Coping with Difference: Social Identity and Mediating Intergroup Conflict in Octavia E. Butler’s Science Fiction Novels

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Introduction

Octavia Butler’s science fiction contains a full range of conflict, “from nuclear war to suburban looting, child abuse to concentration camp slavery, self-defense to deliberate genocide” (Outterson 433). Particularly in her Xenogenesis trilogy, now known as Lilith’s Brood,¹ and her Parable series, intergroup hostility is incredibly pervasive. At the root of this intergroup conflict lies the perception of difference. With little social psychological analyses of identity performed on Butler’s science fiction, a deeper understanding of social identity and intergroup conflict is necessary in order to see how group categories are operative in Butler’s texts. While in theory this psychological approach to understanding Butler’s characters applies only to human notions of social identity and group identity, our struggle to appropriately recognize ourselves and be recognized by others is an innate struggle, one that Butler shows as transgressing the boundaries of gender, race, and species. These intergroup relations include human interactions both among themselves and with members of other species. When humans are intrinsically programmed to recognize difference, their intergroup relations with other humans or species become a kind of shared experience governed by how well they can cope with such differences. Questioning prevalent modes of thinking about Butler’s novels through the lens of social identity, studying closely how humans seek positive group distinctiveness and seeing how this objective helps humans cope with their discomfort to their sameness with certain out-groups, proves to be useful in analyzing the dynamic intragroup processes that form from social categories, an area that standard approaches to Butler’s science fiction is lacking.

Modes of Thinking about Butler’s Novels

Believing that humans shape their own destiny, Butler discloses in Essence magazine that she writes about people and their contribution to creating problems that lead to possible disastrous futures (165). These kinds of problems categorize her texts into a historically unique genre, one that intersects feminism, science fiction, utopian and dystopian thinking, and postmodernism. Such “intertextual” narratives are effective tools to “undermine ostensibly clear-cut distinctions between self and other” and “explore possibilities for alternative and non-hierarchical definitions of gender and identity within which the difference of aliens and others can be accommodated rather than repressed” (Wolmark 2). For example, in the end of Dawn, Lilith is impregnated and will be bearing a human-Oankali child, Akin. This hybrid child embodies the notion of difference: the child cannot be seen as the “same” as Lilith, nor can it be seen as purely Oankali; the child is also similar to each of its parent-species because it has the essences of both parent-species.

When transitioning from Dawn to Adulthood Rites, there is a shift in emphasis from “Lilith to the constructs” that enables Butler to “move away from a
cultural map that is dependent on familiar oppositions between human and alien, male and female” (Wolmark 36). Through shifting the emphasis to Akin, Lilith’s human-Oankali “construct” son, the narration is no longer a distinction being made between humans and aliens, as it was in Dawn, but is now a way in which one can read the text through the subject positions of both.

Jenny Wolmark’s comment about the way feminist utopian/dystopian writing undermines “ostensibly clear-cut distinctions” functions similarly to Donna Haraway’s notion of the “cyborg.” The shift in emphasis from Lilith to her children, who are human-Oankali “constructs,” allows Butler to explore the possibilities of partial, fluid cyborg identities and subject positions that Haraway proposes, in which “permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” have the potential to enable one to “see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point” (“Cyborg Manifesto” 72). The “cyborg” epitomizes how humans must reorient the way they view themselves in the postmodern world. Haraway argues that Butler’s “fiction, especially in Xenogenesis, is about the monstrous fear and hope that the child will not, after all, be like the parent...[It] is about resistance to the imperative to recreate the sacred image of the same” (Primate Visions 378). Haraway supports Butler’s emphasis on valuing difference over sameness and acknowledges the “fear” of embracing difference that Butler’s characters struggle with. In Dawn, Lilith considers the Oankali’s “gene trading” practices to be an end to the purity of the human species, whereas Jdahya considers this “gene trade” a “rebirth of your people [humans] and mine [Oankali]” (Butler 43). Lilith’s and Jdahya’s inabilities to view “difference” in a similar fashion set the tone for the rest of the novel, where the Awakened humans and the Oankali cannot peacefully coexist as hoped.

Walter Benn Michaels analyzes why a peaceful blending between a human and an alien species cannot occur in Butler’s Xenogenesis series and also critiques her on how she portrays cultural differences. Michaels proposes, “The fundamental questions are not about how society should be organized but about whether the different species (or, alternatively and inconsequentially, different cultures) can survive” (The Shape of the Signifier 34). He suggests that species difference is another kind of racial and gender differences, one in which cultural differences determine who you are based on fixed traits such as physical appearance, location, and so on. He goes on to argue that it is because of these fixed traits that “the enemy is re-described not as people who disagree with us as to how society should be organized...but as people who occupy different subject positions (aliens)...all conflict has been reimagined on the model of the conflict between self and other” (The Shape of the Signifier 34). Following Benn Michaels’ logic, in relation to Dawn, the Oankali play the role of the “other” that occupy “different bodies rather than different ideas”; he agrees with Butler’s emphasis on the Oankali’s different subject position rather than whether this subject position is fixed or mobile. However, unlike Haraway, he criticizes Butler for underscoring the importance of difference over sameness when “valuing difference and valuing sameness are just two different ways of doing the same thing” (“Political Science Fictions” 662).

Wolmark, Haraway, and Benn Michaels all rely on arguments revolving around the notion of the posthuman. Robert Pepperell defines posthumans as “persons of unprecedented physical, intellectual, and psychological ability, self-
programming and self-defining, potentially immortal, unlimited individuals” who “have overcome the biological, neurological, and psychological constraints evolved into humans” (Pepperell 170). While the posthuman is further evolved, more efficient, and more clearly defined by radical physiological changes that fit different needs, arguments about the posthuman pay less attention to the specific struggles of Butler’s protagonists and to their attempts to maintain distinctiveness. In other words, the concept of the posthuman only addresses difference as an endpoint. Unlike prior approaches that evaluate the endpoints of Butler’s novels, approaching her novels through the lens of social identity will focus more on the process of differentiation and the construction of distinctiveness. In examining her novels in this way, I hope to answer questions such as “how do we construct or negotiate difference?” and “what kind of cognitive processes do we go through when thinking about difference?”

Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Conflict

Social identity theory, a theory about the collective self and of intergroup relations, explains that mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups, even when differences between the two groups are arbitrary or “minimal,” is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination. The motivation to perceive categories during human interactions becomes central to the need to compare oneself when developing a social identity. Developed initially as an analysis of group behavior, self-categorization theory proposes that “individuals tend to define and see themselves less as differing individual persons and more as the interchangeable representatives of some shared social category membership,” shifting self-perception from personal to social identity (Turner et al., 455). These “self-categories” create and define the individual’s place in society (Turner et al. 458). Turner et al. emphasize how categorizing is inherently comparative and hence “intrinsically variable, fluid, and relative to a frame of reference” (456). According to social categorization theory, people perform “impression management” to indicate their preferred identity, such as adopting a position typical of the group they seek to align themselves with and even derogating the out-group for the purpose of ingratiation (Branscombe et al. 52). With individuals constantly trying to achieve group distinctiveness, “real conflicts of group interests not only create antagonistic intergroup relations but also heighten identification with, and positive attachment to, the in-group” (Tajfel and Turner 8), producing an in-group bias, or a tendency to evaluate the in-group more favorably than the out-group.

While social categorization provides a system of orientation for self-reference, social identity “consists...of those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (Tajfel and Turner 16). Social identity “refers to the shared social categorical self (“us” vs. “them,” in-group vs. out-group, us women, them men, Whites, Blacks, etc.)” as opposed to personal identity (“I” and “me”) (Turner et al. 454). The driving motivation behind social identity theory is that individuals strive to maintain positive social identity, based largely on favorable comparisons between the in-group and some relevant out-group, and like positive group distinctiveness, stemming from the way individuals need to perceive their in-group as positively differentiated from the relevant out-group. According to Tajfel and Turner, “the aim
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of differentiation is to maintain or achieve superiority over an out-group on some dimensions...the possibility of social comparison generates ‘spontaneous’ intergroup competition” (17); therefore, any such act to differentiate is not only comparative but also competitive.

When a social identity is unsatisfactory or lacking, an individual will strive to leave his or her existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make his or her existing group more positively distinct (Pickett, Chen, & Gardner, 2010). Distinctiveness threat is the threat in which group distinctiveness is prevented or undermined. Tajfel and Turner hypothesize that “when a group’s action for positive distinctiveness is frustrated, impeded, or in any way actively prevented by an out-group, this will promote overt conflict and hostility between the groups” (23). Evidence suggests that “increasing intergroup distinctiveness can actually reduce identity threat, with greater differentiation between groups diminishing in-group bias (Deschamps & Brown, 1983), and improving intergroup relations (Brown & Wade, 1987)” (Branscombe et al. 46).

Given that we derive part of our self-esteem from our social identities and positive social comparisons with other groups, it follows that “social comparison with similar out-groups could threaten group distinctiveness and social identity” (Branscombe et al. 42). Alleviating threatened group distinctiveness and status depends on one of two belief systems of social behavior. According to Tajfel and Turner, in contrast to “social mobility,” where it is possible for unsatisfied individuals to move individually into another group that suits them better, the concept of “social change” implies that “the nature and structure of the relations between social groups in the society is characterized by marked stratification, making it impossible or very difficult for individuals, as individuals, to divest themselves of an unsatisfactory, underprivileged, or stigmatized group membership” (9). This very situation confirms the perception that it is extremely difficult to conceive the possibility of “betraying” one’s group by moving to the opposing group and, thus, creates an intense conflict of interests (Tajfel and Turner 10).

The likelihood for social change and status depends on how the individual addresses the outcome of intergroup comparison. Status reflects “a group’s relative position on some evaluative dimensions of comparison”; it is an outcome rather than a scarce resource or commodity such as power or wealth (Tajfel and Turner 19). Tajfel and Turner hypothesize that “a status difference between groups does not reduce the meaningfulness of comparison between them providing that there is a perception that it can be changed” (22).

One group strategy for changing the perception of status difference involves a level of “social creativity.” In establishing positive distinctiveness for the in-group, social creativity “redefines or alters the elements of the comparative situation” (Tajfel and Turner 19-20). Social creativity involves (1) comparing the in-group to the out-group on some new dimension, (2) perceiving a previously negative comparison as positive through changing the values assigned to the attributes of the group, and (3) changing the out-group (or selecting the out-group) with which the in-group is compared—in particular, “ceasing or avoiding to use the high-status out-group as a comparative frame of reference” (Tajfel and Turner 20). Not comparing with a high-status out-group should help self-esteem recover as well. The most extreme strategy in seeking positive distinctiveness is through direct
competition with the out-group, or “social competition” (Tajfel and Turner 20). In brief, any threat to the distinctive superiority of a group implies a potential loss of positive comparisons and possible negative comparisons, which must be guarded against. This threat to the out-group’s superior distinctiveness produces intergroup tension (Tajfel and Turner 20).

**Reading Butler’s Novels through the Lens of Social Identity**

The lens of social identity becomes useful in thinking about Butler’s novels because of its ability to hone in on the processes of differentiation. Prevalent approaches to reading Butler’s science fiction novels often focus on the notion of “difference” as an end and not as a process that relies heavily on maintaining distinctiveness. Social identity theory allows us to see that in Butler’s *Dawn*, the first novel of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Lilith, the protagonist, and her fellow humans perceive themselves as belonging to a distinct group from the alien species, the Oankali:

“Oh god,” [Lilith] whispered. And the hair—the whatever-it-was—moved...She frowned, strained to see, to understand. Then, abruptly, she did understand. She backed away, scrambled around the bed and to the far wall...staring at him. Medusa...The tentacles were elastic. At her shout, some of them lengthened, stretching toward her.  

(*Dawn* 13-14)

In her narrative, Butler acknowledges upfront the threatening aspect of inviting the other “in.” Human reactions to difference contrast with those of the aliens due to the fundamental fear of the other and ignorance of the aliens’ cultural structure. In the initial chapters of Lilith’s early encounters with the Oankali, she constantly describes the Oankali as lacking. She describes them as lacking physical features that humans have (e.g., facial features) and cultural markers (e.g., race). The human and Oankali physiologies reinforce the idea that race is a human-made construct rather than a universal societal marker. For the Oankali, the organization of their sensory “arms” not only establishes their physical presence but also indicates their moods and thoughts. When Jdahya reveals himself, he says to Lilith, “I’m here to tell you...and show you. Will you look at me now?” The narrator describes Lilith’s behavior, “Since she was looking at him—it—she frowned” (12). This causal reaction shows Lilith’s need to see Jdahya for what he is and her inability to comfortably acknowledge his presence without a visual of him. The free indirect discourse breaks the flow of narration with the word “it,” demonstrating Lilith’s struggle with negotiating between the Oankali physicality and her notions of race and gender. Describing the Oankali and their culture as lacking allows her to maintain positive social identity through her in-group’s (humans) positive group distinctiveness.

Lilith’s difficulty with adapting to the Oankali lifestyle and the conflicts that ensue in her adaptation process comes from her emotional attachment to her social identity as one of the few humans who survived Earth’s destruction and, thus, must maintain the purity of her endangered species through resisting the Oankali’s physical and mental reconditioning of the human species. Such a strong attachment creates conflict through triggering intergroup discrimination, simply through recognition of the differences between humans and Oankali. Lilith’s and the other humans’ resistance and attempts to escape from the Oankali’s spaceship are
actions aimed at maintaining the positive group distinctiveness of their physicality through resisting the Oankali’s “gene trading” practices.

What disturbs Lilith about the “gene trade” is the forced “crossbreeding” of the Oankali and human species. Lilith thinks to herself, “The children of the last surviving human beings would be different” (Butler 43). She also resists the Oankali mentally through focusing on the qualities where the human species, or the in-group, fares better in survival. As a way of trying to understand the Oankali’s notion of a genderless species, she tries to project sex characteristics onto the Oankali, calling Jdahya “the usual, quiet, androgynous voice” during her initial encounters with him. Focusing on the human notion of gender and its parameters of male and female, Lilith further reinforces species and societal differences. Rather than embracing difference, she resists it and differentiates herself and her in-group through the construction of their group distinctiveness. She destabilizes the naturalization process that defines difference as a given and instead points out that how we deal with difference is what creates the binary of self and other.

Like Lilith, Lauren in Parable of the Sower also initially perceives herself, an individual born with a hyperempathy syndrome, as belonging to a group distinct from normal humans:

“He [my father] has always pretended, or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about…I can’t do a thing about my hyperempathy…I get a lot of grief that doesn’t belong to me…I’m supposed to share pleasure and pain…Anyway, my neurotransmitters are scrambled and they’re going to stay scrambled. But I can do okay as long as other people don’t know about me.

(Parable of the Sower 11-12)

Even though “sharers” look and act relatively normal unless they witness another person in pain (even feigned pain), Lauren nevertheless feels discriminated against, despite her father’s efforts to not treat her differently. Her ability to distinguish feelings that are her own versus the feelings of others, such as “grief that doesn’t belong to me,” only reinforces the differentiation between herself and the “other,” in this case, humans without hyperempathy syndrome. She acknowledges the permanence of her handicap as she narrates through her journal entries, “I can’t do a thing about my hyperempathy…my neurotransmitters are scrambled and they’re going to stay scrambled,” which is both a kind of displacement from the norm and an embracing of difference.

That Lauren embraces her difference from others allows her to maintain positive social identity:

It’s beyond me how one human being could do that [kill] to another. If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn’t do such things. They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it…I’ve never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before…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)
While still calling her condition a “problem,” Lauren embraces how this difference is a part of her identity, calling it a “biological conscience,” one that allows her to keep a positive group distinctiveness from those who have “no conscience at all.” From the killing of her brother, Keith, she not only clearly sees the cause and effect relationship of the lack of hyperempathy and the resulting murder but also understands the significance of “sharing” both pleasure and pain; in wishing she could “give it to people” and live among “other people who have it,” she marks her current efforts to blend in with normal humans as futile and considers leaving it completely to join some more positively distinct group, that is, to join her fellow “sharers.” Such a newly found attachment with other “sharers” triggers intergroup discrimination, simply by recognizing the differences between normal humans and “sharers” who experience hyperempathy.

Embracing difference empowers Butler’s characters to dissolve demarcations between themselves and those around them. This form of boundary transgression becomes important in *Parable of the Talents*. Through the narration, Butler demonstrates how much of Lauren’s experience in relation to difference leads her to discover elements of humanness.

That’s why the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars. I know you [Bankole] don’t want to hear verses right now, but that one is...a major key to us, to human beings, I mean. When we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves. (Parable of the Talents 179)

In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren’s self-created religion, Earthseed, comes full circle. She no longer separates herself and other “sharers” as distinct beings but rather encompasses both sharers and non-sharers in her self-built community, called Acorn, under the collective identity of members of Earthseed. As the leader and creator of Earthseed, she believes humans have the “difficult, long-term purpose” of “taking root among the stars,” without which humans would “fight each other.” Earthseed is Lauren’s seed of utopian hope for humans. In contrast to how she initially perceives the hyperempathy syndrome with which she is born, Lauren constructs difference through identifying with her Earthseed community; such an identification with the group and persistence in maintaining this positive social identity—a cooperative, communal society based on human dignity, respect for difference, and the constant need to adapt to present circumstances for the good of the group—designates her social identity as a religious leader above her personal identity as a mother and wife.

This idea of embracing difference as a form of boundary transgression also resonates in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Ridding of social stratifications allows one to tolerate, even accept, a mediated group such as the construct children of the Oankali and humans without feeling that there is a conflict of interest or “betrayal” of one’s group.

In *Adulthood Rites*, Butler demonstrates the limits to which humans tend to embrace difference:

“Human beings fear difference,” Lilith had told [Akin, her construct son] once. “Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves
from stagnation and overspecialization. If you don’t understand this, you will. You’ll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior…When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference.” (329)

Lilith explains to her construct son the reasons for why human beings cannot “embrace difference” and the Oankali can. Besides “fear,” humans have an innate need for hierarchy, or “to give themselves definition and status,” and “persecute their different ones.” They attempt to behave in a manner that, they believe, is more prototypically human and to derogate any creature that is remotely Oankali, the out-group that includes all Oankali as well as Akin and the other construct children, for the purpose of in-group ingratiation. While humans categorically reject any transformation of their form and immediately translate difference into categories and delimitations, the Oankali view difference as elementary to the existence of their species (Melzer 76). The aliens understand that they play a role in establishing difference, acknowledging that it is a cooperative practice to embrace difference.

Dawn and Adulthood Rites

Throughout the latter half of Dawn, as Lilith awakens more humans, her social identity as the mediating figure between the humans and the Oankali determines how well she can situate herself among humans. This is especially evident in situations where there is little likelihood for social change because of her special abilities, such as increased physical strength, superior healing abilities, improved memory, and so on, which the Oankali have given only to her. Because the Oankali have physiologically and mentally reconditioned her, her intrahuman relationships are strained as she struggles with perceiving the thoughts and feelings of her fellow humans. As one of her awakened humans reminds her:

“Look at things from Curt’s point of view,” Gabriel said. “He’s not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He’s taken like a woman…He knows the oooloi aren’t male. He knows all the sex that goes on is in his head. It doesn’t matter…Someone else is pushing all his buttons. He can’t let them get away with that.”

(Dawn 203)

The very intimate act of sex becomes a kind of social stratification, a reminder of one’s underprivileged and reprehensible status of being human. Sex is no longer a physical act but a series of mental sensations that “someone else” controls. The oooloi has violated the intimacy of sex for Curt in that he is no longer having sex with a female but with a gender-neutral creature, making him feel “taken like a woman,” and he is not given the liberty to “control…what his own body does and feels.” This violation disturbs Curt because he and other humans are now receiving sexual sensations from a nonhuman creature and he lacks agency over what he considered to be a physical act. While Lilith refers to the Oankali as “it” or calls them “androgynous” when she tries to categorize them into some human notion of gender, Curt uses gender to differentiate them for a different effect; unable to definitively label his alien sex partner with a specific gender, he instead internalizes this crisis of gender identity and feminizes himself in the sexual act. His inability to cope with this contamination of his species and its reproductive practices from an androgynous creature through bodily infiltration causes him to view
humans, such as Lilith and Joseph, who willingly engage in such behavior, as abominations and betrayers of their species. When he eventually kills Joseph from fear of the sight of Joseph’s body naturally healing from gruesome wounds, he justifies this murder through claiming to an ooloi, “We didn’t kill a human being...We killed one of your animals!” (228). Lilith’s and Joseph’s healing abilities are threats to what Curt perceives as his in-group’s positive distinctiveness, that is, the purity of his species. Thus, when he kills Joseph, he not only alters the elements of the comparative situation between himself and the Oankali but also eliminates the threat to his group’s distinctiveness. Joseph’s murder disillusions Lilith from allowing the Oankali to offer themselves as survival resources to humans being brought to Earth, and ultimately shapes the way her partial Oankali identity takes precedence over the human one.

In her process of coping with her social identity as a human with Oankali characteristics, she struggles with letting the other “in”—in this case, the Oankali—and with understanding the thoughts and feelings of an Oankali. With the loss of her human mate, Joseph, Lilith tries to cope with grief and wonders if her ooloi, Nikanj, feels any sorrow over his death, asking herself, “What did it feel?” (225). When Nikanj presses its sensory hand on the back of her neck, she describes what it feels:

> It gave her...a new color. A totally alien, unique, nameless thing, half seen, half felt, or...tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelmingly, compelling.
> Extinguished.
> A half known mystery beautiful and complex. A deep, impossibly sensuous promise.
> Broken.
> Gone.
> Dead.

*(Dawn 226)*

The thoughts and sensations that Lilith receives from Nikanj are in a language incomprehensible to humans. At first, the sensations are “new...alien, unique...frightening, yet overwhelming, compelling”; Lilith is immersed in the consciousness of an ooloi and can hardly describe the power it has over her. All of a sudden, these novel sensations, “a deep, impossible sensuous promise,” are “extinguished...broken, gone, dead.” Although these feelings are not coherently displayed to Lilith, there are some striking similarities in the way the humans and the Oankali feel grief. As depressed as Lilith is at having Joseph unjustly killed and taken from her, Nikanj also feels a sense of loss. As Lilith attempts to describe how it feels to Nikanj, she refers to a “blaze” that is “extinguished”; its “half known mystery beautiful and complex” and “deep, impossibly sensuous promise” is “broken, gone, dead.” While Lilith cannot directly translate Nikanj’s feelings into a comprehensible human language, it is undeniable that Nikanj also feels a deep loss through Joseph’s death. This enlightening experience of sharing Nikanj’s perception offers Lilith a way to cope with her new social identity, one that is no longer purely human but also not completely Oankali.

At the end of *Dawn*, Lilith foreshadows the conflict that follows with the birth of her construct child, Akin, telling Nikanj that it “won’t be human...That’s what matters. You can’t understand, but that *is* what matters” (248). Nikanj replies, “The
child inside you matters,” attempting to appeal to her human, motherly characteristics and downplay the human-Oankali distinction. Unlike Lilith, Nikanj understands that her construct child is neither fully human nor fully Oankali; it is both human and Oankali. Influencing genetics plays a heavy role in the way humans seek to preserve their species in *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites*. The Oankali need to gene trade in order to evolve and, thus, preserve their species while at the same time benefit their human symbionts. However, humans find this “gene trading” to be a contamination of their species; even though gene trading with the Oankali is physiologically beneficial, humans nevertheless resist risking the purity of their species for this benefit. Because of this distinction in the way the species preserve themselves, the humans and Oankali constantly have difficulty communicating and understanding each other. Their struggle to negotiate these terms of differentiation is a recurrent process by which the characters construct social identities while also reinforcing divisions between the species.

While gene trading is seen as a progressive act for both human and Oankali species in *Dawn*, Butler shows in *Adulthood Rites* how gene trading is a retroactive act, one that recreates divisions between the two species. Human resisters, no longer able to have children through their standard mode of intercourse, blame the Oankali for making them sterile and for their “pointless, endless existence” (402). Akin asks his resister-caretaker, Tate, “What do you want to happen instead?” (403). This is the first time in *Adulthood Rites* that an Oankali has asked a resister his or her desired outcome for the human species. Despite Akin’s efforts to comprehend Tate’s perspective, their dialogue is a constant struggle:

“Not extinction,” she whispered. “Not extinction in any form. As long as we’re alive, we have some chance.”

Akin frowned, trying to understand. “If you had kids in the old way, your prewar way, with Gabe, would that mean you and Gabe were becoming extinct?”

“It would mean we weren’t. Our kids would be Human like us.”

“I’m Human like you—and Oankali like Ahajas and Dichaan.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I’m trying to.”

“Are you?” She touched his face. “Why?”

“I need to. It’s part of me, too. It concerns me, too.”

“Not really.”

Abruptly he was angry. He hated her soft condescension.

(*Adulthood Rites* 403)

Tate views the Oankali way of preserving their species, or gene trading, as an “extinction” of the human species. Being a product of both species, Akin “tries to understand” how an existing human-Oankali construct, such as himself, means that humans are no longer “alive.” He explains to Tate, “I’m Human like you—and Oankali like Ahajas and Dichaan,” and because he is partially human, her concerns are his concerns as well. Tate replies to him, “You don’t understand.” Tate not only is being “condescending” to Akin for his naivety but also assuming that because he is not purely human, he cannot completely comprehend the fear and anxiety of human extinction; it is not enough for Akin to only be “like” a human. Tate’s use of the pronoun “we” when referring to humans and “you” when referring to Akin further recreates the terms of differentiation between humans and the Oankali.
Tate perceives Akin and the other human-Oankali construct children to be a gradual extinction of the human species; in contrast, Akin sees himself and the construct children as a way for both his parent species to survive. This distinction in the way both perceive species-preservation contributes to their inabilitys to negotiate these terms of differentiation.

Because this sense of differentiation is localized in Akin, he has the ability to communicate between both his parent species and can attempt to remedy the misunderstandings between them. Akin relays Tate’s concerns about the fate of the human species to his Oankali-parent Dichaan:

“Then it will be an Oankali species,” Akin said softly. “It will grow and divide as Oankali always have, and it will call itself Oankali.”

“It will be Oankali. Look within the cells of your own body. You are Oankali.”

“And the Humans will be extinct, just as they believe.”

“Look within your cells for them, too. Your cells in particular.

“But we will be Oankali. They will only be…something we consumed.”

(Adulthood Rites 443)

Akin affirms that the generation of construct children will eventually “call itself Oankali” once they are fully developed. Dichaan justifies this act through claiming that both Oankali and human cells exist within Akin’s body and that the human species will survive through the birth of construct children like Akin. Akin refuses to accept this justification, declaring the Darwinist outcome that the human species will be reduced to “something we [the Oankali species] consumed.” Interestingly, Akin associates himself with the Oankali, calling himself and Dichaan “we” and calling humans “they,” even though he is speaking on behalf of humans. When his social identity as a member of the endangered human species is perceived as lacking in his conversation with Dichaan, he unconsciously categorizes himself with the Oankali, a group that is more positively distinct in this situation. Almost simultaneously, Akin shifts back to his human social identity as he feels himself excluded from the communication between Dichaan and his Oankali sibling, Tiikuchahk:

“Akin stared at the two of them, wondering what communication they shared that he took no part in...He sat watching them, trying to see them both as a resister might. They slowly became alien to him, became ugly, became almost frightening” (Adulthood Rites 443).

Akin’s ability for dual perception taking as a human-Oankali construct allows him to see how a resister can view the Oankali as a predatorial species. This renders the Oankali identity as unsatisfactory and causes him to shift his mode of thinking to align more with his human identity. As he does so, his sibling and Oankali-parent become as “alien, ugly, and frightening” to him as they may be to a resister. Akin’s exclusion from the connective conversation between Tiikuchahk and Dichaan and his sudden sense of alienation from the Oankali species as a whole show his struggle to negotiate the terms that govern both of his social identities as a human and as an Oankali. Such a struggle only makes it more difficult for Akin to construct a social identity of his own that would mediate between his two conflicting subject positions.
**Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents**

Born with a hyperempathy syndrome, Lauren Olamina is forced to share the pain and pleasure of others; her ability to distinguish her own feelings from those of others further reinforces the differentiation between herself and others, that is, humans without hyperempathy syndrome. While the act of sharing allows Lauren to deeply connect with people, her sharing ability functions to promote distancing between herself and other characters. As Harry, her life-long friend and fellow home-village survivor, states when she first reveals her hyperempathy to him, “So...you faked everyone out. You must be a hell of an actor.” She responds, “I had to learn to pretend to be normal” (*Parable of the Sower* 194). Her performance of impression management, “pretending” to be normal, signifies that her preferred identity is that of non-sharers and shows how she adopts a position typical of the group with which she seeks to align herself. Even with Lauren’s confirmation of her condition, Harry still persists in holding onto the identity that he grew to know of her:

“Maybe you are normal. I mean if the pain isn’t real, then maybe—”

“Maybe this sharing is all in my head? Of course it is! And I can’t get it out. Believe me, I’d love to” (*Parable of the Sower* 194)

This displacement from the norm disturbs Harry to the point that he tries to convince Lauren, and indirectly himself, that “if the pain isn’t real,” Lauren’s sharing ability may not be real as well. As he comes to terms with this new sense of differentiation, he says to her, “Let me know something about the you that hides. I feel as though...as though you’re a lie. I don’t know you. Show me something of you that’s real” (*Parable of the Sower* 195). It is as if the intangible “sharing,” a defining marker of her social identity, does not happen because it occurs “in her head”; if it *does* occur, its occurrence somehow makes Lauren “a lie,” a different person altogether, rather than just changing her given identity.

This motivation to perceive categories during human interactions is central to the process of comparison that Lauren and other characters perform in developing social identities. The categorization process is inherently comparative and relative to a frame of reference. As more strangers join Lauren’s traveling group, she begins using herself as a frame of reference for spotting other sharers. She and Zahra privately discuss their suspicions of sharers in their group:

“Hey, Lauren, you ever notice anything funny about those two—Emery and Tori, I mean? And about that guy Mora, too?”

Something clicked into place for me, and I sighed again.

“They’re sharers, aren’t they?”

“Yes, all of them—both adults and both kids. You knew?”

“Not until now. I did notice something odd: that tentativeness and touchiness—not wanting to be touched, I mean” (*Parable of the Sower* 299)

Lauren can iterate the exact oddities of sharers such as Emery and Tori based on her own experiences of sharing, detecting the familiar “tentativeness and touchiness—not wanting to be touched.” She can also communicate with sharers in a way that may seem incomprehensible, even “insane,” to a non-sharer. After a
raid on their group’s resting site, Lauren and Mora can discuss the effects of the attack that only sharers could have felt:

“How many times did you die?” Mora asked me.
“Three at least,” I answered, as though this were a sane conversation. “Maybe four. I never did it like that before—over and over. Insane. But you look well enough.”

His 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.  

(Parable of the Sower 300)

Only another sharer such as Mora can even fathom the notion of dying “three...maybe four” times from shooting that many attackers. Her incisive dig at Mora, “you look well enough,” reveals her lack of sympathy for his pusillanimous character as she, a “fellow sharer,” took blows and risked her life when the group was in danger. Although subtle, the language she uses in her intra-sharing relationships shows not only that she is comparing herself and other sharers but also that she is negotiating new terms of differentiation between herself and other humans in general.

While the social identity of a sharer is not yet fully constructed in *Parable of the Sower*, raising issues of authenticity and performative actions, it becomes a social identity that produces its own mechanisms of differentiation in *Parable of the Talents*. Lauren’s self-created religion, called Earthseed, is the product of her experiences with sharing and becomes the operative social category. As Earthseed develops in the Acorn community, Lauren’s social identity as a leader of this community takes precedence over her other identities, such as that of a mother. Following the birth of their daughter, Bankole tells Lauren:

“Now that you’re a mother, you’ve got to let go of some of the Earthseed thinking and think of your child. I want you to look at Larkin and think of her every time you want to make some grand decision”  
(Parable of the Talents 178).

In response, Lauren tells him, “I can’t help doing that...this isn’t about grand decisions. It’s about her and her future” (Parable of the Talents 178). Unlike Lauren, who truly believes her decisions regarding the fate of the Earthseed community will not only benefit Earthseed followers but also her daughter, Bankole has the perspective to see how her social identity as a community leader is an all-consuming one. Presenting the condition that she is now a “mother,” he coaxes her to “let go of some of the Earthseed thinking,” suggesting that Lauren cannot identify herself as a mother while simultaneously identifying herself as an Earthseed leader and still be able to properly raise a child. Lauren’s social identity as an Earthseed leader supersedes what is typically a primary social identity, that is, a mother.

In addition to her social identity as a mother, Lauren’s social identity as a leader of Earthseed takes precedence over her other identity as a sharer. Harry, who in the prequel novel, *Parable of the Sower*, fears Lauren’s abnormality as a sharer and questions the authenticity of her hyperempathy syndrome, speaks more assuredly of her social identity as an Earthseed leader:
“Olamina, we’ve got to kill these bastards [President Jarret’s Christian American radicals and religious oppressors]!”

He almost never called me Olamina. We’d known each other since we were both in diapers. He called me Lauren except during the most important Gathering Day ceremonies. He had called me Olamina for the first time when I Welcomed his first child into the Acorn community, and into Earthseed. It was as though for him the name were a title.

(Parable of the Talents 218)

Harry’s discretion in the use of Lauren’s first name and last name marks his delineations of her social identities. “Lauren” signifies the familiar sharer that he grew up with in their destroyed gated-village of Robledo with the word “except” separating her other name with the phrase “important Gathering Day ceremonies” in the sentence. The name “Olamina” is a “title” for Harry to use to differentiate her less dominant social identity as a sharer from her more dominant one as an Earthseed leader. Interestingly, when Lauren thinks of Harry calling her “Olamina,” she thinks to herself “the” name rather than “my” name, as if she does not completely associate herself with a “title” that comes with the name “Olamina.” This lack of a possessive pronoun before her name suggests that she is also coming to terms with her new social identity and that this identity is a working construction in her thoughts.

The effect of her fully formed Earthseed identity is her estranged relationship with her daughter, Larkin, who is wrongfully taken from her in her infancy. Larkin describes Lauren’s mothering: “All that she did, she did for Earthseed...Earthseed was her first ‘child,’ and in some ways her only ‘child’ (Parable of the Talents 404). Although Lauren is the creator of Earthseed and desires her daughter to follow its belief systems, Larkin categorizes herself separately from Earthseed, claiming the religion is not only the “first ‘child’” that Lauren raises but also happens to be the only one she ever raises. The common experience of oppression in the Earthseed community is one that Lauren endures without Larkin; therefore, Larkin cannot share this experience with her mother and establish the parent-child bond that Lauren has with fellow Earthseed followers. Earthseed’s model of group identity, governed by common experience, plays a significant role in how Lauren chooses her dominant social identity. Unlike the Earthseed community, which is home to sharers, non-sharers, and individuals of all affiliations, the Christian American radicals mobilize and sustain members on the basis of religious affiliation—in particular, members must practice Christianity and even oppress “cults,” such as Earthseed, who do not convert to their religion. She constantly strives to maintain a positive social identity for herself and positive group distinctiveness for Earthseed followers, leading her Earthseed followers toward the path of survival in a chaotic country run by cruel Christian Americans and maintaining a leadership role that she can be proud of. Identifying herself more with a positively distinct group such as Earthseed must compensate for her lacking social identity as Larkin’s mother.

Conclusion

The genre of science fiction immediately raises the issue of difference. In particular, Butler’s science fictional scenarios involve encountering a novum, a
“new” phenomenon not from our current world (e.g., telepathy and hyper-empathy), that produces a sense of “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin 8-9). This estrangement comes from the displacement of social norms where the reader recognizes that the world operating in the text is not his or her own but the characters must still make sense of this novum. It is “cognitive” in that it presents an image of a different world understandable in the terms of contemporary reality. It is “estranged” in that it presents itself in a “novum.” The nova, a kind of cognitive innovation, affects how the reader views beauty, choice, culture, etc.—in other words, difference. Resisting movements toward posthumanism serves as an important way to address difference in terms of intrahuman social formations.

As seen through previous examples, within Dawn, Butler identifies difference as seemingly superficial, initially disturbing Lilith and other characters in the form of physical disgust at the Oankali’s “Medusa-like” appearance and their unclear, “androgynous” voices. The terms of differentiation become more complex as Lilith shares Nikanj’s perception and learns that the Oankali language is made of “sensations” rather than grammatically structured speech. Notions of difference change even more drastically in the sequel, Adulthood Rites. Human-alien distinctions become hardened, creating a retroactive effect where divisions between humans and the “other” are firmly defined. The Oankali restructure the human reproductive process to only carry human-Oankali construct children; perceiving the threat of species extinction, humans “persecute” and exploit these “different” individuals, that is, the construct children and their human parents who have “betrayed” their species to procreate with the aliens.

As previously mentioned, hyperempathy syndrome is the mode through which Butler uses difference in Parable of the Sower. The act of “sharing” evokes anxiety over the authenticity of an individual’s social identity, such as the way Harry questions the actual occurrence of Lauren’s sharing and, thus, questions her social identity as a sharer. This process of differentiation between sharer and non-sharer is less prominent in Parable of the Talents; in Parable of the Talents, the processes of categorization become key. Sharers and non-sharers alike are welcomed into Lauren’s Earthseed community; however, characters must now categorize themselves as part of Earthseed or part of the Christian American radicalist group. This threat to Lauren’s group’s cohesiveness forces her to choose between her social identity as an Earthseed leader and as Larkin’s mother. Identifying herself with Earthseed, a more positively distinct group, allows her to continue her mission to spread Earthseed worldwide; at the same time, choosing her social identity as an Earthseed leader over that as a mother allows her to repress the shame of losing her opportunity to establish a deep parent-child bond with her only daughter.

Rather than immediately turning to notions of the posthuman, the lens of social identity reorients the way we can interpret science fictional discourse regarding the individual who must occupy multiple subject positions, positions that may even be oppositional. As Melzer notes, Butler’s characters occupy multiple subject positions grounded in the idea of “identity as a site of differences, not sameness” (67). But when her protagonists occupy competing subject positions, they face tension between their personal identities and social identities. The protagonist finds himself or herself comparing his or her multiple subject positions and seeking membership in groups that are more positively distinct. Humans are
motivated to perceive categories and ultimately choose group memberships that value these categories, giving the individual a sense of meaning and an increase in self-esteem from membership. This propensity to categorize shapes the kind of hierarchies and status differences that appear in Butler’s novels. Once these group memberships become part of the protagonist’s social identity, it is difficult to view the self as the “same” as a relevant out-group without feeling like he or she is betraying his or her in-group. The mere perception that members belong to two distinct groups, even when the differences between the two groups are arbitrary or “minimal,” is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the in-group. It is these operative group categories proposed by social identity theory that makes a social psychological approach to reading Butler’s science fiction valuable.

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Notes
1. In 2000 Lilith’s Brood replaced Xenogenesis as the title of a collection of three related Butler novels – Dawn, Adulthood Rites, and Imago, originally published individually. Although all references are to the works as they appear in the trilogy, for the sake of clarity I will cite the individual novels.
2. In an unpublished paper, “The Collective Self,” Pickett, Chen, and Gardner use social identity theory to analyze how social identity processes can be used to understand real-world intergroup relations.
3. For the purposes of this paper, I chose to focus on the distinctiveness threat; Branscombe et al.’s chapter, “The Context and Content of Social Identity Threat,” goes into greater depth about other forms of threat to social identity.
4. For this paper, I chose to focus on group strategies for changing the perception of status difference. Tajfel and Turner compare and contrast individualistic strategies to other group strategies in their chapter, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior.”
Works Cited