

“Something Beyond Pain”: Race, Gender, and Hyperempathy in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*

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Abstract

In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia E. Butler describes a heightened form of empathy—a *hyperempathy*—an involuntary, inescapable, and overwhelming wave of empathy amplified to the level of physical experience. The narrative follows Lauren Oya Olamina as her hyperempathy develops from a shameful impairment to an asset that engenders a new and growing community. As an interactional and intra-actional identification, hyperempathy is grounded in a radically relational understanding of subjectivity. As such it initiates a slow and careful dismantling of the humanist subject that is based on the imperative of individualism. This article traces the steps involved in reconceptualizing subjectivity under the auspices of relationality and argues that Butler’s text proposes a distinctive ethics, offering not only a fictional form of relating to the Other but revising the concept of empathy altogether. Distinctly incorporating an emplacement of race and gender, Butler’s text can inform more recent feminist reconsiderations of empathy in relational-cultural theory. Finally, the article argues that Butler’s revision of empathy raises questions regarding deficits and failures in the shared or collective consciousness and demonstrates how speculative fiction can address the violence of liberal conceptions of the human under racial capitalism.

Butler’s Prophetic Science Fiction

One of the many important contributions that Black women’s speculative fiction offers readers today is not a corrective to mainstream male-dominated Euro-American science fiction but an altogether distinctive ethics.¹ A prime example can be found in Octavia E. Butler’s 1993 dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower*, where the concept of empathy is revised in a hyperbolized fictional form that makes emotion-regulation on the side of the empathee impossible. The novel’s main protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, suffers from a condition called hyperempathy,² which causes her to involuntarily experience the joy or the pain of those within the field of her vision. Hyperempathy is a chemical reaction in the body that is triggered by sight. Lauren feels what she sees others feel. In this article I argue that by introducing hyperempathy in *Parable of the Sower*, Butler reconceptualizes subjectivity in the somatic imaginary within an interpersonal framework of mutuality and equality. By doing so, she sheds a new light on the concept of empathy. After introducing more recent theories of empathy and feminist revisions thereof, I argue that Butler’s text ventures even further in exposing the insufficiency of contemporary conceptualizations of empathy. Grounded in a radically relational understanding of subjectivity marked by mutual recognition and an affective bond that carries the potential to eliminate hierarchies, hyperempathy raises questions regarding deficits and failures in the shared or collective consciousness, which I will focus on in this article.

Parable of the Sower is not social theory. The novel is commonly classified as dystopian science fiction (Phillips). Yet, as Madhu Dubey among others has pointed out, the “dystopia presented in *Parable of the Sower* is so closely extrapolated from current trends” that “it produces a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement” (106). Set in the year 2024, the novel begins in a time when “everything was getting worse; the climate, the economy, crime, drugs, you know” (Butler 1993, 176). Readers in 2022 are eerily familiar with such scenarios, which prompted scholars such as Lossifidis, already in 2002, to read the novel as prophetic. Monica A. Coleman was even more explicit in her application of the novel to current problems by organizing a discussion of the novel with the science fiction writer Tananarive Due under the title “Octavia Tried to Tell us: Parable for Today’s Pandemic.” The event correlates the effects of the 2019 Covid-19 pandemic to scenes in the novel. Butler

¹ Sheree R. Thomas situates Butler’s emancipatory forms of speculative fiction within the tradition of the African diaspora. Similarly, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson interprets “Bloodchild” in *Becoming Human* as belonging to an Africanist tradition that exists apart from what is considered to be the Euro-American modernist humanist tradition.

² Cf. Sami Schalk’s chapter 3 of *Bodyminds Reimagined* for an overview of scholarship on hyperempathy.

herself expressed her hope that *Parable of the Sower* would not become a “prophecy” (Butler, Interview). Yet, environmental disasters, a global epidemic, and runaway capitalism are dominating world-news only two years before Butler’s apocalyptic scenario commences. In its prescient quality, the text repeatedly bursts the linearity of futurity in classic science fiction, demonstrating that, as Alexis Lothian expressed it, “we live in the future” (1). It is therefore certainly in keeping with the times when returning to this text in search of answers to ongoing predicaments and one of the strongest elements that Butler proposes is her reconceptualization of empathy.

Earthbound Change or the Future in the Present

There is no consensual definition of empathy (Bohart & Greenberg 1997; Batson 2009). Empathy is considered to be an ability to take somebody else’s perspective, understand this person’s frame of reference, and experience and therefore, in a way, *feel* what this person feels. It is an affective entangling of sentient beings. Most scholars agree that three components are necessary for empathy: “(a) an *emotional simulation*[.]” “(b) a conceptual, *perspective-taking* process[.]” and “(c) an *emotion-regulation* process used to soothe personal distress at the other’s pain or discomfort, making it possible to mobilize compassion and helping behavior for the other” (Elliott et al. 43). In this definition, empathy is a personal simulation that activates manageable compassion and leads to action. The absence of such empathy in *Parable of the Sower* is central to the plot’s development. The novel depicts a society where the overwhelming economic power of big corporations is posing as the de-facto government. Throughout the text, companies that control key decisions about production and distribution are present in the background, with the effect of foregrounding the life of the main protagonist Lauren, her family, and the people in her environment and how they are affected by this concentration of power. Lauren’s father describes this situation: “Politicians and big corporations get the bread and we get the circuses” (Butler 1993, 20). What he circumscribes in a playful if bitter way is a brutal, exhausting, apocalyptic scenario that plays out in violent murders, lethal or personality-changing drug abuse, flight and refuge, brutal corporal violence, and cannibalism. In such an environment, any sense of empathy is a hindrance to survival. For example, when Lauren’s parents tried to help a group of people with an injured woman, the very same group attacked them (10). Empathy can be understood as a virtue, a skill, at times even as a moral imperative. In the society that Lauren inhabits, it is a luxury or a liability.

The link between poverty and racial discrimination is topicalized from the beginning. The novel opens in the gated community of Robledo,

where Lauren lives as a fifteen-year-old child with her father, his wife, and her stepmother’s two sons. It is one of the few remaining self-organized enwalled spaces. Commenting on why big companies still have not expressed any interest in buying off Robledo, Lauren’s father explains it to be “too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic, to be of any interest to anybody” (113). As a self-organized community populated mainly by people of color, Robledo seems a comparably promising environment for young people such as Lauren. Yet, any hope for a future free of violence and hardships is shattered a few sentences later, when the father describes life in this gated community: “What it does have is street poor, body dumps, and a memory of once being well-off” (ibid.). In this way, the first part of the novel establishes a generational gap. While Lauren’s parents and their friends dream of a better past returning in the future, the next generation has no access to this hope. Robledo in all its brutality is all they know. Lauren sighs: “The adults say things will get better, but they never have” (15). Living as a woman of color in an environment that discriminates against people of color and in which women are disproportionately more subject to sexual abuse and violence, Lauren is highly aware of the necessity to plot her way out of these miserable living conditions without recourse to parental help. The first step, she quickly realizes, will demand a break with the framework of a world that her parents inhabit and an ability to imagine a future that does not revert to their past.

It is at the intersection of the past and the future that Butler instrumentalizes the generic conventions of science fiction in her own original way. Lauren is acutely aware of the restrictions of the present, most of which are located at the crossroads of racial and gendered discrimination. Confirming genre conventions, the main protagonist literally reaches out to “the stars,” (80) when all her hopes are invested in the promise of interplanetary travel and life on a different planet. Yet, most of the narrative is structured around her contemplations about how to change life on Earth before boarding a spaceship into a different galaxy. In her own words: “There’s always a lot to do before you get to go to heaven” (ibid.). Butler, therefore, uses a central tenet of the genre, “science and space projects,” (ibid.) to expand the prospects of a world dominated by racial and gendered restrictions without simply highlighting an escape route. Rather than depicting changed social parameters on a different planet, *Parable of the Sower* focuses on the reconceptualization of the same on Earth. To “take root among the stars,” (ibid.) Lauren knows, it is necessary to cultivate a community that destabilizes teleological epistemic presumptions about subjectivities based on hierarchies via exclusion. Demonstrating ways in which empathy relies on a position of privilege to exemplify the intricate structure of social

hierarchies highlights that a simple focus on victims versus perpetrators will not initiate structural change. Rather, the key to building a different community is the belief in change itself: "Everyone knows that change is inevitable" (25) in this novel. Lauren therefore creates her own personal belief-system based on the permanency of change. She calls it Earthseed, putting emphasis on the terrestrial origins of her futuristic interplanetary path.

The Permeability of Boundaries

Along the way of constructing Earthseed, Lauren's decisions are strategically guided by the response to structures within which gender and race operate as organizing categories of oppression. The opening chapters of *Parable of the Sower* set in the gated community in which the protagonist spends her childhood are followed by Lauren's story as a refugee. After even her seemingly safe home burned down and her family disappeared, most likely murdered, Lauren has no choice but to leave, knowing only that she might "stop in Northern California or go through to Canada" (186). From the beginning, she decides that traveling as a woman is too dangerous. Gender thus determines one's chances of survival. This fear is confirmed in various scenes along the way, the most striking of which are numerous depictions of rape, where all victims are gendered female. Their ages range from "a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old" (12) to an "old lady" raped by the drugged burglars who pillaged her house (22). Lauren decides to travel disguised as a man: "A girl alone only faced one kind of future outside. I intend to go out posing as a man when I go" (130). Gendered as female, Lauren is only mobile in disguise. When her stepmother and her brothers in the chaos following the fire in her gated community disappear, Lauren immediately knows that they will not be able to survive: "In the night, a woman and three kids might look like a gift basket of food, money, and sex" (144). Even before intersectionality had been theorized, Butler already intertwined gendered identities with race in order to foreground the intersecting nature of oppressive social structures. When she decides to travel with a biracial couple, Zahra and Harry, Lauren's disguise proves necessary yet again: "We believed two men and a woman would be more likely to survive than two women and a man" (200). In a rehearsal of intersectional abuse, Lauren's friend Zahra summarizes why racial disguise was necessary as well: "Mixed couples catch hell whether people think they're gay or straight. Harry'll piss off all the blacks and you'll piss off all the whites" (161). All along, the violence depicted in the novel is carried out directly by its characters, who have incorporated its parameters of oppression. Lauren dressed up as a man pretends to be Zahra's heterosexual partner and both pretend to be traveling with "their white friend" (ibid.) in order to avoid the attention of fellow travelers. To get at the interlocking nature of

race and gender as categories of oppression, Butler highlights the violence geared directly at intersections such as Black motherhood and interracial romance. All along, the racial and sexual assaults are carried out by poverty-stricken neighbors, drugged youth gangs or people hungry enough to turn to cannibalism. The state behind this violence remains invisible as it exercises its power by withholding access to capital.

Instead of naming those responsible for the miserable living conditions, the narrative is invested in constructing structures that expose the porosity of closed spaces, demonstrating that change can only be initiated within as there is no outside to state control. Reports about violence outside Robledo often match what is happening within the enwalled space, emphasizing that seclusion is not the solution. When her neighbor is robbed, raped, and tied up, Lauren is appalled by the shocking scene: "An old lady like that" (22)! Yet, even this exhibition of violence is exacerbated in the next one: Lauren's father and his wife find Mrs. Smith's dead body, a few days after she had committed suicide. This rapid pace of almost unbearable brutality and despair is kept throughout the text. In the next chapter, Lauren's other neighbor is introduced, the three-year-old Amy Dunn. Raped by her uncle, Amy's mother is just twelve years older than her daughter. Seeing no other possibilities for Amy, Lauren takes it upon herself to provide for the little girl's schooling. In the next chapter: "Amy Dunn is dead" (44). The three-year-old child is shot most likely by accident by a bullet that went "right through the metal gate" (45). Like the bullet that found its way from the outside into the inside of the supposedly gated space, the novel makes it obvious that for innocent, unprotected, poor people there is no safe space, even within the walls of a self-organized, community-oriented environment such as Robledo. Transformation can only be engendered in the present as there is no escape.

Exposed to death and dying almost daily, Lauren understands even as a child that the walls behind which the family had entrenched themselves are only provisional. Lauren thus rehearses daily how to ensure her survival long before she is forced to leave by secretly practicing what will later prove to be helpful and necessary survival strategies such as learning to shoot, studying what can be used as food in the forest, or preparing a survival kit for the case of emergency. The gated community, indeed, never was a place to lead a protected life but rather a training camp to prepare for what comes after Robledo: "I'm trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there" (53). Yet, her actions are guided by the recognition that survival is only the precondition for life. Lauren is therefore working on a philosophy that she hopes will engender a sustainable community. The society depicted in the novel is one where those detrimentally affected by uneven power

structures are either surviving in fortified militarized neighborhoods or left destroying each other in brutal acts of violence. In the face of perpetual conflict and societal dysfunction, both—those on the winning and those on the losing side—know that not state and government but communities can initiate change. Even the rich maintain their status by selling the promise of sanctuary in their privately-owned gated cities. The inside becomes the outside in controlled housing estates as well, as it is in those enwalled spaces that the inhabitants are yet again, as the novel spells out, practically enslaved. Lauren quickly understands that the only way out of this impasse is a reconceptualization of the present with those who surround her. Constructing her own minutely crafted belief system that will engender a community is thus equally important as learning to shoot or forage for food. As there is no space outside of the oppressive power structures, she puts the concept of change at the center of her philosophy. In this only in this way that the future past can become a viable asset.

The failure to keep the outside out, parallels a similar crisis of boundaries in Lauren's hyperempathy. While posing as a man or passing as white might protect Lauren against violence directed at her, it does not protect her from experiencing the effects of the violence committed against other women, women with children, and biracial couples. Her condition of hyperempathy forces her to feel the pain of the other. Yet, rather than avoiding those easily hurt, Lauren initiates the transformation within her society by inviting those affected by the violence to travel with her in spite of her hyperempathy. After quickly identifying women and particularly women traveling with children, as well as biracial couples, to be the most vulnerable, Lauren, Zahra, and Harry accept into their community two sisters who had been abused and sexually enslaved by their father, a mother and her daughter who look the "most racially mixed that I had ever met" (272), and a couple, referred to throughout chapter 17 only as "the mixed couple." Zahra herself, the first to join Harry and Lauren's little group, had escaped from forced polygamy. When asked the reason for inviting people who might be considered liabilities into her circle, Lauren explains: "Why not. We're natural allies—the mixed couple and the mixed group" (196). Circumventing big sentimental gestures, Lauren presents the incorporation of new members into the group as effectively transforming the social environment that she lives in. While the prescribed roles function as navigating guides that ensure survival, they transform into connecting points within the community that Lauren creates. This is most strikingly exemplified in "the mixed couple" that only hesitatingly joins Lauren's group. Once the couple decides to become a part of the community organized around Lauren, they become Gloria Natividad Douglas, "a pale brown woman with a round, pretty face, long

black hair bound up in a coil atop her head” (199) and Travis Charles Douglas, a man with “an unusual deep-black complexion—skin so smooth that [Lauren] can’t believe he has ever in his life had a pimple” (198). In sections like this, Butler does justice to her self-assigned rule to “portray human variety” in her literature. Race and gender are not erased within the futuristic framework of intergalactic travel that her community is preparing for but rather emplaced. Lauren’s Earthseed-group is redefining racial and gendered difference (qtd. in Schalk 85) as an asset rather than a liability, effectively diversifying rather than presenting universal or posthuman models that seek to erase difference.

The Violence of Liberal Humanism Exposed in Hyperempathy

As a condition that marks a porosity of the “bodymind,” to use Sami Schalk’s fitting term,³ hyperempathy incorporates the feelings of another as if they were one’s own. What is commonly perceived as external to one’s own psychological and physical make-up becomes internal. As a young woman, Lauren could leave her enwalled home only on very rare occasions, such as her baptism. While cycling across town on the way to a church, she and her family and friends witness an apocalyptic landscape. Injured or dead bodies are scattered on the streets. Lauren tries not to look but she “couldn’t help seeing—collecting some of their general misery” (10). The pain of those exposed to the devastating brutality of a life outside of fortified neighborhoods is perceptible even without looking at the damaged bodies. Lauren explains her inscription in these lives: “I feel what I see others feeling or that I believe they feel. [...] I get a lot of grief that doesn’t belong to me, and that isn’t real. But it hurts” (12). As Lauren’s hyperempathetic experiences are not exclusively cognitive or emotional, she cannot train herself not to feel them or to dismiss them. The external stimuli become her internal make-up.

One of the earliest definitions of empathy centers on exactly the aspect that Butler hyperbolizes in her hyperempathy, namely the ability to experience the feelings of the other. The British psychologist Edward Titchener, who is credited to have coined the term empathy, explains it by way of the German designation “Einfühlung,” which literally means *to feel oneself into another*. Titchener “denominates empathy the ‘fact’ that when someone has a ‘visual image’ of a given character, that person contemporarily experiences a kinesthetic activation in the corresponding muscles” that is “mind’s muscles” (Titchener 25). Other than more recent

³ In *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*, Sami Schalk uses the materialist feminist disability studies concept of the bodymind that was first introduced by Margaret Price to highlight that the body and the mind are enmeshed in Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, in particular in her concept of hyperempathy.

theories of empathy, this definition accentuates the physicality of the empathic experience, and as such perhaps comes closest to Butler’s sense of hyperempathy. As an intensification of this *feeling into another*, hyperempathy transforms the feeling into one’s own somatic experience. The condition is provoked as much by *interpreting* another as it is by *experiencing*; the corresponding feeling depends on one’s personal understanding of the situation. Rather than a social obligation or even a survival mechanism, hyperempathy emerges at the junction between two bodies and establishes a corporeal and simultaneously cognitive entanglement. The fact that this corporeality extends to all sentient beings only strengthens the materiality. When attacked by a dog that she is forced to kill in self-defense, Lauren almost loses consciousness (cf. 197). Her reaction is triggered by visual impressions of the dog’s pain. Seeing becomes feeling, and Lauren cannot simply choose to not experience what she recognizes in the other, human or nonhuman.

This central passage in terms of Butler’s conceptualization of hyperempathy is raising important questions about empathy. Why is Lauren the only one affected by the atrocious exhibition of pain that they encounter? If we return to Titchner’s definition of empathy, it becomes obvious that Lauren’s friends and family are not only able to suspend their empathy but forced to do so in order to reach their destination. But what good is empathy if it has no effect? In contrast to empathy, hyperempathy is a somatic experience that cannot be discarded nor evaded. The pain that Lauren believes to have seen outside of the gated community travels with her back to Robledo, when she remembers: “There was a naked little boy whose skin was a mass of big red sores; a man with a huge scab over the stump where his right hand used to be; a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs. A woman with a swollen, bloody, beaten face. [...]” (12). She trains herself not to feel the pain exhibited in these images that became part of her memory. The active process of suspending those images exposes the insufficiency of empathy as a key to social justice. An empathic response is reserved for those in power who are free to *simulate* compassion. For Lauren and her family, the exclusion of an emphatic response is a premise to survival.

The topical exclusion of affect is emphasized in two paternal characters: Lauren’s father and her doctor. Both seek to forcefully separate the inside from the outside or the mind from the body as they dismiss their intricate entanglement. Lauren refers to her condition as “sharing,” thus emphasizing the mutuality and the reciprocity. Yet, in spite of the physicality of this experience, the “doctors” describe Lauren’s condition “as an ‘organic delusional syndrome’” (12). This diagnosis, in turn, strengthens her father’s belief that Lauren’s experiences are “not real” or simply “crazy”: “[My father] has always pretended, or perhaps

believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about (11). Working against this paternal gaslighting, Lauren slowly reaches her own understanding of hyperempathy that allows her to reevaluate not only her specific condition but empathy in general. Eventually, she arrives at a conclusion that some sort of dissociation is happening with people who don't *feel* the pain that they witness in somebody else. Since every body experiences injuries as painful, it is to be expected that some form of identification must be part of the reaction of those witnessing these pains. Lauren therefore wonders about people who inflict pain on others:

It's beyond me how one human being could do that to another. [...] If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. [...] [I]f everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? (108)

The abnormality is located in those who do not feel the pain, those who have no empathy, rather than in “sharers” as herself. Left contemplating a world in which pain is regulated by pain, Lauren exposes the violence of the liberal humanist subject not affected by brutality imposed on sentient beings.

This incorporated invisible violence is mostly exemplified in the character of Lauren's father, who as “a preacher and a professor and a dean” forces her to hide “her sharing” (12) throughout her childhood. Instructed in this way, Lauren at first considers her condition to be an unfortunate aberration. The fact that her hyperempathy was caused by her mother's drug abuse while pregnant makes it even more difficult for Lauren to arrive at the conclusion that hyperempathy is not her deficiency but the society's flaw. Yet, upon leaving home, Lauren begins to contemplate what effect hyperempathy has produced in her life so far. Focusing on reading her body in relation to her environment, she finally comes to reevaluate her ability to feel what others feel: “I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it, and live among them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all” (108). Lauren thus marks the missing empathy in her society as a structural impediment towards reaching her goal of constructing a livable future. It is in this way that she identifies her primary goal—to construct a community apart from her father's ideals within which care rather than empathy paves the way towards livable futures.

The Centrality of Care

In instances of hyperempathy, the imaginary receives its material equivalent. Butler foregrounds the reality of the imaginary, when Lauren's

brother, Keith, plays a prank on her by using red color to pretend to bleed. Because Lauren is convinced that he is hurt, she begins to bleed herself. It “isn’t real. But it hurts” (11-12). Hyperempathy is therefore a form of a somatic imaginary. Just as an optical illusion can fool the eyes, Lauren’s hyperempathic sense can also be misled. The physical responses are chemically induced and not controllable. In Lauren’s own words: “my neurotransmitters are scrambled and they are going to stay scrambled” (12). At the same time, they are triggered by Lauren’s subjective assessment of a given situation. Once she has understood this principle, Lauren even learns to bluff, pretend, and delude in order to avoid not only her own pain. She is able to deceive a fellow sharer, Emery Tanaka Solis, by pretending not to be hurt badly and thus avoids causing her pain (cf. 291). This phenomenological gap between what is perceived and what is felt places emphasis on the interpretation or the willingness to see the pain of the other. Only after cognitively recognizing someone’s pain as such does it translate into a personal physical experience. Seen from this perspective, empathy becomes a form of sight, its absence a form of volitional cognitive exclusion.

The willingness to recognize the pain of the Other affirms the moral and political value of the work of care.⁴ The centrality of care is exemplified in the character of Lauren’s brother Keith, about whom Lauren explains: “He believes in what he sees, and no matter what’s in front of him, he doesn’t see much” (14). In other words, he does not care. After Keith is killed by a fellow gang-member, Lauren explains: “He would have been a monster if he had been allowed to grow up. Maybe he was one already. He never cared what he did. If he wanted to do something and it wouldn’t cause him immediate physical pain, he did it, fuck the earth” (108). Keith is a central character in the novel, exemplifying the incorporation of violence that Lauren learns to avert. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde writes: “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (Lorde 227). Keith’s violence grows exponentially in relation to the violence he endures. His indifference is augmented when compared to Lauren’s encompassing dedication to avoiding the pain of the other. Lauren, certainly, *sees much*. She therefore also *feels much*. This, (non)care for other people extends to nothing less than “the earth.” To care implies a willingness to cognitively process one’s own inscription in one’s environment. Care is

⁴ Audre Lorde’s pioneering work in exposing the centrality of care and self-care to Black feminist activism has paved the way to a now established strand of Black feminism that envisions more caring futures that nurture relationships.

thus the elemental factor in an entangled vision of the Self that extends to the domain of the planetary.

In her introduction to a study of the concept of care María Puig de la Bellacasa highlights the connection between caring and community: “Care as a concrete work of maintenance, with ethical and affective implications, and as a vital politics in interdependent worlds is an important conception” in community-building processes (5). The novel’s inclusion of big powerful corporations run by those whose wealth depends on providing the promise of a functional residency to those in need makes it obvious that community is pivotal to survival. If care precedes community, then care is crucial to survival. Keith’s brutal murder by his fellow gang-members functions as confirmation of this assessment. Lauren, thus, feels strengthened in the need to build a community based on care. Of the new people that she meets on the road she decides: “I’d like to draw them all in. They could be the beginning of an Earthseed community” (207). All of the identified characters that she does draw in are former victims of racial and gendered violence. Her care for them leads Lauren to Earthseed. Her growing community creates hope in the midst of their dystopian reality, building on care as a premise⁵. The novel identifies the locus for change in the resistance of the oppressed gendered and raced protagonists to succumb to turning violent themselves. The focus on change, adaptation, and consensual incorporation would have made it possible even for someone as *monstrous* as Keith to change.

It is within this radically reciprocal process of creating a community upon the ashes of destroyed relations, based on the permanency of change, that Butler exposes the insufficiency of empathy. Hyperempathy exposes one of the main problems that comes with classic notions of empathy—the superior position of the respondent. “Sharing” is radically relational, which discards any notion of victimization or moralizing.⁶ Empathy, on the other hand, depends on conscious and controllable simulation, putting the one to extend empathy into the position of superiority. Extending empathy can also be a way of obfuscating responsible reactions. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan

⁵ Similarly, Saidiya Hartman calls her readers to take up “matters of care” as an antidote to violence and Christina Sharpe, responding to this call, analyzes the difficulties involved in extending care built on a long history of racial oppression that nevertheless, as she argues in *In the Wake*, remains to be necessary.

⁶ Exposing the socio-political problems that moralizing entails, Jane Bennett refers to moralism as a “style of speaking, writing, and thinking that is too confident about its judgements and thus too punitive in its orientation to others” (4). Thought-provoking discussions raised by the juxtaposition of critical analysis and moralizing can be found in the collection *Politics of Moralizing* edited by Jane Bennett and Michael J. Shapiro.

Sontag follows the genealogy of a long tradition of fascination with shocking images of war and brutality in Euro-American cultures. Violence, when witnessed without risk or pain, responsibility, sense of agency or presence, as seen in a photograph or a film, is deemed to be voyeuristic and secretly pleasant in Sontag’s account. Expressing empathy, in this sense, when witnessing somebody subjected to violence can even serve as an excuse for failing to take action. Hyperempathy makes any form of pleasure or self-serving functionalizing as response to the pain of the other impossible, as this pain literally becomes one’s own. The effect is, however, similar as it incapacitates one’s ability to extend help.

Lauren’s hyperempathy has occasionally been interpreted as a telepathic superpower (Francis 114) and as belonging to the domain of the supernatural.⁷ These readings dissociate hyperempathy from the community-building framework. Reading hyperempathy from a disability studies perspective, Sami Schalk demonstrates that as a context-sensitive reaction, hyperempathy “challenges the notion that a technologically created, disability-free future is an inherently good future” (102). Butler’s future utopia thus is a complex vision of the non-normative human that includes a revision of disability, racial, and gendered insignnia, all of which are included rather than glossed over. Intensifying empathy to a point of pain is an intensification of relationality. Hyperempathy describes an inscription into the environment that is only debilitating in the context of violence . It is neither unnatural nor supernatural. Instead, hyperempathy describes a subjective reality that translates into a somatic experience with distributed agency. As such, it is a form of intersubjectivity. The relational nature complicates the view of subjectiveness as a biased cognition. The perception is neither in the subject nor in the object but somewhere between the two. The focus on distribution or sharing emphasizes the aspect of participation. Yet, it is care that initiates action.

Subjectivity as Multi-Humanness

Lauren’s subjective interpretation of pain that inevitably translates into a physical experience is an entangling of vision, cognition, and somatic experience. Compassion, in this sense, is superfluous as there is no simulation involved. The experiences that hyperempathy registers are equally visual as they are cognitive and physical. Yet, care remains key to hyperempathy because Lauren’s compassion is not activated by a physical response; rather, her compassion leads to hyperempathy.

⁷ In an interview with Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating, Octavia Butler complains: “Reviewers typically account for Lauren’s hyperempathic powers as something supernatural—as a type of extrasensory telepathy—when I didn’t write it that way” (Butler, Mehaffy, Keating 64).

Lauren needs to see something happen, she needs to care that it happens, and only then does she experience the feelings of the other. Other than classic models of empathy, hyperempathy does not allow any emotion-regulation. On the contrary, it incapacitates the sharer. Lauren thus cannot soothe anyone in distress. Hyperempathy exposes the degree to which the other characters in the novel have learned to control their empathy so as to not care. Furthermore, hyperempathy exposes that soothing is not the solution to the problems they are facing. Rather than soothing, the aim of the sharer is to avoid the pain of the other at all costs. Should this not be the aim of empathy as well? Abstaining and desisting from inflicting pain on the other certainly does seem like a practical solution to ending violence. In other words, what good is empathy, if it does not prevent pain and violence.

It is perhaps for similar reasons that empathy has recently been revised through a feminist lens in what came to be called "relational-cultural theory," developed by Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Janet Surrey, Judith Jordan, and other scholars at the Stone Center for Clinical and Developmental Studies and Research on Women at Wellesley College (Freedberg 254). Empathy, in this new theory, is reconceptualized in response to recent developments in feminist scholarship as a model that highlights the impact on both the respondent and the affected. The more traditional models of empathy all demonstrate a strong focus on the respondent. In these older models, personal growth is acquired through independence on the side of the respondent from the side of the affected. Rather than promoting ways of avoiding dependence for the sake of independence, the relational-cultural model of empathy suggests that personal growth is acquired through dependent connection. Avoiding the unidirectional concept revises empathy as a cognitive-affective experience in an interpersonal framework of mutuality and equality.

Parable of the Sower offers a similar reconceptualization of empathy, but it exceeds the framework offered by scholars at the Stone Center and can thus serve as an important addition, if not correction, to this most recent attempt of improving outdated theories. Using a community-building process centered on change as an organizing device, Butler constructs a fluid group identity based on relationality through diversity. This aspect can inform relational-cultural theory in which *affective resonance* is encouraged and acknowledged as an essential element. In Butler's *Parable* series, one finds a similar notion of affective resonance that is here theorized as compulsive within the framework of hyperempathy. Scholars at the Stone Center describe affective resonance in the following way: "It is a form of psychological arousal in which the worker experiences a vicarious emotional response while

cognitively aware that the source of affect in oneself emanates from the other person” (Jordan 1997 quoted in Freedberg 255). The equivalent in the novel is expressed in Lauren’s description of her hyperempathy: “I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel” (12). As a fictional concept, hyperempathy finds its counterpart in relational-cultural theory in a sociological framework in that it performs a radical revision of empathy under the auspices of reciprocity. Freedberg writes about “the affective flow necessary for empathic connection,” that, according to her grows, “the more the worker presents as a genuine human being” (255). Yet, it is this very humanness that Butler’s novel puts into question.

Rather than prescribing reciprocity and acknowledging humanity, Butler’s text highlights the contours of a humanistic society that excludes relationality. When Lauren thinks about her brother, she is sad and disappointed by his inability to feel how his actions affect other people—she fears that this inability would transform him into “a monster” (108) were he to live longer. Lauren sees his monstrosity expressed in his violent and forced dissociation from his environment. Rather than creating visions of posthumanist, postracial societies, *Parable of the Sower* discards the cultural frame of reference that makes relationality impossible: “WE ARE COMING APART. / The community, the families, individual family members. [...] We’re a rope, breaking, a single strand at a time” (109). Racial and gendered violence that breaks communities makes humanism in its diversified form impossible. The ways in which racial discrimination hinders relational empathy as prescribed by humanism constitute an of yet largely underexamined aspect of relational-cultural theory.⁸ Having lost Keith, Lauren mobilizes all her energy in order to create a community within which it is possible to be more-than-human or differently human. Rather than erasing racial and gendered identification markers, this model is establishing a space for diversification, erasing instead the power relations that they imply, thus marking it as a necessary step towards any relational models.

Hyperempathy extrapolates from Titchener’s focus on *Einfühlung* towards a material interlocking with all sentient beings. This quality has led some scholars to interpret hyperempathy within the new materialist theories such as Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action and Stacy Alaimo’s notion of *trans-corporeality* (cf. Watkins). Hyperempathy, after all, marks a material exchange that creates meaning, a process that is at the heart of new materialist theories. Both Barad’s concept of intra-action and Alaimo’s notion of *trans-corporeality* are not merely physical but also biochemical in nature, i.e. these concepts not only place emphasis on

⁸ Relational theory has addressed gender-specific problems but has “limitations for intervening with women of color” (Quinn and Grumbach 203).

physicality but on material exchanges that cannot be separated from processes of meaning-making. In her important intervention in environmental studies, Alaimo explains: “Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the humans are always inter-meshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (Alaimo 13). Yet, as Diane Leong contends in her interpretation of *Parable of the Sower*, the question as to what degree this substance is inscribed with racial and gendered insignia remains largely unexplored in Barad’s and Alaimo’s theories. In *Parable of the Sower*, racial blackness and gender structure discussions about matter, or more to the point: “the material body—is defined by and through disavowed social fantasies about black female flesh that are linked to the global legacies of modern slavery” (Leong 6). Instances of hyperempathy expose that any attempts of revising empathy will necessarily need to begin at bodily inscriptions across race and gender.

As in Alaimo’s theory, the trans-corporeality of hyperempathy describes an intermeshing with one’s environment (if only the sentient part); yet, Butler places the emphasis on the distribution of affect. In Lauren’s own words: “I had no sense of my own body. It hurt, but I couldn’t have said where—or even whether the pain was mine or some else’s. The pain was intense, yet defuse somehow. I felt [...] disembodied” (282). In lieu of a proper designation, she describes a state that is not incorporeal or metaphysical, but rather disembodied. Yet, in moments of hyperempathy, it might be more accurate to describe Lauren as multi-bodied. Rather than genetically altered, she is posthuman only in the sense of her multi-humanness. In moments of hyperempathy, she is the dog whose pain becomes hers. An effective diversification of subjectivity, this exposure raises the question of what we do in order *not to recognize what we see*. Lauren’s gift starkly demonstrates how, as a highly social species co-existing in vast collective structures, we suffer a surprising deficit of shared or collective consciousness based on intersecting racial and gender discrimination.

Hyperempathy is a powerful concept as it underlines the reinscription of gendered and racialized bodies severed from their environment back into it. The materiality of the body is exposed in a radical interaction with other bodies in its diversity. The reaction to outside stimuli initiates change within social structures in that it does not recognize racial, gender, or species as limitations. The change is material and thus biopolitical, effectively deconstructing the Enlightenment visions of the human as an individual, replacing it with a dividual. The image of the Vitruvian Man in its function as the ideal human figure literally encircled and disconnected from the environment, is exposed in its porosity. Furthermore, the

hyperempathic model is subject to permanent change. Instead of prescribing forms of being-in-the-world, the hyperempathetic body is in constant interaction with other sentient bodies through a physical form of care. The transcorporeality of hyperempathy thus effectively undermines normative structures-based exclusion. Lauren herself describes hyperempathy as “something beyond pain” (41). While it often is, indeed, painful, hyperempathy reaches towards an entanglement with the Other, which, after all, under different circumstances can lead to heightened states of pleasure as well.

In comparison to classic theories of empathy which involve an asymmetrical power relation, hyperempathy describes a raw coupling of minds. It discards the seemingly generous yet often hierarchical gesture that is often extended to another in empathy. As an interactional and intra-actional identification, hyperempathy is grounded in a radically relational understanding of subjectivity.⁹ As such, it initiates a slow and careful dismantling of the humanist subject based on the imperative of individualism. Far from a proposal to seek a solution in a technological fix, Butler’s work reconceptualizes subjectivity and knowledge with the help of a relational theory of the human based on diversification. This, in turn, exposes progressive visions of posthumanism based on universalism as an alluring doxa that can occlude systemic exploitation of racially marked and gendered populations as well as nonhuman subjects and resources. Genetic engineering as a solution to “all forms of racism” (Nayar 2012) erases the feminist investment in creating identification figurations that Butler has so carefully constructed. Lauren bursts the internal frame of reference by making space for change within which empathy is exposed as a relational affect in spite of its initial assessment as a potentially lethal disability. Rather than offering a solution, *Parable of the Sower* exposes the need to radically rethink not just our humanist but also our posthumanist conceptions that have become so central to our present.

⁹ In the sequel to *Parable of the Sower* entitled *Parable of the Talents* Lauren is even forced to feel the pleasure of the slave holder that he feels while whipping.

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