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'A RACIST CHALLENGE MIGHT FORCE US APART': DIVERGENCE, RELIANCE, AND EMPATHY IN *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*, BY OCTAVIA BUTLER

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze racial issues in the resistance community depicted in *Parable of the Sower* (1993), by Octavia Butler, named 'Acorn'. By researching the critical approaches to this novel, I observed that, as much as they admit race as a force that interferes in the relation between offenders and offended, they have not gone further in questioning how the variety and the complexity of the previous backgrounds of these racialized subjects cannot be ignored and homogenized in the establishment of bonds among the offended as well. As I aim to demonstrate, the world experience carried by each character, determined especially by race and social class, helps meditating on their own asymmetrical positions and showing how their empathy towards one another has to be built and (re-) negotiated all the time.

Keywords: Octavia Butler; *Parable of the Sower*; racialized subjects

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Introduction

The main motivation for writing this article is to continue with an investigation by which I felt challenged after reading the article *Octavia Butler: A Retrospective* (2008), by Stephanie Ann Smith. In her text, Smith focuses on the changes that Octavia Butler brought to science fiction, a literary genre that went through a special process of re-signification in the latter half of the 20th century. As Smith points out, "[t]he question about SF/F was and is about a politics of the aesthetics" (Smith 387). To such questionings, Butler's presence – in a moment when SF/F was dissociating itself from the stereotype of interstellar battles and becoming attached to "experiments of social justice" (387) – was crucial.

To prove her point, Smith develops a brief analysis of some of Butler's narratives – *Fledging* (2005), *Kindred* (1979) and "Bloodchild" (1995) – in order to illustrate her claim that Octavia Butler initiated a breakthrough on the ways SF/F was used to approaching the problems of Otherness, especially when this Other corresponds to a character of color. For Smith, previous novelists of the genre used to deal with racial issues by transposing the debates to the image of the "alien", dangerously following the path exemplified by Achille Mbembe, in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017 [2013]): this view, "[u]nable to distinguish between the outside and the inside, between envelopes and their contents, it [race] sends us, above all, back to surface simulacra" (Mbembe 10). On the other hand, Butler's works "complicate the simplicity of understanding the alien as the Other" (Smith 387).

In that sense, Smith highlights that exploring Octavia Butler's narratives is to remember that they are full of ambiguities and contradictions when it comes to race (and gender). Butler's "unflinching eye on racism, sexism, poverty, and ignorance" often reverberates in "unsettling results for both their victims and their oppressors, who may not always be easily distinguished" (391). Smith's description of Butler's character development in *Fledging* encouraged me to think about the possibility of broadening the extension of her claim, which led me to propose to the author[1] that we could transform her argument in a hypothesis of investigation for other Butler's novels as well. As a result, she promptly accepted my proposition, and this article came as an outcome of our dialogue. My initial goal was to check how ambiguous other literary works by Butler could get, at least when it comes to the scope of characters' development and racial issues.

To accomplish this purpose, I chose to focus on the first novel from Octavia Butler's *Earthseed* series, entitled *Parable of the Sower* (1993), since, although following other perspectives, this novel was already an object of research in my Doctoral dissertation. I began with an extensive research on the critical reviews that analyzed this narrative in their articles or book chapters, from which it is worth mentioning: Allen (2009), Moylan (2000), Luckhurst (2002), Phillips (2002) and Baccolini (2003). From them, I was able to perceive a pattern in the way these critics approach race in *Parable of the Sower*: they tend to regard race as a determinant aspect in the way corporatist capitalism revives aspects of slavery in Butler's California of 2025. Therefore, all of these authors make remarkable

points about how *Parable of the Sower* engages in a depiction of the relations between dominant and victim with echoes of slave narrative motives, as both dystopias and slave narratives share a "conspicuous preoccupation with obtaining freedom" (Varsam 2003, 204), which is a claim I also endorse.

Nevertheless, I noticed that none of these essays dwelt on those racial contradictions described by Smith when it comes to the relations of power *inside* the resistance community of the novel – the "Acorn" community. In other words, the pattern of analysis in the critical texts we accessed made us realize that they admitted race as a force that interferes in the relation between offenders and offended, but that they did not go further in questioning if race turns into a complication for the bonds established *among* the offended as well. After all, denying the heterogeneity of the Acorn group is also simplifying the amplitude of meanings it presents to the novel, and reducing its complexity again back to "surface simulacra", as Mbembe points out.

In the beginning of the novel, Octavia Butler's future shows us a social environment of atomization of individuals and segregation of small forms of population. In *Parable of the Sower*, people live inside walled neighborhoods (at least those who are not too poor to become street people), and interracial relationships become rare and rejected. The opposition to this scenario is pictured in the gradual gathering of several characters throughout the novel, whose union will constitute the counter-narrative of resistance. Called Acorn by the end of the novel, this community is led by the protagonist of Butler's narrative, Lauren Olamina, who tries to apply in Acorn some principles of a doctrine created by her, named "Earthseed". By putting thirteen characters from different ethnicities, colors, classes, social backgrounds, and life stories together, Butler makes them face the necessity to work on how to establish equality, reliance, authority, and empathy – which were not part of their past lives – above individualism. As I aim to demonstrate, the experiences the characters go through create situations and reactions that are not always obvious to the reader who is accustomed to binaries like villains (bad)/victims (good).

In order to make a more detailed analysis of some passages in *Parable of the Sower* that support our hypothesis, I focus on the relations established among seven of the main characters: Lauren, Harry, Zahra, Travis, Natividad, Emery, and Grayson. Most of the times, Lauren will appear as a central reference to our analysis, as she acts as the leader of the group and has to deal with the appearance of the other refugees personally. These, in turn, transform her into the figure to whom they have to address their own personal responses as well – so she refers to and is referred by others all the time.

1. Heritages from Robledo: The Foreshadowing Features of the First Part of the Novel

Parable of the Sower draws an implicit division of the book's two halves. The first section of Butler's novel corresponds to the period of life inside the walled

neighborhood of Robledo, from stability to fall. The second half, in turn, begins with the encounter between Lauren Olamina, Harry Balter and Zahra Moss, former residents of that neighborhood. They find each other after thieves and arsonists destroy Robledo, and realize they are possibly the only survivors of the arson. The Acorn community, the main focus of our analysis, begins to be assembled from the characters' diaspora outside Robledo (close to Los Angeles, California) up to the end of their expedition in Humboldt County (close to the geographical division between California and Oregon). We may call their journey a diaspora if we understand this term in its classical definition, described by Michele Reis (2004) as the displacement of individuals, who become refugees, due to traumatic events that determine an inevitable uprooting condition for those people (Reis 46). Even inside California, the Acorn members become estranged from their lands and forcibly removed from them as well, wandering around to find somewhere "better".

Throughout this diaspora, which is the focus of the second half of the book, the encounters with different characters will happen and they will be added to form the Acorn community – our main interest in this study. But before reaching that section, we might as well take a step back and meditate on the first part of the novel, as it can also provide us with useful insights about themes and motivations that will be present in Lauren's journey. Moreover, the walled neighborhood of Robledo is also a common background that she shares with the first two people she meets after the arson, Harry and Zahra.

First of all, we learn from the very beginning that racially mixed relationships, especially the romantic ones, are not natural in Butler's futuristic California. People tend to group with and marry people of the same color and ethnic origins, and when someone challenges this rule, he/she ends up being a scandal in that community. Mrs. Sims, for example, is one of the neighbors who feel frightened by people who are divergent from what this future established as "normal". In "some deep, hard, ugly way" (Butler 22), she hates Chinese people and their Buddhist traditions, and pays respect to Lauren's father *in spite of* his marriage to a Mexican woman (23).

When one of Lauren's colleagues accidentally gets pregnant, we learn how pairing up with people of different colors is seen as deviant by the whole community, and not just by Mrs. Sims' prejudice:

> Bianca Montoya is pregnant . . . Jorge admits being the father. I don't know why they just didn't get married before everything got so public. Anyway, they're going to get married now. The Ibarra and Iturbe families have been feuding with the Montoyas for a week over this. So stupid. You'd think they had nothing else to do. At least they're both Latino. No interracial feud this time. Last year when Craig Dunn who's white and one of the saner members of the Dunn family was caught making love to Siti Moss who's black and Richard Moss's oldest daughter to boot, I thought someone was going to get killed. Crazy. (Butler 86-87)

This is one of the main reasons for our claim that the Acorn community deserves a special analysis in its processes of encountering, gathering and creating a unit. In Robledo, we have different racial and ethnical communities subdivided into groups of those who are similar, and who agreed to try to hide their bias or even to condone subtle forms of prejudice from their neighbors – everything in order to maintain peace. In the Acorn community, however, hybridity is the rule: Zahra Moss, a former street girl who was rescued by a polygamous man, who wedded her and kept her away from the world, is first seen after the arson with Harry Balter, Lauren's white friend who is totally naïve about the real world. Also, Lauren cuts her own hair and has to pretend to be a male and to form a couple with Zahra, so that street people (i) see two males and a female, which shows more power than two females and a male; (ii) increase their fear, as one of the males is white; and (iii) do not underestimate the power of this group by thinking that Harry and Lauren are a male gay couple (Butler 172). In that sense, what was seen as deviancy by Robledo becomes the norm in Acorn.

The first couple they find on the road is Travis Charles Douglas, a "deep-black" man (Butler 204) and son of a wealthy family's cook, and his wife Gloria Natividad Douglas, a "Hispanic-looking", "light-brown" woman who was the maid in the same house Travis' mother worked at (204), and they have a "medium-brown" baby, Domingo. Then, we meet Bankole, a black man much older than Lauren, descendent from men who assumed African surnames in the 1960s, just like Lauren (230), and, right after, Allie and Jill Gilchrist, two white sisters who were prostituted by their own father. After that, Emery Solis and her daughter Tori join the group – Emery is a brown woman, daughter of a Japanese father and a black mother, and formerly married to a Mexican husband, with whom she had Tori (287). Finally, Grayson Mora, a Latino single father, joins them with his daughter, Doe – and even more unusual, according to Lauren, is the appearance of a single father in the group, not because they do not exist, but because they seldom admit such responsibility (290).

If, at first, the differences between all those characters seem to rely on physicality, what is actually important about them, I argue, is that they compose what Mary Louise Pratt (1999 [1992]) calls a "contact zone". According to Pratt, a contact zone is the space of transculturation that can happen not only between dominant and subordinate, but also between subordinate and marginalized groups, in which they reinvent the materials and social constructions that the metropolis or the dominant culture provided them (Pratt 30). However, that does not imply a harmonious process; each person will contribute to the cross-culture process with their own perspectives, either disrupting or creating a new *status quo*, depending on whom they establish contact with.

In light of the above, the Acorn community is formed against all odds: thirteen diverse people cross each other's paths at some point, and transculturation rules over segregation. The more people are added to the group, the stronger they seem to become, for example, when they meet cops on their way to the city of Salinas:

> . . . Salinas looked well-armed. Cops had parked all along the shoulders of the highway, staring at us, some holding their shotguns or automatic rifles as though they'd love an excuse to use them . . . I saw them watching us in particular, but they didn't stop us. We were quiet. We were women and a baby as well as men, and the three of us were white. I don't think any of that harmed us in their eyes. (Butler 240)

From this quotation, it is interesting to notice that it is not the "inner power" of diversity that prevents attacks from the police, but the underestimation of those seen as fragile – "we were women and a baby as well as men" (240) – and the presence of three white people in the group. It is implicit in this quote that if they were all poor men with only Latino or black stereotypes, things might have been different, as "[p]rotection itself is no longer based solely on the legal order. It has become a question of biopolitics" (Mbembe 22). This is why Pratt helps us observe that contact zones also have inequality as a feature; no matter how successful they are, the participants are never totally equal to one another, and nothing truly separates them from reproducing relations of power imbalance (Pratt 31).

Consequently, at the same time that the hybridity of the group is not described by Butler as the heroic idealized space against the system, the tensions between all those varied characters cannot be reduced to simple binaries of victim/villain, good/bad, and conservative/revolutionary. Reactions to the experiences that the characters go through are shown by Butler in unexpected ways, as I will point out in the following specific cases I have identified.

2. Unveiling Concepts of "Civilization" and "Orthodoxy": Harry Balter and the Privilege of Whiteness.

The first example to illustrate our claim focuses on the moment the Acorn group is beginning, after Lauren, Harry and Zahra reunite. Harry, much closer to Lauren than Zahra – who submitted to her husband's commands and could never join others – is the first to declare he will side with Lauren. Both Lauren and Harry share their refusal to go to privatized cities, for fear of debt slavery (Butler 164), and are eager to show each other what objects they were able to collect from the ruins of the neighborhood and the amount of money they were hiding with them, which, for Lauren, is a sign of trust.

However, when Lauren starts acting to put survival first, contradicting all civilized, orthodox manners both she and Harry had learned in Robledo, Harry is appalled by her. Lauren's coldness in scavenging and in recognizing the necessity of having to shoot or kill people makes Harry refuse her friendship. When she decides to tell Harry about her hyperempathy syndrome, which makes her share people's most unbearable pains, it worsens the situation rather than helps. He is disgusted and even swears at Lauren, calling her a "manipulative bitch" (194). She, in turn, sees that reaction as the result of the naiveté of her friend's upbringing. Both Harry and her former best friend Joanne were some of the few white people of Robledo who had learned how to read and write, and to be

distinct from the savagery of the world, something taught by their parents' values. Lauren synthetizes this accusation in the following words:

> 'You think you're strong and confident . . . You think you can take care of yourself out here, and maybe you can. But think what a stab wound or a broken bone would mean out here. Disablement, slow death from infection or starvation, no medical care, nothing . . . Harry, your mind is still back in the neighborhood . . . You still think a mistake is when your father yells at you or you break a finger or chip a tooth or something. Out here a mistake – one mistake – and you may be dead.' (Butler 181)

Curiously, Harry and Lauren's upbringing backgrounds are more compatible to one another than to any other person who will join the group. Like Harry, Lauren also received an education, was raised under Christian doctrine by her father (Robledo's most admired Baptist Minister) and had a very structured family, with the privileges of having shoes to wear and even a house with separate rooms for each sibling. In spite of that, Lauren feels estranged from Harry when acknowledging that he is still limited by such privileges. She realizes much faster than he does that their past could alienate them, especially when Lauren compares both of their education to Zahra's, who had experienced poverty, homelessness, and starvation before Robledo:

> . . . we need our paranoia to keep us alive. Hell, Harry wanted to let the old guy sit with us. It took Zahra and me together to let him know that wasn't going to happen. Harry and I have been well-fed and protected all our lives. We're strong and healthy and better educated than most people our age. But we're stupid out here. We want to trust people. I fight against the impulse. Harry hasn't learned to do that yet. (Butler 181)

In that sense, Lauren is more naturally willing to abdicate power than Harry, recognizing that her educational and cultivated knowledge meant little before Zahra's world knowledge. The journey itself does not transform much of Harry's opinion, begrudging Lauren in every chance he gets. In the final chapters, however, when Acorn arrives in Humboldt County, and sees the necessity of reorganizing the community to survive, Harry is confronted with his privileges of being the only white man in the group. The land in Humboldt County belonged to Bankole's brother-in-law, who was murdered with his family by the time Lauren's group arrives. Challenging Harry's refusal to see how they could stay in that land after this tragedy, Bankole tells Harry that "[h]e [Bankole's brother-in-law] knew plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, and motor vehicle mechanics. Of course, it didn't help that he was black. Being white might help you [Harry] win people over faster than he did" (320).

Emery is another character who exposes Harry's privileges, by telling him he did not need to worry about not having a job that paid him a salary. She reinforces, as well as Bankole, how the color of his skin would also make him get away with his decisions:

> 'You might be able to get a job as a driver (…) They like white men to be drivers. (…)' 'I don't know how to drive, but I could learn,' Harry said. 'You mean driving those big armored trucks, don't you?'
> Emery looked confused. 'Trucks? No, I mean driving people. Making them work. Pushing them to work faster. Making them do… whatever the owners says (*sic*).' Harry's expression had dissolved from hopeful to horrified to outraged. 'Jesus God, do you think I'd do that! How could you think I'd do anything like that?
> Emery shrugged. It startled me that she could be indifferent about such a thing, but she seemed to be. 'Some people think it's a good job,' she said. (Butler 323)

As forms of slavery were updated to the 21st century, so were the ways one could act as a foreman. Not only the thought that Harry could apply for that kind of "job" appalled him, but also the objectivity with which Emery notifies him. He replies her with incredulity by asking "[a]re you telling me you believe I'd like a job pushing slaves around and taking away their children?" to which Emery responds with "I hope not" (323). Emery engages Harry in this painful imaginary exercise to make him realize that decisions in the outer world were independent of relying on one's personality. They were connected with survival, even if that meant taking advantage of one's own privileges as means to achieve a desired end. Harry's unwillingness to understand this point reverberates in his judgements towards Lauren throughout the novel, and in his constant struggle to reaffirm himself as distinct from the "savagery" of the others. In Mbembe's words,

> He [Tocqueville] writes both of the race of men "par excellence," the Whites, the "first in enlightenment, in power, in happiness," and of the "unfortunate races": Blacks and Native Americans. These three racial formations are not part of the same family. They are not just distinct from one another. Everything, or almost everything, separates them: education, law, origins, and external appearance. And the barrier that divides them is, from his point of view, almost insurmountable. (Mbembe 82)

The unconscious parallel created by Bankole and Emery – judging Harry's inevitable shadow of the colonizer, as he had done with Lauren's shadow of the "savage" – puts Harry in an undesirable position. This character must, in turn, confront the fact that "avoiding change is clearly a regressive desire, which not only lacks any concrete future potential but in fact leads to tragedy" (Nilges 2009, 1341).

On the whole, Harry's problems with the group, especially with Lauren, reveal to the latter how unstable concepts such as friendship and reliance are, when there are class and racial problems involved. Harry shows us one of the most important features of hybridity, according to Bill Ashcroft (1998): hybridity as a synonym for mere "exchange" implies "negating and neglecting the imbalance and inequality of the power relations it references" (Ashcroft 119). Harry is not just negotiating equivocations of thought with others; he is being asked to meditate on the ways he used to build knowledge and morals, which he had not recognized as a reflection of his privileged upbringing and education until then. Lauren, in

turn, is aware of this power imbalance. In her words "(…) none of us know what will happen when we're challenged. A racist challenge might force us apart. I want to trust these people. I like them, and… they're all I have left. But I need more time to decide. It's no small thing to commit yourself to other people" (Butler 178).

3. The Encounter with Californian Slaves: Zahra, Natividad and Travis' Narratives.

Unexpectedly, it is Zahra, who had not even spoken to Lauren back in Robledo, who will prove to the Minister's daughter how similar their lives are. After learning Lauren's hyperempathy syndrome was caused by a drug-addict mother – a fact that led Lauren's father to treat her malaise as something shameful – Zahra treats Lauren's problem with normality and even shows her how recurrent that kind of accidental heritage was in street life: "My mama took drugs, too . . . Shit, where I was born, everybody's mama took drugs – and whored to pay for them. . . . You ain't got nothing wrong with you, Lauren – nothing worth worrying about. That Paracetco shit was baby milk" (Butler 142-143). From this mutual understanding of empathy, Zahra becomes Lauren's foundation in supporting her decisions, reassuring her how sensible it is, in spite of Harry's opposition, to put survival in first place and to forget traditional boundaries between what is civilized and uncivilized.

It is even more admirable to Lauren that Zahra is so eager to confront both Lauren and Harry with her knowledge of the world, and her rationality in scavenging, shooting and controlling her impulses, as Zahra's ex-husband ceaselessly attempted to erase her past. Richard Moss had bought Zahra from her homeless mother and kept her safe in Robledo for six years, along with his two other wives, in exchange for what we may call sexual slavery. She was never supposed to go anywhere or do anything without his approval, in addition to sharing endless household chores with his two other wives and having his babies. During her years of seclusion, Zahra was not even allowed to practice target shooting like the other teenagers. Lauren recognized those attitudes as slavery even back in Robledo: "It's the Moss attitude that gets me. Richard Moss lets his wives and daughters pull things like that. He works them like slaves in his gardens and rabbit raising operation and around the house, but he lets them pretend they're 'ladies' when it comes to any community effort" (Butler 89).

Thus, Richard Moss is the epitome of the slavery mode of the 19th century, which, according to Bill Ashcroft, substituted the view of black people as "savages" to "helpless beings in need of care, protection and advancement" (Ashcroft 202) in order to sustain the idea of benefiting those people with "labor". Even after all those years of captivity, when Lauren reads some Earthseed verses aloud and proposes to her group the kind of community that she is willing to build, Zahra is the first to address her with encouragement:

> 'I [Zahra] don't care about no outer space. You can keep that part of it. But 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. I've been talking to Natividad. I don't want to live the way she had to.' I [Lauren] wondered how much difference there was between Natividad's former employer who treated her as though he owned her and Richard Moss who purchased young girls to be part of his harem. It was all a matter of personal feeling, no doubt. Natividad had resented her employer. Zahra had accepted and perhaps loved Richard Moss. (Butler 223)

Lauren acknowledges that Zarah is both sane, as she resisted all the chaos from her childhood, and resolute, as she also endured Richard's efforts to subjugate her to sexist gender roles that would make her more fragile and helpless. Finally, her endurance is even more powerful because it was bigger than any sign of love and gratitude Zahra could have had for Richard. Zahra's sanity and reasonableness becomes, then, a sign that her husband's imprisoning approaches to form her character had failed. It is, thus, Lauren's comprehension that her social position in Robledo, as the Minister's daughter, does not enable her to judge other people's attitudes as less important that will make more people like Zahra follow her – that is, those who had some relation with slavery and servitude, like Travis and Natividad. Even though Lauren was a privileged girl in Robledo, her hyperempathy syndrome makes her more understanding. If others get hurt, she will suffer invariably; thus, seeking to make other people feel safe is, at the same time, guaranteeing her own safety.

In that sense, Lauren's group mirror the mixed group formed by Travis, Natividad and their son Domingo, and they follow her as she inspires protection whenever she is around. Not surprisingly, they immediately follow Zahra's attitude and join Lauren in her efforts to establish a community based on Earthseed principles. Travis and Natividad's marriage emulate the tradition of arranged marriage, common during slavery and servitude regimes, when it was convenient for a wealthy family's household to encourage their servants to have a relationship. Travis, the cook's son, and Natividad, the maid harassed by her master, escape with their son to begin a new life, one in which Natividad would not be watched with lust at the moments she was about to feed her baby (Butler 219). Hearing the couple's stories, Lauren ponders about the similarity between their trajectory and slave narratives from the 19th century. The comparison is explicit after Travis and Natividad finish talking about their escape:

> The son of the cook marrying one of the maids. That was like something out of another era, too. . . . I looked at Natividad who sat a short distance away, on spread out sleepsacks, playing with her baby and talking to Zahra. She had been lucky. Did she know? How many other people were less lucky – unable to escape the master's attentions or gain the mistress's sympathies. How far did masters and mistresses go these days toward putting less than submissive servants in their places? (219)

As Lauren plays with historical memory and continuation, she inserts the couple in the list of runaway slaves of history, remembering those who succeeded and those who failed. Without being conscious, her own story is for us, readers, a contemporary version of runaway slave tales. Maria Varsam, in *Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others*, points out that the focalization on Lauren's perspective, by the way that she tells us her story of escaping capitalist forms of slavery and death, interweaves the dystopian future of the novel with traces of 19th century slave narratives, creating, in the words of Raffaella Baccolini, a "genre blurring" (Varsam 520) between neo-slave, science fiction, and dystopian narratives.

This structural arrangement helps us understand why identification happens between the trio Zahra/Travis/Natividad and Lauren, in spite of the former privileged life of the latter. Lauren is assigned by the form of the novel to the role of writing her own autobiographical tale as a runaway slave. Finding other people, as disparate as their life stories are, facing the common threat of slavery soothes their divergences in order to ally with one another. As a result, to put in Mary Louise Pratt's terms, these four characters create a common language to deal with the social constructions that the dominant ideology had given them and that thus made their paths so similar (Pratt 30). In addition to the issue of slavery, blackness also binds them together, in the sense that,

> [a]s a slave, the Black Man represents one of the troubling figures of our modernity, and in fact constitutes its realm of shadow, of mystery, of scandal. As a human whose name is disdained, whose power of descent and generation has been foiled, whose face is disfigured, and whose work is stolen, he bears witness to a mutilated humanity, one deeply scarred by iron and alienation. But precisely through damnation . . . if there is one thing that haunts modernity from beginning to end, it is the possibility of that singular event, the "revolt of the slaves." A slave uprising signals not only liberation but also radical transformation, if not of the system of property and labor itself, then at least of the mechanisms of its redistribution and so of the foundations for the reproduction of life itself. (Mbembe 37)

Nevertheless, the appearance of Emery Solis and Grayson Mora complicates restricting the approach described above as if it were true to every character who carries traits of slavery forms. It is interesting to take a look at the character's reactions to the arrival of both Emery and Grayson. They were both debt slaves and, surprisingly, affected by the hyperempathy syndrome as well. Even so, they will be essential as a counterpoint to the idea that identification necessarily leads to understanding.

4. Testing Lauren's Empathy Limits: Emery and Grayson as the "Sharers".

The last people added to the Acorn community are Emery Solis and Grayson Mora, with their daughters Tori and Doe, respectively. Both characters are

received with great suspicion by the group – even by Lauren, who is constantly challenging her group's decisions by insisting on receiving people rather than dismissing them. Emery and Grayson are treated completely differently by Lauren if compared with the previous cases, and their inclusion only happens for the sake of their daughters. They are characterized as "odd", potential traitors who need to be watched carefully, and prohibited to carry guns like everyone else does: "They're… odd. They might be stupid enough to try to grab some of our packs and leave some night. Or it might be just a matter of little things starting to disappear" (Butler 292). Even stealing, then, is expected from them.

Both Emery and Grayson are immediately recognized as debt slaves by Lauren, but that does not ease their assimilation by her or by the group – quite the opposite attitude with which Travis and Natividad were received. Emery became a slave in a privatized area after her husband passed away, and his debts became hers. Interestingly, Lauren does not have the same respect for Emery's story as I have pointed out in her connection with Zahra, whose world knowledge Lauren exalted and for whom Lauren abdicated power privileges. In the excerpt below, we can observe how Lauren tries to "correct" Emery's version of her life story:

> She [Emery] decided then to run away, to take her daughter and brave the roads with their thieves, rapists, cannibals. (...) *As for the cannibals... well, perhaps they were only fantasies* (...)
> "There are cannibals," I told her as we ate that night. "We've seen them. I think, though, that they're scavengers, not killers. They take advantages of road kills, that kind of thing." "Scavengers kill," Emery said. "If you get hurt or if you look sick, they come after you." I nodded, and she went on with her story. (...)
> Living on wild plants and whatever they [Emery and her daughter] could "find" or beg, they drifted north. *That was the way Emery said that: they found things. Well, if I were in her place, I would have found a few things, too.* (288, emphasis added)

In light of the above, we learn that the commiseration Lauren had for Zahra is not the same she has for Emery. She does not accept Emery's version of the "outer world" as rapidly as she had done with Zahra's version of the street life. Nor does she show the same ability to listen to the whole story, re-signifying expressions such as "find things" with a touch of irony. By telling Emery that a part of the fear she experienced might have been related to a fantasy, only to be corrected by Emery, Lauren shows a kind of dispute of ownership and authority over the ways to tell the story.

Grayson, also a debt slave, is received by Lauren with even greater hostility. In her opinion, she was certain that he was a slave who became a "rich pauper", who must have obtained his personal objects out of robbery and murder. Not only is Grayson questioned in terms of the veracity of his story, but he is also viewed with bias: someone with envious resentment of Lauren's group union, a potential thief/murder and a hypocrite ex-slave who would see himself as rich enough to address the others with distance and lack of involvement.

> Two things hit me as I talked to him.
> First, he didn't like us. That was obvious. He didn't like us at all. I thought he might resent us because we were united and armed. You tend to resent the people you're afraid of. . . .
> The second thing is only my suspicion. I believe Grayson and Doe Mora were also slaves. Yet Grayson is now a rich pauper. He has a pair of sleepsacks, food, water, and money. If I'm right, he took them off someone, or off someone's corpse.
> Why do I think he was a slave? That odd tentativeness of his is just too much like Emery's. (Butler 291)

Nevertheless, Lauren's suspicions of Emery's and Grayson's "tentativeness" face the most unexpected plot twist: Lauren finds out that they also suffer from hyperempathy syndrome; they are "sharers", exactly like she is. If we put all characters in a scale of compatibility, Emery and Grayson are almost duplicates of Lauren's most exploited features in the novel: the three of them are runaway slaves, and the only sharers of Acorn (along with the potential that the couple's children might also have). On the other hand, as I have already demonstrated, the pair represents Lauren's rejection, distrust and skepticism more than anyone else – an expressive contradiction when comparing them to Zahra, Travis and Natividad. This shows us how much the

> call to race or the invocation of race, notably on the part of the oppressed, is the emblem of an essentially obscure, shadowy, and paradoxical desire—the desire for community. Such a desire is obscure, shadowy, and paradoxical because it is doubly inhabited by melancholia and mourning, and by a nostalgia for an archaic that which is always doomed to disappear. The desire is at once worry and anxiety—linked to the possibility of extinction—and a project. (Mbembe 33)

Thereby, it is Lauren's turn to be confronted with her share of ambiguity in her acts and thoughts in this contact zone, as the hardest people to accept in her group are, in fact, her equals. The Others are within her Self more than she would admit, and all the suspiciousness the pair's "oddness" raise could have been decisive in turning Lauren herself into the distant Other, were circumstances different. The realization that Emery and Grayson are sharers makes Lauren realize the aggressiveness of her behavior and her words, and how blind she had been, reproducing a language that did not belong to her character: "His [Grayson Mora] expression hardened as though I'd slapped him. Of course, I had insulted him. I'd said, *Where were you, man and fellow sharer, while your woman and your group were in danger*. Funny. There I was, speaking a language I hadn't realized I knew" (300, author's emphasis).

After that, Lauren finally cares to really get to know the couple better, mainly Grayson, asking whether he can manage using guns, where he comes from, and admitting that the group needed them: "[w]e need all the information you can give us. *Even without a gun, we need you to help us survive here*" (301, emphasis added). Furthermore, the couple is responsible for a shift in Lauren's understanding of her

role as a leader. For the first time, she is not satisfied in being only someone with a syndrome, who has to be protected and watched over when the possibility of passing away or getting hurt is close. Rather, she becomes the person who has to spare other sharers, and who has to improve her ability of lying about her wounds so that others do not have to share painful experiences with her – marking, thus, a new stage of maturity for her character *Bildung*, whose effects are left to the reader's imagination.

Conclusion

All things considered, to simplify the relations constructed between characters in *Parable of the Sower*, equalizing identification with empathy, is a fallacy. Empathy is not shown as something immediately felt by the oppressed just because of their social position, but something that has to be built, negotiated and that, above all, leads the characters to meditate on their own asymmetrical positions inside the Acorn community. As I have shown, several connections that would be more likely to happen between characters are deconstructed by Octavia Butler. First, we have Harry, who has similar social views to Lauren, and had been her closest friend for years, but is the first and most insistent character in accusing her of unreliability, showing traits of how influenced he was by his white privilege. Likewise, Emery and Grayson's position as contemporary slaves, just like Zahra, Travis and Natividad, does not make their attitudes more excusable and comprehensible to the group – definitely not to Lauren, at first sight, even though the couple is, in fact, her double.

In addition to these, I could also have brought up how Bankole and Emery do not expect the same coldness and betrayal from Allie and Jill, white women, as they expect from Harry, the white male friend. Or how Zahra, whose years of captivity created an expectancy of fragility and helplessness, is much less susceptible to her adversities than Grayson, "a male sharer, desperate to hide his terrible vulnerability" (Butler 324). Thus, the list of examples with which the novel provides us is expressive, and could still be expanded in further studies, and the records of racial (and gender) complexities in the novel could have gotten even more complicated if I had taken Bankole, Allie, Jill, and the children of the community into account. However, due to the selected cuts to approach the narrative, the roles of these characters can be resumed as object of investigation in a prospective research. This highlights how much "Butler's account of the complex social existence of change and the problems it creates would not be as finely nuanced if she readily granted us an easy solution to the problem" (Nilges 1342). In any sense, the aforementioned characters would also help to elucidate Mary Louise Pratt's argument about contact zones and their inevitable role as a space for transculturation (Pratt 30), by which everybody gets affected in lower or higher degrees, for better or worse.

It is worthy remarking that, at the end of the book, the efforts of the heterogeneous composition of the Acorn group to face their divergences, rather than letting these divergences win, reinforce the hope that Octavia Butler seems

to transmit. All characters end up recognizing the need to underscore what unites them rather than what sets them apart. After all, all of them are eventually subject to the violence of the cops, to debt slavery, and to the programmed obsolescence of their bodies by corporatist capitalism, once "(…) there's nothing more replaceable than unskilled labor" (Butler 288). In light of the current global scenario, it is not an exaggeration to state that *Parable of the Sower* helps us understand that, especially observing the recent 21st century decades, "[r]ace and racism, then, do not only have a past. They also have a future, particularly in a context where the possibility of transforming life and creating mutant species no longer belongs to the realm of fiction" (Mbembe 21). After all, "[t]he massive expansion of digitization under way nearly everywhere in the world partly adheres to this logic, with the idea that optimal forms of securitization necessarily require the creation of global systems of control over individuals conceived of as biological bodies that are both multiple and in motion" (22). Finally, the current revolutions happening, such as the "Black Live Matters" movement, show us that the Acorns of this world are still alive, under processes and rearrangements, and as active as ever.

Note

1. Stephanie Ann Smith is, therefore, the supervisor of this research article, and co-supervisor of the split-PhD Program (PDSE - CAPES) in which this research was developed, as part of the activities taken at the University of Florida (English Department) from August 2018 to February 2019, under PDSE/CAPES Process n. 88881.187021/2018-01.

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