Intersectionality and Empathy in Afrofuturist Feminist Dystopian Narratives: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*

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Dystopian fiction transcends the boundaries of reality to recontextualize social issues and imagine diverse futures. In Octavia Butler's (1993) *Parable of the Sower* and Nalo Hopkinson's (1998) *Brown Girl in the Ring,* female protagonists experience intersectional oppressions related to sex, gender, race, class, and (dis)ability, exacerbated by the dystopian contexts of corrupt political environments, climate crisis, and economic collapse. Butler's and Hopkinson's young female protagonists challenge the oppressions they face through empathic reasoning, and both narratives imagine new positions for themselves and for women in general. Engaging with both feminist narrative theory and Afrofuturism theory, I demonstrate how Butler's and Hopkinson's novels make empathy central to their intersectional feminist representations, critiques, and attempted rectifications of oppressive social structures and norms related to violence against women, black motherhood, and (dis)ability.

The Power of Dystopian Literature: *Parable of the Sower* and *Brown Girl in the Ring*

Dystopian literature presents recognizable social issues in their most pessimistic form, envisioning the consequences future generations may face if changes are not made in the present. Shifting real systemic inequities to an unfamiliar context may heighten readers' awareness of what they have normalized in their own contexts. While feminist narratology addresses how narratives represent oppressive systems and the reproduction of these systems, feminist theorists Susan S. Lanser and Robyn Warhol explain that feminist narrative theory remains "too white" (10) and needs a more intersectional approach. The Afrofuturist elements in both *Parable of the Sower* and *Brown Girl in the Ring* demonstrate how Butler and Hopkinson create literary worlds that challenge traditionally exclusive white feminist narratives. Ytasha Womack, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013)*,* defines Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation" (9). As feminist dystopian literature imagines possible futures through a feminist lens, Afrofuturism imagines possible futures through a black cultural lens (Womack 9).

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* constructs a dystopian California, devastated by the consequences of climate change, corporate corruption, and uncontrollable violence. The protagonist Lauren is a teenaged black girl who shifts from a situation of relative middle-class safety to one of dangerous migrancy when her gated community burns down, and she's pushed into homelessness. Despite significant obstacles, Lauren imagines and then establishes a community rooted in Earthseed, a belief system she founds, where she and others are liberated from oppression. Along with being displaced, black, and female, Lauren also experiences the challenging effects of hyperempathy syndrome, a (dis)ability she inherited from her drug-addicted mother, which results in her involuntarily experiencing others' feelings, whether pleasurable or painful. The near-simultaneous homodiegetic narration, which takes the form of

regular journal entries, immerses readers into Lauren's lived experiences in virtual real time, tying the narrative inextricably to her perspective as she attempts to build a more progressive and just future.

In *Brown Girl in the Ring,* Nalo Hopkinson creates a dystopian world in which her protagonist Ti-Jeanne strives to free herself and Toronto from evil forces. Through race-based conflict, Hopkinson develops a narrative that explores Ti-Jeanne's intersectional position as a young black mother living in the Burn, the gang-controlled core of Toronto. Ti-Jeanne's generational connection to the "African powers" (Hopkinson 126) spurs her into battle with Rudy, the black gang leader of the Burn, and, indirectly, the corruption of the suburbs, to which the wealthy, privileged, and predominantly white Torontonians have fled. The suburb-dwelling white premier contracts Rudy to harvest her a healthy heart from the Burn for her own self-interest and an unethical political scheme. Rudy's corrupt manipulation of Caribbean spirituality results in Ti-Jeanne's grandmother's heart being harvested and her mother being turned into a soucouyant, also referred to as a duppy, a malevolent spirit in Caribbean folklore. Ti-Jeanne must harness Caribbean spiritual and cultural knowledge and community support to defeat Rudy and to model empathy rather than corruption. Through heterodiegetic narration with variable focalization, Hopkinson's narrative provides heightened understanding of secondary characters' emotions and motivations, while also providing perspective on the larger forces that propel and affect the challenges Ti-Jeanne faces.

Recontextualizing Sexual Violence through Feminist Dystopian Narrative

Butler's and Hopkinson's dystopian worlds reflect what dystopian critic Kirsten Kasia calls "patriarchy on steroids" (1387). While scholars and literary critics have examined the feminist elements in both texts, they have largely overlooked the representation of physical and sexual violence. In *Parable of the Sower,* all characters face a volatile social climate, yet women experience violence and oppression to a much greater extent than men. Physical and sexual violence against women exists both in the gated, middle-class community of Robledo where Lauren lives and in the surrounding area of extreme violence. Lauren's desensitized awareness of the threat of rape reflects her normalization of violence against women both in her community and in the outside world. When in the dangerous streets, Lauren notices a dazed woman who may have "been raped so much she was crazy" (9) and "a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs" (Butler 13).

Despite not living in the street, women in Lauren's allegedly safe community still face physical and sexual violence from both insiders and outsiders. Elderly Mrs. Sims is robbed by thieves, tied up, and raped (22), and a young girl in the community "was 12 when her 27-year-old uncle who had been raping her for years managed to make her pregnant" (Butler 33). Lauren's recording of these stories in her journal features greater disgust, specifically critiquing the community's reaction to the young girl being raped and impregnated: the rapist uncle is encouraged to "go live somewhere else," and the young girl and her new child are a sight of "embarrassment" and neglect (Butler 33). By creating a dystopian world in which violence unequally affects women, especially women of lower socioeconomic status, Butler offers through Lauren's narration a pessimistic view of how other women react to these injustices. Butler's text centralizes feminist "dystopian fear," which Kasai suggests "arises from the

knowledge of our human history of violence and oppression" (1383). I suggest that Butler's depictions of sexual violence against women are not only a prediction of a grave future but also an amplified reflection of women's current positions.

When Lauren faces homelessness, she poses as man to avoid sexual violence and appear more intimidating, which ironically dismantles the social perception that men are stronger than women. Lauren's cross-dressing demonstrates her heightened awareness of gender roles, as she embodies and performs masculinity and femininity as necessary. Butler critiques problematic and restrictive representations of women as weak and dependent: Lauren can be "macho enough to be a guy" (182) and kill if she has to. I suggest that Lauren is limited not because of her sex, but because of how people perceive her as a woman; whether identifying as a woman or posing as a man, Lauren proves to be a resilient and tenacious leader. Through Lauren's narrative, Butler does not suggest that disguising as a man is a sufficient solution to women's heightened threat of sexual violence; rather, Butler's development of Lauren's cross-dressing can be read as a call to action.

While sexual violence is not as widespread in *Brown Girl in the Ring,* Hopkinson's narrative also represents violence against women as more vicious and insidious than violence against men. Unlike Butler, however, Hopkinson also brings into focus the male perpetrator who uses violence towards women to demonstrate and consolidate power and control. Rudy, the man who "rule[s]" (4) the Burn, commits the most atrocious violence in the novel. He drugs his "haggard" (5) maid Melba so that "her volition, seem[s] to be gone" (Hopkinson 28). To demonstrate his extreme power and control over both Melba and the Burn, Rudy "methodically flay[s] [Melba] alive" (135) in front of Ti-Jeanne's ex-boyfriend Tony. This horrifying scene in the narrative focuses on Melba's perfect obedience to the violence, as she does not object even though "her muscles trembled and twitched with reaction from the pain" (135), and she only cries out when Rudy allows her to.

The narration focalizes Rudy's perverted experience, demonstrating the sexual arousal he feels from mutilating a live woman: "Rudy felt the familiar tightening in his crotch that the sense of power always brought him" (Hopkinson 134). Hopkinson develops the sexual violence of this scene through raw description and Rudy's dialogue, as he uses perversely inappropriate terms of endearment, like "sweetness" and "darling" (137), as he commands Melba to turn her skinless neck to the blade of his knife (137). Before bringing her suffering to an end, Rudy tells Melba, "see what does happen when people defy me" (137), yet Melba has been wholly obedient, and her horrifying death is used as an example to terrify Tony and demonstrate Rudy's power.

While both texts represent the sexual and physical violence that women experience, Hopkinson's horrific depiction of violence against women offers a greater criticism of patriarchal oppression. In *Parable of the Sower,* Lauren frequently demonstrates her awareness of the threat of rape and sexual violence, but Butler does not offer the male agents of this violence the same unflinching attention that Hopkinson does. Hopkinson's account of Melba's death centralizes the perpetrator Rudy as a symbol of patriarchal control. I argue that while Butler's handling of sexual violence in her text is significant, Hopkinson achieves greater force and effect by holding readers captive to the violence Melba experiences. Both *Parable of the Sower* and *Brown Girl in the Ring* offer substantial critiques and feminist representations of violence against women and sexual assault. Analyzing the considerable presence of sexual assault in narrative

representations constitutes a call to action in the real world. Through narrative, we can better understand the social inequities we currently face and strive to rectify these injustices.

Intersectional Representations of Black Motherhood

The two narratives also depict black motherhood differently, as *Parable of the Sower* addresses negative representations of crack-addicted black mothers and *Brown Girl in Ring* explores the complex position of black single mothers, both significant social issues in the 1990s, when the novels were published. In arguing for an intersectional narratology with expanded "historical and geographical maps" (24), Lanser asserts that the binary model of gender in the 1980s placed women as a universal group in contrast to men (26), which problematically situates all women in the same position. To support her example and take a more intersectional approach, Lanser questions the assumption that motherhood is a "universal female experience" (27). By comparing the unique portrayals of motherhood that Hopkinson and Butler offer, I examine two complex narrative representations of women emerging at the same time as third-wave feminism.

Literary critic Anna Hinton argues that "Butler published *Sower* in 1993 at the height of the crack epidemic" (447) and that Lauren represents societal anxieties about "drug-addicted black mothers" (Hinton 447), as she is a "drug damaged" (Butler 12) product of "bad black motherhood" (Hinton 446). Hinton explains that Butler's representation of Lauren as a maternal figure, with a disability born of a drug-addicted black mother, can be read as a threat to social hierarchies: Lauren uses her hyperempathy to imagine a new world and mother the birth of a new religion (Hinton 450), redefining the burden of hyperempathy as a gift she uses to create a better future. Lauren controls the narrative by reporting and interpreting her own experiences, "instead of others interpreting them for her" (Hinton 452). Rather than being seen as disadvantaged because of her hyperempathy, Lauren uses her (dis)ability as a way to imagine a world without violence: she asks, "if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? … a biological conscience is better than no conscience at all" (Butler 115). Her reconception of hyperempathy as a conscience redefines her disability as a biological gift. Lauren's narrative imagines a progressive outcome from the consequences of addicted black motherhood, and Hinton notes that this "complex embodiment draws on black feminist and feminist theories" (Hinton 453) to recontextualize negative views of black motherhood.

Brown Girl in the Ring also explores complex representations of black motherhood, as Ti-Jeanne struggles to position herself as a single mother who grew up as an unwanted baby. Hopkinson's narrative resists the stereotype of the naturally "nurturing, doting biological mother" (Anatol 7), as Ti-Jeanne struggles with being a new single parent. I assert that this representation does not position Ti-Jeanne as what critic Anatol calls an "apathetic, even antipathetic, mother" (Anatol 7); instead, Hopkinson depicts motherhood as a difficult task for which women are not necessarily innately suited. By exploring Ti-Jeanne's frustration, the narrative reimagines motherhood as a learned role instead of an inherent biological trait, which destabilizes the implied universality of motherhood.

Early on, Ti-Jeanne articulates "the stress of learning" (Hopkinson 20) how to be a mother, and "guilt burn[s] at her" (33) when she shakes her child. Rather than being apathetic,

as Anatol unfairly concludes, Ti-Jeanne embodies the imperfect mother who is learning to "soothe" (32) her child and "do better" (49). Ti-Jeanne's learning curve is apparent when she later responds to the baby's crying with "rocking and shushing" (150) instead of frustration and shaking. As explained by scholar Romdhani, the unnamed baby is "perceived as a threat to Ti-Jeanne's autonomy" (Romdhani 75) and a source of "shame" (Hopkinson 49), which reflects the real turmoil women are entitled to feel without being labelled as bad mothers. When Ti-Jeanne's own hitherto absent mother Mi-Jeanne enters the story, a reconciliation takes place that demonstrates Ti-Jeanne's maturation as both a daughter and mother. Hopkinson's text is able to explore the dynamic position of Ti-Jeanne as a new mother because the narrative focalizes the observations of other characters outside of Ti-Jeanne's lens. For example, through the observations of the grandmother, the reuniting of Ti-Jeanne and Mi-Jeanne through their shared nurturing of the baby demonstrates that Ti-Jeanne "is learning to reach out a healing hand to others" (147) as both mother and daughter.

In addition to these complexities of learned motherhood, the text also positions Ti-Jeanne as both mother and heroine. Anatol claims that "Hopkinson suggests that the actual physical caretaking of a child and heroism are incompatible" (Anatol 11), but I perceive Ti-Jeanne's maternal position as a motivating factor for her heroism. After witnessing her grandmother die, Ti-Jeanne collapses on the road, only to become refocused by "her aching, milk-swollen breasts" (Hopkinson 159), and she arranges for a neighbour to watch Baby while she goes to battle with Rudy. When Ti-Jeanne is offered freedom through becoming a duppy like her mother had been, she is presented with the possibility of emancipation from her responsibility as a mother. Almost persuaded by flight and freedom in a form "she'd always wanted" (217), Ti-Jeanne eventually choses motherhood and community, and she rejects Rudy's temptations. Baby, along with the community that motivates and supports Ti-Jeanne, symbolizes the future world that Ti-Jeanne battles to improve. Hopkinson's narrative subverts traditionally negative depictions of black single motherhood; Ti-Jeanne's success as a heroine entails a redefined idea of black motherhood.

Empathy and Pro-Social Action

In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren directly acknowledges empathy as an obligation from which she cannot escape, and consequently every decision she makes is motived by empathic reasoning. Comparatively, *Brown Girl in the Ring* incorporates the theme of empathy subtly through the heterodiegetic narration. While Ti-Jeanne does not have a physical imperative to think empathically for her own benefit, she literally sees the experiences of others through visions she experiences when she is in the form of a duppy; she initially rejects these visions but eventually embraces them to become empathic. Empathy, along with empathic reasoning, becomes a significant tool for both protagonists, as they adjust to empathizing with others as what scholar Romdhani calls a "source of power and knowledge rather than as a sign of powerlessness" (85).

Lauren has pro-social motivations to create a "unifying, purposeful life here on earth" (Butler 261), and even before she becomes "one of the street poor" (Butler 156), Lauren begins to imagine a new religion outside the hierarchies of male dominance. When experiencing violence and displacement, she starts her journal entry with the verse "kindness eases Change"

(167), a mantra that symbolizes her dedication to create a world rooted in empathy rather than the violence she currently experiences. Through her hyperempathy, Lauren establishes a philosophy of empathy as a tool to avoid violence and a way to cope with trauma: she explains to her followers that "taking care of other people can be a good cure for nightmares" (Butler 257). Despite putting herself and others at risk, Lauren empathizes with a vulnerable family and invites them to join her group because "they have no natural allies" (207). Lauren's ability to understand and empathize with others gives her strength and compassion as a leader, and she uses this skill to improve situations for herself and others. Lauren's original vulnerability due to her (dis)ability is reframed as a positive force that makes her a resilient and empathic leader.

The presence of empathy in *Brown Girl in the Ring* serves to prevent Ti-Jeanne's zombification: through greater understanding of people's motivations, she refuses to become a duppy-soucouyant and instead defeats Rudy. When attempting to defeat Rudy, Ti-Jeanne is poisoned and enters a temporary, zombified state, which allows her to fully "live the experiences of others, which is an extreme form of empathy" (Romdhani 85). Through the literal seeing of different perspectives, Ti-Jeanne's zombified form allows her what Romdhani calls the "supreme empathy" (85) of becoming her grandmother, her mother's duppy-soucouyant form, and her ex-lover Tony. This extreme empathy is described as an invasion (Hopkinson 219), but it also allows Ti-Jeanne greater understanding of the shortcomings of her family members. Despite these characters being sources of pain and shame for Ti-Jeanne, her temporary adoption of their perspectives grants her enhanced empathy, and she can reconcile her internal conflict and thus refuse Rudy's offer to become a soucouyant with unlimited freedom. Hopkinson's narrative suggests that Ti-Jeanne's ability to empathize allows her to reconnect with her Caribbean spirituality, as she calls down her "oldest ancestors" (126) to become the "Duppy Conqueror" (229). Instead of choosing freedom and flight from the complicated relationships that have caused her intergenerational shame and trauma, Ti-Jeanne adopts an empathic attitude, which gives her the power and knowledge to defeat Rudy and create a better future for her community.

Narrative Empathy, Afrofuturism, and Intersectional Feminist Theory

Lauren's and Ti-Jeanne's capacities for empathy allow them to construct communities and futures that imagine new positions for women through both feminist and Afrofuturist lenses. My analysis and comparison of these texts demonstrate how Butler and Hopkinson use the dystopian with homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration, respectively, to illuminate violence against women, revise representations of black motherhood, and ultimately establish how empathy serves as a significant tool in facing and rectifying oppressive social environments.

Lauren's narration positions readers so close to her perspective that she can reframe, for them, what it is to be a young black disabled woman. Womack explains that women Afrofuturists "make their own standards and sculpt their own lens through which to view the world and the world to view them" (104), which is exactly what Butler does by creating a female protagonist who resists dominant culture and recontextualizes her identity with her own vision. Lauren's ability to take control of her social position through the construction of Earthseed positions her as an activist who strives to overcome the societal oppressions she and others experience. Importantly, her decisions are guided through empathic reasoning and

understanding, and this tool gives her the power to change the way people perceive her. Similar to Butler, Hopkinson positions her protagonist's capacity for empathy as central to her success, although this theme is incorporated through a heterodiegetic narrative that allows readers to understand the larger social implications and forces that affect Ti-Jeanne. This choice of heterodiegetic narration provides a different perspective on the similar issues Lauren faces, as Hopkinson evaluates the positions and perspectives of people beyond Ti-Jeanne.

   Hopkinson's heterodiegetic narration achieves a broader and deeper analysis of the socioeconomic and racialized inequality that exists between the Burn and the suburbs, while Butler's simultaneous homodiegetic narration engages only with Lauren's direct experience. Lauren's narration, on the other hand, illuminates her empathic reasoning to a greater extent than Ti-Jeanne's. Both texts, through their respective narrative techniques, thus represent narrative empathy and intersectional oppression in different ways. These complex texts deserve attention through the lenses of narrative empathy, Afrofuturism, and intersectional feminist theory, as the combination of these approaches contributes to a movement to diversify narrative theory beyond its white Western roots.

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