

Finding Footholds in the Abyss: Crisis, Cripistemologies, and Radical Care in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

Introduction: The contemporary moment as a time of crisis and a reimagining care.

The contemporary moment is a time of a largely unacknowledged and minimized public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, which is entangled with many other problems and crises. The COVID-19 pandemic is an important contributing factor to the state of precarity that we live in, as it continues to kill and disable people globally. Yet governments, public health agencies, and media sources perpetuate the idea that the pandemic is over and COVID-19 is now only a matter of individual risk and responsibility.

A total of 1,198,416 people have died from COVID-19 in the United States since January, 2020 (CDC). About 68,117 of those people died after the United States' Public Health Emergency ended and the federal government began unwinding COVID-19 protections and measures for greater access to healthcare (CDC). A Household Pulse Survey conducted in 2024 by the National Center for Health Statistics showed that more than 17% of U.S. adults had experienced Long Covid, and 5.5% were currently experiencing Long Covid (NCHS). The COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing mass-death and mass-disabling event. This is still a crisis, there is a risk of developing Long Covid for everyone each time someone is infected. There is no way of implementing protections or recommendations designed to protect "the vulnerable" while everyone else gets back to normal. We are all vulnerable - anyone can develop Long Covid regardless of health status or history - and there is no returning to normal without allowing preventable death and long-term illness. The COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of any adequate,

continued response to it by governments and institutions is a major contributor to the precarious, disabling conditions of living in the U.S. and elsewhere.

The failures of U.S. federal and state governments and public health departments to respond robustly to COVID-19 spread, or to continue necessary measures, has rendered some people's lives more vulnerable to long-term illness, death, and other negative impacts of infection. The words of governments, public health agencies, and others given authority have sought to condition the public into accepting that the only reasonable way for the United States to respond to COVID-19 is to accept high levels of transmission and illness as unavoidable and get back to "normal". Returning to "normal", often said to mean abandoning policies and guidelines intended to slow viral spread, has meant immense violence as governments knowingly expose their populations to a dangerous virus and downplay the resulting death and disablement. Practicing radical care can allow people to better endure the precarity of largely unmitigated viral spread, and all of the related crises, structural failings, and acts of neglect that are perpetuating it or occurring alongside it.

The adoption of an individualized view of the virus by those in power and most of the population has exacerbated and justified the public health crisis. Embracing and practicing a radical imagining of care can combat this deadly individualism. Radical care is something you do for yourself while considering the relations in which you are situated, or you do with others to meet the needs of those neglected by governments or other institutions (Hobart 5). To allow radical care to flourish would threaten the status quo of the neoliberal, capitalistic state. This is a status quo in which public health practices must not be implemented in a way that might disrupt the running of a "functional society", in CDC Director Rochelle Walensky's words during an interview on shortened isolation guidance (Shapiro).

Hyperempathy Syndrome as Disability in *Parable of the Sower*

The novel *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler centers around Lauren Oya Olamina, a Black teenage girl living with her family in a walled-off neighborhood outside Los Angeles in 2024. She lives in a dystopic version of the United States in which social and governmental institutions are collapsing, the impacts of climate change are disastrous, and wealth and social inequality has soared. Lauren has a fictional congenital disability in which her visual and auditory perceptions of other people's sensations result in intense sensations of pleasure or pain. The novel's representation of this non-realist disability emphasizes the importance of context in understanding someone's experience of disability.

Hyperempathy can be considered a disability because of the way it limits or impairs a person's abilities and the context in which Lauren and other people with the condition, also called sharers, live in. The intense sensations that Lauren feels when she perceives others' sensations, most often pain, temporarily impair or threaten to impair her abilities, including immobilizing her and making her lose consciousness. Lauren explains her hyperempathy at the beginning of the novel, "I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel" (Butler 12). Although doctors classify it as "an organic delusional syndrome" and her father suggests she can simply not give in to it, she asserts that she "can't do a thing about my hyperempathy" (Butler 12). She doesn't hold any false notions that she can overcome her hyperempathy or somehow completely ignore these sensations. She views her hyperempathy as a disabling condition, something she has to live with and find ways to manage the impacts of. Throughout the novel, Lauren is acutely aware of how vulnerable her hyperempathy could make her and of how it could impede her ability to protect her friends. The world around her is full of pain and

death due to prolific physical and sexual violence, diminished labor laws and slavery, environmental disasters, lack of healthcare, and overall state neglect and oppression. This reality contributes to the disabling nature of hyperempathy because she is likely to encounter pain, often unexpectedly, and the consequences of being temporarily impaired can be deadly in many situations.

This essay considers hyperempathy syndrome to be a disability based on a more expansive definition of disability that considers how context influences a person's experience of disability. Lauren's disability defies clear, neat categorization under the medical model of disability, which posits disability as a purely individual, medical matter. Instead this non-realist disability reflects an understanding of disability as "simultaneously social, relational, and material", as theorized in the disability rights movement (Shalk 88). The nature of hyperempathy means it embodies this conception of disability in unique ways, such as how sharers only experience impairment due to someone else's pain and how larger sociopolitical factors that lead to human suffering impact how they experience their disabilities.

In the chapter "The Future of Bodyminds, Bodyminds of the Future" in *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, Sami Shalk draws on the work of Margaret Price in using the word bodymind to discuss the significance of Lauren's hyperempathy. This term is a way of referring to a person's being that acknowledges the "ways in which mind and body are not distinct yet connected components of our being, but a single entity" (Shalk 89). Hyperempathy as a fictional impairment challenges conceptions of the mind and body as separate entities, as it can not be categorized as solely physical or mental in nature (Shalk 89). The sensations are triggered by her senses and her mind's perceptions of what another person is feeling, yet they are felt viscerally within all of her being. This non-realist

disability doesn't allow the reader to apply preconceived assumptions about disability to its representation, instead revealing how context and larger social, political, and material factors affect how people experience disability.

Hyperempathy Syndrome and Cripistemologies

Lauren's experience of living with hyperempathy syndrome informs how she thinks about and responds to the enormity of the ever-worsening state of the environment and human society. She is able to imagine possible futures that are even more uninhabitable than the present, and not retreat into denial or hopelessness, instead considering what she and others can do to survive and eventually try to build a better world.

The term "cripistemology", coined by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer in a 2013 issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, can be used to analyze Lauren's knowledge and ways of knowing. Johnson and McRuer describe cripistemologies as "forms of 'prohibited knowledge' that emerge out of the experience of disability", taking a broad view of what it means to experience disability that includes being in relation to a disabled person (Whatcott 2). Lauren develops cripistemologies from her experience of living with hyperempathy syndrome that allow her to grapple with the severity and uncertainty of the interconnected crises surrounding her, while maintaining a sense of hope. Through her Earthseed beliefs, she imagines a different future for herself and others, in which she builds a community based on principles radically different from the apathy and trust in government and capitalist systems of many in the walled community.

The gated community she grows up in represents able-bodied, dominant ways of living and being together. It is a socially fractured community that fails to truly protect or care for each

other beyond individual biological families, allowing for violence to occur in the neighborhood, including the rape of a child. What Lauren knows and believes to be true, including her Earthseed tenants, goes against this way of living together. Her beliefs balance accepting dire, unpredictable realities with a sense that people must build community and work together to shape how change affects their lives.

A Crip View into the Abyss

In a community where most adults believe stability and the status quo will be restored by government or industry leaders, Lauren's ideas about community resiliency challenge social norms. Early in the novel, Lauren shares her thoughts about what her community should be doing to prepare themselves in case they are forced out of their walled neighborhood to Joanne, a friend her age. Her father finds out and reprimands her for what he characterizes as "scare talk" (Butler 64). He tells her that if she scares others and "nothing happens, they lose their fear, and you lose some of your authority with them" (Butler 65). He assumes that when someone is teaching or sharing ideas, the person teaching is seeking authority over the other person in order to achieve some sort of objective. This reflects a patriarchal view of how knowledge is imparted, from a more knowledgeable and powerful, likely male, figure to a passively receiving audience. His emphatic refusal of Lauren's desire to discuss this with their community also suggests that he does not want to disturb the way the community operates. He tells Lauren that she doesn't "make decisions for this community", even though she just wants the community to talk about and learn survival skills (Butler 64). He believes that any decisions that might affect how the neighborhood operates should be made by him or other adults. What she is suggesting could also cause members of the community to doubt her father's strategies for protecting the

neighborhood, mainly training everyone to use guns to protect themselves and their property. He sees protecting the communities' houses and property as the best way to ensure their survival, refusing to consider what could help them survive if they were forced to flee the neighborhood.

Lauren's father argues that it is "best to begin by teaching" their neighbors skills without discussing outright why survival skills may be necessary (Butler 66). He argues that if they are going to teach their neighbors these skills, they must do so in a way that avoids making anyone look down "into the abyss" (Butler 66). The abyss connotes the enormity of the reality in which they live, including all of the worsening crises that could wipe away the community's fairly stable existence. He suggests that to think about how bad things are and how much worse they could likely get is pointless because individuals have no power to stop or abate such things.

Lauren poses an alternative vision of what looking at the abyss could mean that reflects her perspective as female and disabled in this society, as well as her budding theological ideas. She responds to her father by suggesting that "maybe it's time to look down" and start "looking for some hand and foot holds before we get pushed in" (Butler 66). She sees value in sustained attention to "the abyss", especially in collaboration with other people. The perspective Lauren shows here can be seen as a form of *cripistemology*, or a way of knowing that comes out of experiences of living with a disability and that challenges normative ways of knowing. Lauren understands what it means to live with uncertainty in a more intimate and embodied way than her father or others in the neighborhood. Her *bodymind* feels what others feel, making her much more aware and less disconnected from the violence and human suffering that occurs outside and within the neighborhood walls. She is aware of her increased vulnerability as a sharer and a woman, which helps her accept that her relatively safe, protected existence is temporary and precarious. She knows that there is nothing she can do to rid herself of her *hyperempathy* but it is

still worth it - and in fact critical to her survival - to do everything she can to adapt to living with it. Her Earthseed verses articulated the sense that the only constant is change and that in order to survive and even thrive individuals and communities must seek to build resiliency and try to shape how change impacts them. This allows her to accept that the crises surrounding her will not go away any time soon nor can she shield her community from them entirely, but there are things she and others can do to attempt to influence how change affects their lives.

In contrast, her father refuses to seriously consider the possibility of his family and their neighbors being forced out of the neighborhood. It is easier for him to focus on how to protect his and his neighbor's property than to imagine how they could work together to increase their collective, long-term ability to survive if or when things get much worse. That kind of collective discussion and action would require him to shift away from believing it is possible to ensure the relatively safe and stable existence of the community indefinitely. It would also mean a major change in how the community as a whole operates.

Although an individual or community could never hope to eliminate or control these enormous threats to their survival, they can find small and eventually larger ways to increase their chances of surviving various probable scenarios. Lauren's words affirm that seemingly small or insignificant actions can make a difference in how one navigates and survives dangerous, unpredictable conditions. Lauren's unique perspective on accepting dismal possibilities and building resilience for the future is born in part out of her experiences with hyperempathy syndrome.

A Disabled Perspective on Change and Earthseed as Alternative Future

While living with her family and after being forced to flee the walled-in neighborhood, Lauren develops a belief system she calls Earthseed that helps ground her and her friends as they navigate an uncertain and dangerous world. Lauren's experiences of needing to adapt to living with frequent, unpredictable pain influences how she develops aspects of Earthseed. Adaptation and change are central tenets of Earthseed. Her disability helps Lauren come to value adaptation, as she must adapt to the way it affects her and her abilities, such as by masking pain to hide the condition and learning that shooting while lying down allows her to protect herself better. The verse that Lauren chooses to be the first page of the first book of "*Earthseed: The Books of the Living*" is this: "All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change / God / Is Change" (Butler 195). Lauren describes how these lines say everything that she believes and knows, and the rest of the Earthseed verses build off of this and illustrate its truth. Every person or being has an impact on everything that they interact with and their environment and everything that interacts with them has an impact on them. Hyperempathy likely aided the development of this understanding because she has had to accept the unpredictable, changing impacts that human and non-human creatures around her can have on her.

Lauren has had to find ways of living with both the pain itself and the uncertainty of when it will come on, in a world where any sort of impairment means greater vulnerability. Lauren's ability to accept the inevitability and unpredictability of change and the value of adaptation informs the core of her Earthseed beliefs. Her Earthseed beliefs guide her to build a community of other people who are disabled by hyperempathy, traumatized by violence, and/or displaced from their homes, that work together to ensure each other's survival as best they can.

Guided by Earthseed principles, they work together to adapt and influence how change affects them in order to survive in a precarious world.

Resisting Neoliberal Solutions and Building Community in *Parable*

Lauren's understanding of and opposition to the extreme neoliberal governance happening in the U.S. stems in part from her cripistemological knowledge. She resists pressures to trust in the power of more state-led efforts to solve crises or alleviate suffering and precarity. In "Crip Collectivity Beyond Neoliberalism in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*", Jess Whalcott argues that the novel "'cripistemologically' theorizes neoliberal governance" (2). Neoliberalism "creates disabling conditions through privatization and deregulation" and then displaces responsibility for such structural precarity on disabled and mentally ill or mad people (Whalcott 8). Common responses to the disabling conditions of neoliberalism are "either to cling to the neoliberal promise of recovery through more privatization and deregulation leading to market solutions", or the liberal impulse "to demand a return of government investment in the social safety net" (Whalcott 7). *Parable* rejects both of these responses, resisting the assumption that more advanced capitalism or state interventions will lead to recovery of society and bodyminds. Unlike members of her family and others in the walled-in community, Lauren sees clearly the false promises of neoliberal solutions such as company towns offering supposed safety or the president promising to restore stability through further deregulation. Instead of placing her trust in the state to improve the conditions in which she lives, Lauren carefully forms connections with other displaced people in order to build a community based on mutual trust and care. The novel depicts the emergence of a collective - guided by the vision and

cripistemological knowledge of a Black disabled woman - that allows people who have been harmed and abandoned by the neoliberal state to survive.

Crip Collectivity and Community Building

Lauren builds connections and eventually a community in an intentional way that increases their collective ability to survive and, as Whatcott argues, resists their “regulation to tragedy” (Whatcott 8). After being forced to flee her home and travel north with two other young adults from the neighborhood, Harry and Zara, Lauren carefully builds bonds of mutual trust and collaboration with other travelers. These bonds are based on a mutual understanding that if attacked while traveling together they will protect each other as best they can and that they won’t steal each other’s life-sustaining supplies.

Lauren discusses her Earthseed verses with Zara and Travis, who along with his wife and child are the first travelers to join Lauren and her friends from Robledo, as they travel along the highway. Zara begins to feel drawn to Earthseed, remarking that she doesn’t care about the ambitions for human habitation on other planets but telling Lauren, “if you want to put together some kind of community where people look out for each other and don’t have to take being pushed around, I’m with you” (Butler). Lauren and her friends intentionally create a community in which people who would usually be more likely to be “pushed around” are able to work together to ensure their survival and freedom. The group that creates a home together called Acorn on secluded land at the end of the novel includes women, mixed race couples and families, formerly enslaved or indentured people, sharers, and people who have gone through traumatic experiences. They are a part of groups that are more likely to be subject to violence or have their freedom threatened under disastrous neoliberal capitalism. The collective they form

allows them to survive and even thrive, rejecting assumptions that they have no agency and will inevitably be victims of further tragedy and violence.

Conclusion: The Harms of Denial and Radical Care for a More Habitable Otherwise

The novel demonstrates how denial and minimization causes harm to others as well as the individual doing the denying. Lauren's father's denial of their precarious position harms the entire community when their neighborhood is attacked by arsonists and they have no plan for how to meet up outside of the neighborhood wall. When individuals and groups choose to deny or minimize the reality of COVID-19, they cause harm to others by contributing to the assumptions and social norms that lead to the lack of precautions being taken by individuals. Denial by individuals also serves to support or allow the dangerous inaction of governments in the face of continued mass death and disability.

Any individual or group that seeks to theorize, imagine, or work to build more habitable, just futures must contend with how care would be felt and acted on in these futures or communities. It is important to question who would receive care in these futures, what kinds of care would be practiced, and what crises or aspects of reality would be acknowledged. Any attempt to theorize and build better futures or worlds must contend with the full reality of COVID-19 as an ongoing event of mass death and disability or long-term illness. It is also essential to recognize how this crisis is indicative of how our societies and governments treat problems or crises that require systemic and widespread action. The lack of effective, prolonged responses to the pandemic has been justified and perpetuated by eugenic, racist, and ableist logics that treat some bodyminds as disposable, in service of the status quo and interests of the privileged and powerful. Practicing radical care can be a powerful form of resistance against this.

In “Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times”, Hi‘ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese theorize care as “an affective connective tissue between an inner self and an outer world” that “constitutes a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others” (2). The authors define radical care as “a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds” (Hobart 2). Taking precautions to prevent contracting and spreading COVID-19 can be a radical act of care that allows oneself and others to better endure precarious conditions. In order to practice care intentionally, we must consider how all of our bodyminds and futures are entangled by an airborne virus that has killed so many and taken so much from so many people’s lives, and continues to do so. Taking precautions, helping to spread accurate, non-minimizing information on the virus, and talking about COVID-19 as an ongoing problem can all be acts of radical care. These strategies are not only vital in our current context but also instructive on how people can act together in the face of problems or crises that have been normalized and minimized.

The authors of “Radical Care” describe how despite relentless disaster and crisis they find hope in “locating spaces and enactments of care” because “mobilizations of care allow us to envision what Elizabeth Povinelli describes as an otherwise” (Hobart 3). Envisioning an otherwise in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic can mean rejecting hegemonic narratives that stress that high COVID-19 transmission - and the deaths and the Long Covid conditions it causes - is unavoidable, or not worth avoiding. This otherwise can mean a world in which the lives and wellbeing of all people are valued and protected, even at the expense of the interests of more privileged people, and knowledge gained through disabled experience is treasured and applied in practice. A perspective and practice of radical care allows for imaginings of various otherwises

in which preventable death and disability isn't regarded as inevitable and communities collectively work to protect themselves from infection and its harms.

Caring for oneself and others intentionally by taking COVID-19 precautions has radical possibilities for imagining and working towards better futures. To use the metaphor employed by Lauren, it is necessary to look for hand and foot holds in the abyss before one gets pushed in. Just because COVID-19 isn't wreaking havoc on your bodymind or your life directly at the moment doesn't mean it could never impact you, and doesn't mean you have no responsibility to ensure you don't contribute to someone else's death or disablement. It's awfully lonely and terrifying to be gazing out into the abyss at the horrors and injustices of reality alone, so it must be done in community with others to be sustainable. Opportunities for surviving and even thriving amidst worsening crises become apparent if you have others to think and learn with you, willing to practice care and build community.

Reading and reflecting on *Parable of the Sower* offers valuable lessons on how to grapple with terrifying, often unacknowledged realities and maintain hope. It is vital that instead of accepting the normalization of problems and crises, that we seek out ways to care for each other and help ensure each other's survival in light of such things. A disabled perspective on COVID-19 can show how pointless it is to wait for the neoliberal state to tell you what the right thing to do is or save you from a novel pathogen causing unprecedented rates of death and disability. When individuals and communities act to mitigate COVID-19 transmission and support those most harmed by the virus and other interconnected crises, they are increasing collective survival and practicing care in powerful ways.

The time to look for footholds is now.

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