

THE FUTURE OF BODYMINDS, BODYMINDS OF THE FUTURE

The futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present; it seems entirely possible that imagining different futures and temporalities might help us see, and do, the present differently.—ALISON KAUFER, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*

In response to a series of questions about writing, including the question, “Is there a particular picture of the world which you wish to develop in your writing?,” Octavia E. Butler wrote, “Only the picture of a world, past, present, or future, that contains different races, sexes, and cultures. All too often in the past, sf writers made things easy for themselves by portraying a white, middle class, male dominated universe, even attributing white, middle class, male values to their ‘alien’ races. I am not comfortable writing about such a universe, behaving as though it represented the one true way . . . I want to portray human variety” (Octavia E. Butler Papers, “OEB 2390,” 1978). Butler is known for her ability throughout her corpus of novels and short stories to address social issues in explicit and material ways. Patricia Melzer writes that within “Butler’s work, difference is used as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance . . . She always remains critical of unambiguous and seemingly unproblematic approaches to dealing with difference and power” (*Alien Constructions* 69). In Butler’s futuristic and fantastical worlds, such as that of the *Parable* series, difference is not erased, but addressed directly. Since Butler is one of

the most prominent black science fiction writers, one who also mentored and inspired many other writers from marginalized groups, her work is an important place to explore how black women writers of speculative fiction represent a diversity of bodyminds in the future.

By explicitly representing issues of (dis)ability, race, and gender in the future, Butler's work diverges greatly from many speculative fictional—and especially science fictional—representations of the future. In speculative fiction, visions of the future have traditionally been hopeful and positive, particularly when produced by early writers in the field, most of whom were male and almost all of whom were white. In an early critical study of science fiction, Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin write that “because of their orientation toward the future, science fiction writers frequently assumed that America's major problem in this area—black/white relations—would improve or even wither away” (188). Mark Bould critiques this statement, claiming that by presenting racism as a problem of the past, nonapplicable to the genre's constructed futures, speculative fiction both excludes “people of color as full subjects” and “avoids confronting the structures of racism and its own complicity in them” (177, 80). Similarly, s. e. smith argues that, in “imagining a world that is better for humanity or hypothesizing about the grim consequences of our current society's misdeeds[, speculative fiction writers] can't seem to find a place in their framework for disability rights and dodge the issues by avoiding disability at all” (95). Absence of marginalized people has been common in the history of the genre and has been widely critiqued.

When speculative fiction has addressed issues of privilege and oppression in the imagined future, this has typically occurred in one of two ways. The first is by creating future worlds in which difference is not entirely erased; however, explicit issues of (dis)ability, race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation get displaced onto aliens, robots, and other nonhuman creatures who stand in allegorically for the Other without acting as a direct representation of any specific marginalized group.¹ The second way in which speculative fiction has traditionally addressed privilege and oppression in the future is through stories that take place not in the midst of struggling with the complexity of ableist, sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic oppressions, but rather after such problems have been resolved. For example, in Marge Piercy's much celebrated feminist, speculative-fictional utopian novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, sexism is eradicated by eliminating sex and gender roles, racism is solved by mixing all the races into one, classism

is solved by a socialist structure of shared, equal resources, and ableism is erased by removing or curing all people with disabilities.² Discrimination and oppression based on difference is resolved here and in many speculative fictional futures through the erasure of difference altogether, or what Smith refers to as an “eliminationist ideal” (89). This supposed solution to oppression, De Witt Douglas Kilgore argues, “enshrines white [nondisabled, heterosexual] masculinity, unmarked or troubled by culture . . . as the norm to which all ‘difference’ must assimilate” (231). While multiple forms of difference are erased in much speculative-fictional visions of the future, disability is perhaps the most unquestioned erasure.

In the contemporary United States, the cultural impetus when thinking about the future is to assume that technology will allow people to live longer while remaining stronger, healthier, and simply more (if not hyper-) able. A disability-free future, it seems, is a better future. Feminist disability studies theorist Alison Kafer argues that while this vision of the future is generally understood as positive and hopeful, underlying it are the ableist assumptions “that disability destroys quality of life, that a better life precludes disability, and that disability can and should be ‘fixed’ through technological intervention” (“Debating Feminist Futures” 234). The acceptance of the positive nature of a disability-free future, therefore, stems from the fact that many people cannot imagine the benefits or value of disability to society nor the benefits, value, or possible social contributions of disabled people.

New Wave and contemporary speculative fiction writers, particularly feminist writers and writers of color, have increasingly challenged traditional genre conventions of representing the future as one of sameness by insisting on the presence of marginalized people. These contemporary representations of the future by feminists, people of color, and, increasingly, disabled people tend to be dystopian, or at least less hopeful, than their earlier white male counterparts. This dystopian tendency of marginalized speculative fiction writers is connected to the history of technological, medical, and other scientific abuses of poor, female, nonwhite, and disabled people’s bodyminds, knowledges, and lands. Writers from these groups have less reason to assume a utopian tomorrow and more reason to contemplate the many possible ways that power will be dispersed in our imagined futures.

In this chapter I argue that Butler’s *Parable* series actively resists the concept of a technologically created, disability-free future and its assumed inherent value through the representation of a nonrealist disability called hyperempathy. Unlike representations of a disability-free future which un-

derstand disability as incompatible with a desirable or livable future, the *Parable* books represent a black disabled future heroine and theorize alternative possibilities of bodyminds that have important implications for scholars of (dis)ability, race, and gender collectively.

The *Parable* series (also referred to as the Earthseed novels) includes two texts, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. These books represent the life of Lauren Olamina, a black woman with hyperempathy, and her family and friends. *Parable of the Sower* depicts Lauren as a teenager between the years 2024 and 2027 through her first-person narrative journal entries. During this time Lauren is living in a dystopic California as America's social infrastructure is in decline and her walled-in community is destroyed, causing her to flee with a few other survivors and move north. The book details how Lauren, in the midst of this crisis, develops a belief system she calls Earthseed. She uses this belief system to ground and guide herself and others as they travel in an uncertain and dangerous environment. *Parable of the Sower* ends with Lauren and her small group of companions beginning a new community in northern California called Acorn. *Parable of the Talents* picks up on Lauren's story, but the structure of the novel disperses the narrative voice. In this second novel, Lauren's journals are interspersed with the first-person narratives of her husband, Bankole, her brother, Marc, and her daughter, Asha, depicting their experiences as well as the development of the Acorn community and Earthseed between 2032 and 2090.

Throughout the novels hyperempathy is experienced as disabling and understood as a disability by those characters who have it. Hyperempathy is also mostly understood as a disability by medical professionals and most other characters without hyperempathy. As a result, throughout this chapter I refer to Lauren's hyperempathy as her disability even while discussing how other scholars have interpreted hyperempathy in the novels. Most of the scholars I cite here, however, do not use the term *disability* at all. Instead, they tend to refer to hyperempathy as an affliction, condition, or disease—language that resides in the medical model of disability and is counter to the work of the disability rights movement to understand disability as simultaneously social, relational, and material. I refer to hyperempathy as a disability not only because I am working from a disability studies perspective, but also because differences in bodyminds in speculative fiction must be read within the rules of reality of the text. I use *disability* and *hyperempathy* interchangeably for linguistic variety throughout the chapter and only use other terms when directly quoting an author.

On a basic level, hyperempathy is a congenital disability in which visual and auditory perceptions result in drastic sensations of pleasure or pain without any actual touch or contact with something or someone. Or, as Lauren explains it, “I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel” (*Parable of the Sower* 12). Although doctors in the *Parable* series refer to hyperempathy as an “organic delusion syndrome,” hyperempathy is not exclusively mental (12). Even the term *psychosomatic* does not do this fictional disability justice because the “somatic” of hyperempathy is not singular; rather, it is Lauren viscerally responding to her visual and auditory interpretation of another person’s bodily experience. The way hyperempathy exceeds our understanding of a mental versus physical disability makes using the term *bodymind* especially important in this chapter. As discussed in the introduction to this book, I draw my use of *bodymind* from Margaret Price to reference the ways in which mind and body are not distinct yet connected components of our being, but a single entity. In particular, Price writes that the bodymind is “a sociopolitically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural (power- and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience” (“The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain” 271). Price’s emphasis on sociopolitical circumstances, individual experience, violence, and pain, as she later discusses in the article, is especially important in understanding hyperempathy. My use of *bodymind* here is particularly apropos because Butler’s papers reveal that she was very much aware of this concept in terms of her own life as a person who experienced a variety of health concerns and disability.³ In a journal entry dated June 22, 1969, Butler used the hyphenated term “mind-body” (Octavia E. Butler Papers, “OEB 928”). In a later journal entry dated March 17, 1999, she argued that “dichotomies that become so important to us are false. Mind and body for instance” (Octavia E. Butler Papers, “OEB 1069”). Butler’s engagement with the concept of the *bodymind*—well before it was a theoretical term in disability studies—is clear in her representation of hyperempathy and therefore essential to my reading of the *Parable* series.

The representation of hyperempathy in the *Parable* novels theorizes the possibilities and meanings of bodyminds, especially disabled bodyminds, in a number of important ways which require a change in how we read and analyze these texts and their implications. The series resists preconceived notions about disability, emphasizes the importance of context to understanding a person’s experience of disability, and, finally, challenges the assumed inherently progressive value of a technologically created, disability-free fu-

ture. As a result, this series demonstrates another way that black women's speculative fiction imagines (dis)ability differently—indeed makes us interpret (dis)ability differently—and the benefit of such reimagining to not only theories of (dis)ability, but also theories of race and gender.

In what follows, I first discuss previous scholarly interpretations of hyperempathy, which I refer to as “totalizing” approaches—meaning that these interpretations emphasize clear intelligibility over ambiguity in reading this nonrealist disability. I explain how these interpretations limit understandings of the importance of (dis)ability to both the texts and the larger political and theoretical concerns of the *Parable* series. Second, I provide a close reading of hyperempathy in context in order to underscore why this approach is so necessary in speculative fiction. This second section demonstrates how reading disability in context—within the rules of reality of the texts—opens up new modes of analysis. Having introduced these new modes in regard to the *Parable* series, I then parse out the various theoretical and thematic implications of this particular representation of disability in the future. In this third section, I additionally demonstrate how my disability-focused reading draws attention to issues of the bodymind pertinent to theorizations of race and gender as well. By doing so, I provide further evidence as to how disability studies can provide essential theories and frameworks that benefit black feminist theory and related fields of inquiry. Finally, in the conclusion, I return to the idea introduced in the epigraph of this chapter, which connects our visions of the future to the biases and behaviors of the present. I explore how black women's speculative fiction, and speculative fiction by other marginalized people, finds value and possibility in futures with diverse bodyminds and how such fictional visions of the future can have real-world implications and impact.

Interpreting Hyperempathy: The Limits of Totalizing Approaches

In most discussions of hyperempathy, scholars explain that Lauren feels or experiences the pain and/or pleasure of those around her. This basic symptom-based description of hyperempathy does little to reveal its nuances or implications. This approach also does not prioritize Lauren's personal understanding and experience of hyperempathy beyond its manifestations within her bodymind. Lauren takes a very measured and, at times, ambivalent position regarding her disability, yet critical interpretations of hyperempathy have typically taken one of four totalizing approaches that

present hyperempathy as having a clear meaning and impact. Generally, critics of the *Parable* series tend to ignore hyperempathy as disability entirely, read it as primarily negative, read it as primarily positive, or read it as a metaphor for something not related to disability. Very few scholars have taken the more nuanced approach that Lauren herself seems to embrace and which, I argue, demands changing the rules of interpretation in ways that expand our conceptualization of (dis)ability, especially in regard to its practical, political, and theoretical relationships to race and gender. In this section I will discuss each of the four common totalizing approaches to hyperempathy in order to demonstrate how they reduce the complexity and importance of disability in the series. This will thereby set the stage for my own argument that the texts insist on the contextualized nature of disability and reject cultural assumptions about the value of a technologically created, disability-free future.

The first totalizing approach is to ignore or erase hyperempathy as a disability entirely. There are different ways this occurs. First is when scholars do not mention Lauren's hyperempathy at all.⁴ Second is when critics mention hyperempathy in passing as a character trait of Lauren, but do not include discussion of her disability in their interpretation of the texts. In both cases hyperempathy is understood by the critic to be of minor importance to Lauren's character and to the text as a whole, so much so that it's hardly worth mentioning. Another manifestation of the critical erasure of hyperempathy appears when critics do not register hyperempathy as a disability or outright deny Lauren being disabled. An example of this version of ignoring hyperempathy occurs in an interview with Butler by Juan Williams on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation*. In the interview Butler speaks about the smart pills in *Parable of the Sower*, explaining that Lauren's "mother was addicted to them, and as a result [Lauren] has a birth defect" (quoted in O. E. Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 163).⁵ Williams responds in a fashion that reveals his ableist perspective. He retorts, "Well, hang on a second. What do you mean a birth defect? I think, in fact, she's very smart" (163). Butler replies, "Yes. Oh, I didn't say that she wasn't smart" (163). Here Williams denies that hyperempathy is a disability or "birth defect" because Lauren is smart. I understand such a denial of hyperempathy as disability to be part of the totalizing approach of ignoring hyperempathy because it operates from a related perspective. If, as I contend above, those who do not discuss hyperempathy much or at all understand Lauren's disability as an unimportant detail, then those who refuse to recognize hy-

perempathy as a disability do so because Lauren does not fit stereotypical notions of disabled people and therefore assume she cannot actually be disabled or, more colloquially, readers do not *think* of her as disabled. In both cases, disability is not viewed as a critical part of Lauren's character or essential to our understanding of the series as a whole. As a result, in these interpretations hyperempathy is essentially ignored.

A second approach scholars often take toward hyperempathy is to read it as a disability, which is primarily negative. In this approach scholars either read hyperempathy itself as mostly negative, painful, or burdensome for Lauren or they read Butler's inclusion of disability negatively. Those who view Lauren's disability as primarily negative includes scholars like Melzer, who refers to hyperempathy as an "affliction"; Jeff Menne, who refers to it as a "pathology" and "psychological delusion"; and Teri Ann Doerksen, who reads Lauren as a martyr due to her disability (Melzer, *Alien Constructions* 98; Menne 731, 32; Doerksen 22). Those who read Butler's use or creation of disability as negative include Trudier Harris, who claims that Butler makes Lauren disabled in order to force the reader to sympathize with or pity her, thereby coercing the reader into being forgiving of the fact that Lauren has to kill and does so, according to Harris, in an emotionally detached way (159–61). Collectively, these negative readings of hyperempathy reveal an entrenchment in hegemonic cultural narratives of disability as inherently bad, negative, painful, and difficult, whether the critic is making such claims directly or claiming, like Harris does, that Butler is attempting to play on the affective results of such stereotypes for pragmatic purposes. Either way, negative readings of Lauren's disability tend to do little to confront the stereotypes of disability that the novels actively resist. These negative readings also often do not engage with the ways in which Lauren's particular dystopian context impacts her experience of hyperempathy by increasing exposure to pain—something I will discuss in more detail in my own analysis.

The above types of negative readings of hyperempathy are generally fewer than the positive readings of Lauren's disability. This is likely because Butler is considered a progressive political writer and critics are invested in locating and revealing her work's liberatory potential. The tendency toward positive readings of Lauren's hyperempathy may also stem from what I would call a subtle or passive ableism. Representations of disability tend to provoke emotion, particularly pity or inspiration, and the positive readings of the *Parable* series may be influenced by a liberal compensatory desire to recast disability as "specialness," to incorporate it without actually grappling

with the challenges of inclusion or the negative aspects that can accompany some experiences of disability. Many scholars have read Lauren's disability as something primarily positive. Benjamin Robertson refers to Lauren's hyperempathy as "otherwise enhanced physical abilities," while Kate Schaefer calls it "an odd psychic gift" (Robertson 370; Schaefer 184). Marlene D. Allen refers to hyperempathy as both a "gift" and the "ultimate power" because it is an "innate biological and psychological propensity for sharing and empathy" (1363). Gregory Jerome Hampton positions hyperempathy as an ability rather than a disability, writing, "Although Lauren initially views her ability as a disease, she does learn to appreciate her difference and uses it to help her become a more efficient leader and matriarch by the end of the narrative" (104). Scholars take this primarily positive approach despite the fact that Lauren insists that hyperempathy "isn't some magic or ESP" (*Parable of the Sower* 11). In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren writes, "It is incomprehensible to me that some people think of sharing as an ability or a power" (33). Later in the second book, when Lauren meets Len, another sharer, this sentiment is repeated when Len says, "Some people think sharing is a power—like some kind of extrasensory perception," and Lauren responds, "You and I know it isn't" (341). All of these instances clearly indicate that Lauren and other sharers in the novels reject an inherently positive power/ability kind of reading of hyperempathy because such readings downplay the reality of their pain and vulnerability.

In addition to calling hyperempathy a gift and a power, scholars taking a positive totalizing approach have also emphasized how this disability supposedly makes Lauren a unique leader. Allen writes that hyperempathy makes Lauren "uniquely suited to lead her people out of bondage on Earth," while Isiah Lavender insists that hyperempathy "creates in her a profound sense of compassion . . . [which] grants her the wisdom to lead people" (Allen 1363; Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction* 21–22). Similarly, Sandra Govan writes that Lauren "shows an ability to achieve difficult tasks . . . because of her disability," and Lauren J. Lacey argues that because Lauren "experiences the process of becoming other" through feeling others' pain and pleasure, her "'hyperempathy' makes her uniquely positioned to understand becoming, [and] creates an alternative discourse that answers to dominant power structures and that works from the concept of becoming" (Govan 116, original emphasis; Lacey 390, 91).⁶ These scholarly claims that Lauren is uniquely situated to create the alternative belief system of Earthseed and lead people due to her disability ignore the fact that there are other

sharers in the books who don't survive or don't become leaders like Lauren. Lauren writes that there were once tens of millions of sharers in the world, but that they generally have a "high mortality rate" (*Parable of the Talents* 13, 33). This information makes clear that hyperempathy itself is not inherently something that positions Lauren to become the shaper of the Earthseed belief system. By reading Lauren's disability as *the* reason for her life perspective and choices, these scholars reduce Lauren to her disability alone, and this approach, despite the positive spin, denies the complexity of Lauren's specific experiences which help her become a future leader in contrast to the many other sharers in the text who do not achieve such a position. On the surface, the positive readings of Lauren's hyperempathy seem useful and important for disability studies since they seem to be resistant to the stereotypes of disability to which the negative readings conform, but singularly or predominantly positive readings of hyperempathy are also problematic since they neglect important information about hyperempathy supplied by both Lauren and other sharers in the series. Some of these issues with positive totalizing readings of Lauren's disability are repeated in the metaphorical interpretations of hyperempathy as well.

Due to the nonrealist nature of hyperempathy, some scholars take a purely metaphorical approach to it, thereby obscuring the materiality of disability and its role in the plot, character development, and themes of the series. For example, Peter G. Stillman writes that Lauren "is the living embodiment of the subversion of differences; her hyperempathetic syndrome, where she feels what others feel, symbolizes the suspending of barriers and the creation of unity across them" (28). Taking a different metaphorical interpretation, Jerry Phillips argues that Lauren is "a symbolic negation of the psychopathology of atomized, corporate society" (306). Finally, using strikingly medicalized language, Jim Miller writes, "By turning profound compassion into an illness, Butler defamiliarizes our current indifference toward each other. Rather than something which needs to be healed, perhaps Lauren's 'syndrome' is the right medicine for our present 'compassion fatigue'" (357). Each of these metaphorical readings of hyperempathy understands Butler's choice to make Lauren disabled to be a pragmatic move not intended to demonstrate anything about (dis)ability or ableism, but to make readers think about other issues such as social barriers, cultural indifference, the need for connection, and the sociopolitical value of empathy. While these readings all hold important truths about the implications of Lauren's disability and Butler's authorial choices in constructing hyperem-

pathy as she did, reducing disability to simply metaphor erases the material importance of hyperempathy to the series. As discussed in chapter 1, disability metaphors are not inherently ableist, but they function most effectively and least problematically when used to highlight the relationship of disability to other social issues, oppressions, and identities. Here, metaphorical readings of hyperempathy obscure what this speculative fictional disability might indicate to us about disability in the real world, especially in relationship to race and gender and visions of the future. As a result, this totalizing metaphorical approach to Lauren's disability tends to be reductive and to deflect from the centrality of disability to the *Parable* series.

All of the above scholarly interpretations of Lauren's disability ignore hyperempathy or overemphasize its negative, positive, or metaphorical aspects. These readings limit our understanding of disability in the novels by interpreting hyperempathy in relatively static ways that often ignore or contradict important information about this nonrealist disability provided by Lauren and other sharers in the novels. In the next section, I analyze the representation of hyperempathy in the *Parable* series within the specific context of Lauren's future dystopian world—that is, within the rules of reality of the novels. While my interpretation of the series connects to these previous approaches in various ways, it diverges greatly by insisting on the centrality of disability to the plot, character development, and thematic content of the series.

Disability in Context: A Close Reading

As we already know, hyperempathy is a nonrealist disability from a speculative fiction futuristic world. I argue that Butler's creation of hyperempathy encourages a non-, or at least less, ableist understanding of what disability entails and means particularly due to its nonrealist nature and futuristic setting. The nonrealist nature of hyperempathy, that is, the fact that it is not a disability we recognize in our current reality, disallows readers the ability to overlay preconceived notions about disabilities we recognize from our own world. In an article on the contemporary representation of autism in sentimental narratives, Stuart Murray contends that the increased cultural awareness of autism is tied to the increased representation of autism in contemporary fiction and film ("Autism and the Contemporary Sentimental"). These two cultural phenomena impact each other, creating a cycle of social knowledge in which nondisabled writers and actors supposedly know the

experience of autism enough to recreate it and audience members similarly supposedly know enough about autism to recognize it in a character's behaviors and mannerisms. In the *Parable* series, readers cannot use such cultural knowledge, assumptions, or stereotypes to interpret Lauren and her disability since we have no previous knowledge of hyperempathy to apply. It is unlike anything in our reality thus far. Readers and critics are therefore forced to learn about and understand hyperempathy within the terms of the novels, which are primarily narrated by Lauren herself.

To fully understand Lauren's character and actions we must put her and her disability into the specific social, cultural, and historical context of the novels because one's experience of a disability is not only about physical and mental manifestations, but also about one's environment and the interaction between bodymind and society. Lauren is living in a dystopian California in the mid- to late twenty-first century where social infrastructures such as schools, police, fire services, and utilities are failing; where only the very rich living in walled-in communities can afford clean water, safe food, and effective medical care; where the middle class is nearly nonexistent; and where the growing poor population lives in either dangerous, squatter settlements or in company towns, working for room and board or confined as debt slaves. This context impacts how Lauren experiences her disability and her disability impacts how she experiences and negotiates this context. In addition to the direct bodymind effects of hyperempathy, which produces pain and pleasure for Lauren and other sharers when they witness such sensations in others, hyperempathy also indirectly influences Lauren's growth, behavior, and choices throughout the series. The first portion of my analysis, therefore, relies on close reading and examines how hyperempathy impacts Lauren beyond mere symptoms. I place Lauren's hyperempathy in the context of her dystopian futuristic setting and demonstrate how disability matters both to Lauren's character development and to the plot and themes of the novel overall.

The dystopian context of the *Parable* series is important for understanding Lauren's experience of hyperempathy because, as Lauren writes, "I'm supposed to share pleasure *and* pain, but there isn't much pleasure around these days" (*Parable of the Sower* 12; original emphasis). At the beginning of *Parable of the Sower* Lauren lives "in a tiny, walled fish-bowl cul-de-sac community" where she is "the preacher's daughter" (12). In this setting Lauren is protected from the major violence that occurs outside her community, but her pleasure is also limited—primarily coming from sex, first with a

friend in the community and later with her (eventual) husband, Bankole. Lauren recognizes that the walled community protects her from experiencing the extremes of her disability, and that this protection is somewhat an illusion since the community is highly unprepared to protect itself from attacks, always teetering on the edge of survival. Lauren's brother, Keith, who runs away from home and lives outside of the walled community, confirms Lauren's concern, telling her, "Out there, you wouldn't last a day. That hyperempathy shit of yours would bring you down even if nobody touched you" (110). Indeed, Lauren learns much about the effects of context on her experience of hyperempathy once her walled community is attacked and she must survive in the outside world.

Outside her walled community Lauren quickly learns the necessity of killing a person (or animal) who is in great suffering near her in order to stop sharing the pain in her own bodymind. An injured or dying person can cause Lauren severe pain to the point of unconsciousness—something which would put her in extreme danger of being robbed, raped, and/or kidnapped. The dangers of being around the injured or dying also means that when dealing with hurt friends and loved ones, Lauren knows she may not be able to provide support or protection because she can become just as incapacitated as the injured person. Lauren admits that she may only be helpful to her travel companions for a few good shots when defending from attacks by other groups and then be "useless" afterward due to the pain (251, 78). As a result, Lauren discloses her disability to those who need to know, but is otherwise secretive about it since hyperempathy is not externally visible on the bodymind, but can easily be taken advantage of by others.

An example of such potential abuse is revealed later in *Parable of the Sower* when Lauren learns that sharers, especially children with hyperempathy, are targeted by company town bosses and kidnappers because they are considered easier to control. Company towns are supposed to be safer and more stable. As a result, company towns are theoretically places where people with hyperempathy who lack the security of a walled community might want to go. The knowledge of abuse, however, confirms Lauren's belief that company towns are just revitalized versions of indentured servitude and slavery. In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren comes to learn from personal experience that abuse can further complicate her experience of hyperempathy when she is illegally imprisoned in a Christian America "re-education camp."⁷ In the camp, Lauren learns to expect high levels of pain since prisoners are frequently overworked and lashed with electronic slave collars. Thus

Lauren must endure her own pain as well as that which she shares with the prisoners around her. However, in the context of the “re-education camp” Lauren also learns that even the sharing of pleasure can take on negative and traumatic valences in a dystopian setting. Her first instance of experiencing pleasure in a negative way occurs when she recognizes the sadist pleasure of her captors, referred to as “teachers” in the camp. She writes, “There have been times where I’ve felt the pleasure of one of our ‘teachers’ when he lashed someone. The first time it happened—or rather the first time I understood what was happening, I threw up. . . . it never occurred to me that I had to protect myself from the pleasures of our ‘teachers.’ . . . There are a few men here, though, a few ‘teachers,’ who lash us until they have orgasms” (233). Here Lauren reveals how this new context has made her aware of the need to protect herself from not only pain, but also pleasure that is derived from abusing someone—pleasure that, when shared, sickens her. The particular context of the Christian American camp—an even more dangerous and violent environment within the larger dystopia—produces a new experience of hyperempathy for Lauren that shapes how she negotiates and survives this setting, ideally without revealing her disability to her captors.

Lauren’s sharing of pleasure is made even more negative and traumatic in a second instance during her illegal detainment by Christian America. Not long after being imprisoned in the reeducation camp, Lauren is one of four women taken by their captors at night and raped. She writes, “Of the four of us, only I was a sharer. Of the four of us, only I endured not only my own pain and humiliation, but the wild, intense pleasure of my rapist” (234). These two moments demonstrate how the context of Lauren’s dystopian environment and her specific experience of imprisonment and rape shape her experience of her disability and vice versa. Overall, as Butler succinctly stated in an interview, “This is a rough disability *for her time*” (quoted in O. E. Butler, *Conversations with Octavia Butler* 42; emphasis added). Hyperempathy could theoretically result in more positive experiences of shared pleasure than shared pain, but the context in which Lauren is living makes her experience more prone to pain, abuse, and trauma.

My discussion of hyperempathy in the context of a future dystopian California here might seem to support the negative readings of hyperempathy from the previous section. Indeed, Lauren’s experience of being a sharer in this time and place is highly negative, and yet, Lauren is the heroine of the series, a black disabled woman who becomes the leader of a powerful national belief community. Reading hyperempathy closely must thus entail

understanding not only how Lauren's experience of this disability is impacted by her context, but also the ways in which her disability impacts her negotiation of that context as well.

One impact of hyperempathy is that Lauren is less likely to be violent and produce pain in other people or animals because she feels each act of violence as if she had done the harm directly to herself. Lauren views this as a sort of virtue of herself and other sharers. She cannot comprehend how people without hyperempathy can so easily do violence to one another. Regarding torture specifically she writes, "It's beyond me how one human being could do that to another. If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. They would kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. But if everyone else could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? . . . I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it, and live among them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all" (*Parable of the Sower* 115). In early drafts of this series, Butler's papers reveal that she originally considered making hyperempathy a contagious disease spread by fluid or skin contact. She wrote several drafts and fragments of chapters experimenting with this idea, but ultimately chose to make the disease genetic rather than contagious.⁸ As a result, the ways in which hyperempathy impacts Lauren's experience and understanding of the world cannot be transmitted to others literally via bodily contact, but only intellectually through her faith community of Earthseed.

The tenets of Earthseed are influenced by Lauren's experience of hyperempathy. Some scholars, however, have read hyperempathy as being the exclusive or dominant impetus for Earthseed's development and success. For example, Phillips, noting Lauren's idea about the possibility of giving hyperempathy to people, writes that "in a hyperempathetic world, the other would cease to exist as the ontological antithesis of the self, but would instead become a real aspect of oneself, insofar as one accepts oneself as a social being. Earthseed is the practical ethics of this heightened consciousness of what it means to experience being as, irreducibly, being-with-others" (306). Like the predominantly positive readings of hyperempathy, Phillips's interpretation reduces Lauren, and also Earthseed, to disability alone and ignores the other important influences in Lauren's individual life and larger social context, which cannot be untangled from her experience of her disability. After all, Lauren is not the only person in the text who has hyper-

empathy, but she is the only one to become such a clear leader. Lauren's development and leadership of Earthseed is influenced by the fact that she grew up a precocious, well-educated black girl from a middle-class background. Lauren was also the oldest child in her family, always responsible for others, including other children in the walled community. Lauren served as a teacher for the youngest children in the neighborhood while her stepmother, who ran the community school, taught the older kids. This personal history influences Lauren's development and cannot be easily or clearly separated from how she is influenced by her experience of hyperempathy. It is important to read Lauren's creation and leadership of Earthseed in the context of the totality of her life and intersectional identities as a black disabled woman from an educated middle-class background. Hyperempathy is not the sole reason for Lauren becoming such a prominent figure by the end of the novels. That said, it is possible and desirable to read Lauren's disability as strongly influencing her development of the specifics of the Earthseed faith.

The influence of hyperempathy is particularly apparent in two of the primary tenets of Earthseed: adaptation and change. Sharers are forced to adapt to the unruly sensations of their bodyminds and to change their relationship to the world in order to protect themselves from harm. As Lauren notes, "Sharers who survive learn early to take the pain and keep quiet. We keep our vulnerability as secret as we can. Sometimes we manage not to move or give any sign at all" (*Parable of the Talents* 33). Although there is no direct parallel between hyperempathy and any contemporary realist disability, there is a definite connection between hyperempathy and chronic pain. In her discussion of pain and theories of transcendence, Susan Wendell writes how she has learned to recognize her chronic pain as "meaningless" pain, that is, pain without an exact cause or problem which can be attended to or fixed (173). This is not exactly the case for hyperempathy, since witnessing severe pain can cause real injury for a sharer, but Wendell insists that by coming to understand pain as meaningless she is able to free herself from thinking about pain to pay attention to other things, to undergo "a reinterpretation of bodily sensations so as not to be overwhelmed or victimized by it" (173). In the series, Lauren has the ability to focus, pay attention, and do work while in pain, an adaptation with living *with* pain or the possibility of pain. Specifically, Lauren writes that she has learned to handle higher levels of pain than most people without visibly reacting, but as a result she is also sometimes read as seeming "grim or angry" while trying to mask pain (*Par-*

able of the Sower 13). On an individual level, therefore, hyperempathy helps Lauren recognize the value of adapting, and this then gets translated on a more communal, species, and abstract level in the values of the Earthseed communities.

Connections between the tenets of Earthseed and disability are also evident in terms of larger disability rights and disability cultural values. Concepts such as adaptation and change can be found in both the Americans with Disabilities Act and the processes of universal design.⁹ The Americans with Disabilities Act, which was passed in 1990, just three years before the publication of *Parable of the Sower*, requires accommodations for people with disabilities in areas such as employment and public transportation. The law has necessitated the adaptation of many buildings to include accessible features like ramps and push buttons to open doors. Similarly, universal design—originally an architectural concept that has since expanded into areas like education—seeks to create spaces and environments that are accessible to as many people as possible. Price argues that accessibility is a process not a product, something which is never done—thus the emphasis in universal design is on frequent, contextual, and relational adaptation and change based on who is present (*Mad at School* 88–102). We see similar emphasis on contextual and relational adaptation and change within the Earthseed communities, which encourage people to contribute to the community in the ways they are most talented. Earthseed communities like Acorn also make all decisions on a communal basis, allowing everyone to express their needs, desires, and concerns before taking a vote.

My interpretation of hyperempathy in the *Parable* series demonstrates the complex interaction between (dis)ability, individual lives, and social contexts. Lauren's hyperempathy impacts her in material ways. Often her dystopian context exacerbates the negative effects of her disability, and yet, there are clear ways in which hyperempathy makes Lauren an admirable person within her dystopian setting and impacts how she navigates her world, including her creation of Earthseed. One of these statements is not prior to or more important than the other; rather, Lauren's disability and her context mutually inform her experience and understanding of the other. This close reading of hyperempathy in context demonstrates that totalizing approaches that seek to understand hyperempathy as primarily positive, negative, or metaphorical do not do justice to the complexity of Lauren's experience of this nonrealist disability. Rather than simply applying our contemporary realist assumptions about what disability means or entails,

the *Parable* series encourages readers and critics alike to read closely and understand this disability in its physical, mental, social, and environmental contexts. This is particularly due to the nonrealist nature of hyperempathy and the speculative fictional futuristic context of the series overall. The interactions between Lauren's experience of hyperempathy, her dystopian future world, and her behaviors and choices within that world—especially in regard to Earthseed—demonstrate the importance of disability to the texts. This contextualized reading of hyperempathy also sets the stage for my arguments about how the series resists the assumed value of a technologically created, disability-free future, a resistance that has important race, gender, and class implications as well.

Resisting a Technologically Created, Disability-Free Future

In addition to the role of disability in shaping plot and character development in the *Parable* series, there are larger thematic, political, and theoretical implications of hyperempathy that challenge the cultural assumption that a technologically created, disability-free future is an inherently desirable, positive, and achievable future. I argue that the representation of hyperempathy resists this assumption through depictions of the unpredictable nature of future technology and the possibility of disability-related pleasure. The *Parable* series is an example of what Kafer refers to as a crip vision of the future, a theory which suggests “that disability cannot ever fully disappear, that not everyone craves an able-bodied future with no place for bodies with limited, odd, or queer movements and orientations” (“Debating Feminist Futures” 236). Butler's crip vision of the future also has important implications for and intersections with issues of race, gender, and class. Yet my argument here is strongly based on a contextualized reading of hyperempathy as disability in the *Parable* series. This section therefore also demonstrates how a disability-focused analysis can lead to broader theoretical discussions concerning other social vectors of power.

Butler's construction of hyperempathy in a future dystopian California challenges the notion that a technologically created, disability-free future is an inherently good future. Recall that the notion of a technologically created, disability-free future assumes that disability prevents the possibility of a full and valuable life, that technology can and should be used to “fix” or “cure” all disabilities, and that the eradication of all disabilities (and thus all disabled people) is as an unquestionably positive aspect of what technology

can do for humankind in the future. This sort of representation of disability in the future is common in speculative media and can be found in popular films such as *Avatar* and *Source Code*, as well as the acclaimed science fiction novel *The Ship Who Sang* by Anne McCaffrey, all of which represent disabled people significantly enhanced—and essentially erased as visible figures—through technology in the future. The *Parable* series resists this trend in speculative media that assumes the positive nature of a technologically created, disability-free future by representing disabled people existing in the future, particularly in the case of Lauren as a black, disabled, woman protagonist and future leader.

When analyzing the *Parable* series, it is important to note the position of these texts as critical dystopias.¹⁰ Kafer argues that in contemporary American culture, dystopian representations of the future are often based on the proliferation of disability, understanding this proliferation as a primary sign of how the future and future uses of technology have gone awry (“Debating Feminist Futures” 223). Critical dystopias, however, present a dystopian, even apocalyptic future, in order to comment on the problematic elements of the present and to suggest that if things do not change, then such a future is possible. At the same time, critical dystopias present the hope of change, of a different, more utopian future if the present problems are addressed and behaviors altered. As a critical dystopia, the *Parable* series does not present a negative future based on the proliferation of disability; rather, it presents a dystopian future that includes the proliferation of disability, without representing disability as inherently negative. There are two key ways that hyperempathy in particular allows the *Parable* series to include disability in its dystopian future without falling into the stereotypical traps of reading disability primarily or exclusively as loss or suffering. First, it does so by revealing the unpredictable nature of technology, and second, by insisting on the possibility of disability-derived pleasure.

In speculative fiction, technology is most often presented as something that enhances human life and produces more abilities and powers, rather than as something which produces disability or which reduces or alters ability in a way that is not ultimately understood as positive and powerful. Perhaps this is why critics tend to read Lauren’s disability so positively as a “power” despite the fact that Lauren does not understand her hyperempathy that way. Melzer writes that in contrast to “paranoid rejections of post-human subjectivity” by “Marxist and feminist critiques that focus on bodies alienated by technology . . . queer sf erotica celebrates bodies and

sexualities that are enabled and enhanced through technology (“And How Many Souls Do You Have?” 177). Melzer here takes a primarily celebratory, posthumanist approach to technology, viewing it as that which enables and enhances bodyminds, pleasures, and quality of life and understanding the representation of technology in speculative fiction as a challenge to notions of a “natural” unadulterated body. In her critique of posthumanism, Sheryl Vint makes a related argument, contending, “Technological visions of a post-embodied future are merely fantasies about transcending the material realm of social responsibility. . . . The ability to construct the body as passé is a position only available to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working-class) bodies as the norm. This option does not exist . . . for those whose lives continue to be structured by racist, sexist, homophobic, and other bodily-based discourses of discrimination” (*Bodies of Tomorrow* 8–9). Scholars and writers of science fiction, therefore, are often divided on the radical possibilities and limits of technology. The independent documentary, *Fixed: The Science Fiction of Human Enhancement*, discusses the various ethical concerns involved in the belief in and pursuit of continuous technological enhancement of human bodyminds by posthumanists, especially in relationship to disability and the future of disabled people. These ethical issues include financial access, continually increasing competition, and reduction of individual bodymind choice when technological enhancement possibilities become requirements. As *Fixed* suggests, technology is neither benign nor objective, but rather is created and used within particular social and historical contexts of privilege and oppression.

Butler effectively demonstrates the ambivalent, unpredictable, and contextual nature of technology in the *Parable* series. In the novels, gasoline vehicles are rare and fairly useless, while water sanitation tablets and guns, including outlawed military-grade weapons, are essential for survival. The downfall of the public education system means that educated and trained doctors and nurses are few and far between. As a result, advanced medical technologies are inaccessible to all but the very rich because of both finances and the dearth of trained professionals who can operate them. The poor end up in company towns or as debt slaves with new technology like electronic slave collars used to keep them submissive and controlled, while the rich spend the bulk of their time in virtual-reality rooms, having incredible, pleasurable experiences as the real world around them collapses. Perhaps most important, however, is how Butler’s representation of hyperempathy challenges the notion that technology which prevents, reduces, or

cures disability provides an automatically positive move toward a disability-free future.

In the series, hyperempathy is the result of an individual's parents' (or grandparents', since hyperempathy is hereditary) abuse of the drug Paracetco, a designer "smart pill" intended for the treatment of Alzheimer's, but that has been used by college and graduate students to increase concentration and productivity (*Parable of the Talents* 13). Since new pharmaceutical creations are forms of technology, the representation of hyperempathy's origin therefore demonstrates how a technology intended to cure one known, realist disability—when misused by the public—unintentionally creates a new disability.¹¹ In "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future," published in *Essence* magazine in 2000, Butler shares a story about going to her doctor to discuss unwanted side effects of a new medicine he had prescribed her. The doctor responds by telling Butler that he can give her a new drug to counteract the side effects of the first drug, stating that this second drug has no side effects whatsoever. Butler writes, "I realized that I didn't believe there were any medications that had no side effects. In fact, I don't believe we can do anything at all without side effects—also known as unintended consequences" ("A Few Rules for Predicting the Future" 166). Butler then closes this portion of the essay with a quotation from *Parable of the Sower*.

Through the origins of hyperempathy, Butler demonstrates how modern technology can have unpredictable effects, particularly technologies applied to human bodyminds. Such a speculative fictional representation is not far from impossible given the incredible rate of prescription drug consumption in contemporary American culture and our increasing interest in genetic testing, selection, and manipulation of embryos. The representation of hyperempathy suggests, in its critical dystopian form, that we cannot know in advance what our widespread cultural use of pharmaceutical treatments, genetic alterations, and other disability-preventing/curing technologies might have on our bodyminds in the long run, let alone on the bodyminds of future generations. Butler's papers reveal that she planned to extend this theme in the unfinished third book in the series, often referred to as *Parable of the Trickster*. Drafts, notes, and outlines for this text show Butler was exploring the idea of having an Earthseed community travel to start a new colony on a planet in another solar system. When the community members arrive, people begin to experience different forms of disablement, which vary from draft to draft, including blindness, epilepsy, paralysis, and hallucinations. The idea that she continued to experiment with, based on these

drafts, outlines, and notes, was that either the technology used to keep the Earthseed community members alive on the trip, or the toxins in the air of the new habitable planet, caused these changes, and the community must learn to live with their altered bodyminds.¹²

Butler's engagement with the effects of technology in the future is not simply limited to (dis)ability, but also has important material intersections with issues of race, gender, and class. When imagining a disability-free future perpetuated by technological advances that will supposedly prevent congenital disability and "fix" or "cure" all acquired disabilities, it is important to ask, who will have access to these advanced medical technologies and who will not? On whose bodyminds will new and experimental drugs and devices be tested? Who will perform the labor to extract raw materials for and construct these new technologies? Who will benefit the most and who will be barred from participation? If the history of medical experimentation such as the Tuskegee experiments or the work of Dr. Marion Sims tells us anything, people of color, women, working-class people, and people in poverty will benefit the least from technological advances and will be most at risk for harm in the development, production, and consumption of new technologies.¹³

In the *Parable* series, Butler emphasizes that technology is neither inherently liberatory nor destructive. In a journal entry dated April 23, 1999, Butler writes about this directly, stating, "Technology isn't good or bad. It's part of who we are, part of what we do. It's how we us[e] it is [w]hat matters, of course" (Octavia E. Butler Papers, "OEB 1069"). Technology does not have inherent value; rather, it is how we as a culture use, misuse, and make available technologies that produces technological enhancements and/or harm. Further, the line between enhancement and harm is not always clear—nor are the two mutually exclusive. Enhancement for whom and harm to whom? What kind of enhancement and how much? What kind of harm and how much? As Butler writes, "Consequences may be beneficial or harmful. They may be too slight to matter or they may be worth the risk because the potential benefits are great, but the consequences are always there" ("A Few Rules for Predicting the Future" 166).

Technology, the *Parable* series asserts in the face of the ideal of a technologically created, disability-free future, is an ambivalent cultural tool which is subject to both use and abuse, availability and unavailability, and a variety of unintended consequences. Hyperempathy is used as a primary example of this position on technology. As a result, Butler encourages readers to un-

derstand that one's critical position in relation to technology need not be either purely celebratory or, in Melzer's words, "paranoid rejection" ("And How Many Souls Do You Have?" 177). Instead, we can evaluate particular technologies within specific contexts of creation and use. We can do so in solidarity with people with disabilities, people of color, the working class, the poor, and others who are more likely to participate in the creation and testing of such technologies while being less likely to be the beneficiaries of the results of such developments. Butler's published and unpublished writings argue that technology guarantees neither a disability-free future nor any other supposedly desired outcome since we cannot predict its long-term effects, especially when it comes to biomedical technology. In particular, the *Parable* series demonstrates how marginalized groups, especially people of color and the poor, are less likely to have access to healing/curing technologies and are much more likely to be the targets of destructive technologies of violence and war.

The suggestion that we cannot know in advance what our impulse toward a technologically created, disability-free future might lead to may seem problematically foreboding because it potentially suggests that the problem of disability-prevention technologies is that they might simply create more disability. However, the second way that the representation of hyperempathy resists our cultural idealization of a technologically created, disability-free future is through the representation of disability-related pleasure. Butler's creation of hyperempathy insists on pleasure as an inherent aspect of the experience of this disability, a type of pleasure that nonsharers can never experience. For example, Lauren states that when having sex, "I get the guy's good feeling and my own" (*Parable of the Sower* 12). During her early travels with her friends Harry and Zahra, Lauren also shares their pleasure when they have sex near her during their watch, writing, "I got caught up in their lovemaking. I couldn't escape their sensation" (200). Later, when she meets Bankole, Lauren again discusses sharing pleasure in sex, explaining, "Best of all, he took a lot of uncomplicated pleasure in my body, and I got to share it with him. It isn't often that I can enjoy the good side of my hyperempathy. I let the sensation take over, intense and wild" (266). While these moments of Lauren's shared pleasure are few in comparison to the many representations of shared pain, they are incredibly important to Butler's representation of disability in the future. The representation of disability-related pleasure in the *Parable* series shifts the ableist ways in which our culture typically understands disabled bodyminds as both nonsexual and as always more dif-

difficult and limiting than nondisabled bodyminds. Importantly, Butler does this without making Lauren come across as magical or as the perpetually overcoming, superpowered supercrip.¹⁴

Butler's representation of pleasures specific to hyperempathy aligns in many ways with the experience of some people with disabilities who find specific pleasures with and through their disability, such as the use of residual limbs or "stumps" for penetration or erotic stimulation. Wendell writes that if "people's genitals are numb or paralyzed, they may discover things about the nature of intimacy and sexuality that remain unknown to people who can participate in cultural obsessions with goal-oriented, genital sex" (69). Despite the fact that Lauren has few opportunities in the texts to experience the pleasurable aspects of hyperempathy—due to her context, not her disability—the representation of pleasure produced by and through disability rather than *despite* disability represents a critical aspect of Butler's cripper vision of the future. This representation not only allows oppressed people the possibility of pleasure in the face of difficult circumstances and injustice, but it also suggests that pleasure may arise specifically in the context of or as a result of different bodyminds or experiences. That is, Lauren's sharing of pleasure stems on a material level from her hyperempathy, but her relishing and appreciation of that pleasure also comes from the fact that she has experienced so much pain, and she knows how precious these moments of pleasure truly are in the context of her environment. I will return to and say more about the importance of pleasure in the context of oppression in the conclusion of this book.

Through the representation of unpredictable effects of technology and the possibility of disability-related pleasure, the *Parable* series adds to a broader theoretical understanding of the limits of and problems with the uncritically accepted notion of a technologically created, disability-free future as an inherently positive goal. These disability-based theorizations have additional important implications for issues of technological (ab)use and access in relation to racial/ethnic minorities, women, and people in poverty.

Conclusion

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are prime examples of how black women's speculative fiction can create alternative possibilities and meanings of bodyminds in ways that require attention to the context

and relationship of (dis)ability, race, and gender in interpretation and analysis. Lauren's hyperempathy has often been either ignored as a nonessential part of her subjectivity or read in totalizing positive, negative, and metaphorical fashions. Such readings of hyperempathy, while often attentive to important aspects of Lauren's disability and experience, tend to overemphasize its power, pain, or impact on Lauren's life trajectory. The series demands a more contextualized approach to its complex and generative representation of disability, which challenges cultural assumptions about the supposedly inherent value of a technologically created, disability-free future. Such a disability studies-grounded approach then yields a reading of the series that also has important thematic, political, and theoretical connections with issues of race, gender, and class in regard to technology and the future.

I began this chapter with an epigraph from Kafer which reads, "The futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present; it seems entirely possible that imagining different futures and temporalities might help us see, and do, the present differently" (*Feminist, Queer, Crip* 28). The first half of this epigraph suggests that depictions of the future can be a reflection of what we value and desire. Speculative fictional representations of the future dominated by nondisabled, white, straight men make clear what is most desirable in the mainstream. But black women writers of speculative fiction as well as other writers of color, women writers, and disabled writers often use this genre to explore how the diverse bodies oppressed people value, desire, and inhabit might continue to exist in future worlds, even as hegemonic forces attempt to literally write us out of these futures.

We see writers from marginalized groups creating diverse visions of the future in recent collections such as *Accessing the Future*, which features stories by disabled writers about disabled people in the future, and *Octavia's Brood*, which features speculative fictional stories by writers working in social justice movements. The editors of *Octavia's Brood*, Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, refer to this kind of writing as visionary fiction. Visionary fiction, brown explains, is that which "explores social issues through the lens of sci-fi; is conscious of identity and intersecting identities; centers those who have been marginalized; is aware of power inequalities; is realistic and hard but hopeful; shows change from the bottom up rather than the top down; highlights that change is collective; and is not neutral—its purpose is social change and societal transformation" ("Outro" 279). Butler's *Parable* series is an example of visionary fiction. Collectively

her body of work inspired the editors of *Octavia's Brood* to work with activists, many of whom did not previously consider themselves writers, to create the collection. Imarisha and Brown's concept of visionary fiction connects with the second portion of the Kafer epigraph, which suggests that imagining different futures might impact the way we behave in the present. As Imarisha writes, "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction" ("Introduction" 3). Imagination, representations, and the real world influence each other cyclically. As authors and activists imagine better futures, they create representations of that future—in words, in text, in images—which influence people to not merely hope for and believe in such futures, but work for them as well. They open up for us new ways of being in the world that may not yet exist, but could.

Butler was particularly aware of how, though a disparaged genre, speculative fiction can be incredibly important for marginalized people. In response to the question "What good is science fiction to Black people?" she rhetorically asks, "What good is any literature to Black people? What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction?" (*Bloodchild and Other Stories* 134–35). Butler understood that representation matters and can have real-world implications and impacts, and she sought to do that with her work. As she wrote in one of her notebooks, "I don't want to write *about* what's wrong with us. I want to help right the wrongs. Through my writing I will help. Perhaps I can leave something 'permanently' useful behind" (Octavia E. Butler Papers, "OEB 3180," 1982–83). For her many fans who mourn her far-too-early death, it is incredibly clear that she left us so much to use in our lives and imaginations.

Butler's particular influence on the imaginations, futures, and self-images of many people, especially Black women, was documented on Twitter in the summer of 2016, shortly after the tenth anniversary of her death. Using the hashtag #BecauseOfOctavia, people shared what happened in their lives because of Butler's writing or influence, such as "#BecauseOfOctavia & the futures she created with her speculative fiction especially, I dared to dream bigger, aspire higher out of comfort zone," "#BecauseOfOctavia I grew up reading science fiction and always understood the genre to be a forum to produce calls to action," and "#BecauseOfOctavia I believe I have the power

to sculpt and write and speak my future into being.”¹⁵ Truly, representation matters and visionary fiction can be powerful—and this is exactly what Butler hoped for and believed in as well.

On August 2, 1983, shortly after her home was robbed, Butler ended a letter to a friend with the following sentiments, “I’ve got to get back into my writing. All this damned reality is getting to me. I can create a better world than this!” (Octavia E. Butler Papers, “OEB 4115,” 1983). For Butler, creating a better world in her writing did not mean making a perfect world. It did not mean utopia. She was far too practical and pessimistic for that. But she believed a better world was clearly possible. In the *Parable* books Lauren is a young, black, disabled woman who manages to not merely survive but to create a belief system and lead a community that brings together and helps thousands in the midst of chaos. As a result, this series is one example of how a better future can include those of us whose lives, bodyminds, and perspectives are often devalued and discounted.

More specifically, Butler’s critical and contextualized representation of technology and diverse bodyminds in the future in the *Parable* series is fostered by and through her representation of hyperempathy. This nonrealist disability resists the application of contemporary disability stereotypes and emphasizes the importance of context by having no real-world equivalent. A close reading of hyperempathy in context reveals its broader thematic, political, and theoretical resistance to the notion of a technologically created, disability-free future as an obviously positive and desirable future. Through Lauren and hyperempathy, Butler suggests that technology is neither inherently good nor predictable; that disabled, poor, and racialized people are least likely to benefit from advanced technologies yet are more likely to be victims of technological abuse; and that disability itself can produce experiences, perspectives, and even pleasures that are useful and desirable. The visionary representation of the future in the *Parable* series is not a disability- or even oppression-free one. Instead, Butler represents a future in which systems of privilege and oppression continue to operate and impact bodyminds. This speculative fictional future stands in stark contrast to both traditional speculative fiction futures and to our more general contemporary cultural assumptions about the future in the United States. As a critical dystopia and visionary fiction, the *Parable* series presents readers with a worst-case-scenario future, but does so in order to critique contemporary practices, present areas of hope, and theorize possibilities for positive change. From these texts, we can further understand how black women’s

speculative fiction can provide new and complex representations that challenge ableist, racist, and sexist assumptions about bodyminds and societies in the future. As I have suggested above, this kind of representation, imagining a future for ourselves and people like us, also truly matters in intellectual, emotional, psychological, and material ways. In the next chapter I continue to explore how speculative fiction can challenge ableist, racist, and sexist assumptions of the bodymind, but there I shift the focus to fantasy texts and their nonhuman characters. I explore how this form of nonrealism can challenge cultural assumptions by altering the meanings and boundaries of the categories of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality in the first place.