itself that offers hope, but how it is used. Likewise, it is not just the presence of a frontier that offers renewal, but what one brings to that frontier.
In contrast to the emphasis on individual determination in “homesteading” science fiction like *The Martian Chronicles*, Abbott cites “terraforming” science fiction, “[t]he big questions of [which] have to do with public purpose and public action: What goals are worthy of the state? How can the costs and benefits of economic change be fairly allocated? How can large-scale action be sustained over time?” (242). These novels shift the focus from the individual to the community and take on a more socially conscious and active tone. Abbott also historicizes them, linking terraforming science fiction to the era of social revolution and fragmentation between the 1960s and 1970s during which they were popularized (251). This era of science fiction was influential to Butler’s work, especially because its brought gender and race issues to the forefront of the genre’s concerns, and Abbott explicitly although briefly mentions Butler as being a part of the “terraforming” tradition. The writers of this tradition, rather than conceptualize the frontier as a single location of escape, recontextualize it as a space defined by “the convergence of multiple peoples arriving from every direction, the conquest of indigenous peoples and the landscape itself, the dominant role of capitalism, the conservation of cultural norms carried from Europe, eastern America, and other homelands, and the determining power of communities rather than individuals” (Abbott 244). *Parable of the Sower* expresses such an understanding of the “high” frontier of space exploration by showing the consequences of what has happened when a society ignores the realities of the aerospace industry in exchange for its promise of a better future. Butler’s novel presents the apocalyptic landscape of a Los Angeles where that promise has failed.

At first glance, Bradbury’s and Butler’s works seem in complete opposition. However, there are continuities between the two. *The Martian Chronicles* and *Parable of the Sower* are formally similar. *The Martian Chronicles* is written in brief vignettes; *Parable of the Sower* is a series of diary entries written by the protagonist. Both address their historical moment in the guise of a projected future. In Bradbury’s novel, postwar Southern California is transplanted to Mars, while in Butler’s novel, Los Angeles has become an economically and racially divided dystopia made up of isolated gated communities surrounded by a sea of chaotic violence. However, the fact that *The
*Martian Chronicles* takes place on another planet entirely is indicative of the novel’s at least partial embrace of the desires of frontier ideology. Jerry Phillips, in his essay “The Intuition of the Future: Utopia and Catastrophe in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower,*” argues that *Parable of the Sower* is so grounded in historical reality that it “produces a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement” (quoting Potts 302). While both *The Martian Chronicles* and *Parable of the Sower* take place in ostensibly unfamiliar settings, Bradbury’s novel makes Mars feel familiar through its characters’ continuing to adhere to their middle-class values. Butler takes what should be completely alienating, a Los Angeles cityscape so war-torn as to be almost unrecognizable, and makes it feel familiar by showing that her fractured urban image is logically connected to the current historical trends happening in the city’s present reality.

The dystopian Los Angeles found in *Parable of the Sower* is in part the exaggerated but nevertheless logical outcome of the region’s dependence on the aerospace industry: its boom and bust economic cycles which led to mass layoffs as the industry’s presence in the region declined, its contributions to suburban sprawl, and its disastrous environmental impact. Anita Seth, in her article “Los Angeles Aircraft Workers and the Consolidation of Cold War Politics,” argues that entrenched racism was another legacy of the aerospace industry: “African Americans seeking employment in the war industries at the time faced multiple barriers, from racism within management and unions, to the ineffectiveness of federal mechanisms to enforce nondiscrimination laws, to prohibitions against training in particular skill areas” (88). Such racism, whose origins can be traced back to the Aryan dreams of Millikan, was not only confined to the factory floors of the aerospace industry. The large suburban developments that housed the industry’s workforce were also racially exclusive.

These racist housing practices are embodied in the “privatopias” of the gated communities in *Parable of the Sower.* They represent the dark side of the idyllic, if somewhat boring, suburbs of Bradbury’s work. As Graham points out, such “privatopias,” and the isolationism they encouraged, were products of the housing boom generated by the aerospace industry in Southern California. He writes, “There was a nowhereness, a randomness of place in new suburbs whose existence had been
ordained only by the blueprints of developers, architects, and government bureaucrats” and cites Waldie’s description of “the miniaturization of the world within the unchanging grid, of how each house became ‘its own enchanted island’ in a sea of others, and how, as islanders, ‘the extent of our concern’ reached only the immediate tract, or the block, or, as residents aged, to the houses they could see from their own” (Graham 257-58). In Butler’s imagined Los Angeles, only those with private property are able to afford security. The walls of the fortified neighborhoods are used to keep those inside safe, by keeping those outside out. Graham delineates the consequences of white flight from urban centers to the suburbs that was spurred on by the growth of the aerospace industry. He writes, “With this outmigration came a growing alienation from the Los Angeles left behind: in the mainstream imagination, Los Angeles began to take on a dystopian image . . . in which a militarized, mostly white police force armed with the home-grown technologies of the aerospace industry patrols the streets and skies of a chaotic, violent, mostly black and Latino inner city—the ‘carceral city’ in Davis’s words, the ‘militarized technopolis’ in Soja’s” (Graham 264). The extrapolated future of Parable of the Sower, then, is not that far off from the reality of Butler’s Los Angeles. Moreover, the novel shows the violent consequences of such racist practices.

Phillip writes of the futuristic setting Butler’s novel: “In 2024, patterns of race and class dominance have hardened to the point where they have genocidal implications—others are those I must kill” (305). The aerospace industry, because it profited from the Cold War through government funding and military contracts, was instrumental in the continuance of the Cold War ideology of “us” versus “them.” However, even when the Cold War ended, its legacy of division remained; only the definitions of “us” and “them” changed. The enemy abroad became the enemy at home as international tensions were replaced with domestic tensions drawn along racial lines. The withdrawal of the aerospace industry from the region left large groups of the unemployed who were both bitter at its failed promise of a better future but still indoctrinated by the conservative and divisive ideology upon which that promise was based. Waldie writes of the grim series of layoffs: “The managers at Douglas had nothing else to offer, least of all the meaning of their work, until the work evaporated in the rounds of layoffs that cut the Douglas
workforce by nearly 30,000 between 1990 and 1994. . . . Tomorrow, it turned out, didn’t reveal much difference between their clipboards and Riley’s rivet tool” (Waldie 42). The situation is similarly dire in *Parable of the Sower*. The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Lauren Olamina, reflects, “There are fewer and fewer jobs among us, more of us being born, more kids growing up with nothing to look forward to. One way or another, we’ll all be poor some day. The adults say things will get better, but they never have” (13). Even though these layoffs impacted both factory workers and management, and black and white Angelenos alike, they only furthered class and racial tensions. Besides Butler’s novel, the film *Falling Down*, which came out just a year after *Parable of the Sower* was published, memorably portrays the decline in the aerospace industry and its devastating effects on its workers. Graham describes the movie like so: “a white, suburban aerospace engineer laid off from his job who, stuck in traffic, leaves his car on the Hollywood Freeway and wanders through a third-world Los Angeles populated by Latino gangsters, Korean shopkeepers, and white supremacists, and descends into a maddened rampage of violence that ends in his death in the Pacific Ocean” (264-65). Unsurprisingly, the film is tinged with racial tension. That same racial tension, as well as the third-world landscape, is also found in *Parable of the Sower*. Lauren narrates, “The Garfield and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days. On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind, but with all of us armed and watchful, people stared, but they left us alone. Our neighborhood is too small for us to play those kinds of games” (31). Here, Butler is able to capture how economic hardship, such as that created by the withdrawal of the aerospace industry from Southern California, impacted communities across color lines, while at the same time reified divisions along color lines.

In contrast to the dystopian setting of *Parable of the Sower*, defined by racial and economic divisions, is Lauren’s “hyperempathy,” which causes her to completely feel the pleasure and pain of others. While she at first views it as a burden, it ultimately leads her to create a new religion, called “Earthseed.” Already in contrast to the frontier individualism of *The Martian Chronicles*, both Lauren’s ability and the religion she founds based on it point toward the communal values embodied in “terraforming”
science fiction. After her biological family is murdered by invaders into the gated community where she lives at the beginning of the novel, she establishes a new family through her religion, creating a commune called “Acorn.” Phillips points out that the agricultural language of Lauren’s religion and commune are similar to the utopian language of the frontier: “One sows as one reaps, which is to say, conscious human activity is the key force in determining social evolution” (307). The language is reminiscent of a vignette of *The Martian Chronicles* called “The Green Morning,” in which Bradbury retells the Johnny Appleseed myth as a Martian legend. However, in the story, Bradbury’s protagonist Benjamin Driscoll describes his plan to plant trees with antagonistic language. The narrator observes, “That would be his job, to fight against the very thing that might prevent his staying here. He would have a private horticultural war with Mars” (78). Human agency causes the Martian landscape to blossom into a green paradise, but likewise, the characters of *Parable of the Sower* are reaping the consequences of such agency. The human agency that built an entirely new civilization on another planet is the same that has left Los Angeles in a pile of rubble.

In Butler’s novel, the characters’ opinions of the still existing Moon and Mars programs also reflect the failure of faith in individual determination. Lauren narrates, “That’s what the space program is about these days, at least for politicians. Hey, we can run a space station, a station on the moon, and soon, a colony on Mars. That proves we’re still a great, forward-looking, powerful nation, right?” (18). By voicing such a critique, Butler challenges frontier ideology by showing that at its core, it is not a means of true transformation or renewal, but, as Bradbury feared, simply a rearticulating of the same old fears from which civilization is running away. Moreover, for those left behind, it is a monumental waste of resources. Lauren continues, “People here in the neighborhood are saying she had no business going to Mars, anyways. All that money wasted on another crazy space trip when so many people here on earth can’t afford water, food, or shelter” (15). Such sentiments have historical echoes in Los Angeles, especially during the 1980s under the Reagan Administration, whose “Reaganomics” cut government spending on welfare, healthcare, and public education programs, while simultaneously investing heavily in the aerospace industry due to the potential military
applications of its technologies. However, unlike the other characters in *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren still holds out hope in such endeavors. She confesses, “Maybe I’ll be more like Alicia Leal, the astronaut. Like her, I believe in something that I think my dying, denying, backward-looking people need” (22). Significantly, however, Lauren doesn’t go to Mars to create a new world. She plants her utopian dream in the very ruins of her old world. While Phillips argues that Lauren’s new utopian enterprise falls short in radically transforming the economic relations of society—the community still relies on commodity exchange and private property and protects it with violence when necessary—it is able to transcend cultural determinism and classification for her community consists of a diversity of races (309). Ultimately, Lauren is not a hero, but a survivor. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* presents a means of survival against the same social concerns, the products of technological progression, from which Bradbury’s characters desire to escape.

The difference in their responses to the same issues in large part has to do with the different periods in which they were writing. *The Martian Chronicles* was published at the end of the Second World War and on the cusp of the Cold War and space age, and the work, consequently, reflects this historical moment’s complex relationship to technological advancements that produced both the means to make life increasingly free, safe, and comfortable, and the means to utterly wipe it out. The wars and mass extinctions that dot the timeline of the book are reminiscent of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that occurred just five years prior to the book’s publication and prophesy the arms race and doctrine of “mutually assured destruction (MAD)” of the Cold War. Despite the complete destruction that the earth undergoes in *The Martian Chronicles*, the idea that technology gives us the means to run away from such destruction and just start over in another place is at its heart the frontier dream, which implicitly suggests an anxiety about the current state of society. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, however, was published in 1993, after the promises and threats (although not consequences) of the atomic age had dissipated and the aerospace industry had all but abandoned the Southern California region. The characters that the novel follows are equally abandoned, as if they missed the rockets of Bradbury’s Martian expeditions.
There is no dream of escape for these characters, at least not by technological means. They have to remain and face the world that has been left to them. Hence, Butler’s novel, while set in the future, is less “futuristic” in the sense that technology can offer any kind of solution to modern social issues. Instead it is a sobering reflection on how technological progress has only exacerbated these underlining social issues, and that the fear in Bradbury’s work of “all of the technological achievements…intended to insulate human beings from the environment . . . becom[ing] just another implacable form of indifference to human well-being” has come to pass and will continue to come to pass, unless, as Ziser puts it, we “consider trading in less effective forms of California dreaming in favor of speculatively rearranging the state’s material layout and getting on with the next phase of the shared delusion that will be twenty-first-century California” (34). For almost a century, Southern California’s defining myths were built upon the economic promises of the aerospace industry to build a technologically advanced and therefore better future. As Butler’s novel shows, this myth needs to be rewritten to account for the harsh material realities it produced. What Butler does, by producing a Los Angeles nightmare, is deconstruct the original dream, and suggest the need for a new one based not only on material layout, as Ziser suggests, but also on a social system that embraces racial diversity.

Another key to the differences between Bradbury and Butler’s approaches to Los Angeles science fiction stems from their relationship to the region itself. As already related, Bradbury was not a native of Los Angeles, but moved from the Midwest to the city at a young age. Butler was a Los Angeles native. As J. Scott Bryson writes in his essay, “Los Angeles Literature: Exiles, Natives, and (Mis)Representation,” natives can offer a unique perspective on the region because they have grown up in the midst of its myths—usually created by outsider perspectives—and are somewhat inoculated from them by their daily experiences (710). They experience firsthand the incongruities of what is said about the region and the actual experience of living in it. Moreover, this perspective allows them to not only see, but also, through that vision, more adequately address the underlying issues at play in the city, including as Bryson lists, “racial and class-based discrimination; ecocatastrophe; an embracing of cultural and ethnic
identities and backgrounds; the blurring of national, geographic, cultural, moral, and ethnic boundaries; and immigration and naturalization issues" (711). Hence, while both writers address what Westwick calls the “imperial expansion and domestic collapse” of the region under the influence of the aerospace industry, we see that Bradbury’s alarm and fascination at Southern California’s technological progression is colored by a frontier myth that has more to do with his Midwestern upbringing than it does with Southern California itself. Therefore, while it would be unfair to characterize Bradbury’s novel as ignoring these concerns, according to Bryson’s argument, it is fair to say that the overlaying of an externally constructed mythology on his representation of the region blinds him to some of its most important social concerns. Butler, in contrast, acknowledges this external myth but transcends it by contrasting it against actual, historical concerns. Her understanding of the history of class and race relations in Los Angeles, exasperated by racist hiring practices and the mass layoffs that characterized the aerospace industry in the decade preceding the publication of The Parable of the Sower, bleeds into her novel. In this way, the novel is an extrapolation of these trends and the “personal resentments” described by Westwick and depicted in Falling Down that these trends created (Westwick 9). Her work is a response to the failure of the aerospace industry to live up to its promises, both economic and social. No utopia was ever created, either here or on any other planet. Instead, what is left is an eerily realistic portrayal of the future of a city that is already here.

For all their differences, however, each author speaks to the issues at the heart of trying to define Los Angeles and the role of its aerospace industry. While the dynamic of dystopia/utopia certainly plays a role in both writers’ works, neither one directly aligns with a “sunshine” or “noir” narrative. Instead, The Martian Chronicles and Parable of the Sower capture the interplay between the external myths overlaid on the landscape of the region and the social-historical realities beneath them. So after all, Westwick is correct in identifying the impact of the aerospace industry on the region’s cultural development as a vertical relation. Perhaps it can be said, as Bradbury so eloquently put it, that the myths of Los Angeles are like those “too-far” stars, and perhaps we, despite our technological relations, are still “too soon from the cave.”
Of all places, it seems fitting that Los Angeles should be the place where science and science fiction met. But what is the historical significance of these two examples of a specially Angeleno science fiction, now both decades old? And ultimately, why are they important to the history of the aerospace industry in the region? As Peter J. Westwick points out in his introduction to *Blue Sky Metropolis*, the infrastructure of the aerospace industry, the physical places in which it once existed, are now quickly disappearing, being torn down or reappropriated. Moreover, its history and cultural memory, preserved more through private memoir than official public history due to Cold War paranoia and secrecy, is also fading, as the generation of those who lived it pass away. We are quickly losing the material histories of its impact and are only being left with intangible myths. As Los Angeles continues to change, this important part of its history is increasingly at risk of being lost. The science fiction literature produced during the aerospace industry’s emergence and prominence in Los Angeles offers a vital venue in which this history can be recaptured. Both early science fiction literature produced in Los Angeles like Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*, and later science fiction works produced by an increasingly influential group of native writers like Butler, give us the means to more firmly delineate the myth from the material world that produces that myth. The science fiction of Bradbury and Butler, not only points us toward prospective futures, but also challenges us to reflect on our city’s past, lest like Bradbury’s humans on Mars, in our drive to transcend our earthly limitations, we simply recreate them anew.
Works Cited


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