

part ii

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chapter five

navigating (and fighting) archism

Anarchism in Practice

IN MOVING FROM a more purely theoretical model of what anarchist prophecy might look like to the application, both in real life and in the literary imagination about such prophecy, it becomes necessary to think about a central problem that was brought up in the earlier chapters but remains unresolved: namely, how do anarchist communities manage to come into their own, and even thrive, in the face of archist predation? What role do the anarchist prophets play in this drama and how can their own archist tendencies be prevented from reproducing the archism that they assist the community in resisting in the first place? The first part of this book looked at theoretical models of resistance, but in this, the second part, I focus on the actual experience of living amid and fighting archist power and authority, without, however, abandoning the theoretical analysis that comes along with these case studies.

The role of anarchist prophecy in these narratives is both critical and complex. The very ambivalences that we see in figures like Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Benjamin's angel of history are lived out in both real-life and literary examples. One cannot engage with archism, even with the intention

of resisting it, without feeling its siren call, and anarchist prophets, like the communities that they come out of, are not immune to that call and its temptations. My focus in this chapter is on how best to navigate archism, how to beat it at its own game without succumbing to its horrible and seductive power. Insofar as anarchist prophets must take on the mantle of archism in order to perform their task of ruining it from within, there is always a risk of becoming the very thing that they are fighting. And this temptation happens not only to the anarchist prophets themselves but to entire communities as they too grapple with their anarchist parasite.

In this chapter, I visit these kinds of questions using a variety of sources, both actual and literary. I have four examples in all, two from real life and two literary. In both pairings, I contrast a perfect or near-perfect case of anarchism, Spain in the 1930s and José Saramago's *Blindness* and *Seeing*—especially the latter text—with a more compromised, and therefore perhaps more typical, example of anarchism coexisting with or navigating archism: Rojava and Octavia Butler's Earthseed series.

In terms of the real-life examples, I begin with what might be the ultimate moment of collective anarchist prophecy, namely, the decades-long experiment with anarchism in Spain that culminated in the Spanish Revolution and then its violent defeat by fascism in 1939. In this example, I show how the Spanish anarchists organized themselves in such a way as to make their collective reliance on any one person or some group of persons redundant, something to be held in suspicion. The anarchists of Spain had their heroes and leaders, to be sure: Buenaventura Durruti, Francisco Ascaso, and the Haymarket martyrs figure prominently in anarchist discourse of the time. But there is a particular way that these figures are linked into the larger Spanish anarchist community that is distinctive in no small part because of the concern for and guardedness against what I call incipient archism—and which is sometimes referred to as “leaderism”—that counteracts, at least partially, both the allure and the stealth presence of archist models.

A second real-life and much more recent, in fact contemporary, model that I draw upon is the case of Rojava, the Kurdish region of Syria that has gained autonomy from the authoritarian state that still nominally controls it. The case of Rojava is interesting because it suggests a case in which a more conventional leftist movement led by Abdullah Öcalan began to transform itself into a more anarchist model (officially called democratic confederalism). As the story goes, Öcalan began his career as a Marxist, but while in a Turkish prison—where he remains to this day—he studied the work of the American anarchist writer Murray Bookchin, among others. Here we may

seem to find a case where an archist prophet, even if from the left, turned himself into an anarchist one, although the degree of his own anarchism, as well as the anarchism of Rojava more generally, is not a settled fact.¹ That vision in turn was translated—and perhaps facilitated by the fact that Öcalan himself was prevented from having any direct political power due to his jailing—into a more widespread form of anarchist practice. The full story is, once again, more complicated than this, and Rojava is neither free from sovereign power nor perfectly anarchist—then again, neither was Spain in the 1930s—but here too we see a tension between archist and anarchist elements that, at the very least, may have resolved themselves more in favor of the latter than of the former.

In terms of literary texts that engage with this same dynamic, I begin with two books by José Saramago, *Blindness* and *Seeing*, and then look at two books that constitute Octavia Butler's Earthseed series (*The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*). Both sets of books are sequels. In these books, we see a similar overlapping of anarchist and archist aspects, with the former set once again displaying anarchism as a "purer" form.

In the Saramago novels, we see something that approaches an utterly anarchist model, wherein there really are no leaders of an anarchist movement that rejects the state entirely, albeit in a context where archism is not dead but simply at a remove. If there is a singular anarchist prophet in those books, it is a character known only as the doctor's wife. Yet in a sense her role as leader is mostly a reflection of the archist state's desperate attempt to find a leader of the entirely collective anarchist movement that threatens them. They reason that by identifying, intimidating, and killing her, they can in effect stop the movement itself. Yet, in her very ordinariness, and in her connection with that collectivity that she is only part of, we see the complete failure of that mission.

In Butler's novels, Lauren Olamina, the heroine of both books, is unquestionably a singular figure in a religion that she begins called Earthseed. In this way, she looks and acts a lot like an archist prophet would. Yet her religion is itself highly anarchist and may serve to combat some of its leader's—that is, Lauren herself—own archist tendencies.

In all these readings, I am arguing that the fact that anarchism and archism remain intimately intertwined does not mean that we are always fated to archist victory. In fact, I think the opposite is true, that the universe itself tends toward anarchism and that it is archism that must fight against the current in order to persist. What the examples I look at show is that while anarchism can itself be a source of archism—especially in cases where an

anarchist prophet is singular or part of a small elite group—there are ways to combat incipient archism. I also claim that ultimately, for anarchism to succeed and thrive, anarchist prophecy must become entirely collective, or it will eventually succumb to archism all over again.

The fact that those rare moments of anarchism emerging into the open inevitably seem to bring the harshest possible archist response does not in and of itself mean that an anarchism that has overtaken its archist entanglements can never be more than a fleeting and temporary experience. Part of the purpose of this chapter is to see lessons that can be learned and applied to future (and past) anarchist endeavors, to fight, as Benjamin would say, for the sake of the living and the dead alike.

The Spanish Revolution

It may seem not only strange but downright obnoxious to equate the anarchists involved in the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s with any theological terms such as prophecy, insofar as one of the signature aspects of that revolution was a sound rejection of any form of religion whatsoever. Hostility to the Catholic Church and its connection to corrupt and dictatorial forms of control in Spain was rampant among the anarchists who took part in the Spanish Revolution. This is one of the places in which it becomes helpful to speak of archism, rather than sovereignty or statehood, as a foundational aspect of modern life. Archism is itself a theological phenomenon; even its most secular face preserves a certain kind of theological orientation, and so the remedy to that theology must be a kind of countertheology, the kind that I have been describing as anarchist prophecy.

To think about the Spanish Revolution in theological terms does not condemn the anarchists of that time to yet more religion but finally and actually achieves what Maria Aristodemou calls “atheism,” a reckoning with and then final break with theological externalities once and for all.² I think therefore that the Spanish anarchists of this period can be considered atheists rather than secularists with their a-theism aligning with their an-archism. In both cases, the “a” in question is not a pure negation—so not just “not theistic” and “not archist.” It is also, and perhaps more critically, a positive model, one that replaces and supersedes the archist models with other forms of political, social, and economic organization that reflects the anarchism of everyday life, albeit in a way that is far more evident and far more dangerous for the forces of archism than what archism itself normally permits us to see and act upon.

To begin this inquiry, let me first give a bit of background for what most people call “the Spanish civil war” but anarchists, and I, being one of them myself, will stick with this practice, call the Spanish Revolution. The names are important because most of the famous revolutions that we talk about—the French Revolution, the American Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the Chinese Revolution, to give only some of the most famous examples—are either liberal capitalist or communist in their structure. There are certainly anarchist aspects to all these revolutions, as Arendt attests in her book *On Revolution*. There, she describes moments when small workers’ councils—the Soviet workers’ councils in Russia, the clubs and societies in France, and so on—were organizing at the local level, but as she shows, in each case, these “elementary republics” were overcome by parties (the Bolsheviks, Jacobins, etc.), which led these revolutions in a different, generally archist, direction.³

The Spanish Revolution was different. Arguably this was the closest that any revolution has come to having a real anarchist takeover of power. Perhaps more accurately, it was not a takeover of power but a removal of archist power over anarchist life. In his book *Insurgent Universality*, Max Tomba argues that anarchism does not need to literally replace archism (my word, not his). All it needs to do is create a fully viable alternative to the state and to the market which readily replaces and renders obsolete those state and market functions.⁴ This is precisely what the Spanish anarchists did. Although ultimately the anarchist revolution in Spain was crushed by a combination of archist forces, we should not take this to mean that the revolution was a failure or that it indicated anything about anarchism per se that suggests a weakness or an impracticality. In fact, the opposite might be true: the Spanish Revolution was so successful, even in its prewar mode, that it threatened capitalism—and archism itself—to its very core. This led to a violent fascist counterrevolution that was initially effectively supported by nominally liberal and antifascist democratic powers such as the United States and Great Britain, a fact that should not surprise us when we realize that archism is above all about supporting its main economic form, namely capitalism.

Key to the reception of this revolution was the fact that it was, and remains to some extent, either widely ignored or, if paid attention to, treated as a bit of an anomaly rather than as a major revolution in its own right (hence the importance of what we call it). As Bookchin said of the revolution: “What so few of us knew outside Spain, however, was that the Spanish Civil War was in fact a sweeping social revolution by millions of workers and peasants who were concerned not to rescue a treacherous republican regime but to reconstruct Spanish society along revolutionary lines. We would scarcely have

learned from the press that these workers and peasants viewed the Republic almost with as much animosity as they did the Francoists.”⁵ In many ways, this reminds me of another largely anarchist revolution—at least by my own definitions—that was also deliberately forgotten, at least as far as the West was concerned, namely the revolution in Haiti at the turn of the nineteenth century (certainly this revolution was not forgotten in Haiti, nor was it forgotten in the Black communities in the rest of the Caribbean, as well as in North and South America).⁶ The imperialist powers of the West acted as if the Haitian Revolution had never happened because of the challenge it posed to Western narratives of white and European supremacy. The fact that an army of slaves could overthrow the combined power of Napoleonic France and many of his erstwhile enemies—then, as in the case of Spain in the 1930s, you had *de facto* alliances between mortal enemies when it came to the common defense of capitalism—proved impossible for the West to fathom, much less admit to. That is once again why I think it’s important to call the event in Spain in the 1930s what it was, a revolution, and not just a “civil war,” and an anarchist revolution at that.

The roots of the Spanish Revolution can be traced to a mixture of Indigenous and external factors. Bookchin cites the influence of Giuseppe Fanelli, a supporter of Mikhail Bakunin, who came to Spain in 1868 to spread the doctrine of anarchism.⁷ Yet Fanelli didn’t arrive in a vacuum. Bookchin himself argues that “the resiliency and tenacity that kept Spanish Anarchism alive in urban *barrios* and rural *pueblos* for nearly seventy years, despite unrelenting persecution, is understandable only if we view this movement as an expression of plebian Spanish society itself rather than as a body of exotic libertarian doctrines.”⁸

Spanish society at the time was marked by a strong resentment of the *caciques*, local strongmen, along with an antagonism to the power of the Church and the state, which was often seen as corrupt and self-interested. Thus, Fanelli arrived at a place that was very ready to receive his message. He gave a name, a sense of united purpose, and a set of organizational strategies to a movement that was already nascent long before his arrival.

The chief aspect that distinguished Spanish anarchism, especially when it really came into its own in the 1920s and 1930s, was its connection to unions. The concept of “anarchosyndicalism” is a good term to use for this particular anarchist manifestation because, in effect, the main anarchist union, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT, National Confederation of Workers), an organization that had as many as one and a half million members at its height—and the anarchist movement were effectively one and the same.⁹

Many recounters of the revolution, ranging from Murray Bookchin to Juan Gómez Casas, use the terms *anarchist* and *anarchosyndicalist* interchangeably in this regard.¹⁰

The CNT also had a strong relation to an alliance of affinity groups called the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI, Iberian Anarchist Federation). This group worked in tandem with the CNT for much of its history. It has often been accused of “leading” or ruling the CNT, but in fact its purpose was quite the opposite: it served to ensure that the CNT itself did not succumb to what some call “leaderism,” a tendency for organizations, even radical anarchist ones, to develop a leadership that tends to undermine its own rank and file, to make common cause with other leaders of the state and industry.¹¹

Here, we can already see evidence of the struggle between archism and anarchism that this chapter is focused on. Even an anarchist union like the CNT was subject to archist tendencies within itself. Recognizing this tendency and acting to counter it as much as possible is one way that anarchist movements can maintain horizontal forms of vision.

Throughout its history, the CNT was under attack from both external and internal foes. Externally, it had to fight off the predations of many communist and socialist organizers who had their own intentions for the union. From its inception, the CNT had to resist attempts to merge it with the other main union at this time, the socialist Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT, General Workers’ Union), which did not share the CNT’s concerns about leaderism and was far more reformist and collaborative with the Spanish state. The CNT also had its own internal battles, including the moderate and reform-oriented “treintistas” led by Ángel Pestaña, who favored more common cause with other unions and with republican and Popular Front forces.

Despite these challenges, a generally collective form of anarchist commitment sustained the CNT in these battles even before the FAI came into being. Juan Gómez Casas writes: “The CNT . . . had a sufficiently strong ideological foundation to correct errors and maintain its course. It could neutralize or expel bodies that were foreign to the nature of the organization. It was the anarchist character of the CNT that closed the door to the partisans of Moscow even though there was no specific organization of the anarchists at that time.”¹² In other words, what kept the CNT going, what preserved its anarchist structure, was anarchism itself. It remained anarchist therefore not because of but despite its own leadership. Its anarchism was located in its vast membership and in their collective forms of vision. Let me therefore detail a bit more precisely how that collective form operated and was preserved.

Organization of the CNT

The CNT had many deliberate organizing features designed to combat incipient leaderism in its upper ranks. This was done in ways that were both formal and informal. One key element of this organizational structure was the concept that there should be one union (*uno sindicato único*), which would be composed of various sections across all sorts of trades that operated more or less independently from one another even as they were coordinated by the union apparatus. In this way, the union as a whole could stand united against capitalist predations, but at the same time, the CNT had a federalist structure that allowed maximal diversity of views and actions.¹³ This is typical of a pattern of what might be called decentralized planning, a key feature of anarchist organization, whereby the parts are separate but coordinated, allowing for a best-of-both-worlds combination of decentralized creativity, experimentation, and talent along with the benefits of unity and coordination as far as other organizations and institutions were concerned.

Relatedly, the CNT practiced a unique kind of solidarity in its ranks. Sections that were not as bought into anarchism were not excluded from membership but were engaged with, allowing for a great deal of ideological diversity so long as the basic principles of organizing from the ground up was maintained.¹⁴

Another key tenet of the CNT, held for much of its existence until the struggle against Francisco Franco, was that its leaders would not participate in state politics or direct its members to participate in parliamentary elections and other liberal—and anarchist—models of political participation. This tenet was reneged upon in 1936 when four members of the CNT leadership became ministers in the republican government, creating a storm of protest and criticism among the rank and file.¹⁵ This may reflect more the steady erosion of anarchist solidarity and morale in the face of war than an internal problem within anarchism as such. As Vernon Richards points out, just two months after an essay in *Solidaridad Obrera*—one of the main anarchist journals and a publication of the CNT—condemned any thought of coalition with the government as leading to the “rapid destruction of our capacity for action, of our will to unity,” the same journal praised the fact of bringing four CNT ministers into the very same state, insofar as the latter had “ceased to be an oppressive force against the working-class.”¹⁶

Another key element in fighting leaderism was the attempt to limit the scope and number of positions that could become the basis for centralizing tendencies. Positions of authority were only open to those who actively practiced trades that were included in the CNT (i.e., no “professional union

activists” were allowed).¹⁷ To resist a tendency for men to dominate and form cliques, women were deliberately included in all steering committees as well.¹⁸ Finally, leaders, such as they were, were limited to short terms and were not paid. In practice, however, these last points were not always adhered to, leading to some difficulties over time.¹⁹

Radical Practices and Institutions

In addition to its organizational models, there were also some institutional and conceptual aspects of the CNT that also helped hold back leaderism. Perhaps the key point here is that the CNT was devoted to the idea of direct action, a concept that came from French anarchosyndicalists. Direct action permitted the rank and file to take matters into their own hands. It also meant that union demands were not to be negotiated but either taken as is or rejected.²⁰ This meant that there was no bargaining team to make side deals. The demands themselves came from general assemblies of the rank and file so that, to the highest degree possible, there was no “middleman” between the workers and the bosses.²¹

Another way to call the leadership into question was through the enormous and flourishing anarchist press of that period. Some publications, like *Tierra y Libertad*, were directly associated with the CNT, as was *Solidaridad Obrera* (although on at least one occasion, militant workers, noting that the editors were all in jail, took over the press and wrote their own issue).²² Other journals, such as *Redención*, *Iniciales*, and *La Revista Blanca*, were more independent. In general, these newspapers and other publications were free-wheeling and open sites of collective discourse—even the ones operated by the CNT itself—that allowed for a great deal of criticism and debate within the anarchist ranks.²³

The development of the FAI, and even within the FAI certain subunits such as *Nosotros* (Us), was another way to avoid the ossification—or really the archization—of the CNT. The FAI, which was formed in 1927, was a collection of affinity groups that came together to coordinate with the CNT. In one of the preliminary congresses that led to the formation of the FAI, it was stated that “the two organizations [i.e., the FAI and the CNT] could complement each other, the unions and the ideological groups, and . . . they should be joined in a federal structure, each maintaining its autonomy, with joint representation of the groups and their federations with the unions and their federations at all levels.”²⁴

Here again, a typical anarchist solution, informal but coordinated, with confederal unity at the macrolevel with a devolvement into smaller

independent groups at the microlevel, is maintained both within and between various anarchist organizations. As Gómez Casas argues, the informality of this structure was both a blessing (because it once again allowed maximal experimentation and flexibility for these organizations as they worked together and apart) and a curse (because it allowed anti-anarchist forces to say things like the FAI was “leading” the CNT, among other anarchist characterizations of this organization).²⁵

Finally, anarchist economic models were also deployed, in terms of both collectivization and worker self-management, in ways that were analogous to the anti-leaderist methods of political organization already mentioned. In the case of both rural collectivism as well as urban and industrial collectivism, the pattern was quite different from the sort of centralized planning-based collectivization that was undertaken in the Soviet Union. In Spain, families remained in their own homes but worked together to achieve economies of scale. In some places, wages were paid, and in others, profits were shared, once again showing the diversity and experimental nature of anarchist practices.

The same political model used to organize people in general was used in rural collectivization—often constituting the same bodies, in fact—wherein small independent individuals and groups organized themselves into larger groups and then went on to form extremely large unitary organizations that nonetheless preserved their internal diversity. One estimate is that during the main period of collectivization, during the struggle with Franco, up to three million rural people may have been involved in anarchist collectives.²⁶ As a rule, peasants were not forced to collectivize if they didn’t want to, leading to a kind of patchwork of collective and noncollective rural activity. Those who chose not to collectivize were still invited to participate in the group economy, as they were able and willing to do.

What was true for rural farming was also true for urban collectivization. Here, larger firms with more than one hundred workers were generally collectivized while those with fewer than one hundred workers were allowed to remain capitalist if their owners chose, but even in such cases, their workers were guaranteed certain rights, while cooperation with the collectives was also encouraged.

In all these models of organizing, one principle was key: the idea that the people in their variety and own experiences collectively knew far better what was right for them, whether in terms of political or economic questions, than any politicians or managers. All they need is a forum in which they can encounter one another to collectively decide on their own work practices, a situation that anarchist work systems do everything in their power to avoid.

Stripping off this parasitic, archist layer and allowing them such a forum returned the workers and peasants to their own knowledge (i.e., expertise) and agency, and, as such, this system flourished before the fascist victory cut it dead. Here we can see very clearly how anarchist vision ultimately comes not from some externality but simply from its removal.

The Fight against “Leaderism” in the CNT

Despite all these precautions and institutional barriers, corruption and co-optation in the leadership was an ongoing problem for the CNT, especially after 1936 when the struggle against Franco began and when some CNT officials became members of the government. Richards quotes the French anarchist Gaston Leval as explaining:

Some anarchist delegates, who had become ministers or official personages in different capacities, took their tasks seriously: the poison of power took effect immediately. But what was saved was the potential of the Spanish anarchist movement. It had thousands of seasoned militants, in all or almost all the villages of Aragon, the Levant, and Andalusia. Almost all the militants of the CNT had a solid experience of practical organization in their own trades or in the life of a village and enjoyed an indisputable moral ascendancy. Furthermore, they were gifted with a strong spirit of initiative.²⁷

Here, Leval is attesting to the principal strength of anarchist forms of vision, their rootedness in locales and communities. The CNT militants who formed the rank and file were once again reflecting the ordinary and anarchist life that we all take part in. Only in this case, they were allowed to use that vision for meaningful political and economic purposes; the organizing structure of the CNT and the various forms of collectivization that the Spanish anarchists engaged with more generally allowed for an actualization of that anarchist potential, giving people a voice and a place from which to speak to and hear from one another, largely minus the overarching competition of archist forms of organization and vision.

This preservation and enhancement of anarchist forms of vision allowed the rank and file to anticipate and attempt to counter any archist tendencies in their leadership. Vernon Richards offers one example of how this worked out when, in February 1938, the Generalitat, the elected governing body of Catalonia, announced that it intended to take over the public entertainment industry in the region. In order to gain support for this, the Generalitat appointed three CNT officials to oversee this sector, thereby seeking to

co-opt the leadership. When the government nonetheless began to get resistance to this move from rank-and-file union members as well as the anarchist newspapers, they decided to just strong-arm the situation and declare it a done deal. That led to a general strike by workers, who clearly saw the attempt to buy off union leadership for what it was.²⁸

Another more critical example of this kind of situation came when the republican government sent in troops to take over the Telephone Exchange building in Barcelona in May 1937. They only succeeded in taking over the first floor, while CNT militants barred them from going any further upstairs. This takeover was rightfully seen by the CNT rank and file as the bourgeoisie trying to take over power in Barcelona, long a center of anarchist resistance. The CNT leadership at the time was eager to broker a deal, whereas the rank and file had no intention of doing so. In sequence, two of the leadership's best orators were sent to make appeals to the workers, who had lined barricades around the building. This included Juan García Oliver, a highly regarded militant with strong anarchist credentials. As it was recorded, García Oliver gave an "oratorical masterpiece which drew tears but not obedience."²⁹ This helps show that there were limits to how much the CNT leadership could manipulate the rank and file, although ultimately, at the end of the day, they did make a deal and it did betray the rank and file.

Anarchist Prophets and the Question of Vision

It seems clear that anarchist leaders are not immune to the seductions of power. But what about those anarchists who were killed before those seductions could fully take hold or who managed to hold out and remain committed to the larger forms of vision held by the anarchist rank and file? Does their status in any way threaten the collective vision they help instantiate?

Perhaps the most critical person to discuss in this regard is Buenaventura Durruti, who has a near legendary status in the annals of the Spanish Revolution. If anyone can claim the mantle of anarchist prophet for the Spanish Revolution, it is Durruti.

A metallurgy worker from León, Durruti was from an early age adamant about imposing organizational limits to stop even a figure such as himself from abandoning his connection to collective forms of power, vision, and authority. Durruti always insisted that theory take a back seat to action; he saw politics as emerging from the decisions and actions of people on the ground and held that only in that way could there be revolutionary change.³⁰ He sought, for example, to forbid anyone from FAI or related groups from becoming a leader of the CNT. He states:

No anarchists on the union committees unless at the ground level. In these committees, in case of a conflict with the boss, the militant is forced to compromise to arrive at an agreement. The contacts and activities which come from being in this position, push the militant towards bureaucracy. Conscious of this risk, we do not wish to run it. Our role is to analyze from the bottom the different dangers which can beset a union organization like ours. No militant should prolong his job in committees, beyond the time allotted to him. No permanent and indispensable people.³¹

One writer, Abel Paz, whose account of Durruti is certainly hagiographic, tells us that “the cult of personality should never be encouraged, but neither Durruti nor his comrades like García Oliver and Francisco Ascaso could escape from the influence they exerted against their will. This influence could be pernicious and Durruti was tormented by this more than anyone else. He was perfectly conscious that his comrades at work looked up to him: this wasn’t caused by the aura which he spread unknowingly but by a sort of gratitude which they felt for the way in which he had given himself so entirely to his work.”³²

Paz suggests a paradox. The more a figure like Durruti is devoted, body and soul, to the revolution—Paz notes that Durruti barely saw his family and his partner was forced to raise their daughter effectively single-handedly—the more they become venerated, threatening in a sense the very openness and horizontality that they are devoted to creating.³³ Such devotion to the collective seems to produce a mixture of reverence both for the figure themselves and for the anarchist collectivity that they help instantiate, and these two forms of reverence may at times work at cross-purposes.

Not all of the best-known anarchists shared Durruti’s hesitations about taking on a leadership role. García Oliver, for example, was one of the handful of CNT members appointed to ministries during the struggle with fascism. García Oliver was also far more open to models of organization that looked very much like archist ones. At one point, he and Durruti argued over the formation of paramilitary forces. García Oliver was for creating such a force as a way to combat Franco’s troops. Durruti wanted only guerrilla fighters, fearing that a paramilitary force would lend itself to supporting some form of statism within the anarchist ranks.³⁴

It may therefore be conjectured that part of Durruti’s mass appeal was precisely that he did not try to stand in for the anarchist power he was devoted to. The masses, seeing that he did not try to replace their vision with

his own, could afford to appreciate him while being more wary of people like García Oliver. In this way, they could allow Durruti to serve in a purely mimetic fashion, not as a leader but as a model for what every anarchist subject could be or was: maximally open to collective decision-making.³⁵ Durruti in this way could serve as the site where leadership would occur and ensure that that site was kept maximally open to the vastness, experience, and diversity of the rank-and-file anarchist members.

These attitudes toward Durruti can be seen as being reflected in the anarchist press, which often wrote about him and his exploits. In a November 1936 issue—the month when Durruti was killed—*Boletín de Información*, a CNT publication, had an essay in which the author wrote: “Victor Hugo and Lenin rest in pantheons, in superb mausoleums. Our comrade Durruti is not in a pantheon; he is more modest and offers us only his name and his work, giving him a privileged place in our estimations. Resting by his side is the other great fighter [*luchador*], his brother, our brother too, the great Ascaso.”³⁶ Francisco Ascaso, who had been killed earlier that year, is another key figure who was highly regarded by the anarchist rank and file (other anarchist heroes included Federica Montseny as well as August Spies and the other Haymarket martyrs).

It is true that in the case of a major figure like Durruti, he is clearly given his due. The same article in *Boletín de Información* also notes: “None other [than Durruti] to our eyes has the height of this giant, none other can replace his mission. . . . There is no one who is so intimately connected to the substance of the Iberian revolution.”³⁷ Here he does seem to be seen in an exalted sense, as someone above the rest.

And yet the essay continues, “But there is yet here something in this death that serves to raise—frenetically and ardently—our energies.” Connecting the death and legacy of Durruti once again with Ascaso, the article explains: “These two had a fate which was tragically equal. The two fell in the field of honor, killed by homicidal bullets . . . but nothing, neither men nor events nor time itself, could extinguish the great light they projected into the shadows of an ill-fated past. Nothing could stop their ideas and examples from fertilizing the conscience of men to disseminate the ideas that sustain and set the foundation for the society of the future.”³⁸

Here, as is often the case in these archival sources, the greatness of these figures is seen mainly insofar as it serves as a catalyst for collective greatness. In these tributes, the role of heroic figures and martyrs, rather than being set on a kind of pedestal, is always brought into a collectivist project, seen as models for and examples to all individuals who take part in these forms of

struggle, suggesting once again a largely mimetic function for the anarchist leaders, at least for those like Durruti and Ascaso who fought the tendency to idolize them.

This relationship to leadership was not uniquely related to the men of the revolution either. Federica Montseny was also a major figure among anarchist leaders (she was one of the deputies appointed to the Popular Front government and, perhaps for this reason, much of the anarchist scholarship seems to downplay her role). There were also anarchist women who formed their own collectives and affinity groups. As Martha Acklesberg writes in *Free Women of Spain*, Lucía Sánchez Saornil, Mercedes Composada, and Amparo Poch y Gascón founded the group *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women), which worked with the CNT and other anarchist organizations. As Acklesberg tells us, “What was necessary was an organization run by and for women, one committed to overcoming women’s subordination in all its facets, whether in their home, in the workplace, or in the anarcho-syndicalist movement itself.”³⁹ This giving voice and concrete political structures to communities within the larger anarchist community—the community of women being obviously the most important and numerically largest—was another way that the anarchists sought to fight against anarchist forms of hierarchy (the democratic confederalists of Rojava engage in similar practices).

From Heroes to Anarchists

A key takeaway for thinking about how to preserve anarchist vision under conditions such as those experienced by the Spanish revolutionaries might be to look at how they redirected and repurposed archist tendencies. If hero worship can be said to be one of the bases of archism, then turning heroes into anarchist subjects involves a conscious and steady engagement with the bases of such worship. What is held “high” becomes held “sideways”; the directionality of admiration becomes horizontalized, perhaps akin to what Machiavelli has in mind when he speaks of glory.⁴⁰

If we think of “charisma” as being a quality that is held not by leaders themselves but by the community as a whole, then we can see that ordinarily—that is, under conditions of archism—this form of authority is monopolized by leaders, being effectively stolen from the community that produces it and claims it as its (i.e., the leader’s) own. When a community reappropriates that charisma back into itself, sometimes with the help of anarchist prophets, it experiences its own collective form of authority in a no-longer-alienated form.

As to the question of whether we “need” anarchist prophets, as far as the example of the Spanish Revolution is concerned, I would say that the answer is a qualified no. The anarchist model in the Spanish Revolution shows that, when left to its own devices, a community readily adopts its own collective forms of sight, even as nonheroic leaders like Durruti definitely played their part in fomenting and assisting those actions. The very idea that the people are “stupid” or need help figuring out what they actually want as a community is belied by the fact that on those occasions where real forums are created that allow people a chance to engage with one another on a political, social, and economic level, they already know what they need to do. They don’t have to be told anything.

This connects back to a point I made in chapter 1, that politics may be one of the key activities for which human beings all have an automatic expertise. If anarchist politics is about life, then all of us who are living are in fact already “experts”; the way that anarchism has turned politics into a profession—and an exclusive one at that—only serves to convince other people that they are better off not taking part in their own political existence. To the extent that those of us who live under the full control of anarchism, as opposed to the partial control afforded by the Spanish Revolution, it is good to remember that we too have that form of vision even when anything but anarchist logic and vision appear to be unimaginable.

Rojava’s Incomplete Revolution

Turning now to a contemporary moment of anarchist practices, the current situation in Rojava—meaning “the West” in Kurdish since this area of Syria is considered to be western Kurdistan—is highly unstable, but then again so was the situation in anarchist Spain in the 1930s. Even so, Rojava offers us another important example of the resilience of anarchist models of authority as well as the complex way in which anarchist and anarchist modes both coexist and interact. The very question of the “anarchism” of Rojava is not accepted by everyone and this is, at best, a deeply imperfect model, perhaps especially in comparison with the Spanish Revolution. But for this very reason, the contrast between Spanish anarchism in the 1930s and Rojava today allows us to see how resistance to anarchism works in a variety of contexts and with a variety of different results, how even a partial anarchism allows some critical elements to flourish, elements that anarchism is normally entirely oriented toward stamping out.

In the chaotic aftermath of the Arab Spring uprising that challenged Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria, the civil war that followed, and the subsequent rise—and fall—of ISIS, the Kurds of northeastern Syria, along with many multiethnic partners, managed to carve out a kind of state within a state. More accurately, because in fact the Syrian state has never renounced or abandoned its rule, at least *de jure*, of this region, and the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK, Kurdish Worker's Party), the Kurdish political party, which, along with its partners the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD, Democratic Union Party) and the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG, People's Protection Units), is ideologically opposed to statehood, one could say this is more of an antistate within a state, albeit imperfectly so.

The PKK is one of several Kurdish political parties that follow the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan, a former Marxist who has since embraced a version of anarchism that is called democratic confederalism.⁴¹ Öcalan and many of the Kurdish resistance movements that he is connected to underwent a major political and ideological transformation beginning in the 1980s and culminating in 1999 when Öcalan was captured by Turkish authorities, sentenced to death—since then commuted to life imprisonment—and held in solitary confinement in a prison on İmralı island in the Sea of Marmara.

While in prison, Öcalan intently studied the works of the anarchist writer Murray Bookchin, among others (Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Foucault were also important influences).⁴² Originally, the Kurdish resistance movements were committed to the same Marxist-Leninist ideologies as the larger Turkish left. Later, however, these movements abandoned the centrally planned and organized models that this form of thinking tended to entail. As the radical activist Ercan Ayboğan describes this transformation: “[The PKK] rejected the existing Marxist-Leninist structure as too hierarchical and not democratic enough. Political and civil struggle replaced armed struggle as the movement's center. Starting in 2000, it promoted civil disobedience and resistance (the Intifada in Palestine was also an inspiration). Further, the movement gave up the aim of establishing a Kurdish-dominant state, because of the existing difficult political conditions in the Middle East and the world; instead, it advanced a long-term solution for the Kurdish question within the four states Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria: democratic confederalism.”⁴³

Bookchin's influence on Öcalan is significant, although it should not be overstated.⁴⁴ Based in part on Bookchin's philosophy of libertarian municipalism—where Bookchin's use of the word *libertarian* is not to be

confused with right-wing pro-capitalist libertarianism that is rampant in the United States—Öcalan helped develop the bases for democratic confederalism, which sought to make small local communes the basis for all political power and authority.⁴⁵ In order to promote this vision, Öcalan created the *Koma Civakên Kurdistanê* (KCK, Union of Communities in Kurdistan).⁴⁶ This movement began a broad-level experiment in locally oriented political forms. Their mission also included commitments to ecology and a form of feminism called *Jineolojism*.⁴⁷ These experiments resulted in the current-day practices we now see in Rojava itself.

“Eroding the State”

In an essay titled “Eroding the State in Rojava,” the anarchist activist and writer Ali B. describes the degree to which democratic confederalism has been achieved in Rojava. Although he claims that the movement in Rojava is more successful as an antistatist entity than as an anticapitalist one, Ali B. nonetheless concedes that this example has vitally important connotations for thinking about anarchism as an actual and enduring practice. Among those practices is a deep commitment to overcoming narrow ethnic and nationalist identities. As Ali B. describes it, despite claims in the media of ethnic cleansing of Arabs in Rojava, in fact it is a mistake to think of this as a purely Kurdish project. He writes that the fact that “Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Syriacs, Chaldeans, Armenians, Chechens and Turkmens; Christians, Shia, Sunni and Alevite Muslims are sharing governance in one of the most sectarian regions of the world . . . might be revolutionary in and of itself.”⁴⁸

This is in keeping with Öcalan’s own antinationalism, part of the reason he does not advocate for an independent Kurdish state (and, since Rojava has not formally declared independence from Syria for this reason, it allows the strange coexistence of sovereign and antisovereign bodies that we see there). In his booklet *Democratic Confederalism*, Öcalan explains, “The call for a separate nation-state of the Kurds results from the interests of the ruling class or the interests of the bourgeoisie, but does not reflect the interests of the people.”⁴⁹

Ali B. also describes the way that Rojava is politically organized. He writes:

The most basic unit of society in Rojava is defined as the commune. Communes are found in different sections of society, on both the local neighborhood level, as well as in workplaces and in accordance with other groups, such as women or youth. They are meant to be the vehicle of self-governance. Visiting some of the neighborhood-based communes (in Qamishlo City, for example, there are around 100), as well as their higher

level organizational structure the *Mala Gel* (People's houses—of which there are 7 in the same city), illustrates the challenges captured in the opening quote of this article [i.e., the challenge to creating an anarchist-based society in the context of the Syrian Civil War]. While attempting to provide the foundation for a self-managed society, there are still remnants of the prior regime that threaten to return the Rojava revolution to what it replaced.⁵⁰

The communes are the first level of response in Rojava. Given the fact that the Baathist regime is still nominally in charge in the region, one scholar describes the communes—citing Bookchin too—as a “decentralized, radical democracy *within or despite the given nation-states*,” reflecting the ways that the communes can coexist, at least to some degree, with anarchist elements.⁵¹ The communes serve to “decentralize decision-making and realizing self-rule.” They “ha[ve] the power to determine how electricity and food would be administered,” among other matters.⁵² Each commune sends delegates to city or local councils (delegates also come from political parties, women and youth groups, and others).⁵³ Each such council in turn has to have at least 40 percent of its members be women.⁵⁴

Yet, as Ali B. points out, these communes are not entirely self-directed. Cadre from the PKK serve as a kind of “professional revolutionar[y]” institution in regard to organizing Rojava.⁵⁵ There are also so-called peace and consensus committees, which serve as a kind of parallel legal system that was developed by leftist Kurdish insurgents over many years of struggle with the Turkish state.⁵⁶ There is also what Ali B. calls a “parliamentary superstructure,” the Tev-Dem, which represents the various people's assemblies.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the Charter of the Social Contract of Rojava (Syria), which serves as a constitution, enumerates several levels of governance, including a governor, a legislative council, an executive council, and a separate judiciary. The preface of that document states: “The areas of the democratic self-management, does not accept the concept of state nationalism, military and religious. It accepts the centralized management, central rule and it is open to the forms of compatibility with the democratic and pluralistic traditions, to enable all social groups, cultural identities, the Athenian and national to express themselves through their organizations, and respect the Syrian border and human rights charters and preserve civil and international peace.”⁵⁸

Here, we see an attempt to live with both anarchist and anarchist elements. The Social Contract, whose very name, with its Rousseauvian overtones, speaks of that same kind of coexistence, does not accept “state nationalism,”

but it does recognize some centralizing—and hence archist—features of government. In Article 2 of the Charter of the Social Contract, it states that “people are the source of authorities and the sovereignty exercised through institutions and elected assemblies, and not to any contradiction of the social contract of the democratic self-management.” Asserting that there can be no “contradiction” does not of course ensure a smooth coexistence, but it at least expresses a hope that such coexistence is possible.

In his own thinking about the issue, Ali B. notes the incongruity of the situation in Rojava. He tells us, for example, that when it comes to the communes, “Many people still treat these structures as if they were a typical government agency; they knock on the door of these new political forms asking for bureaucratic signatures, permissions, and requests, as opposed to utilizing them as a means and resource for self-organization.”⁵⁹ Similarly, there are offices for the still intact (but not effectively functional) Syrian government, including certain ministries and airports and even a bakery, islands of Baathist authoritarianism scattered amid an otherwise fairly anarchist space.⁶⁰

In this mixture of archist and anarchist elements, what emerges is, as Ali B. puts it, an “eroding state,” not a vanishing one. The state persists and, as with the Spanish anarchists, one can see traces of “leaderism” both among the leadership itself and even, as we see, among the people, as the example of ordinary Rojavans treating communes as if they were government agencies shows.

This balance is perhaps even more problematic when it comes to the economic practices in Rojava. Ali B. offers that while on the ideological level, the Rojavan Revolution seeks a real and meaningful break with economic forms of archism, in practice this quasi-anarchist system does not effectively function to contain capitalism.

The Kurdish proposal for Rojava, and in fact for the whole region, is genuine. But the transformation it seeks is arduous and impeded by both an ongoing war and pre-existing social relations. One thing which is clear upon visiting Rojava is that the revolution, in its capacity to abolish today’s world, is much more anti-state than anti-capitalist. To be more specific, three types of property are present in Rojava; communal, public, and private. Private property, including factories and land holdings, is permitted. The wage system still exists in the streets of Qamishlo, but the main constitution-like document, the Charter of the Social Contract of Rojava, states that there must be limits set on private property

and enterprise. On the flipside, the state as a landholder is being abolished and decisions effecting the lives of those living in Rojava are made increasingly through the commune structures. But despite this, and perhaps due to wartime conditions, certain conventional functions of the state are still assumed by Tev-Dem and with it come tensions.⁶¹

In this way, we could perhaps speak of “eroding” rather than eliminating capitalism, just as Ali B. speaks of eroding the state. In my own view, capitalism is more critical for archism than the state per se, which in its contemporary form works mainly as a way to bolster and protect capitalism. Accordingly, the fact that the Rojavan Revolution has had more success with antistatism as opposed to anticapitalism may suggest serious problems with the model from an anarchist perspective. Yet this discrepancy was also true of the Spanish Revolution, where in some areas capitalism was left more or less intact while in others it was almost completely eliminated. The point to stress here is that the destruction of the capitalist core of archism is the ultimate, but not yet achieved, goal of an anarchist polity and that in both revolutionary Spain and Rojava, a spirit of experimentation and localism helps us see which means of self-organizing and structuring economic and political life best lead to that result.

Not a Prophet

In thinking about the upshot of the Rojavan Revolution, it is important to stress the relatively short time it has existed as well as its great precarity. The situation in Rojava is very unstable; already at the time of writing this, Turkey has seized a large amount of territory along the northern strip of territory, forcing the Rojavan forces to retreat deeper into their territory. The strain of dealing with Turkey and with ISIS—not entirely eliminated to this day—the threat of Assad’s own reassertion of his power over the area; the perceived treachery of the United States, which cut a deal with Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to allow his seizure of territory along the Turkish border; and other ongoing threats all mean that the Rojavan Revolution is operating under conditions of major duress. Then again, every anarchist experiment, the Spanish Revolution very much included, has occurred under such conditions, not once again because anarchism doesn’t work but precisely because it does; its success poses an existential threat to archism that archism cannot tolerate.

It may be that by the time this is published, Rojava in its current form will be no more, although I certainly hope that is not the case. Yet, in its very existence, Rojava, like the anarchism of the Spanish Revolution, speaks

to the possibility of pushing back upon, if not eliminating, archism and, in the process, demonstrating models of anarchist politics that can serve both present and future manifestations of anarchist life.

One key question to raise in this case is the role of Öcalan in all this. He is clearly the major figure leading this form of resistance, but does that mean Öcalan is an anarchist prophet who became an anarchist one? And, if so, how does his relationship to those who follow him change? David Graeber, for one, rejects the notion that Öcalan is any kind of prophet at all. In his introduction to Öcalan's *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization*, volume 1, Graeber writes: "Öcalan's work, over the last fifteen years of his captivity, has been nothing if not ambitious. True, he carefully avoids taking on the role of the prophet. The latter would be easy enough under the circumstances: to speak ex cathedra in epochal declarations like some latter-day Zarathustra. Clearly he does not want to do this."⁶² Leaving aside my own claims that Zarathustra is a very different kind of prophet than what Graeber might have in mind, we can see that there is, at the very least, a desire on Öcalan's part—and Graeber's part as well, clearly—to avoid his determining and controlling the various formations of democratic confederalism (which are not limited to Rojava, by any means).

In his transformation from a more conventional Marxist to an anarchist, Öcalan argued that the original Marxist-Leninist structure of the PKK was "too hierarchical and not democratic enough."⁶³ Creating the KCK was intended as a way to create an independent set of bodies that would be relatively immune to their own party leadership (including Öcalan's own authority, presumably). In his own introduction to *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization*, Öcalan states, "The [KCK] will be the entity of the role of resolving the problems with the rigid nation-states that surround it. KCK can be the leading model for the Middle Eastern democratic confederalism."⁶⁴ Even if Öcalan is the one who conceived of this model and set it into place, it is made to run itself and in this way function separately from any will or direction from Öcalan himself.

Furthermore, the fact that Öcalan has been in jail throughout the entire period of the Rojavan Revolution—in solitary confinement, no less—is another factor that may help minimize his own control over and determination of what occurs in Rojava. Öcalan has been extremely prolific in jail, writing volumes of books (although he is not always allowed to have paper and pen).⁶⁵ Yet his writing is a far cry from the kind of leadership he might have engaged in had he been physically present to direct operations in Rojava and elsewhere in Kurdistan.

In this way, a mixture of fate and Öcalan's own ideology have helped reduce the degree to which he himself serves as an impediment to furthering democratic confederalism. It is true that Öcalan has a larger-than-life status in the Kurdish movement. His followers are called Apocu based on his own nickname of "Apo"—uncle, in Kurdish—and his movement is called Apoculuk (Apoism). But in a very real sense, Öcalan's success has been to make himself relatively irrelevant to the day-to-day choices and actions of the communes of Rojava. In this way at least, he can be considered to be an anarchist prophet even if in ways that are not necessarily always voluntary (but that is not atypical of anarchist prophets more generally). The imperfect rollout of an anarchist polity in Rojava may in part reflect the fact that this transition from archist prophet to anarchist prophet and onto collective forms of prophecy has not been entirely successful, but it also suggests that even an imperfect, episodic, and fragmented anarchist polity demonstrates the absolute challenge that anarchism more generally poses to archism.

Furthermore, the need for absolutes and totality may itself be a marker of archism. In both the Spanish and the Rojavan Revolutions, there has been an acceptance that popular forms of authority can be piecemeal, can come and go, and can be here but not over there. It is archism itself that requires every inch of space and every moment of time be occupied by its own authority structures. In considering these experiments, we should be careful to avoid using archist measurements to gauge the success or failure of these revolutions. We see then that the admixture of archist and anarchist elements that are visible in both the Spanish and Rojavan Revolutions speaks less to the fact that anarchist elements seem to generally always be tied up with their archist counterparts—including in terms of the institution of prophecy—and more to the fact that despite this mixture, anarchism is able to thrive and even dominate in some cases.

This ability may reflect an asymmetry between these two forms of power. Precisely because archism must be everywhere and forever, any kind of mixture with anarchism threatens it absolutely, whereas anarchism as a political form has long existed within archism's embrace. In this sense, because anarchist life exists even in the most absolute of archist societies—to stamp it out would be to stamp out life as such—the archist system is under a continual state of threat. In a nutshell, anarchism can readily live without archism, but the reverse is not true. Archism, which is only death, needs anarchist life to predate upon; when that life declares itself independent of such a predator,

archism has no response but more violence, lest it be returned to its own original nothingness.

Saramago's *Blindness* and *Seeing*

Turning now to a set of literary analyses, I look first at *Blindness* and *Seeing*, written by the Portuguese author José Saramago. These novels offer a perspective on anarchism, prophecy, and sight through the double action of removing first physical sight (in *Blindness*) and then phantasmic, archist sight (in *Seeing*).⁶⁶ These twin novels are interesting for my purposes because they describe the subversion, but not quite elimination, of a key standard of archism, the concept of representation. In *Blindness*, Saramago's first novel, (almost) everyone goes blind with what Saramago calls a plague of "white blindness," wherein people can only see a uniform whiteness, as if the medium of representation itself has washed over its limits and made any kind of actual vision impossible. In *Seeing*, which is set in the same (unnamed) city four years after everyone has recovered their sight, a large majority of members of that community turn in blank ballots in a general election. That is the first action in an anarchist rebellion against the strictures of archist forms of vision and rule. The casting of blank ballots, by those that Saramago calls the "blankers," makes everything go topsy-turvy; normally the vote is a way that archist subjects feel they are participating in their own political life (even though by voting for someone, they are allowing that person to live their own political life on their behalf). Here, however, the vote becomes a form of defiance and so, once again, the stuff of archism becomes turned into a weapon to undermine and subvert it.

The one common figure in both novels is the singular character known only as "the doctor's wife" (Saramago avoids proper names and also uses a very anarchist style of punctuation). She is the only one who does not go blind in *Blindness*, and in *Seeing*, she is the one who is accused by the archists of fomenting a vast conspiracy (because from their perspective, someone has to be leading it!).

In *Blindness*, in all her ordinariness, the doctor's wife exemplifies what a prophet who is not about herself but is instead about a communal form of sight that she alone holds onto might look like. In *Seeing*, in the face of an attempt to entrap and frame her, the doctor's wife continues to hold onto that vision and in fact to spread it to the very person who is responsible for catching her out (a character known only as the Superintendent).

It might seem too much to call the doctor's wife in this sense an anarchist prophet—although in both *Blindness* and *Seeing*, she displays a high degree of vision, courage, and resolve—but that may be precisely why she succeeds in that role. She cannot become the voice for the blankers, despite the archons' insistence that she play that role, because she is so clearly just one of many. The fact that the doctor's wife has no special sight (just the regular kind) and doesn't have inside, special knowledge (because there is nothing special to know) is precisely why her anarchic vision is so critical and resistant to archist predations.

Blindness: Seeing Too Much

In her own brilliant reading, Maria Aristodemou treats *Blindness* in particular as depicting an encounter with the Lacanian Real; the sudden and swift catastrophe of mass blindness in the book marks an eruption of the Real into human life. She writes: "The Real is not, as sometimes assumed, something that does not happen; what is horrific about the Real is that, unimaginable as it is, it nevertheless does happen, or more accurately *strikes*. But what renders it 'Real' is that it exceeds our capacity for representation; since we do not have the words to represent it, it remains unassimilable in our experiences."⁶⁷ As Aristodemou further puts it, the entrance of the Real "confuse[s] our confidence in seeing" and, in this way, in my own terms, serves as a core challenge to archism, which is above all a case of ruling by sight, a massive visual organization via the elements of representation that it controls.⁶⁸

Aristodemou goes on to suggest that in Saramago's parable, people are struck by blindness because they suddenly see what they normally cannot: the blind spot, the part that cannot be represented, the excess that constitutes the Real. She further writes: "When Saramago's people are reunited with the bit that has been severed from them in order to be able to see, they see too much which in effect disables them from seeing at all . . . When the subject, like Oedipus, like Saramago's people, is reunited with the lost object, they see the gaze, that is, they cannot see at all."⁶⁹ To put this another way, the people of this city suddenly start to see the "real" archeon, the otherwise invisible basis of archist rule; that which forces itself into the world via representation suddenly comes into view. The subjects of *Blindness*—minus the doctor's wife—lose their sight because they see too much (everything is white). If representation itself becomes a basis of a failure to see—rather than what it normally is, a basis to force us to see in a particular way—in effect archism has succeeded all too well in its usual forms of self-authorization. Too

much seeing becomes the same as too little, and so the very tools by which archism normally binds and controls us become, in Saramago's parable, a way to allow other forms of sight or at least to disallow the forms of vision that we are normally subjected to.

When everyone goes blind around her, including her husband, "the doctor," the doctor's wife assumes she will go blind too. She goes with her husband to a hospital, where the city leaders, in their panic to contain the contagion—it spreads from one person to another like a plague—put the newly blind. The hospital quickly becomes overcrowded and taken over by a group of men Saramago calls "the hoodlums."

The hoodlums hoard all the food that has been provided by the state. They set up a system where each group of residents, who are organized by wards, has to provide their women to be raped if they want to have any food at all. The other men quickly comply and the serial raping begins. The doctor's wife, who no one but her husband knows can still see, doesn't think she has any choice and gets raped along with the other women in her group in one of the most awful scenes in the book. After this, she says to her husband, "We are no longer the same women as when we left here, the words they would have spoken we can no longer speak," attesting once again to the violence and unrepresentability of the Real.⁷⁰

After that, however, the doctor's wife decides she can't allow this to continue. She sneaks into the hoodlum's ward and, while they are engaged in raping another group of women, she kills the head hoodlum by stabbing him in the neck with a pair of scissors, subsequently punching her way out of the room and taking the other women with her.

The head hoodlum's assistant, an accountant who had been blind before the plague—and who therefore has better life skills than the others—grabs the dead leader's gun and brandishes it, trying to restore order. He makes everyone in the hospital get together and demands that the leader's killer be given over, but the doctor's wife's courage is contagious. An old man says that if anyone turns that person over, "anyone who gave himself up, I'd kill him with my own hands. . . . We, who have nothing, apart from this last shred of undeserved dignity, let us at least show that we are still capable of fighting for what is rightfully ours."⁷¹

Facing a full-on rebellion, the blind accountant is cornered and has only his gun to establish authority at this point. "After the tragic death of their first leader, all spirit of discipline or sense of obedience had gone in the [hoodlum's] ward, the serious error on the part of the blind accountant was to have thought that it was enough to take possession of the gun in order to usurp

power, but the result was exactly the opposite, each time he fires, the shot backfires, in other words, with each shot fired, he loses a little more authority, so let's see what happens when he runs out of ammunition."⁷²

Here, we see the most naked, violent face of archism winnowed down to its ultimate point: do what I say or I'll kill you. When it is so reduced, deprived of all its representational claims—the white blindness took care of that—archism is really nothing at all. In other words, the fact that it was always nothing becomes much more visible. With each shot fired, the blind accountant loses authority but, by the same token, each bullet he fires restores that authority to the community from which it was originally stolen.

Interestingly, the contagion of collective resistance might even have spread to the now dead leader of the hoodlums. Saramago says that the former leader, now poorly buried and rotting, “continues to be remembered, at least he makes his powerful presence felt by the stench.”⁷³ Here, that leader's authority, what had once seemed nameless and invulnerable, becomes something all too human, mortal, and tangible, contesting that phantasmic power through its undeniable reeking materiality and undermining any sense that the blind accountant is offering anything but more death. In the absence of visibility, other senses necessarily come to the fore. Now that he is only a corpse, the leader of the hoodlums ceases to project one kind of authority and, via his bodily decay, begins to issue forth a different sort, akin to what Benjamin calls the “authority of the dead,” which is counterprojective and anarchist.⁷⁴

Seeing: The “Gentle Rebellion”

In *Seeing*, after 83 percent of the population of the unnamed city—Saramago tells us it is the capital of a country, possibly Lisbon, but also possibly not—turns in blank ballots, and not once but twice, the archons who run the election cannot understand what is happening. They immediately decide that there must be some kind of organized plot with leaders and cells because archism cannot imagine anything but more of itself. They are confounded above all by the lack of so much as a shred of paper suggesting this conspiracy. Because paper is how the archeon projects, records, and maintains its power into the world—or at least it used to be before it was replaced by virtual data—they assume that any challenge to them must also leave a paper trail.

The blank ballot may be particularly subversive in this regard; like the white blindness, its sheer blankness ruins any representational function that it might have been intended to serve. Since representation is the life's blood of archism, the way that people are led to believe their leadership is of and for them, not just set over them, the very blankness of the ballot suggests

the erasure of that authority (and via the very instrument through which that authorization is normally made). This new preference for blankness is replicated by large demonstrations where the blankers all wave blank white flags. Here too, something that is normally meant to signify surrender—something archism understands very well—becomes a sign of its opposite, resistance and usurpation. Saramago tells us that even the patterns of speech among the blankers changes so that the word *blank* itself becomes scrupulously avoided in ordinary speech, perhaps reflecting that term's new and critical function.⁷⁵

The archists' response to all this is to remove the government from the city and surround it with troops. They think this is the ultimate punishment because of course, in their understanding, a community cannot survive without its leaders. Yet in fact the community thrives without them; the expected crime wave and other forms of ruin the archists predict never happen (here, it is the archons who are disappointed!). Indeed, by having this level of "representation" removed, the city really comes into its own. More accurately, the anarchist community that the city has always been—albeit eclipsed by archist parasitism—comes to the fore, especially in terms of a kind of unplanned mass coordination that continually flummoxes the archons, who watch events from afar through their spy networks.

Beyond the widespread voting by blank ballots itself, this mass coordination becomes clear at the moment when the archons and their armies leave the city. They do so in the middle of the night under cover of darkness without any kind of prior announcement. As the top-secret convoy rolls out of town, the lights in the windows of all the houses along the streets they are traveling suddenly and simultaneously flick on and stay on until the convoys pass, at which point they simultaneously all flick off. This deeply unnerves the archons. Saramago adds that the worst part for them is that as these lights come on, there is no one at these windows, "as if the official convoys were foolishly fleeing from nothing, as if the army and the police, along with the assault vehicles and the water cannon, had been spurned by the enemy and been left with no one to fight."⁷⁶ If the blankers had jeered as the archons passed, if they had lobbed grenades at them, the archons would have known what to do. They could have mowed down the protestors and engaged with mass arrests. This simple act of turning the lights on and off, an act that normally passes without notice and which happens all the time, a simple part of ordinary life, suddenly becomes a moment of deep resistance.

Another example of ordinary life rising up to defeat archism happens when the archons arrange a garbage strike in the city to create—they hope—the

chaotic conditions that they assume must accompany their withdrawal (they also explode bombs to sow confusion and mutual recrimination among the blankers, but no dice). In fact, however, on the first day of the strike, at precisely noon, groups of women come onto the street with brooms and clean everything up: “These women, were not just looking after their own interests, but after the interests of the community as well. It is possibly for this same reason that, on the third day, the refuse collectors also came out into the street. They were not in uniform, they were wearing their own clothes. It was the uniforms that were on strike, they said, not them.”⁷⁷

Here, to use Benjaminian language, a radical proletarian general strike has been undertaken, something that involves no negotiations with management (unlike the contrived garbage strike).⁷⁸ Here too, an ordinary act, sweeping with a broom, takes on a radical and subversive meaning. In both the examples of turning lights on and off and sweeping the sidewalks, in addition to saying no to archism in all its variants, these anarchist acts have a positive message. In saying no to the state, they are saying yes to the anarchist ferment, to ordinary nonarchist life—which includes sweeping and turning the light on among an infinite other myriad and ordinary acts—itsself.

Saramago calls this a “gentle rebellion,” a form of collective action that does not return the state’s violence but simply abandons the state entirely.⁷⁹ The state of course thinks *they* have been the ones doing the abandoning by withdrawing from the city, but here they experience a key vulnerability of archism: namely, the way that archism needs its subjects to exist but the reverse is definitely not true. In a way, the archons are correct that this is a conspiracy, but it’s not a top-down, planned conspiracy with leaders who make decisions and members who follow orders. Instead, it is a conspiracy of (almost) everyone, one that expresses a collective form of decision and action. That collective voice that is so rarely heard under conditions of archism—but which is always there in all its complexity and disharmony—becomes visible to itself and to the archons as well, although the archons do not have the capacity to understand or even to see what it is that they are facing.⁸⁰

Spreading the Contagion of Anarchism:

The Doctor’s Wife and the Superintendent

Because from the archon’s perspective there has to be a leader, because there can be no movement without a head, the archons zero in on the doctor’s wife, purely because she was the only one who didn’t go blind during the previous plague. That single fact makes her exceptional and, bereft of any other potential candidates, they decide that it *must* be the case that she is guilty.

Archism, after all, is never really about reality per se but about its version of reality, and so the perceived guilt of the doctor's wife becomes increasingly a determined and required thing. In this way, it *does* become retroactively "true" in the same way that all archist truths function.

In order to expose her as the ringleader, the archons send in a man known only as "Superintendent" along with a team of assistants to gain her confidence and expose her for what she is (must be). Initially, the Superintendent is fully bought into an archonic logic. He tells his team during the investigation that the imagined conspirators, the doctor's wife and her husband, are "bound to make mistakes if they haven't reached some prior agreement about what they should say and what it would be best to stay quiet about, our job is to help them make those mistakes."⁸¹

Over the course of that investigation, however, the Superintendent becomes more and more anarchized (or maybe de-archized). In their first discussion, the doctor's wife offers the Superintendent a cup of coffee, which he refuses because "we don't accept anything when we are on duty," to which she replies, "Naturally, that's how all the great corruptions begin, a cup of coffee today, a cup of coffee tomorrow, and by the third cup, it's too late."⁸² The doctor's wife appears to be sarcastic here, but in fact her words are prescient (even prophetic!). This is exactly the sequence by which the Superintendent is "corrupted," suggesting once again the power of ordinary actions: turning on the light, sweeping, and now serving—and drinking—a cup of coffee.

At their next meeting, the Superintendent accepts a cup of coffee and they have the following exchange:

And [she asks] you're not afraid that the coffee I'm about to bring you will be a step along the road to corruption, Ah, [he replied] I seem to remember you saying that that only happens with the third cup of coffee, No, [the doctor's wife said] what I said was that the third cup of coffee completed the corruption process, the first opened the door, the second held it open so that the aspirant to corruption could enter without stumbling, the third slammed the door shut, Thank you for the warning, [he said] which I take as a piece of advice, and so I'll stop at the first cup.⁸³

The Superintendent thinks he is tricking the doctor's wife, but it is clear that he is not as in control as he thinks he is. He is operating from an archist perspective on one level, but there may already be a suggestion that he really wants that cup of coffee precisely for the way it might corrupt him (or maybe he's just tired or thirsty).

Just as critically, the more the Superintendent talks to the doctor's wife, the more it is clear that there are no secrets to glean from her or her husband. She has nothing to hide because hers is not *that* kind—that is, an anarchist kind—of conspiracy. And since she has to be a grand conspirator according to anarchist logic, but clearly is not, the longer he is in her company, the more the Superintendent has no choice but to see things differently. The falsity of anarchist vision becomes unsustainable when faced with an ordinary person who fails to live up to its fantastic projections. Here the whole game, the tricks he has been trying to play on the doctor's wife, collapse on themselves.

He had crossed the frontier [back into the city] in pure movie detective style, he had convinced himself that he had come to rescue his country from mortal danger, and, in the name of that conviction, had given his subordinates ridiculous orders for which they had been kind enough to forgive him, he had tried to hold together a precarious framework of suspicions that was gradually falling apart with each minute that passed, and now he was wondering, surprised by a vague anxiety that made his diaphragm tighten, what reasonably credible information could he, the puffin [his spy name] invent to transmit to an albatross [the code name for the minister of the interior who is monitoring his actions] who would, at this moment, be asking impatiently why he was so late in sending him news.⁸⁴

In subsequent meetings, the Superintendent becomes more and more openly anarchist. He calls the doctor's wife to warn her that she is in real danger (shortly afterward, she is shot and killed by a sinister assassin known only as the man in the blue tie with white spots). As he is giving the doctor's wife these warnings, any pretense of his being a police superintendent investigating her is gone. Virtually the last thing they say to one another is that, after she tells him she thinks he helped her much more than he let on, he says, "That's just your impression, you're talking to a policeman, remember," to which she replies, "Oh, I haven't forgotten but the truth is that I no longer think of you as one."⁸⁵ He doesn't disagree with her; in fact, he thanks her for saying that. At this point, his metamorphosis into a blanker—and, I would add, an anarchist—appears to be complete. The contagion of anarchism has continued to spread, now among the archons themselves. The Superintendent is not the only convert at that point, and one suspects that many more will succumb in the near future too.

The Doctor's Wife as an Anarchist Prophet

In thinking about the prophetic power of the doctor's wife, it is certainly true that her vision is not unique in any way. As she tells one of the people she helps in *Blindness*, "I am simply the eyes that the rest of you no longer possess."⁸⁶ Her uniqueness comes from the way that she holds onto ordinary forms of vision when no one else does, but she does come to bear the weight and responsibility for everyone else in the process. In *Seeing*, the doctor's wife serves as an anarchist prophet because archism has singled her out to be one. That is, archism has set its focal point on a single person. It has picked the doctor's wife, perhaps arbitrarily, but she is picked nevertheless.

As such, the doctor's wife is forced, in a sense, to represent an anarchist conspiracy that she is only one small part of. Insofar as representation is a critical aspect of archism, the doctor's wife is herself not perfectly innocent of archism, even as she remains thoroughly anarchist. In *Blindness*, this doubleness is more apparent in that she is unquestionably the leader of the small band that she stays with throughout the plague. Yet even in *Seeing*, there is a way in which, demanded to speak on behalf of the conspiracy, the doctor's wife does so. But what she does or says is not some hidden truth or secret at the core of the conspiracy. Instead, she simply gives voice to one perspective among others, to one part of a collective that is feeling—and seeing!—itself as such for perhaps the very first time.

Representation is the life's blood of archism, perhaps a strange term to use for something that is dead and empty, but it conveys its importance. Archism cannot function without this pose of connectivity to those communities it sits parasitically atop. In fact, representation is the vehicle by which that parasitism is enacted; it is what transfers life from the community itself to this dead nonbeing in the guise of doing the opposite. It is here that we can see the greatest subversion that the doctor's wife performs. By becoming unique and even indispensable, the doctor's wife has smuggled ordinariness and a connection to actual—as opposed to faux—collectivity into the heart of representation. In doing so, she reverses the way that representation singles us out in order to isolate us, the way it makes us relate to the state and not to one another. This is not to say that the doctor's wife makes representation work but that she uses a false mechanism in ways that act against its intended purpose.

Here, we see once again the unexpected vulnerability of archism, wherein it is perpetually threatened by what it dominates and orders. As already noted in chapter 2, archism must live with and rely upon language that is,

after all, an ongoing and collective set of decisions about meaning. It may pretend to control that process, but the truth is that it must accept the collective decisions its subjects make on an ongoing basis. In this one way at least, representation is never wholly a tool the archists control; taken as language itself, it always has this subversive aspect to it.

Although they are mistaken in the way that they characterize the doctor's wife, their mistake does allow the archons a sense of the existential threat that she and the other blankers pose to them. For some of them, like the Superintendent, their misunderstanding actually grants them access to the anarchist conspiracy itself. Yet for all her centrality, there is a way in which the doctor's wife also serves as a kind of decoy. While they are fixated on her, the conspiracy goes on apace. Killing her, we sense, is not going to stop the blankers; now that they have learned to see in a different way, a way that has no external source but is only about what they chose to see and how to see it, there is no stopping them. In this way too, the doctor's wife, for all her ordinariness—although not everyone would show the resolve that she showed during the plague of blindness—is doing a unique service for the anarchist community as a whole.

There is a way in which the doctor's wife understands her role as transitory. The job of any anarchist prophet is, after all, to make herself redundant. At one point in *Blindness*, she talks to someone in her group about what would happen if people remained blind forever. She says: “[There were] few [blind people] in comparison [before the plague], the feelings in use were those of someone who could see, therefore blind people felt with the feelings of others, not as the blind people they were, now, certainly, what is emerging are the real feelings of the blind, and we are still only at the beginning, for the moment we still live on the memory of what we felt.”⁸⁷ This passage suggests that even if everyone goes blind and stays that way, the blind would adjust to their new form of vision, and the anarchist ferment of ordinary life would reestablish itself or would recognize the fact that it never went away but only changed its form. If anything, such an eventuality would deprive anarchism of visuality, which has always been its preferred and dominant sensory mode. Thinking in these terms means that there will always be a place for anarchist conspiracy, a force that is never going to stop hiding in plain sight even if there is no one to physically see it anymore. In a nutshell, as long as there is life, there is anarchism and there is nothing that anarchism can do about that.

The Earthseed Series

Moving on to Octavia Butler's Earthseed series, the two-book sequence *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents* traces the life and work of a prophet named Lauren Olamina. Lauren is a young—and then not so young—Black woman who lives in a time set in the near future when the United States has completely fallen apart (these days, it is not so hard to imagine this, and the books seem prophetic in a more ordinary sense as well).⁸⁸ In the face of the abandonment of the kinder and gentler appearances of archism, we are left with its teeth: the state is overtly racist, classist, and aggressively violent. In the time when the novel is set—a time people call the “apocalypse”—the rich live in corporate enclaves and everyone else is left to suffer. In response to the myriad crises of this period, society itself has become more violent as well, and death swoops down on those who try to hold onto some form of “normal life.”

Into this mix, Lauren develops her own religion, called “Earthseed,” which is extremely anarchist in both its spirit and its practice. Yet Lauren herself often acts like any archist prophet would. She is often ruthlessly intolerant of dissent and disloyalty, and—as we see in the second book—she seems to be a deeply problematic parent. Yet, for all of her all-too-human—and archist—faults, we see that Lauren offers a way for her followers to resist the lures of archism and come to their own forms of sight, despite the fact that they live in a time of great danger, a time that usually makes people cling all the more desperately to archist promises.

There is something in Butler's work more generally that I find quite subversive, namely a way that she generalizes the Black experience to a larger population. Her main characters are almost always Black women, and the situations that her communities face include invasion—sometimes by extraterrestrials—slavery, domination, bullying, rape, and murder. None of this is science fiction; these are all a reflection of Black life in America. In this sense, Butler is not writing about the future but about the disaster that is already here, the disaster of archism. If Black and Brown people already know this disaster for what it is, Butler's books still offer resources of how to survive and even to thrive in the face of that ongoing catastrophe. Her characters evince a form of fatalism, but it's more in the spirit of Nietzsche's *amor fati* than any kind of passivity. They accept the world as it is rather than railing against the loss of what they are taught to expect it to be. In that acceptance, they find pathways for change that are not simply attempts to make archism be true after all.

Earthseed, Lauren's religion, is uniquely disappointing and, accordingly, radically anarchist. Unlike the Abrahamic God, Lauren's God is utterly indifferent to human affairs (making her more akin to Spinoza's God, who I discuss in the next chapter). The God that Lauren worships is nothing more than the vast anarchist materiality of the universe, a force of pure contingency. Put differently, it's not just that Lauren's God is an anarchist but that anarchism and this God are one and the same thing. This leads to what I think is the most critical aspect of Lauren's prophecy for the purposes of this book: by making the universe itself anarchist—including having human beings going out to live on other worlds, hence making the universe accessible and material rather than abstract and determining—Lauren deprives archism of one of its key architectural functions, its claim to be transcendent and all determining.

"A Pessimist if [She's] Not Careful"

In her own self-description, Butler calls herself "a pessimist if I'm not careful."⁸⁹ Just as optimism can be cruel—to cite Lauren Berlant—pessimism can be cruel as well, especially if it means giving up on trying to change a world full of violence and injustice.⁹⁰ The kind of bad fatalism that comes from such pessimism amounts to thinking, "I will be killed if I don't do x and y," an attitude that is critical for the perpetuation of archist rule even if it is not always a conscious thought. This is the great deception of archism, the fox telling the hens that they have no choice but to trust her because there are so many far worse things out there (better to be murdered by a fox than by a wolf! And anyway the fox said she *might* not kill you; she seems kind of nice sometimes, etc.).

The temptations of this kind of pessimism are very familiar to Lauren when the first novel starts. She lives with her father, stepmother, and siblings and a few other families in a cul-de-sac in Los Angeles, forming a community that has built up walls to keep out the killers and rapists who lurk outside. Her father is a preacher who holds the community together through the promise that things are bound to get better. But all his promises are in vain; he suddenly disappears one day, presumably killed on his way to or from the compound. Even before his death, Lauren refuses to pretend that everything is OK. At one point, her father tells Lauren that her ideas are scaring people. He tells her that she is wrong to make people look down into the abyss that stands before them. She replies, "Maybe it's time to look down. Time for some hand and foot holds before we just get pushed in."⁹¹

Here, we see two very different modes of seeing. Her father is still looking up, to heaven and the state, for rescue. Lauren is looking around for ways to

live in this world, to live her life and not just hope that she doesn't die. This is a perspective that will serve Lauren well while so many people in her community, in their denial of what is really going on, fail to address the issues at hand and succumb to violence and exploitation.

The Religion of Earthseed

In a poem that she includes in *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*—the key scripture of her religion—Lauren writes: “We see what we're permitted to see,” indicating that she is very aware of how archist vision is perpetuated.⁹² It's not that Lauren doesn't see this way as well; it's just that Lauren *decides* to see things differently. Although she is not above using the language of truth at times, it would be more accurate to say that Lauren wants to give herself and her disciples a chance to see for themselves, to make decisions according to their own thoughts, experiences, and logics.

Speaking to the admixture of reality and resistance that characterizes her religion, at one point Lauren writes in her journal: “I've never felt that I was making any of this up—not the name, Earthseed, not any of it. I mean, I've never felt that it was anything other than real: discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation. I wish I could believe it was all supernatural and that I'm getting messages from God. But then, I don't believe in that kind of God. All I do is observe and take notes, trying to put things down in ways that are as powerful, as simple, and as direct as I feel them.”⁹³

In a conversation with a man named Travis, who becomes her first convert, he says:

“But [Earthseed is] not a god. It's not a person or an intelligence or even a thing. It's just . . . I don't know. An idea.”

[Lauren] smiled. Was that such a terrible criticism? “It's a truth,” [she] said.⁹⁴

In both instances, Lauren is commenting on the nature of her truth. As I read these novels, the externality of truth for Lauren comes not because this truth is out there as an unchanging aspect of an eternal universal—that kind of truth is exactly what Earthseed makes impossible—but rather because it reflects the kinds of collective determinations that are outside any one individual, even an individual as singular as Lauren.

It may be that Lauren's insistence on speaking of God and calling Earthseed a religion is a way to give it legitimacy in an archist world where theology is the *sine qua non* of authority. Yet, not unlike as with Benjamin, Lauren describes a uniquely self-undermining God, one whose authority is swiftly subverted

and which therefore immediately returns the focus to human agency. In this way, Earthseed may be one of the most radical versions of negative theology there is.

“God Is Change”

This can be shown more clearly by looking at one of the key doctrines of Earthseed that Butler uses to introduce one of the very first chapters of *Parable of the Sower*.

All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth is Change
God is Change.⁹⁵

If we take these tenets one by one, we can begin to better see the subversive possibilities inherent in Earthseed.⁹⁶ “All that you touch / You Change” suggests the impossibility of human nonagency. Even the most passive of persons cannot help but touch, and hence change, the world around them. While this might smack a bit of the liberal phantasm of the autonomous subject made famous by John Locke who goes out into the world and mixes a bit of themselves into the world, allowing him—and in the case of the liberal depictions, it is definitely a him that we are talking about—to control and dominate the world, we see that the second line, “All that you Change / Changes you,” renders such a reading impossible.⁹⁷ Here the touchers and changers are themselves always being touched and changed, suggesting a plurality of intermingled and intermingling selves, a veritable anarchic stew of subjectivities both inside and outside the boundaries of each individual. Here, the contingent and ever-shifting bases of identity make precise delineations of selves—a prerequisite for liberalism—impossible.

This multiplicity of selves gets taken to the next level of generality by the following line, “The only lasting truth is Change.” Insofar as archism, at least its Western form, tells us to think that something that is true is lasting by definition, to say the only “lasting truth is change” implies that everything else that we thought was true is not. If this is a way to universalize the ideas about personhood and subjectivity set down in the first two tenets, it does so in a way that actually ruins the very universe that such truths are projected onto. A universe marked by constants, by set principles and absolute laws, is precisely what Earthseed unravels. In a way, to say that “the only lasting

truth is change” is to say that there is no truth at all, or at least that the truths that exist are always in the process of becoming, ensuring that no doctrine or form will last, hence making archism, which is all about lasting, about abstract universals and truths, impossible.

The final tenet, “God is Change,” is the final blow to any archist readings of Earthseed. Such a statement determines that any attempt to circumvent this unraveling of all certainties by going straight to God—to the ultimate archon—is undone because God is brought into the maw of contingency, and indeed constitutes that maw. In a sense, “God is Change” is highly analogous to Hobbes’s claim that “Jesus is the Christ.” Both sentences are short and almost entirely devoid of content. Both create an irreducible pith that resists being further read into and fetishized. In this way, in both cases, these two simple statements engage in a form of derepresentation of their own, serving to ensure that every other statement, whether about Christianity in Hobbes’s case or about Earthseed in Lauren’s case, or about the universe more generally, is going to be nullified as a possible and self-sustaining truth. In this case, by saying that “God is Change,” Lauren ensures that there is no higher authority from which to escape this general anarchization of the subject and the universe that subject occupies.⁹⁸

Lauren explains: “Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action. With action, it’s only useful if it steadies you, focuses your efforts, eases your mind.”⁹⁹ Here we see once again that the truth that Lauren sees is not some invisible and permanent truth that in some way supersedes the world around her. It works the other way around: her seeing of the world as being in constant flux and dynamism disallows her from seeing the stable icons that archism insists upon. It is up to her, and ultimately up to the community of Earthseed, to determine what she is going to take away from all that flux and change, as well as what she is going to do about it.¹⁰⁰

Where archism tries to claim that the world can be understood, taxonomized, and dominated, Earthseed unravels the basis of that domination by giving the world back its own deeply aleatory aspects. Lauren’s worship goes not outward to a godlike figure but back to herself via a God that is nothing but the anarchic quality of the universe, the way that all matter is entropic and always in flux.

It even appears that the people of the world can in fact change God, as Lauren acknowledges when she states: “The essentials [of Earthseed] are to learn to shape God with forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit

their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the fulfillment of the Destiny [of human beings going to the stars].¹⁰¹ In a nutshell, if God is change, then God is also changed, and if human beings are changers, then they partake in that changing as well. Here, human agency is not so much lifted up in this way as it is connected to a much vaster universe. If saying God can be changed makes humans seem godlike, they can never be *that* godlike, they can never be as big and diverse as the universe itself.¹⁰² They are only one set of players in a multitude of life—and nonlife—forms.¹⁰³

Earthseed then propounds a kind of ultimate immanentism (in the next chapter, I discuss other modes of immanentist theologies), even as it retains some aspects that are usually considered to be transcendent. On the one hand, there is nowhere for this God to go or be that isn't part of the universe. The universe is only what it is (and that is always in flux). Nor is there any perch from which this God could judge or exempt herself from that judgment. In this way, God does not have to abandon this perch as she does with Benjamin, nor does she have to “die” as with Nietzsche. And yet this God is—at least as far as we are concerned—both omnitemporal and omnipotent and thus transcendent in this sense at least. Stuffed within our temporality, as it were, this deity defies any attempts by would-be archists to “wait her out” (she will be God for all of time) or find a space where she is not (she is everywhere).

Here we get a kind of “best of both worlds” situation, the human orientation of immanentism and the power and authority of transcendentalism in one. In terms of the former, insofar as this God has no set content of her own—like Hobbes's Holy Spirit, she is pure form—there is no danger of her becoming a basis for an occult reintroduction of archism, leaving human beings to their own devices. And in the latter case the very absolute conventions of archism—its very need to be everywhere and at all times—serve to defeat it since this God already occupies that space and denies it to them. So long as the tenets of Earthseed hold, this God, and hence those who follow her, is/are about as immune from archist theology as it gets.

Lauren as Prophet

In the same way that Earthseed embodies many elements of what seems like archist theology even as it is profoundly anarchist, so too, in examining Lauren's own bearing as a prophet, do we see a complicated and sometimes contradictory mixture of archist and anarchist elements. Lauren does not shy away from the respect and power that come with her prophetic functions,

but does that in any way compromise her own role or the religion that she brings into the world?

The most troubling aspects of Lauren's career as a prophet become clear in the second volume, *Parable of the Talents*. Lauren has a daughter, Larkin, who is kidnapped early on in that novel and raised by a family of fundamentalist Christians. Lauren does not know where her daughter is until well into the novel, when Larkin is much older. In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren's own narrative is juxtaposed with Larkin's so you can see things from both perspectives.

Although Lauren searches endlessly for Larkin, this does not stop her from continuing to focus on growing Earthseed, which becomes a huge and powerful movement. The very first sentence of *Parable of the Talents* is Larkin saying, "They'll make a God of her."¹⁰⁴ She writes: "I think that would please her, if she could know about it. In spite of all of her protests and denials, [Lauren]'s always needed devoted, obedient followers—disciples—who would listen to her and believe everything she told them. And she needs large events to manipulate. All gods seem to need these things."¹⁰⁵

This already suggests the possibility that Lauren's own status—perhaps even as a god herself—might corrupt Earthseed, making it about her rather than her doctrines. Larkin also objects to her mother's preoccupation with Earthseed, which she sees as coming at her own expense. She comments that if her mother had found her earlier in her life, "How long would it have been before she put me aside for Earthseed, her other kid?"¹⁰⁶ She also writes: "I was her weakness. Earthseed was her strength. No wonder it was her favorite."¹⁰⁷

We may read Larkin's criticisms of her mother through the lens of her own bitterness at feeling abandoned but, as she so often does in her writing, Butler does not give us an easy way to resolve this tension: Lauren had to pay a price for Earthseed and she did (and Larkin had to pay it too). While being a negligent parent—at least in Larkin's view—is not a requirement for archism, Lauren's choices do suggest a preoccupation with her own grandeur and status, a slow seduction into the pleasures of leadership and control.

The fact that anarchist forms of prophecy can come even from a partially archist person should not surprise us; archism is ubiquitous in our time, and we are all infected and formed by it. What is critical is to look for not pure anarchism but anarchist effects in the midst of an archist context and, more particularly in this case, anarchist sight in the midst of archist desires and projections. Lauren's example shows us exactly what this might look like.

The Destiny

Another complication around Lauren's form of prophecy is the idea of the "Destiny," her view that human beings must go out into the universe and colonize the stars. Not only is this very future oriented—the favored archist temporality—but it also smacks of the kinds of imperialism and colonization that are the hallmarks of archist practice more generally. Furthermore, in constantly evoking "the universe," another favorite archist trope, is Lauren sending her disciples right back into an archist phantasm?

In the same way that Lauren makes God into a radical and (largely) immanentist anarchist, she does the same thing to the concepts of the future and the universe, depriving archism of these critical foundations as well. At one point in speaking of the Destiny, she tells Travis, "After all, my heaven really exists, and you don't have to die to reach it."¹⁰⁸

Here, Lauren is showing how the Destiny serves to push back the forms of archist phantasm by actually going out into the universe and experiencing it firsthand. The "afterlife," a place and time that archism normally uses to denigrate and dominate human life, becomes brought into the immanent, and available, universe; it can be accessed by the living and not just the dead. In this sense, the "Destiny," despite its capital letter "D," is the opposite of the archist destiny (whether capitalized or not). It offers a way to live while still alive, to have any rewards available within the universe instead of beyond it (in the next chapter, I describe the Melanesian immanentist viewpoint, which is similar in some ways). Such a life remains, as Lauren herself remains, fully in the present. Even if Lauren herself can't see life on other planets—she lives to see the assemblage of the first starship but no farther than that—that life will be real and tangible, that is, present, to those who will step onto those worlds. So while this is "future" and "destined," it does not serve as what Benjamin calls "homogenous, empty time" (the time of archism).¹⁰⁹ Lauren's Destiny takes the place of that other future, bringing it back to life, to change and to anarchism, instead of stasis and archism.

By creating a literal and tangible possibility of "heaven," Lauren disallows the metaphysical heaven and afterlife from competing with her own vision. Insofar as archism is ultimately based on the promise of immortality and the conquest of death, this is no small feat. Even a fully secularized and liberal version of archism is built on some conception of heaven, some transcendence of death, whether by exporting death to other people via racism and violence or by promising a kind of capitalist paradise where all cares are answered and life itself is assured, or even a future where "progress" takes us finally and utterly to some kind of happy culmination.

Earthseed's literalization of the afterlife also implicitly involves a secularized version of heaven, namely the universe itself. Instead of being a metaphysical space that represents perfection, omnipresence, and omnipotence, a kind of black box that archism can use to judge and rule the world from, the actual universe becomes a place to be visited. The vastness of the universe becomes a way to defeat human hubris rather than to bolster it; to actually go out into space is to experience its actual measure and its reach. Here again, as with the concept of heaven and the afterlife, Earthseed is displacing the metaphysical with the physical and the immanent and, by that connection, undermining once again some of the core tenets of archism—certainly of its liberal variants—in the process.

A final issue regarding the Destiny to think about is whether, despite all this, it becomes an opportunity for archist humankind to do to the universe what it has done to the Earth, namely colonize other beings, take over an area of space seen as “terra nullius,” and make it available for plunder. If Earthseed is indeed an essentially colonizing mission, then no amount of anarchizing countertheology could serve to undermine this most archist of gestures based on the desire to dominate and control other spaces and other forms of life.

We don't get a lot of evidence one way or the other on this question. Toward the very end of *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren does note that the very first starship to go into the universe has been named the *Christopher Columbus*. Lauren comments: “I object to the name. This ship is not about a shortcut to riches and empire. It's not about snatching up slaves and gold and presenting them to some European monarch. But one can't win every battle. One must know which battles to fight. The name is nothing.”¹⁰ This could just be Lauren rationalizing. But here, once again, it is the doctrine of Earthseed itself that is the best defense against incipient archism. At one point, Lauren tells someone she is recruiting to Earthseed that with the Destiny “we can . . . become some combination of what we want to become and whatever our new environments challenge us to become. Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them.”¹¹ This statement is very much in keeping with the idea that “God is Change.” The archist premise that underlies colonization does not include the idea of the colonizers being altered by their encounter with new places and people. From its position of all knowing and all seeing—the stance of archist prophecy—it is the other peoples or worlds that will be changed, while the subject in question will remain constant and inviolable. The doctrine that “God is Change” removes that inviolable center, the very thing that gives the colonizer the supposed “right” to conquer, rape, and murder

other communities in the first place. Without *that* kind of destiny, we get instead, once again, the “Destiny,” which is less a guarantee of conquest and power and more a chance to live, to continue to change and adapt in new environments.

What Kind of Prophet?

Perhaps the most troubling issue to consider in the Earthseed novels is that of Lauren’s indispensability for her followers. Without her, there would be no Earthseed and no alternative to the grinding misery that the world had become. Yet, just as with the prophet Zarathustra, Lauren does not truly change anyone. Instead, she restores them, as it were, to themselves, to their own power of decision and judgment. Her job, as with the other prophets I’ve looked at in this book, is not to tell them what to see or think but simply to disappoint them. She doesn’t tell them anything they don’t already know; she only takes away the archeonic position from which they are always and endlessly being judged and determined. Just as she tells us she didn’t invent Earthseed but discovered it, so too does she merely reflect a larger conversation that envelopes her, even if, at times, she appears—because she is human too, after all—to take credit for it.

When her husband, Bankole, who is killed in the same raid that Larkin is kidnapped in, asks her about whether she has any doubts about Earthseed, Lauren says: “My doubts are personal. . . . You know that. I doubt myself, not Earthseed. I worry that I might not be able to make Earthseed any more than another little cult. . . . It could happen. Earthseed is true—is a collection of truths, but there’s no law that says it has to succeed. We can always screw it up. I can always screw it up. There’s so much to be done.”¹² Here, Lauren tries not to make Earthseed all about her (contra Larkin’s reading of her). Yes, she “discovered” it, but she is not *it*. Earthseed, whatever it is, is part of the universe, a collective response that works to undermine and deny the insights and truths and principles of any one person, even those of its greatest—and so far only—prophet.

While it might literally be true that Earthseed as such would not have happened without Lauren’s vision, it is not the case that the insights of Earthseed would have been lost to the human race forever had she never existed. The insights that it has are based not on Lauren’s own ideas but on the anarchic nature of the universe itself. The universe—normally that ultimate bedrock of archist authority and power—becomes the source of opposition to that very same thing. If the universe is in fact anarchic rather than archic, then Earthseed itself cannot depend on one person’s sight; it merely needs

to reflect the vast anarchic complex of people and things—with things infinitely outweighing the number of people—that it resonates with.

This anarchism is always there, to be stumbled on, to be encountered but never invented. By the same token, the planets that the Earthseed members will go to will be encountered as they are, having and affecting a material presence that is not up to human beings to determine or confer. That is one of the key insights that come from this kind of immanentism.¹³

The members of Earthseed may well consider themselves to have been lucky to have had Lauren as a prophet. She is indeed a most unusual kind of prophet, and Earthseed is a most unusual kind of religion, but it may just be that Lauren hastened but did not cause her follower's engagement with the world—and the universe—as it is. For all the gloom and harshness of the Earthseed series, I think its core message is very positive: The universe is anarchistic. God is change. No amount of archism can change that. People will continue to suffer from the temptations and predations of archism, but archism is not fated to rule the universe. That is not the Destiny that Lauren Olamina sees, and here, at least, the universe itself is in accord with her vision.

Making Anarchist Prophecy Redundant

Looking at the various examples that I have offered in this chapter—the Spanish and Rojavan Revolutions, the prophetic roles of the doctor's wife and Lauren Olamina—the common theme is that the kind of archist compromises that often come along with anarchism are not fatal to it and can in fact become a basis for greater and further resistance. Insofar as anarchism generally seems to find itself in archist contexts—although not always, as the next chapter attests—this is critically important knowledge. Even as the expression of anarchism in an open fashion always brings a violent archist response, as we see in the case of Spain in the 1930s and as we are seeing in Rojava today, it is clear that there are certain built-in advantages that anarchism has that archism can never overcome.

Archism's answer to anarchism, its only possible response, is violence. That response did succeed in destroying the Spanish Revolution, and has severely restricted and pressured the Rojavan Revolution as well. The violence that archism imposes is not only physical. Haiti, the site of perhaps the greatest rejection of archist power in history, became the subject of harsh economic sanctions, along with frequent invasion and occupation, long after it won its revolution. And we all live with yet another kind of violence,

the violence of an imposed sense of reality, a demand to read the world in a certain way, what I have been calling appointing vision and Benjamin calls mythic violence.

Yet, as the blind accountant learned in *Blindness*, violence alone does not serve to perpetuate archism. Archism requires its disguise, its lies, its promises and seductions. It needs representation and other myths to assuage, confuse, and obfuscate its ultimate source of power, which is entirely stolen from the anarchist life that it predates. Here again, we see great vulnerability when all archism really wants us to see is its power and impermeability.

The figures that I have looked at in this chapter, both actual and literary, are to a person imperfect beings infused with the archist contexts in which they lived. What all that imperfection and intermixing of archist and anarchist elements tells us is that anarchist vision does not need to come out of some pure form. If anything, it is precisely because they *know* archism and understand it from within and on its own terms that the anarchist prophets I have looked at here succeed. Ultimately the goal is not to have one anarchist prophet but to turn the entire community into a collectivity of prophets that will argue and struggle together over what they are seeing. Collective decisions and collective forms of vision can only come out of the ferment of anarchist life in all its variety and nonharmonious bases. The role of an anarchist prophet, if she is going to be singular, is simply to hold onto that sight, to allow for a transition from the requirement of one prophet to many; she can't have all those discussions and arguments by herself.

Any time the anarchist prophet goes beyond the simple act of holding onto collective forms of sight, she threatens—as Lauren Olamina might have threatened and as many of the leaders of the Spanish Revolution *did* threaten—to replace that collective with her own form of sight and, in that way, to reproduce archism even while trying to destroy it.

The anarchist prophet is thus in a very unstable position and it is not always even a necessary one. She will never be invulnerable to the temptation to make her vision only her own. She can never guarantee success, and indeed most anarchist prophets in real life anyway have ended in abject failure, if you use the archist norm of lastingness as your key principle of judgment. Yet for all this, anarchist prophecy remains a critical way for anarchist life to come to see itself. Above all, the form of anarchist prophecy allows the mechanics of archist subjectivity—wherein there must be one leader, there must be one form of sight given to others, and so on—to serve as a basis for their own undoing. Sometimes, then, from very bad (archist) sources, you can still get very good (anarchist) outcomes.