

Acting with Disruptive Compassion at Empathetic Intersections
in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents*

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Introduction: Contextualizing Empathy and Care in *Parable of the Talents*

It strikes one that Octavia Butler must have had the archaic origins of “empathy” in mind when she wrote the near-future apocalyptic novels *Parable of the Sower*, published in 1993, and its 1998 sequel, *Parable of the Talents*. The Ancient Greek *empátheia* meant “passion” stemming from “feeling,” but its root could also be construed as “suffering” (“Empathy,” OED). Butler renders physical and emotional pain an inescapable facet of empathetic relation for the protagonist of *Parables*, Lauren Oya Olamina, in a deliberate deconstruction of the presumption that a hyperattuned sense of “feeling-with” others is a prerequisite for moral virtue and peace. Despite the fact that the term *empathy* is often employed in psychological and pedagogical contexts under the assumption that it facilitates mutual understanding and prompts altruistic behavior, its critics have demonstrated that empathy can be “biased” and “narrow” (Bloom), that graphic depictions of suffering often amount to “spectacle” rather than inspire compassion (Hartman 4), and that it normalizes a disturbing impulse to “assimilate” another’s experience into one’s own (“Banality”).

The paradox presented—the desire to understand another’s internal state without resorting to violating practices, is one which Octavia Butler meticulously unfolds with palpable viscerality via *hyperempathy syndrome*, a condition with which Olamina¹ lives, tenuously. Due to being hyperempathetic, “I felt every blow that I struck, just as though I’d hit myself,” she explains regarding a scuffle with her brother Keith in the early pages of *Sower* (11). The nonlethal nature of the condition does not prevent it from being a debilitating distraction and source of dangerous suffering; upon witnessing the shooting of a neighbor, Olamina “fell with her, caught up in her death” (144), and later “died with someone” twice in rapid succession during a climactic firefight

¹ Unlike in *Sower*, where the protagonist is primarily called “Lauren” by family, friends, and community members, she is introduced as “Olamina” early in *Talents* (2). She confirms to her brother that “Thanks to [her husband] Bankole, just about everyone” calls her Olamina (127).

(282), rendering her “no more good for anything” and dependent upon the protection of others until the pain passed. At the end of *Sower*, she undertakes a rhetorical act of recovery in identifying herself not as “hyperempathic” or “delusional” (11), but as a “sharer” (284), one who “share[s] other people’s pain and pleasures”—not that her experience of 2020s and ‘30s America, with its crumbling societal structures and ubiquitous violence, affords many pleasures. (262)

Over the course of *Sower* and *Talents*, then, Olamina experiences her sharing primarily as an involuntary participation in the physical pain of others. Even in the rare context of pleasure (outside of a loving relationship with her husband, Bankole), the sensation is frequently nauseating and immediate, occurring regardless of Olamina’s desire to take part. Her experience of these sudden, nonconsensual emotional and physical violations mirrors language used by Namwali Serpell in her 2019 article, “The Banality of Empathy.” Expressing skepticism of empathy’s status as societal paragon of relationality, she cautions that intrusive extensions of self can be “a kind of ghostly possession or occupation.” In a particularly vivid and horrifying example, the condition denies Olamina and fellow sharers the choice of whether to experience for themselves the sensations of men who invade their community of Acorn. Olamina and others are forced to share in the “wild, intense pleasure” of the invaders as they continually torture and violate (*Talents* 225).

Butler’s exploration of the pitfalls of feeling-with through Olamina’s experience of sharing effectively anticipates Serpell’s critique of empathy and other contemporary engagements with empathetic modes of relationality, particularly regarding the ethics of “projecting into” the bodily experience of another. Psychologist C. Daniel Batson, who assembled a comprehensive list of the tangled definitions for empathy he saw being used in the field, might describe this phenomenon of projecting as “inhabiting”: the blurring of lines between the self and another. This sentiment is echoed by Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* as “encompassing,” with the wake itself described as

both “the state of being inhabited/occupied and also being or dwelling in” (20). It is precisely this interpretation of feeling-with that Serpell finds most dangerous: the “emotional mind-meld” that precludes any possibility for “keeping distance” or “maintaining integrity” between the self and other. As a teenager in *Sower*, Olamina was instructed to suppress and hide her sharing. She frequently struggled with maintaining dignified boundaries between herself and a suffering other, nearly vomiting and passing out when unexpectedly encountering a critically wounded dog—she is forced to shoot it to relieve both of them of its pain (41). Serpell cites Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as a parallel cautionary tale about the dangers of empathy-as-projection and -inhabitation, pointing to Sethe’s increasing obsession with fulfilling Beloved’s demands as an example of “characters overidentifying with others... lest they usurp them.” Serpell and Sharpe are joined in their suspicious readings of empathy in scholarship undertaken by other Black women theorists including Saidiya Hartman and adrienne maree brown, who similarly attest that willful applications of empathy are all too frequently invasive, violating, and nonconsensual.

Empathy itself, as a term used in English, first emerged in literary contexts around 1908—far later than its commonly confused but not-quite-interchangeable companion *sympathy*, which has been in use since the late 16th century; initially as an affinity of feelings between two parties, and a few decades after to signify “fellow-feeling” and agreeability (“sympathy,” OED). Significantly, Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith enthusiastically embraced sympathy as a sentimental cornerstone of humanist thinking (Stueber)—an alignment which has soured in the wake of the legacy of imperialist colonialism. *Empathy*’s intervention in the world of psychological attunement to another’s emotional state, as adapted from the German *Einfühlung*, was to introduce the idea of “sympathetic projection,” in which the subject shares affective and physical responses with the object of their observation. Serpell is quick to note that

this should *not* result in an erasing of boundaries between individuals, nor blur the lines of morality. She cites Homer's extensions of empathetic characterization toward Trojans and Achaeans alike as one which "offer[s] a broader view of humanity, while maintaining a keen awareness of who is friend and who is foe." Olamina, too, by the time she is a community leader and mother in *Talents*, manages her hyperempathy as retaining a clear understanding of her relation to those around her. Amidst the continual intrusion of sickening pain and pleasure, she dilates rather than surrenders her focus: "we'll find or create some weakness, some blind spot," she writes of studying her captors, "Then we'll kill them" (202). Empathy, it should be noted, does not preclude the possibility of justified violence: understanding another's internal state, even coming to feel affinity or pity for them, does not erase their culpability for inflicting irreparable harm and suffering.

Olamina's interpretation of empathetic relationality, notably, is nearly always grounded in actionable response to emotional stimulus. Batson's list, by contrast, details seven forms of empathy which are primarily internalized and feeling-based. (I have simplified these into the terms *Name It, Do It, Feel It, Inhabit, Imagine Other, Imagine Self, and Feel Distress*). Only the eighth and final definition, *Feel Compassion*, could be construed as action-oriented, as it creates the imperative impulse to actively relieve the distress of another. Batson's list attempts neutrality in recognizing the complexity of the "distinctiveness of these eight things called empathy," but is undercut by an admission in the conclusion that his goal is to "advance our understanding of how it is possible to know the internal states of others and respond with sensitivity to their suffering" (12). Serpell, for her part, makes the case that the most productive and least extractive form of empathy is one often referred to as *negative capability*, a term coined by John Keats in reference to expansive readings of Shakespeare. She cites it as a form of relationality in which you "imagine using your own mind but from [the other's] position" (*Imagine Self*), which honors the boundaries

between self and other rather than blurring them (thereby resisting *Inhabit*), and which can lead to actionable care (*Feel Compassion*). As she puts it, “you make an active, imaginative effort to travel outside of your circumstances and to stay a while, where you’re welcome.” Serpell’s point is that the ubiquity of a mental or societal framework which posits that a general increase in empathy will make the world peaceful does not preclude the possibility for desensitization leading to corruption.

Olamina’s participation in this practice frequently manifests as a show of physical comfort, particularly to other hyperempathetic community members who have primarily experienced human contact as fraught with more risk than reward. When teenage sharer Jorge Cho unwisely ogles the result of a firefight only to double over in pain and cry out, Olamina “held him until the pain passed from both of us,” successfully avoiding the “nasty feedback loop” of sharing hurt back and forth in agonizing echoes (32). Throughout the scene Olamina expresses bitter resentment toward living with hyperempathy syndrome and envy for those who “look at pain and feel nothing.” What she has self-taught that they have not, however, is the ability to deploy care toward the work of physical comfort, emotional soothing, and community building. This is where Butler’s *Talents* makes its primary intervention into notions of relationality—by positing a model for human exchange that places its imperative emphasis on the final syllable: *change*.

The groundwork for contemporary critiques of empathy, particularly by Black women scholars like Serpell, Hartman, and Sharpe, can be traced back to the work of revolutionary Black feminist scholars of the 1960s and ‘70s—the years in which Butler attended college and began her career. These, in turn, informed the community-centered activism of the ‘80s and ‘90s which comprised Butler’s prime writing years. Inklings of Earthseed, Olamina’s radical spiritual system in which God is conceived of not as an anthropomorphic, unquestionably perfect being but as “Change,” can be seen in Gwendolyn Brooks’ frank confrontations of Christianity in 1945’s *A*

Street in Bronzeville. Trudier Harris describes Brooks' work as having "transformed God by personifying him in human terms," and asserts that the '70s gave rise to a slew of Black women authors who "challenge traditional conceptualizations of God and offer alternatives to His omnipotence and sovereignty" (Harris). In other words, Butler's approach to spirituality in the *Parables* series emerged from a radically Black feminist tradition that turned away from not only the racial and patriarchal markings of Western Christianity, but that also reenvisioned the very theology of a God who is fixed and unwavering. "God is Pliable—," reads one of Olamina's earliest passages of Earthseed scripture. "Trickster,/Teacher,/Chaos,/Clay./God exists to be shaped./God is Change" (*Sower* 24). Indeed, Earthseed deviates from normative conceptions of God so thoroughly that Dan Noyer, a newly adopted resident into Olamina's community of Acorn, initially assumed he was living among atheists (*Talents* 71).

Political waves of impact in the era could also be traced to classrooms. Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream* explores the role of literacy pedagogy in Black women's liberation, which may explain why a number of Butler's protagonists are perpetually preoccupied with the urgency of writing as a means of archiving truth and crafting meaning from horrific events.² "I write, not knowing how long I will be able to write," Olamina records after Acorn is taken over by the tyrannical president's "Christian America" invaders. "I write because they have not yet robbed us of everything. Our freedom is gone... But somehow, I still have paper, pens and pencils... I must hide that record so that, someday, Earthseed will know what Earthseed has survived" (178-9). Just as often, Olamina takes the time in *Talents* to record Earthseed's accomplishments in small moments of joy and creation, particularly when it showcases students' self-initiated education. An

² See, for instance, the lengths to which Dana, the protagonist of *Kindred*, goes to keep pen and paper at hand, even in the knowledge that the discovery of her literacy, and active practice of writing, risks immediate and cruel punishment by those who perceive her as an enslaved woman. See also Lilith, the protagonist of *Dawn*, who refuses to cooperate with her Oankali hosts until she is supplied with local substitutions for writing materials.

average evening in Acorn might include original plays and songs written by Earthseed-raised teens, and while sketching Olamina enjoys “a set of dramatic readings that three of the older kids were giving of their own work or of published work they liked” (137).

Royster, similarly, speaks to her own need for “developing the habit of caring as a rhetorician” (258) in her research and consideration of subjects, and seems to echo an aspect of Earthseed’s mission in her own “collective quest for literacy and... [for] participating in public domains and ways of working to make the world a better place” (256) via afrofeminist research and pedagogy. Royster recalls taking part in Spelman’s Thinking Across the Curriculum Initiative in 1985 and its mission to “raise intellectual development from tacit levels of understanding to conscious awareness and systematic attention” (262). This, too, was the context in which the *Parable* series emerged: the burgeoning shift toward women in Black feminist spaces conceptualizing themselves as academics.

Olamina creates a unique space for the kind of work she wishes to undertake as an educator and scholar, taking on the title of “Shaper” and nurturing students toward dual roles as student and teacher from a young age (71). She gives in to her husband Bankole’s pressure to publish her spiritual writings as *Earthseed: The First Book of the Living*, recognizing the powerful academic authority lent by placing a hardback publication in the hands of a skeptic when she watches Dan’s doubts dissipate (72). Even more directly, her daughter Larkin/Asha Vere³ is depicted as earning her Ph.D. by her early thirties (361), and the version of *Talents* in the reader’s hands is presumably Asha’s edited publication of her mother’s spiritual and personal writings, with brief passages by

³ The frame narrative speaker is born in Olamina’s time partway through *Talents* (165) and, in her only encounter with her mother, expresses the desire to be called “Asha Vere,” the Christian name she is given by her kidnapers (212, 386). Prior to this, however, the reader’s only name for her is Olamina and Bankole’s choice of “Larkin.” I have opted to call her by this name for the range of pages the reader would know her only by her birth name, and Asha or Asha Vere for events succeeding the reveal of her name on 212.

Bankole and Olamina's brother Marc. Despite her resentment of Earthseed as Olamina's favored "first 'child,'" Asha ironically becomes a de facto scholar of Earthseed theology and history, mentioning that Olamina continues to teach (as opposed to preach) Earthseed on the lecture circuit until the age of 81 (386). Royster's affiliation of a feminist scholarly achievement with social impact, then, is established as a generational habit in Olamina's line by the end of *Talents*.

In considering Olamina as a theologian and scholar, the truly radical innovation underlying Earthseed lies just as much in its counternarrative to the fixity of an unchanging Christian God as its guidelines for practical, day-to-day interactions with other adherents. "Shape God/With generosity/And compassion," reads one passage of scripture (147), emphasizing the daily remaking of self and God that is foundational to an ethos of change. The imperative presented by Earthseed, and by the challenges that Olamina faces in *Talents*, are that in any given relational encounter, *you have to change first*.

This is a form of relationality which I envision as a kind of cultural repair to the Prisoner's Dilemma: here, the question is not whether to betray an unseen partner to one's advantage, but whether to undertake compassionate action for the seen, relational other whose difference opens the possibility for (inter)change. Revisiting Olamina's encounter with her Christian America abusers and invaders, the act of *changing first* does *not* necessitate changing *in the direction of* the person encountered. It is, instead, the ability to "make an active, imaginative effort to travel outside of your circumstances and to stay a while, where you're welcome" (Serpell), to "respond with sensitive care" toward yourself as well as others (Batson 4), and to live, accepting that "Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism" (*Talents* 165). Changing first is about making the hard decision to enter into an exchange in which you will not come out the same person you went in—and choosing this mode of relationality every time.

To be clear, this interpretation of change is not asking adherents of Earthseed to succumb to victimhood, or to turn the other cheek in the face of violence. To the contrary, Olamina's highest value is the survival of Earthseed as a people and community. After the few members of Earthseed who survived internment manage to kill and escape from their Christian America captors, Olamina orders them to scatter for safety's sake, lying and going on the offensive where it can save their lives. "Whatever you think will endanger your accusers the most, say it!" she tells them. "Don't just defend yourselves. Attack" (262). It is a painful reminder for Olamina of an earlier moment in Earthseed's existence: all through *Sower*, her circumstances necessitated that her primary concern be to survive the random violence of a society coming apart at the seams, and to establish a community that could acquire for itself basic necessities like food and shelter.

The focus of *Talents* marks a shift toward the possibility of *thriving*, toward what Kevin Quashie might term *aliveness*: a vibrant force with directionality, a *towardness*, which is able to "surpass terror as the uninflected language of black being" (9), "a term of relation where the focus is on one's preparedness for encounter rather than on the counter itself" (21). Like Olamina, Quashie advocates for a black aliveness founded on continual, renewing change: "every black being is of *being*, the verb that infers a process of becoming" (11). To Quashie, black worldmaking is "an aesthetic imaginary that encompasses heterogeneity" and draws from terms used in "black women's feminism" as a guide (11). "Aliveness is an argument for blackness oriented toward towardness" he writes, arguing that it exists via "discourse of relation" (26).

Olamina's long-term goal, then, the one she plans to continue past her lifetime for many generations to come, is to further the mission she attaches to the only future possibility for aliveness and worldmaking: seeing the human species "take root among the stars" (*Sower* 80). To her, this pursuit would enable humanity to undertake new attempts at harmonious relations to the

environment and one another. She does not picture an extrasolar utopian paradise, but incredibly trying conditions, telling a new Earthseed member, “We can go on building and destroying until we either destroy ourselves or destroy the ability of our world to sustain us. Or we can make something of ourselves... to become whatever our new environments challenge us to become” (342). Achieving this improbable dream means studying friend and foe alike, learning from both, gleaning tools of survival from all you encounter. It means walking away from every human interaction stronger and more knowledgeable, having learned something about how to bring more people, and different kinds of people, into a productive collaborative community. While this model for living appears optimistic on the long-term scale of futurity, there is no sense of utopia to Olamina’s methods or conception of being. Aliveness does not emanate from material gain, but pulses with *towardness*, and with what Olamina terms the “positive obsession” that enables focus (*Sower* 1).

If empathy is the fraught, fragmented conceit of relationality critiqued by the *Parables*’ hyperempathy, and if aliveness is the vibrant quality of directional black worldbuilding, then a Black feminist ethics of *care* becomes the most appropriate term to bring together Olamina’s positive obsession, Serpell’s negative capability, and Batson’s Feel Compassion: the action of responding sensitively and tenderly to relieve the distress, and enable the changing of, another. The commitment to change, in and of itself, is insufficient to constitute care; its imperative is that of using what one has learned to relieve another’s distress. I am drawing primarily upon Christina Sharpe’s conception of *care* from *In the Wake*, which foregrounds the *longue durée* of slavery in ways inextricably reminiscent of Olamina’s experience as a Black woman who continually fights for her life and community: “Living... in spaces we were never mean to survive, or... punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet imagine

and transform spaces” (130-131). For Sharpe, an ethics of care is tantamount to “an ethics of seeing, and of *being* in the wake as consciousness” and engaging a praxis of “repair, maintenance, attention” (131). In defining a particular conceit of *care* as it applies to Earthseed, I wish also to take inspiration from a curiously specific definition of love posited by poet Ronald Mason, speaking on Dr. Nelda Ormond’s podcast “At the Edge: Think Culture.” Mason describes love as “taking responsibility for the spiritual well-being of another person” (Ormond). This adds to notions of *care* as exhibited in Earthseed the imperative to *accept part of the responsibility for another person’s journey towards aliveness*. While questioning Olamina about Change as an unfeeling God, seemingly out of fear, Dan Noyer asks, “Who cares for us?”, to which Olamina responds, “We care for ourselves and one another” (330).

In a world as shattered as the apocalyptic *Parable of the Talents*, and informed by the tenets of Earthseed, care often manifests as *acts of disruptive compassion*. “Disruptive,” here, I use in the sense of something which is unexpected and interruptive of the status quo, and which introduces the possibility of setting new trajectories for mindsets and behaviors.⁴ I use it, too, in reference to its counterhegemonic potential, capable of compelling change. I draw on applications by Ashon Crawley in his discussion of the “disruptive capacities found in the otherwise world of Blackpentecostalism” (Crawley 4) and Soyica Diggs Colbert’s reference to the “disruptive power of black social movements” (Diggs 119).⁵ The notion of *disruption* posits change both as jarring encounter and fulcrum: that which unsettles, and tilts in a new direction. “Compassion,” here, combines elements of Batson’s Feel Compassion and Serpell’s negative capability: the

⁴ Notably, adrienne maree brown’s *Emergent Strategy*, which takes heavy inspiration from Earthseed and Butler’s other writings to make recommendations for contemporary social movements, is wary of the term, acknowledging the ways “disruptive” has been employed to discredit and dismiss Black voices of protest.

⁵ Diggs’ *Black Movements* dedicates an excellent chapter to discussing Olamina as a prophet figure in comparison to other Black leaders who have invoked theological models for social change.

instantiation of an intuitive drive informed by understanding of and feeling for another person that, far from rendering one paralyzed from distress, prompts actionable change and helps move both parties in the direction of aliveness.

Contextualizing Empathy & Care in Contemporary Black Scholarship

In the year prior to the publication of *Talents*, Saidiya Hartman published *Scenes of Subjection*, in which she excoriated the “assimilative character of empathy” (35) as an unsettling interplay of spectacle and relational exchange. She cited as an example the vivid brutalities on display in Frederick Douglass’ recounting of his Aunt Hester’s whipping, proposing “the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (4). Like Serpell, she expresses wariness of the potential for dramatic rises and falls of vicariously experienced emotions to be used for entertainment and arousal rather than critical self-reflection. “The empathy model of art,” Serpell cautions, “can bleed too easily into the relishing of suffering by those who are safe from it.”

This line is a tightrope Olamina is forced to walk more than once over the course of the *Parable* series; when the Acorn community is overrun by Christian invaders acting in the name of a far-right president, Olamina is all too aware of the potential for empathetic relationality to reinforce the conditions of Sharpe’s wake and its “dysgraphia of disaster” (Sharpe 21). Olamina finds it impossible to “protect [herself] from the pleasure of our ‘teachers’” (*Talents* 224), who take avaricious and sexual delight in the torture they inflict using electrocuting slave collars. “To be a sharer,” Olamina explains, “is to feel... the apparent pleasure and the apparent pain—of other people” (223). The fact that Camp Christian “teachers” watch the spectacle of violence and brutality—in addition to frequently inflicting it themselves—constitutes an act of violating fantasy,

and a particularly toxic form of empathy. It does *not*, however, engage in acts of care or a form of compassion which disrupts existing power structures. What Olamina experiences of their violent arousal, by contrast, causes her to become physically ill: it is disruptive for *her*, mentally and bodily in the most distressing of ways.

What makes this example especially disturbing is how much Olamina notices that the self-proclaimed Crusaders' actions are dressed in a pretense of empathetic relation: "They're not all sadists or psychopaths," she notes with astounding consideration for the invaders who have abducted her child and killed her husband (224). She observes that the men speak of their actions as providing "help" for heathen sinners and believe they are serving American society at large by enforcing repentance and conversion to Christianity. Olamina takes time to describe in some detail one man with a "strange, self-pitying attitude" who pursued an Acorn woman named Cristina, telling her stories of his dysfunctional home life and begging her for forgiveness after raping her. Cristina's circumstances are confounding and horrific, and a notable aspect of this anecdote is Olamina's choice of how to respond: she writes Cristina and her family into the archival record that is her journal (225). While unable to intervene physically to aid Cristina without subjecting them both to death or torture, Olamina praises Cristina for using even the moment of her violation to acquire knowledge of her oppressors and transmit that knowledge back to the Acorn community. The invaders display obvious emotional vulnerabilities—ones that could be utilized to ensure her own survival, and the endurance of Earthseed.

It is in thinking of Hartman in particular, then, that I choose to engage with the notion of "disruptive compassion" as a descriptor for change brought about by empathetic relationality. Rather than prioritizing warmth, affection, and forgiveness, particularly with regard to one's oppressors, the most critical characteristics it promotes include observation, consideration,

collaboration, and a willingness to change oneself—to expand knowledge and skill—regardless of the other’s intent to reciprocate. In this regard, it is the anti-Prisoner’s Dilemma one wins every time: the acquisition and internalization of knowledge and skill, even if others involved in the encounter choose not to do the same. Olamina’s particular application of this methodology requires that it be employed in service of attaining long-term (read: intergenerational) goals. She makes decisions based not exclusively on what will ensure health, happiness, and ease for herself and those immediately around her, but rather for what will best fulfill the Earthseed “Destiny” of cultivating a human society able to flourish among the stars. “*We need purpose!*” she emphatically asserts in a moment that this Destiny comes under scrutiny (172).

It should be noted that hyperempathy itself is not sufficient to drive a person to embrace disruptive compassion, since *sharing* as a mode of empathetic relation is devoid of choice and conscious effort. For Olamina and fellow sharers, the experience is sudden, involuntary, and frequently violent. It requires no imaginative effort for Olamina to suffer from a stab wound she sees another person receive, or writhe in pain as another person is beaten, for she experiences it as if the same torture is being inflicted on her. Shortly after the Crusaders invade, they engage in a mass lashing of Acorn residents, and Olamina gravely notes that, “if anyone had been paying attention to me in particular, they would have seen that I was a sharer. I lost control” (204). The billowing wake which buoys to the surface new and old forms of slavery to 2030s America compels Olamina to share in her entire community’s suffering.

The term *sharer* is a deliberate rhetorical resistance to the cultural denigration of what her father and childhood doctor once called a “delusion” (*Sower* 11): something to be medically dismissed as fabulation or hidden and suppressed. In Tamika Carey’s *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*, she proposes that “...African American

rhetorical traditions as a set of action-taking, knowledge-making, and community-sustaining resources is to figure out how we can put projects such as Black women’s healing into everyday, critical use” (Carey 146), just as Olamina reconfigures the language of hyperempathy from the medically and psychologically pathologized to the communal, relational connotations of *sharing*. “[As] African Americans have shown many times over,” Carey continues, “the undesirable and the complicated can be repurposed towards generative ends. Contemporary healing efforts require repurposing because of Black women’s ongoing investment in wellness” (146).

To this end, Olamina’s sharing and consequent emotional hyperattunement to others allows her to gently invite others, closed off after a lifetime of suffering, into relational spaces of comfort and affinity. It also enables her to recognize when messages of Earthseed are having the emotional impact she desires and allows her to persuade those who have been taught caution by cruelty (350). This use of her sharing to facilitate linguistic coaxing of another’s comfort and receptivity is less a violation, and more a mode of careful observation and deployment of hyperattuned social skills. The term “seducer,” used early in Asha’s commentary as an accusation of sinful temptation, is recovered as a kind of benevolent “manipulation” (351). Olamina uses her charisma and care to entice rather than control, and remarks of a potential Earthseed convert, “what I had decided that I wanted from her, I couldn’t steal. She had to give it” (353). It is likely no coincidence that “sharer,” the term Olamina employs to depathologize hyperempathy in the social imagination, is only one letter away from “Shaper” (117), the title she and other seasoned Earthseed members adopt as an encapsulation of their blended role in the community as leaders, teachers, and enactors of change.

Sami Schalk, who has written extensively on hyperempathy from the perspective of disability studies, shared at a 2017 conference hosted by the Huntington Library (“Octavia E. Butler Studies: Convergence of an Expanding Field”) that Butler’s original vision for the *Parable*

series was a utopian one, in which an entirely hyperempathetic citizenry ceased violent actions upon learning that harming others was—quite literally—harming themselves. Such a dynamic initially appears utopian in its provision for a landscape of reflective, attentive people who engage in considered actions only after reflecting upon the potential consequences for those around them. Schalk recounts that Butler hastily came to realize, however, that such a society posed a serious problem for nurses, doctors, and others whose jobs involved witnessing, and taking part in, daily human suffering. How can one perform good for society when weighed down with both the physical and emotional distress of those you seek to help? In other words, she was faced by a conundrum in which Batson’s fourth and seventh definitions of empathy, *Inhabit* and *Feel Distress*, were the predominant modes of all relationality; namely, that which “involves feeling distressed by the state of the other” (8). A world founded upon this manner of co-sentiment quickly turns on its head and becomes dystopian, situating its denizens within a vicious cycle of anxiety and perpetual suffering.⁶

It is difficult not to notice, underlying the principle of “feeling *for*” someone, the dual meaning of extending compassion *toward* them, and taking on their distress *in place of* them. This mode of rhetorical engagement with defamiliarization of common words and phrases is similar to the one Christina Sharpe uses to interrogate Black consciousness in the wake. One of *In the Wake*’s chapters contends with a critical component of Butler’s own engagement with empathetic relation: the capaciousness of *holding*. Sharpe’s work, being aligned with a Black feminist ethics, does not conceive of compassionate relationality in terms of empathy, but rather as a *praxis of care*. As a rhetorical resistance to the violence of “holding” that Black subjects have experienced as a

⁶ There’s a charming account by Tananarive Due of a conversation in which she asks for Butler’s reaction to those who have called her a “pessimist,” to which Butler responds with mock innocence, “Moi?” See “In Honor of Octavia Butler” in the Sept. 2019 issue of *Essence*.

consequence of the legacies of the slave trade and policing, she asks, “In what ways might we enact a beholden-ness to each other, laterally?” (100) and “How are we beholden to and beholders of each other in ways that change across time and place and space and yet remain?” (101). Olamina’s answer, which first comes at the end of *Sower*, is to engage with holding as a physical embrace of compassion when words are insufficient comfort. At a loss to express grief, gratitude, and understanding all at once to Allie, a woman who has lost her only remaining family member, Olamina takes her into her arms and holds her, while fellow Earthseed member Natividad follows her lead to do the same for Allie’s adopted child Justin. “The wordless message was the same for both child and woman: *In spite of your loss and pain, you aren’t alone. You still have people who care about you and want you to be all right. You still have family*” (Sower 287).⁷

The question Sharpe poses is how one can *hold* another in care and compassion rather than in bondage or extractive assimilative desires. Butler presents one kind of answer in the ritualistic acceptance of the fledgling Earthseed community. Newborn children, for instance, are Welcomed into the community by being passed between all arms, and significant events such as adoptions and marriages are marked by a communal laying-on of hands (62). Touch as holding and beholding serves as an efficacious nonverbal intervention into what Sharpe calls the *dysgraphic*, “the inability of language to cohere around the bodies and the suffering of those... Black people who live and die in the wake” (96). Taking up as a counter to the dysgraphic a kind of “wake work as aspiration” (109), Olamina establishes rituals that quite literally shape the community under the molding of a considered and compassionate hand. The act of touch—something that Olamina has so frequently experienced as pain enacted both upon herself and on those she witnesses—is a mode

⁷ *Talents* sees the deaths and departures of the majority of original Earthseed adherents. It feels significant, then, that Olamina, Allie, Natividad, and Justin all survive, with Justin being reunited with Earthseed after being kidnapped by Christian America.

of relationality she recovers and employs thoughtfully, lovingly, and as a form of disruptive compassion.

Parable of the Talents: Empathy as Antagonist, Care as Disruptive Compassion

The fascinating intervention Butler makes with regard to the dynamic between empathy and care is most clearly exhibited by Olamina's reaction to the antagonistic forces which arise to challenge Earthseed. One threat stands above the others as singularly potent, violating, and terrifying—Christian America's "Crusaders"—but their methods of relationality, while claiming grounding in empathetic "help," are easily dismissed. Prior to their arrival, Olamina's daily anxieties are preoccupied by the more nuanced internal divisions which threaten to divide Earthseed, often by tempting members away from the hard work and long-term planning it takes to fulfill the Destiny. In short, every antagonistic force in *Parable of the Talents* exhibits a failed form of empathy, and every Earthseed counter against it is an effective expression of care via disruptive compassion. It is *care*, the active demand of it, which rests at the heart of Earthseed's truth, and its ability to endure.

The challenges which Olamina's fledgling spiritual movement faces in *Talents* are arguably greater than those of *Sower*. Earthseed contends with open derision from new members, attempts at Christian proselytization from within, and an invasion which kidnaps the community's children and institutes a concentration camp. Even so, those who manage to liberate themselves hold true to its tenets, and the novel ends with Earthseed's imperative to "take root among the stars" being set in motion by the first fleet of interstellar travelers within Olamina's lifetime (388). The challengers and outright invaders who attempt to undermine Earthseed (notably all men), carry with them claims of empathetic motives which crumble under an examination of relationality

grounded in the premise of care. It is by exposing their flawed approaches to providing “help” and “education” that Butler sheds light on ways in which many supposedly benevolent individuals and institutions continue to fail the people with whom they come into contact.

What tantalizes about placing *Talents* as opposed to *Sower* in dialogue with notions of empathy and care is seeing how the understandably wary, doubtful Lauren of the first novel blooms into the humble, self-assured Olamina of the second. Her commitment to recording communal memory in *Talents* includes litanies of gratitude: she carefully inscribes the names of all six community members who care for a dying woman they rescued, “sitting with her, tending to her needs” (47). She takes the time, in lovingly describing Bankole rocking newborn Larkin to sleep, to share a long aside about Acorn residents Allie and Grayson collaborating to build the rocking chair, and how they had acquired carpentry skills to do so (166).

Knowing that *Talents* takes place approximately five decades prior to Asha’s commentary, which curates the frame narrative for each chapter, invites a reading of these moments in the context of what Badia Ahad-Legardy calls “regenerative nostalgia.” She describes this mindset as one which “encourages the sentimental recall of historical memory as a way to heal from the pain of the past” and gives life to “aesthetic recollections [which] imagine new black pasts and new black futures” (24). Despite the atrocities that Acorn and Earthseed suffer, the reader is able to engage with Olamina’s account through a lens of nostalgia via Asha’s revisiting and archiving of her own narrative, and that of her parents. While Asha’s early entries caustically condemn Olamina, referring to her as a zealot (43) and sinful seducer (61), a later passage concludes, “I miss Acorn. Of course, I have no memory of being there, but it was where my parents were together and happy during their brief marriage” (199). Closer to the end of the text Asha writes of her mother, “She was always a woman of obsessive purpose and great physical courage” (295), something she

knows, from transcribing so much Earthseed scripture, that Olamina would take as a great compliment.

Asha's story is one which echoes with familiar resonance throughout the wake: she was forcibly removed from her parents at birth, given a new name, raised to obey strict Christian traditions, and sexually fetishized and violated by the household's male authority figure (312). In editing, analyzing, and curating the writings of her parents and uncle, including the scriptures of Earthseed, she takes up an act of historical and personal recovery which invites a nostalgically curious engagement with home and culture which should have been hers, even as she reckons with confused feelings toward her mother. The transformative nature of her relationship to her Olamina, which reshapes itself from bitterness and spite to begrudging respect to real love over the course of the text, is testament to the fact that her resentment toward Earthseed does not preclude her generative reading of its tenets: she approaches Olamina's writings as an empathetic intersection, and as an opportunity to engage in disruptive compassion as much toward herself as to her mother.

In a moment of crisis, facing uncertainty that escape from Camp Christian will be possible, Olamina explains why she records so much of her life in her journals: "My writing is a way for me to remind myself that I am human, that God is Change, and that I will escape this place" (215). She juxtaposes current events with personal memories and voices the discursive affirmation that her writing drives her to live, just as living drives her to write. As Carey writes in *Rhetorical Healing*, and as Butler has thematically foregrounded in the *Parable* series, "the step toward empathy that is one of the best outcomes of rhetorical healing and other endeavors toward empowerment can come from adopting a writer's mindset" (160). Frank B. Wilderson III, in *Afropessimism*, concurs: "As a Black writer I am tasked with making sense of this violence without being overwhelmed and disoriented by it" (246). Where Wilderson makes the case for Black

writing as survival, Carey makes the case for its facilitation of aliveness. For this reason, Olamina makes for a narrator at once prolific, honest, and a model of the kind of care-actor Earthseed calls on its adherents to be. The challenge of her lifetime is convincing those who have been exploited and manipulated, particularly those who are sharers, to willingly embrace the vulnerability and continual work of *care* as a mode for relationality. Earthseed's Destiny calls on humanity to leave Earth—not because the species is ready, but precisely because it is *not*.

Close Reading 1: Dan Noyer and Individual Exceptionalism

To reiterate, all of the major challenges which face Olamina's fledgling Earthseed community in *Talents* arise from failed forms of empathy. The tensions which take up the most space for rumination in the opening third of the novel are the doubts raised by three men in her life: her husband Bankole, her brother Marcus, and a young man named Dan Noyer. Bankole, despite sometimes dismissing what he sees as Olamina's naïveté in youth, respects and dignifies her dream of Earthseed, and is willing to undertake the work of self-change that marks their relationship as one founded on care. When he disagrees with Olamina's decision to remain in Acorn rather than move their family to an established town with more stable resources, he approaches her with a question rather than an objection. "Talk to me, girl," he says on a night when Larkin is asleep in her crib. "Tell me exactly what you want to do in this place, with these people" (169). The conversation they have is the most sustained, versatile interaction of the entire novel, ranging from parenthood to politics to philosophy, and while the two frequently take issue with the other's stance, neither loses respect for the other. "When [human beings] have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive for, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves" Olamina explains (172). Each came to the interaction prepared to listen, to change, and to use physical comfort where words

fail. When Olamina breaks into tears after Bankole pushes her to tangibly consider the possibility of Earthseed's failure, he holds her, tenderly and insistently, through her self-disgust, until she decides, "I was right where I wanted to be" (173).

While Bankole raises difficult questions about Olamina's decision to stay in Acorn rather than raise their child in a town with more stability and resources (169), he does not present a "challenge" to Earthseed in the form of a systemic mindset or methodology Olamina must contend with. Bankole and Olamina continue to push and change one another emotionally, philosophically, and politically in ways which dignify one another's core values (his healing, her spiritual mission). Marcus and Dan, on the other hand, represent parallel foils in their suspicion of Earthseed. Both ultimately leave the community under pressure from self-imposed images of masculinity, but not without the indelible mark of the community's lessons upon their lives. The primary difference between the places they end up is that Dan allows himself to be held and comes to see Acorn as a place to orient toward "home," while Marcus does not.

Butler specifically resists the temptation of writing matters of "karma" or "poetic justice" into *Talents*, for Earthseed is not a prosperity theology; its distant, interstellar Destiny promises no tangible rewards in one's own lifetime. Dan's story, therefore, is a puzzling inclusion in *Talents*: despite his impulsive abandonment of Acorn, his brash act of "heroism" is rewarded with improbable success, as the 15-year-old manages to return with his kidnapped sister Nina in tow, having escaped thieves, pimps, and enslavers (158). At first glance, his narrative arc almost seems to reinforce what Serpell calls "the empathy model of art," which can be "a gateway drug to white saviorism, with its familiar blend of propaganda, pornography, and paternalism." The way in which Olamina responds to his actions, however, and to his untimely death (from injuries sustained in ensuring Nina escaped), suggest otherwise. Why would someone who has witnessed as much

unusual cruelty and suffering as Olamina be rattled enough by this one “horrible and ordinary” story (53) so as to spend several pages meticulously recounting his losses (49-56, 153-160)? Why does she expend so much energy extending concerted empathy, agonizing over his fate in her journal and practicing care (as when she patiently answers his more insulting questions about Earthseed and holds him when the loss of his family overcomes him) when he forsakes safety for heroism, and why does the narrative ‘reward’ him for doing so?

The emotions that Dan piques within Olamina, who knew him for a mere seven months, are curiously strong for a figure who should play a minor role in her decades-long mission to see Earthseed’s interstellar destiny come to fruition. “He is a good, brave, stupid boy, and I suspect he’ll pay for it... If he insists on dying, he will die, damn him. Damn!” she writes upon discovering that Dan has run off to a near-certain death in the middle of the night (103). Dan is a nonliterate 15-year-old from a white, affluent family that has raised him to be skeptical of religion, and not skeptical enough of the dangers in an America devolved into violence and chaos (71). His upbringing has taught him to embrace with pride his status as the eldest son, protector of his sisters, and individual actor in times of crisis. He refuses to accept an evolving moral reality brought about by the apocalyptic disintegration of society: in particular, the fact that no amount of personal heroism grounded in an individualistic vigilante mindset will be enough to make his sisters safe in this world. In running away, Olamina presumes, Dan has ignored this reality, and thereby rejected living by both Change and care. Her outburst upon discovering his flight is potentially due to the fact that she takes it as a failure both personal and professional; a loss to the community, and a realization of Bankole’s fears of Earthseed’s transience.

Seemingly, the opportunity for empathy to exist between Dan and Olamina presents itself readily, as his life includes several direct parallels to her own. Both of their families made the

fallacious assumption that they would be protected from the “outside” world: Olamina’s father Laurence believed that the gated walls of Robledo would keep them safe⁸ (*Sower* 10), while Dan’s family assumed that their middle-class status, whiteness, and isolation would be enough to protect them (*Talents* 49). Dan’s family, like Olamina’s, was struck by calamity when he was fifteen. Dan, too, became separated from his younger siblings, and is desperate to believe they are still alive. Dan, like Olamina, was unresponsive during the worst of the violence.

Here, however, their stories critically diverge: where Olamina was incapacitated by sharing in another’s death, Dan *chose* to play dead while two of his sisters were dragged from their family truck (52). Dan, unlike Olamina, is not a sharer. Though he had been shot and had reason to think he was dying, his inaction during his sisters’ kidnappings haunts him. Where Olamina readily rebuilds human connections through found family, extending the same courtesy to him, Dan’s decision to run pushes away the possibility of embracing a new community if it means giving up on the sisters who were taken, and by association, his self-conceit as the male protector and leader of his family. He accepts the resources and nurture that Acorn offers, while rejecting the change that Earthseed compels: a change which would require him to let go of familiar, comfortable notions of individualistic, masculine heroism.

Dan presents his choice to leave as an application of empathy. Wouldn’t he, after all, want for his sisters to come rescue *him* if their situations were reversed? Upon reading Dan’s runaway note, Olamina remarks that Dan must have been spurred to action when, “He saw Cougar [a pimp and enslaver] and his crew” with a group of enslaved children and teens and had “learned nothing” (103). He feels acutely the potential misery of his sisters, with Olamina privately conjecturing that

⁸Diggs’ chapter in *Black Movements* includes an extremely valuable examination of walls in the *Parable* series, and makes the case that Olamina’s greatest mistake was in replicating her gated community’s ethos in the “living wall” of plants, trees, and thorny bushes surrounding Acorn.

the missing girls are likely now “prostitutes... in some rich man’s harem or working as slave farm or factory laborers” (103). Dan’s application of feeling-with, while moving him to action, amounts less to *Feel Compassion* than it does to *Feel Distress*. Despite Olamina’s reassurances that she and other Earthseed members are taking practical steps to recover his sisters, his anxiety over their grim fate overrides his patience and gratitude.

Here, it plays out almost as if Dan is co-opting the experience of sharing: the idea that to *really* feel the suffering of another would be to replicate it within the self and experience tantamount distress, rather than imbuing one with the strength to enact meaningful change or offer comfort. Far from inspiring care, it demands immediate relief of one’s own symptoms, and an inability to serve others. Dan imagines that his anticipated heroism is done out of a sense of love and duty toward his sisters—the context suggests, conversely, that it is out of a desire to relieve his own sense of guilt and emasculation. Butler provides as a helpful contrast the caring practice of Bankole, who tells Olamina of wanting to move to a town, “I think you’ve saved me... I wish you’d let me save you” (168-9). When Olamina explains her reasoning for rejecting the offer, he respects her thoughtful consideration and takes no action to “save” her against her will. Serpell, similarly, opens her “Banality” with a condemnation of that form of relationality that positions the self as “savior,” pointing to a choose-your-own-adventure episode of *Black Mirror* which gleefully chastises viewers for conducting the protagonist toward increasingly grisly deaths. Rather than inspire empathy for the character’s ill fate, she contends, it invites either viewer despair which teaches avoidance of feelings-sharing, or a numbness toward violence which dispels the desire for empathetic inclinations entirely.

That being said, Dan’s instinct for action is one to which Butler herself would not necessarily be unsympathetic. When she was thirteen, Butler recalls hearing the child next door

being beaten by her parents, and pleaded with her own mother to do something. Her mother declined, saying that the neighbors, “had the right to do what they wanted to with their own children” (McCaffery 56-57). “*That*, I realized, was slavery,” Butler explains to her interviewers, citing the experience as foundational to her interest in exploring the myriad forms and consequences of slavery via literature. In the moment of bearing witness to another’s suffering, social conventions dictating the propriety of inaction, normally mundane, are revealed as horrifying means of suppression. Unlike Dan, any action she might have tried to take on her own would not have come from an instinct toward masculine vigilantism, but like Dan, part of her wanted to be the sort of “good, brave, stupid” girl able to break down the door and stage a rescue.

Despite the gulf in personality and experience which separates him from Olamina, when Dan finally weeps for the loss of his family and she reaches out to him, he pulls away once, then embraces her back (75). When Dan returns to Acorn with his sister Nina in tow, both having been brutalized and raped, it is at cost to his life, but not Olamina’s respect. In spite of her fears that he had learned nothing from Earthseed, she recognized the faith he placed in their way of life, and in her, after his initial skepticism. He had chosen to return to Acorn as a place he identified with safety, comfort, and care.

Dan’s decision to leave Acorn may have been prompted, in part, by his unwillingness to comprehend a decision Olamina made—admittedly a shocking one—in searching for his stolen sisters. Olamina responds to a tip that a local enslaver may have the Noyer girls, and they meet with “Cougar,” who keeps his teenage subjects under control via electric shock collars (96). The Noyers are not among them, but stunningly, Marcus, Olamina’s long-lost brother, is. She briefly considers escalating the scene to violence, but judges that it would pose too great a risk to the enslaved victims, and engages instead in a grueling hour-long haggling session over the price she

will pay for Marcus' freedom (99). On the Butler-centered reading and analysis podcast *Octavia's Parables*, co-host Toshi Reagon (creator of the *Parable of the Sower* opera which debuted in 2022) lingers over the scene in which Olamina patiently, persistently negotiates for over an hour buying her brother from his enslaver. Reagon expresses awe at Olamina's unflinching determination in a scene which would invite every opportunity for rage to overcome her outward calm and seems to feel, like Dan, a certain degree of intimidation at the callously casual affect she was so readily able to adopt. Her analysis raises the possibility that Dan's reaction of horror and revulsion was born of that rallying cry of Western exceptionalism: "We don't negotiate with terrorists."

It's an attitude meant to evoke a sense of pride and moral virtuosity in comparison with one's opponents, and it seeps through the foundations of Dan's disgust with Olamina in this scene, a distaste which does not dissipate even once he realizes it was done in the service of saving a sibling of her own. His incomprehension as to why someone would negotiate with an enslaver rather than meet them with force is tied to his positionality from outside the wake, and reinforces his return to exhibiting the sixth form of empathy posed in Batson's review: *Imagine Self*, in which the subject imagines "how they would think and feel in another person's situation" (Batson 7). Dan could not comprehend that Olamina's top priority, her primary care as a Black woman cognizant of the horrors and histories of slavery, was what she continued thinking even days after they brought her brother back to the relative safety of Acorn: "Marcus must not be shot" (101), or, in Sharpe's terms, the imperative to "...keep breath in the Black body" (Sharpe 109).

Incredibly, Olamina expends precious moments of attention during what must be one of the most emotionally demanding hours of her life acknowledging, recording, and explicating the distress of those around her. While she negotiates, she notes of the other Acorn residents, "My people were the confused, angry ones" (98). One person's reaction occupies her attention the most

closely: “Dan in particular looked first disbelieving, then disgusted, then furious.” She goes on to recount Bankole’s reaction and their friend Travis’, the faces of the other children still collared, and the reactions of Cougar and his cronies. This capacity to hold many experiences at once, to keep balanced in one’s memory the minds of many others, brings to mind Serpell’s call that compassion-stirring art “should not be a release valve, but a combustion engine” (“Banality”). Olamina’s ability to maintain a sense of distance, of possibility, of what Serpell might call *uncertainty*, is what grants her the wisdom to carefully parse the space between emotional influence and manipulative domination, the first of which she employs after careful ethical consideration and the latter of which she rejects entirely.

What Dan cannot recognize is that it is a privilege to refuse negotiations with those who inflict terror. As a white American man, he has never before been in the position of having to bargain for a loved one’s life, likely never even imagined it, and he is unprepared for the brutal coarseness of demeanor and speech Olamina is prepared to engage in if it means liberating her brother. Ironically, what Dan witnesses as Olamina’s apparent coldness and apathy is in fact a heightened attunement to the emotional state of others; even as he himself he increasingly turns his attention inwards. Olamina suspects this is a rare advantage of sharing, which “makes [her] extra sensitive to body language” (99). She thus enters the system on the enslaver’s level, employing his own methods against him. She laughs at his initial price, denigrates her own brother’s physical appearance, and otherwise “plays the game.” She slips readily into a persona which will best serve her focus, what Earthseed scripture terms “positive obsession” (*Sower 1*), in order to ensure Marcus’ freedom. She changes before her community’s eyes; something the others are shocked by and begrudgingly accept, but with which Dan is not able to reconcile.

Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* suggests that some of Dan's repulsion may be the result of gendered expectations for relationality: "Girls are more tolerant in their attitudes toward rules, more willing to make exceptions, and more easily reconciled to innovations," she explains (Gilligan 10). This provides insight into not only Dan's objection to negotiations with Cougar, but his initial wariness of Earthseed, which he perceived as outside the norms for "rules" applying to religions. Gilligan also suggests that the heightened attunement to emotions Olamina experiences as a result of sharing is similarly tied to gender socialization. She proposes that women are likely to be guided to "emerge from an identity formation period with empathy" while boys are not (7-8). Dan's singular rule from his now-deceased parents—that he protect his sisters—is a rigid order and an unwavering foundation for his masculinity; not one he has been socially conditioned to alter. But... what can you do with a God like that?" he asks with regard to the central tenet regarding Change. "It doesn't love you or protect you. It doesn't know anything. What's the point?" (72). Olamina hands him *The First Book of the Living*, which, at Bankole's insistence, she had copyrighted and published. "Even people who can't read are impressed by books," she notes of Dan's reaction, for something in the materiality of a printed and bound text granted Earthseed weight and authenticity in the young man's mind that words alone had not (72).

Care used successfully, in other words, when enacted as disruptive compassion, is *flexible*. It is not extended toward one person, indefatigably, but sends out feelers to gently prod at the permeability of those with whom it comes into contact. Olamina, in reading Dan's hesitancy, has already *changed first*: she consented to publishing her works, overcoming no small sense of trepidation, in a move that ultimately results in the expansion of Earthseed as a national movement, and eventually provides her estranged daughter with a means of finding her. Just as effectively, she reads the feelings of Marcus' enslaver—a man practiced in lying and manipulation—and can

tell when he is about to bend to her will. She has learned to use her hyperattunement to leverage Batson's first three definitions of empathy—*Name it, Do it, and Feel it*—as a counterweight against *Inhabit*, maintaining clear, demarcated boundaries between herself and the other. If some degree of emotional performance or influence is involved, Olamina still affords the other person the freedom to make their own choices as to how to react.

Reckoning with twin feelings of euphoria and mourning in the wake of her reunion with Marcus, Olamina writes gravely of Dan's departure from Acorn in a tone that suggests disappointment with herself: "To tell the truth, I had forgotten about Dan. My mind had been filled with Marcus... Yet Dan had suffered a terrible disappointment. He was in real pain" (102). In an ironic twist, as Dan slips off in hopes of saving his lost sisters, Olamina's struggle is contending with her own desire to be *Dan's* lone savior. She chastises herself for "leaving" his care to two infinitely patient and kind friends because they were busy with young children (102). She does not seem to recognize, in this early portion of the novel, that her self-criticism establishes an expectation that she must possess the superhuman capacity to singularly serve as parent, therapist, and coach to Dan in a moment when she is tending to a long-lost brother recently recovered from slavery. Olamina believes she has missed a critical moment to administer care, but if there is a predominant throughline in the *Parable* series, it is that she must let go of the notion that she can save everyone. The teacher, the prophet, the leader who sees the distress of every member of the community and is able to relieve it with the right word deployed, the right kindness extended, is a myth. Since the beginning of Earthseed, she has continually refused the impulse of others to mold it using existing forms into a cult of personality with her at the center. This temptation to let hyperempathy evoke a response of *hypercare* is one which she must ultimately resist: the greatest threat to the energy she has vowed to dedicate to Earthseed.

Close Reading 2: Marcos Duran and Martyrial Black Manhood

If Olamina's preoccupation with Dan haunts a surprising range of pages in *Talents*, it is entirely eclipsed by her troubled relationship with her brother, with whom something approaching *hypercare* becomes a central antagonistic force. First introduced as "Marcus" in *Sower*, he asks to be called "Marcos" upon their first post-liberation conversation at Acorn, then goes by "Marc" after abandoning Earthseed and taking up full-time employment with the Christian American church. Despite this malleable nomenclature suggesting an openness to change, he is openly hostile toward Earthseed, seeing it as a dangerous fantasy which he tries to counter by actively proselytizing to Acorn residents about the Bible and Christian doctrine (143). Unlike Dan, Marcos is never able to reconcile the idea of Acorn as a home so long as it coexists with Earthseed. In the years following his escape from their destroyed home, preaching the Christian Gospel to an adoring congregation became central to his conception of manhood, particularly when illiterate congregants were dependent on his narration and analysis of the Bible (118). His conceit of care is one grounded in the *perpetual giving of the self over to the many*: the sacrifice of one's time, energy, and even body, Christlike, to alleviate the suffering and sinfulness of those he perceives as being without a shepherd. "I loved being Marcos Duran—the little preacher. People trusted me, respected me... It was a good life. Most of them were good people—just poor" (119).

Earthseed, however, does not have room for shepherds, and deliberately eschews with a system of prophets and messiahs.⁹ There is no hierarchy, no sole keeper of knowledge who assumes authority over others as intermediary between cosmic truth and tangible reality. "If you

⁹ Early drafts of Butler's *Parable of the Trickster* suggest that a core conflict of the third and final book would have addressed the question of whether Earthseed is able to survive the unintentional elevation of Olamina to messiah status after her death. For more, see "Octavia E. Butler Studies" podcast episode "Parables of the Trickster" with Gerry Canavan, and "Octavia's Parables" podcast episode "Parable of the Talents: Prologue & Chapter 1" with adrienne maree brown and Toshi Reagon.

speak,” Olamina warns him about his desire to preach about Christianity at an Earthseed Gathering, “you have to face questions and discussion” (142). It is the capacious ambiguity of Earthseed, its suspension of power structures, which the commentary for the chapter—provided by Olamina and Bankole’s daughter Larkin, suggests her uncle was unable to accept. “No Christian minister could ever hate sin as much as Marc hated chaos. His gods were order, stability, safety, and control” (108). It is notable that Larkin, who was raised by strict Christians, uses the plural and lowercase “gods” in a deliberate blasphemy. It foreshadows her eventual religious rebellion, and, if not moral alignment, at least a kind of kindred curiosity with her mother.

There are resonances once again with Trudier Harris’ assertion that African American women’s writing since the ‘70s has fostered a literary culture in which “different kinds of spirituality might be more appealing to and useful for... female characters” than traditionally omnipotent forms of a masculine God (“Christianity’s Last Stand”). Indeed, she points to a dramatic shift after Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* debuted in 1976, which she asserts “uncover[s] the divinity *within* African American women,” in which “women bring God to earth and thereby collapse the divide between human and divine even as they assert their own divinity.” Olamina is deliberately *not* propping herself up as a divine figurehead for Earthseed, but indeed calls attention to the divine power within each person’s ability to envision and enact Change. “God exists/To shape/And to be shaped” (89), she writes at the start of the chapter in which Marcos returns. Larkin even includes in her frame narrative an Earthseed passage which responds directly to Marcos’ fears of chaos: “Chaos/Is God’s most dangerous face – /Amorphous, roiling, hungry./Shape Chaos – /Shape God./ Act” (107). Importantly, in contrast to Marcos’ Christian-founded total rejection of chaos as a force of evil,

Earthseed neither ignores nor condemns chaos: “danger” can still be useful, and “chaos” proves a boon in Earthseed’s ability to throw off their Crusader oppressors.

And yet, the allure of certainty and security for Marcos after his years of enslavement and torture is entirely comprehensible. The conflict arises from the fact that what he sees as pragmatic—namely, capitulation to Christianity under an authoritarian president—Olamina sees as a surrender to the status quo, a retreat behind the lines of whichever political force has brought the larger army to the battle (151). While Marcos is no fan of the newly elected President Jarrett—the right-wing evangelist who now-infamously vows to “make America great again” (18) or his followers’ violent methods, he condones their mission to forcefully place Christianity at the center of American life and admires Jarrett’s ability to charismatically command millions.

A topic which Marcos never explicitly raises with his sister is the connection between his sense of selfhood and his Blackness. The circumstances Butler inscribes for his narrative—the influence of his Baptist Minister father, his years enduring enslavement in which he was routinely violated for labor and sex—bear all the markings of a life lived in the wake, but without Marcos choosing to externalize his thoughts on the subject. After liberation, he expresses no desire to dwell on the past, as when Olamina encourages him to “write or talk about what happened” and he responds with a definitive “no” (110). Neither does he care to look too far to the future: “Uncle Marc knew that the stars could take care of themselves,” Larkin writes of his reaction to Earthseed Destiny (108). Marcos’ brief time on Earth has rendered the conditions of the wake visible to him, and he makes decisions “from a position of deep hurt and of deep knowledge” (Sharpe 27). Unlike his sister, however, he embraces the principles of compassion without accepting that a condition of its meaningful application must consist of disruption. His disagreeability upon discovering that

the land, religion, and community are Olamina's suggests a desire for impossible *return*: to a world in which control is assured, leadership is imminent, and Change is optional.

Marcos' adopted family lived in a space where many were latently Christian and illiterate, and it was in this environment that Marcos formulated his personal conception of empathy and care. He developed an identity as an ever-present, ever-giving savior figure adored by all, and for good reason—any time the city “sent an army of cops to drive out everyone who couldn't prove they had a right to be where they were,” they would come to Marcos, whose education permitted him to write the modern-day equivalent of freedom papers for his neighbors and congregants: “You had to have rent receipts, a deed, utility receipts, something. . . .there was a hell of a business in fake paper. I wrote some of it myself—not for sale, but for the Duran and their friends” (117). Marcos' self-sacrifice and compassion in these circumstances is real: he seems to recognize his unique position within the wake as someone who can provide others with a means of survival for another day. The limit to his care is that he does not take up the challenge to help others on their journey to seeking aliveness. He does not recount teaching others to read or write, training them in public speaking to be preachers of their own, or otherwise facilitating their independence from his help. By the time he arrives in Earthseed, it is clear this was a deliberate choice.

Clinging to the identity he lived out as a self-sacrificial savior figure, and as a superior retainer of theological knowledge, is ultimately what drives a wedge between himself and Earthseed—and between himself and Olamina. Her usual means of extending care fall flat: he pulls away when she tries to touch him (116), he resists writing or speaking about his traumatic experiences since escaping their burning home (110), and he is less than impressed with Earthseed scripture, insisting to Olamina that it is a fake religion and that she “made it up” (122). In fact, he

alerts Olamina to Earthseed's notoriety among politicians and preachers as a "heathen" group needing punishment, and urges them to abandon their ways rather than fight for their beliefs (121).

Marcos insists on preaching a sermon at his first Earthseed Gathering, and the event is predictably a disaster. He is clearly caught off-guard to be confronted with a literate and Biblically knowledgeable audience which comfortably counters his denunciations of their spirituality using both Christian and Earthseed tenets (143). The pushback he receives from Earthseed members is by no means hostile or unfair, but he grows quiet and disengages, clearly humiliated that his message was not met with the same admiration and honor he was afforded in the city where he became Marcos Duran. The final straw, surely, is the blow to his masculinity when he is publicly challenged not only by his friendly romantic rival, but by the clever and beautiful girl who might have come between them (144).

Olamina, normally a vocal presence in a Gathering, is conspicuously silent, bringing to mind Elaine Richardson's description in *African American Literacies* of "The strategic use of silence [as] a communication strategy used by African American women to resist perpetuation of distorted images of Black female sexuality and womanhood" (86). It is a testament to Olamina's exceptional teaching that her Earthseed "students," many of whom initially embraced the safety and prosperity of Acorn but scoffed at a religion centered around Change, are able now to do the work she once did alone: to present as a cohesive community of voices considerate of dissent, but ultimately capable of making definitive choices on behalf of the group (143). Marcos' refusal to accept their criticism is another rejection of change and of the reality that it is impossible to be so knowledgeable that one's ideas, even dressed with the trappings of authority (seeing as Olamina granted him the normally prohibited right to lecture rather than discuss), will go unchallenged.

Prior to this incident, signs had emerged that Marcos' discontent was just as much about familial jealousy and gender roles as it was about religious differences. He is skeptical to accept Acorn as Olamina's "place" (120) and is more accepting once he realizes it is tied to Bankole's family. He initially asked Bankole for permission to speak at the Gathering before being redirected to Olamina (141). In a particularly hostile move, he begins spreading the "news" that Olamina had agreed to go live in a nearby town and would be leaving Acorn—and Earthseed—entirely (140). Finally, despite Olamina's continued attentiveness to Marcos' preferred name, never once does he call his sister "Shaper," her community title, or "Olamina," signaling a tacit refusal to accept her reinvention of herself and instead holding fast to his conception of her from their childhood.

As with Dan, his frustration and lack of comprehension seems to emerge from an overabundance of *Imagine Self*, which does little to help him imagine how people *unlike* himself may think and feel at Acorn. Piqued into remonstrance by Marcos' unasked-for forgiveness, Olamina confesses the truth to him about his fiasco at the Gathering. "[Y]ou were given a special privilege," she tells him, despite immediately regretting it. "If it were anyone else, you could have been expelled for preaching another belief system. I let you do it because you've been through so much hell, and I knew it was important to you. And because you're my brother" (152). It's a rare moment in which Olamina mistakes empathetic intentions for care. "He would hear pity in [those words]," she chastises herself. "He would hear condescension." Marcos, barely recovered from his time in slavery, elects to leave Acorn soon after. The gentle hand Olamina had tried to extend, letting her shared blood with Marcos guide her actions rather than Earthseed instincts, was pushed away, whereas it was taken by Dan, whom she had feared neglecting.

Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978) offers possible insight into Marcos' subject position by way of a complex and important perspective on the

dialogues around masculinity and womanhood that took place in the 1960s and '70s. The “contemporary black man,” Wallace writes, in his own mind has “become a martyr” (79) and believes that “manhood is more valuable than anything else. As long as he was able to hold onto his own black-centered definition of manhood, his sense of himself was not endangered” (79). As minister to the Durans and their neighbors, Marcos fulfilled an essential and liberatory position in the community: his words were ones of aspirational encouragement, and his ability to read and write quite literally gave them “passes” to continue living in freedom rather than be sent to jail.

To have this status and dignity stripped, to suffer the injustice and torture of years in a collar at the hands of a ruthless enslaver, and to be bought by a sister whose accomplishments preaching and community-building have surpassed his own must have been a series of nigh-unrecoverable blows to his sense of manhood. Earthseed’s path to healing, he is told, is to embrace Change, which would mean turning away from the Christianity of his childhood and young manhood to embrace his sister’s unorthodox system—one which Marcos is quick to reiterate she “made up.” For Marcos, perhaps, in Olamina’s seeming religious and political success, “She [the Black woman] seemed to make his inferiority a certainty by her own existence” (170). He had once positioned himself as a nigh-divine figure amidst a populace that could not read for themselves the words he preached: that which can give of itself from a bottomless well of bounty and never succumb to the material and intellectual poverty to which mortals fall prey. What he failed to recognize is that such unreciprocated giving leaves no room for the grace and growth of others; it is a system which can only perpetuate its own power dynamics.

In Olamina’s encounters with her brother in the final third of the novel, (by then, he is going by “Marc”), it becomes explicit that the tension between them is a question of whether family members are too intertwined with one’s past identities to be facilitators of Change. Marc is

shaken by what Olamina tells him of Acorn's destruction and the terror and violence wrought by Christian America, but he ultimately refuses to believe her (298). This is the unbreachable rift between them, and begins to raise the question of the degree to which empathy is able to coexist with negative affect. Olamina finds her respect and tolerance of her brother waning after he rejects the knowledge of how her husband was killed, daughter kidnapped, and community destroyed. Marc, in return, seems to have lost his capacity for empathizing with her: Olamina's surreptitious and unintended eavesdropping on his sermon reveals that he frames her in his mind as a "fallen" person, a source of grief and lament, one not even worthy of the condescension of pity (291).

We get precisely one page of writing from "Marcos Duran" (there is another at the end from "Marc"), which he entitles "Warrior." It's an enlightening insight into what he considers a form of care. In contrast to Earthseed's premises of self-recognition and continual Change, he writes, "I would rather fix the problem... What we have broken we can mend" (106). That opening "I" is a telling marker of his sense of self-sacrificial martyrdom, and the title of his work shares an uncomfortable military affinity with Jarrett's idea of Christian warriors, "Crusaders," in turn contrasting sharply with Earthseed's preferred monikers of "Shaper" and "teacher." Marcos' journal entry declines to explicate his years as an enslaved teen and young man, opting instead to reckon with his complicated feelings toward a frightening, favored older brother (not so unlike Larkin's feelings toward Earthseed). His refusal to write or speak beyond what he confided to Olamina in a single conversation signals that he is at a loss regarding how to Change from the experience.

"Warrior" also reveals that the reason that Marcos' empathy failed to manifest in an ethics of care is his loss of the ability to see the people around him as *people*, and his unwillingness to confront what this means, either in discussion or writing. Olamina does not forget that atrocities

being committed are undertaken by members of her own species, as she physically cannot ignore the fact. She is reminded, unceasingly, unbearably, via her sharing that the people causing her pain are fellow humans. Marcos, meanwhile, says of the “outside world,” “It was like a dog with rabies, tearing itself to pieces, and wanting to do the same to me” (106). In recounting the story of his time alone, he tells Olamina, “You walk the roads for a while, and you wonder if anyone is still human” (120). Even his final enslaver, the person Marcos hates more than any other in the world, is a man known only as “Cougar”—a figure reduced to the subhuman, to the animalistic; an ironic reversal considering it is Cougar who “collars” his victims. To be clear, embracing an ethic of care does not require that Marcos forgive those who abused, exploited, and enslaved him. His loss is, instead, the possibility for self-change which enables Olamina’s versatility and success as a leader. The fact of her oppressors’ humanity, and thereby, human flaws, is not something that Olamina forgets once Christian America invades.

Even while subjected to circumstances which rip her infant from her grasp, kill her husband, and result in the torture, rape and murder of Acorn residents, Olamina continues to call her captors “men” rather than monsters. This attentiveness to language can sometimes cause her to come across as cold, as when she dispassionately informs a group of panicking fellow Acorn women, “When men have absolute power over women who are strangers, the men rape” (192). “Captor,” “Crusader,” she calls them, even a sarcastic use of Earthseed’s own preferred title of ‘teacher,’ (201-202), but always human—never monsters, never animals. Olamina is unafraid to confront the depths of human depravity—she doesn’t need to transform them into something else in order to explain their actions. Disruptive compassion in this circumstance is not an extension of kindness toward one’s captors: it’s a stubborn reinforcement of the remembrance, “This, too, is a human,” in all the affective range that entails. Were she to allow herself and the other women of Acorn to

mythologize their captors as “monsters” and “beasts,” they might swell to unfathomable, undefeatable proportions.

As humans, though, they are subject to the same weaknesses as any other, perhaps even more so because their lack of Sharing has not taught them wariness to methodical emotional and psychological scrutiny. “Submission was no protection” (196), Olamina observes as an early lesson in the invaders’ tactics. “We need to pretend to go along with them as much as we can... So any of us who get the chance should spy and eavesdrop and share information with the rest. We can escape from them or kill them if we can learn about them and pool our knowledge” (192). Even in the direst of circumstances, Olamina continues to change first. She can become a liar, a thief, a spy, or a murderer, because all of it is justified against a person who denies another person’s capacity for survival and aliveness. Disruptive compassion, in this context, is not so much a radical extension of kindness, but a deployment of empathetic tools as watchfulness of one’s enemy which facilitates some degree of reclaiming community amidst information gathering, plans for escape, and collaborative chaos.

Conclusion: Facilitating Preparedness for Butler’s Prescription of Care

There’s a small indication that Butler may have thought of the *Parable* series as a kind of “aspirational fiction,” to return to Sharpe’s language of “wake work as aspiration”: continued Black breath as perpetual renewal of towardness. She conceived of this not in predicting the arrival of its bleak futuristic landscape, but in questioning and pushing the nature of what humans are capable of. *Talents* is a thought experiment in the degree to which humanity can embrace change if exposed to a particular model of collaborative, caring community. In *Octavia’s Parables*, adrienne maree brown references a Butler quote that reveals she once expressed doubt that

Earthseed could take root as a religion in the real world, “because there’s not enough comfort in it.”¹⁰ What, then, did Butler perceive as the primary difference between our reality and Olamina’s that makes Earthseed a viable model for relationality and spiritual growth in hers, but insufficient in ours? Is it the desperation of their circumstances, the capacities and composition of the people themselves, or Olamina’s careful alignment of community principles with material and political mobility, that keeps them faithful?

brown herself agrees to an extent with Butler’s assessment, pointing to moments she felt Olamina could have extended Marcos more time and grace to heal. Were she in Olamina’s place, brown notes, she would not have allowed him to preach a Christian sermon to an audience she knew wouldn’t be receptive. Whatever reason the characters of *Talents* initially joined Earthseed, by the end of the novel, though scattered to the winds, they continue to spread their message and grow as a movement, to the point that they launch their first space exploration mission by the end of Olamina’s life. Her friend Harry’s descendants are among those who accompany Olamina on her traveling academic tours; she does not preach, as Marc does, but rather delivers her religion as a critical, theoretical intervention akin to a landmark academic monograph.

And then there’s Larkin, later Asha Vere, herself. The frame narrative from the daughter trying to reconcile with the bitter sense that her mother could have found her had she not been so obsessed with Earthseed reveals that after an unhappy childhood with a Christian America family, she made contact with a handsome middle-aged minister named “Marc,” who recognized her as family and took her under his wing. His decision to look after Asha in secret, saying nothing to

¹⁰ brown's quote, in full: “It’s like they lack that emotional capacity beyond the brief rituals that they have created, and as you’re saying this, I’m reminded of Octavia’s self-criticism here. She was like, ‘Earthseed would not work as a real religion because there’s not enough comfort in it.’ And you can feel that in moments like this [when Marcos is publicly humiliated in the aftermath of his sermon at the Gathering].”

Olamina, is the final affirmation of his lifelong folly of pride. It says, “None but I am righteous enough to care for you and see you to salvation.”

Olamina stays true to her values to the end, even at great personal cost. Her daughter is given the final chapter of the story, and in it she chooses to meet with her mother. “Larkin,” Olamina calls her as the young woman prepares to leave, overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience. “Asha,” she corrects her. “My name is Asha Vere.” Olamina “sags” in something like disappointment, but accepts the decision. She repeats the unfamiliar name, and tells Asha the door will always be open (386). She never forces someone to undergo change without first demonstrating that she does, herself. “Self learns, discovers, becomes,” reads the Earthseed verse introducing the narrative year 2035. “Self shapes. Self adapts. Self invents its own reasons for being. To shape God, shape self” (227). Just as her attempts to persuade Dan to consider Earthseed as a spiritual haven were preceded by her compromise of publishing Earthseed scripture, and just as her warning to Marc that he would have to accept Gathering rules were preceded by her willingness to bend the rules for the sake of his recovery, so, too, is she willing to give this person she has longed to hold for decades the autonomy of space and time. Care is knowing the degree to which one can effect change, by first measuring it against one’s own capacities to relate and change oneself.

Marc, too, makes his final decision, solidifying his choice to uphold a status quo that reinforces his sense of benign authority. He remains guilt-ridden and capable of apology, but does not translate his distress into action which would move toward nurturing the aliveness of others. “I’m sorry,” he tells a conflicted Asha the day after she meets with Olamina. “I had been alone so long that I just couldn’t stand to share you with anyone” (386). And therein lies the ultimate tragedy between Marc’s life and his sister’s: Olamina has, of course, been forced to share *everything*, from

emotional responsibility to material goods to physical sensations, while Marc, who passionately demands vulnerability and change from those in his congregation, has shared nothing of himself.

In a brief column for *The Nation* from 2021, Niela Orr makes the case for *Parable of the Sower* as a “prescient dystopia,” citing the environmental, social, and political conditions of Lauren’s 2024 that mirror our own 2020s. She places an interesting emphasis on the lessons we should take away about the powers and limitations of empathy as a tool to prevent disaster, citing Tananarive Due, Monica Coleman, and Rasheedah Phillips as contemporary authors who draw a throughline between hyperempathy, preparedness, and the mindful, deliberative shaping of a new future. “Empathy takes courage, compassion, and an interest in alterity,” she asserts. “...art, at least, can prompt us to think critically. Like empathy, critical thinking requires compassion” (10).

Olamina’s final triumph, then, while a bitter one, is profound with regard to what she initially set out to accomplish: Asha, née Larkin, may write early and fervently of her love for Uncle Marc, but the real trajectory of her narrative is developing a grudging respect, then open admiration, and finally an unfulfilled yearning for, a sense of aliveness in relationality to her mother. We are led to believe that this volume we are reading—the compilation of journals punctuated by Asha’s commentary, with a smattering of Earthseed verses and pieces by Bankole and Marc—is the culmination of her scholarship as an academic who took up her mother’s spiritual prophesying as her life’s work. The preservation of her mother’s writing in the archive, in full human richness and folly, framed and told in colorful, dimensional, disruptive compassion, is the intervention she contributes. It’s the space in which Asha shows what she could not extend to Olamina in person: she changed first.

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