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**Reflections:**

"A Glitch in the Matrix": A Reflection on Shabazz Palaces' "Welcome to Quazarz" or a New Wave of Afrofuturist Music Videos

By Lidia Kniaż

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Brown Girl in the Ring

By Sarah Olutola

Frozen Journey: Science Fiction, Blacks, Race, and the Limits of Speculative Practice

By John Gordon Russell

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## Letter from the Editor

Hello, lovely readers! The new issue is here—our first themed issue, focusing on Afrofuturism. We selected this theme because several of our editors are engaged in critical work in this sphere and because the *Journal of Science Fiction* is committed to inclusivity in scholarship. I was (pleasantly) shocked by the level of response to the call for papers: we received far more submissions for this issue than for any other, and we're delighted to receive so many thoughtful, provocative manuscripts. (In a related story, we will be seeking editorial and copy editing staff in the near future!)

Because Afrofuturism is outside of my own area of expertise, both Aisha Matthews and Melanie Marotta have taken more leadership in this issue. Please do check out Aisha's foreword—which has details about the pieces in this issue as well as our choice of theme—and Melanie's reflective essay on Nnedi Okorafor. The "Reflective Pieces" category is new for this issue; it may become a regular part of the journal in the future. These essays, which are relatively brief and not peer-reviewed, provide targeted examinations of a specific idea or text. Let us know what you think of the format, and we'll consider whether to continue to include these shorter pieces.

In other news, the *Journal of Science Fiction* wants to recognize our editor, Thomas Connolly, who defended his dissertation in December at Maynooth University in Ireland and is now Dr. Thomas Connolly. Congratulations, Thomas!

Finally, a note about Escape Velocity, the Museum of Science Fiction's annual convention. This year's convention will be May 25-27 at the Marriott Gaylord Hotel in National Harbor, MD. In addition to serving as our assistant managing editor, Aisha is also the director of literary programming for Escape Velocity. Aisha is making sure that the literary programming track is crammed with exciting panels and events for any reader who loves SF, so we hope to see you there! You can get check out more details about guests and events—and buy tickets—at [www.escapevelocity.events](http://www.escapevelocity.events).

—Heather McHale, Ph.D.  
Managing Editor  
MOSF Journal of Science Fiction



## **Foreword to the Special Issue on Afrofuturism**

By **Aisha Matthews**

The *Journal of Science Fiction's* growing interest in and commitment to representing diversity in SF literature has afforded us an opportunity, through this special issue, to foreground a set of beliefs and practices crucial not only to the future, but to the present as well. Continuing the ongoing discourses initiated at last year's Escape Velocity Conference, this special issue aims to recognize the invaluable contributions that black authors and black cultures have made to science and speculative fictions.

Since its inception in Mark Dery's landmark 1994 essay "Black to the Future," the term Afrofuturism has come to mean a variety of different things. To some, it represents a genre of literature and film. For others, it encompasses dance, fashion, and music as well. Many have argued that Afrofuturism reflects only the lives and circumstances of African-Americans, while more recent scholarship has fully integrated African, Afro-Caribbean, and other Afro-Diaspora projects into the larger narrative of Afrofuturism. For the purposes of our journal, we have characterized Afrofuturism as a set of aims that foregrounds images of futurity involving any and all ethnicities within the larger black community. Coined to address the startling lack of racial diversity in mainstream science and speculative fiction, the Afrofuturist movement seeks to provide alternate visions of the future that include and integrate black life and its various cultural specificities alongside advancements in fields such as medicine, technology, interstellar travel, artificial intelligence, and prospective utopias and dystopias. To challenge the notion that the solution to racial strife is to eliminate racial difference, or to otherwise flatten the rich cultures and histories which differentiate racial and ethnic identities, Afrofuturism enlists our help in imagining both solutions to current racial tensions and positive, productive images of blackness which reimagine or otherwise diverge from the legacy of slavery.

This issue of the MOSF's *Journal of Science Fiction* requested submissions reflecting Afrofuturistic modes of thought, analyses of Afrofuturist texts, and unconventional readings of the cultural present projected into the incumbent future. Fortunately, the scholarly SF community heard our call and arrived in full force, offering us a wealth of critical perspectives, theories, and reflections to choose from. Despite their varying focal points and differing rhetorical strategies, the pieces selected for this special issue share a common thread. They explore what it means and will mean to live in a world dominated by racial consciousness and the historical memory of slavery. Further, they look at the genres of science and speculative fiction as sites for the artistic expression of such concerns, and more positively, hopes, about what our future will look like. Addressing the works of authors such as Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson, the musical contributions of Shabazz Palaces,



and the projects of historical reconstruction, #BlackGirlMagic, and Afrocentric technological development, this collection of critical essays and reflection pieces offers commentary on the contemplation of embodiment, racism, self-image, and most germane to our mission, their implications for science and speculative fictions.



**Cover Art**



"Threads and Circuits," by Griffin Ess  
11 inches x 14 inches, 90lb hot press paper, inks & watercolors



## Reflections

### **"A Glitch in the Matrix": A Reflection on Shabazz Palaces' "Welcome to To Quazarz" or a New Wave of Afrofuturist Music Videos**

By **Lidia Kni az**

In their interview for the Guardian, Shabazz Palaces, a hip-hop duo from Seattle comprising Ishmael Butler--a.k.a. Palaceer Lazaro--and multi-instrumentalist Tendai "Baba" Maraire, indicated that they felt like "aliens" in the contemporary United States (Bakare). Their experimental lyrical style and otherworldly sound palette situate the group somewhere on hip-hop's peripheries. Yet the two have mastered their distinctive style and created their own uncanny universe that most fans of Afrofuturism will probably find captivating.

Shabazz's new video for "Welcome to Quazarz," directed by Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist Nep Sidhu, promotes two concept albums, *Quazarz vs. The Jealous Machines* and *Quazarz: Born on a Gangster Star*, released simultaneously worldwide on 14th July 2017. These two albums tell the story of Quazarz, a visitor from space. "Welcome to Quazarz" is a surrealist collage with noticeable social and political overtones. The glitchy video, featuring kaleidoscopic imagery, is an example of how contemporary Black futurists express their artistic vision within the medium of music video. Shabazz Palaces are known for their imaginary videos, including "#CAKE" (dir. Hiro Murai, 2013), "Forerunner Foray" (animated video by Chad VanGalen, 2015), and "Motion Sickness" (dir. TEAN, 2014), to name just a few. The Quazarz videos

showcase their futuristic aesthetic style, which is in line both with their previous videos and Butler's lyrical style present on the p-funk-inspired, experimental hip-hop albums. The complex imagery follows the pattern provided by the sounds, creating a coherent continuity. These Afrofuturist pieces feature contemporary overtones, including emerging technophobic and anti-Republican messages and the lavish use of computer-generated imagery.

"Welcome to To Quazarz" emphasizes a symbolic synergy between Afro- and Arab-Futurism, manifested in the form of Alex McLoed's golden 3D animations and Nep Sidhu's typography and ornamentation based on medieval Arabic calligraphy. Those two aesthetic styles are glued together by the use of CGI, making this video an example of Internet art of the kind stylized as distorted VHS footage. The video also employs Michael Reynolds's analog optics and seemingly random video streams from Tiona Nekkia McClodden's multimedia installation entitled *Sweet Atlanta Black Simulacrum*. All these ingredients make "Welcome to To Quazarz" unusual, but also, occasionally, painful to look at. On the other hand, I find this highly-colored, glaring imagery the only method of fully embracing the plentitude of inspirations relevant to African futurists and telling a contemporary story.



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As African storytelling is often non-linear, attempting to outline a sequence of events in the video would make little sense. The piece delivers the narrative not only in a non-linear fashion, but also on multiple levels, as it features split screens and images within images, reflecting the barrage of information in contemporary media. Sometimes the connection between the images is difficult to understand, but they all seem to reflect total information flows in the media: different sources show different vistas, presenting one twisted, incomprehensible, and often unsettling message.

Political and social concerns are present not only in Butler's lyrics, but also in imagery. The political commentary emerging from the lines such as "We post-language, baby/We talk with guns, guns keep us safe" is emphasized, for instance, by a shot of Black women wearing white bandanas, which appears on the screen only a few seconds later. Soon after, Butler raps that "We don't imagine past the image," a statement that reflects Western ocularcentrism but runs against African orality. And it is difficult not to connect "We killed facts" with the arrival of fake news and post-truth politics. In "Welcome to To Quazarz," science fiction meets social justice as both the futuristic video and the experimental song function as a commentary on our current historical moment. Shabazz criticize "jealous machines" that have taken control of human life, which is visible especially in a statement advertising Quazarz: Born on a Gangster Star on Sub Pop's website: "Stay away from your device - your phantom limb - and stay away from your image - your

phantom self." In the character of Quazarz, Butler implies that the internet and social media destroy, rather than facilitate, human interaction. Shabazz Palaces incorporate futuristic aesthetics, but there are, in their work, skeptical, if not technophobic, echoes. Processed through multiple filters and optical effects, the video intentionally strains the eye. Its "glitches" imply fears connected with overdose of new technologies. By presenting a kaleidoscopic, Afro-Surrealist video, the duo serves a smorgasbord of elements, a veritable megatext of contemporary Afrofuturism. VHS-nostalgic filters, throbbing animations connected to African and Arab mysticism, and bleak collages of seemingly unrelated shots presenting Black bodies all infuse the piece, leaving the audience perhaps disoriented but also definitely fascinated by this "alien" transmission.

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## Reflections

### **Nnedi Okorafor's Afrofuturism and the Motif of Hair**

By **Melanie Marotta**

One of Afrofuturism's objectives is to offer readers positive portrayals of people of African descent. Early Afrofuturist W. E. B Du Bois, who added his short story "The Comet" (1920) to the genre, famously asserted during the Harlem Renaissance that literary contributions by African Americans should concentrate on racial uplift. In a brief analysis of the story, Nisi Shawl (2017) writes, "Like many Afrodiasporic authors who've come after him, he deprivileged the racism inherent in the status quo by smashing that status quo to tragic smithereens. Though the dream of Utopic ages to come is conveyed only in a few paragraphs toward the story's end and experienced by its characters in a nearly wordless communion, this dream, this communion, is "The Comet's" crux." One of the latest Afrofuturists to continue Du Bois' efforts is Nnedi Okorafor; this University of Buffalo professor offers her readers magical realist works written to both young adult and adult readers. Like Du Bois, Okorafor highlights discriminatory societal constructs that exist in her dystopic spaces.

Many of Okorafor's texts challenge idealized beauty constructs, specifically through the motif of hair. During a speech to the Science Fiction Research Association in 2017, Okorafor reflected on her experiences as a person of color and how she is treated in various spaces because of her natural hair. Okorafor asserted that her experiences have sometimes been

negative and even odd as some people attempt to touch her hair, which has been styled into long dreadlocks. Like Okorafor herself, the heroine of her first novel, *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005) has long dreadlocks, or dadalocks, which offer her a connection to nature and enable her to discover truths unbeknownst to others in her community. Her difference, one that Zahrah struggles to accept, gives her a sense of purpose as it assists her in saving her friend Dari's life. It is also implied in the close of the novel that this friendship may become romantic in the future. In the Binti series (*Binti*, 2015, and *Binti: Home*, 2017), the female protagonist also has her hair plaited, which comes alive once she becomes part-Meduse in the close of *Binti*. It is Binti's hair in both novellas that allows her to retain an attachment to her Himba culture as she continues to use *otjize* (a clay from her home) on her hair. Binti also uses her hair as a barrier between her and others that deem her different. For example, while going through security before boarding the ship to take her to the university, Binti moves her hair in front of her, between herself and the security officer speaking to her. Later, after she becomes biracial, Binti attends school, thereby learning how to master her new power. In the sequel (2017), Binti sets off to return to Earth, to her homeland; on her way there, she arrives at Oomza West Launch Port and reveals that her time away has altered her perceptions of others. While perusing the space and offering



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self-deprecating commentary about her hair, Binti observes, "Being in this place of diversity and movement was overwhelming, but I felt at home, too." This statement offers hope for the transformation of Binti's identity, one that allows for individuality. It is in *Binti: Home* that the protagonist learns to accept the changes made to her identity. When Binti travels to the Priestess Ariya, they discuss the changes that Binti experiences, including her hair as Meduse tentacles. Ariya responds to Binti's fears, notably the most harmful to her identity, as Binti asks herself, "Nothing is wrong with me?" In a cliffhanger ending (the third in the series—*Binti: Masquerade*—is expected in early 2018 from Tor), Binti learns to accept the Meduse, the bi-racial part of herself, just in time to ready herself for the imminent battle between the Khoush and the Meduse.

In "Hello, Moto" (2011), which showcases a combative moment between former friends, Okorafor continues her exploration of female friendship and POC hair, specifically the practice of wearing of wigs. Here, the female protagonist, Rain, combines magic and technology in order to create wigs for her friends, Philo and Coco, and for herself. These wigs are meant to bring the women closer together and help them become community leaders, but her plans go awry when Philo and Coco's desire for power and their greed drives the women apart. Instead of technology making life easier for the three women as Rain intended, Okorafor creates—as Lisa Yaszek observes—a conundrum. Okorafor highlights what the consequences are when the proverbial genie is let out of the bottle. According to Yaszek (2015), "Okorafor uses

classic SF tropes to stake claims for black people as authoritative subjects of technological modernity while asking us to carefully consider the ethics of technoscientific genius and its creations." Regarding prevalent issues in Okorafor's body of work, Yaszek observes that "Africans grapple with the lingering alienation of their various colonial pasts while combining Eurowestern and African technoscientific traditions to build new futures." The controversy surrounding females of color who wear wigs, thereby concealing their natural hair, highlights this conflict. Okorafor plays with this concept as she opens her short story, noting that Rain's natural hair is in poor condition because of the use of her wig, which is described as "jet black, shiny, the 'hairs' straight and long like a mermaid's."

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison points out this desire by some females of color to have a European physical appearance. In the concluding chapter, Pecola, in an effort to escape from her father's sexual abuse and the child that will result, she imagines what she looks like with blue eyes. Pecola believes that blue eyes, idealized beauty, will protect her from harm. Okorafor offhandedly calls attention to this desire for idealized beauty with the use of the wigs by her characters in "Hello, Moto"; here, the concept of Othering appears. For Rain, altering her appearance makes her feel disconnected from her community, her two friends. This separation is symbolized by her wig—it is a barrier that keeps her from human contact and incites violence in her community. Instead of their transformation enacting peace,



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it aids in the deaths of a woman and child. The wigs symbolize the colonial power to oppress others, which is shown through Philo and Coco's greed. In the end, Rain tells the readers that even though she has attempted to quash their appetites by using both juju and technology, which appear as the Hello Moto ringtone, to cease the power of the wigs, the women ultimately are unwilling to reverse their transformations. Philo, Coco, and Rain change into vampires, the story concluding with Rain trying to stop her friends' violent assault. Throughout these Okorafor texts, one can infer that for Okorafor, the issue of idealized beauty is a central point of contention.

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## **Power and Vulnerability: BlackGirlMagic in Black Women’s Science Fiction**

**Jalondra A. Davis**, California State University, Los Angeles

**Abstract:** #Blackgirlmagic has become a mode of digital resistance against the devaluation of black women and girls. But it has also provoked criticism by black feminists who question the movement’s political potential given its propensity towards foregrounding the beautiful and the able bodied. Further, such critics have interrogated its reinscription of a “strong black woman” narrative that trivializes black women’s pain and demands their labor rather than addressing the conditions that necessitate their allegedly superhuman strength (Hobson, 2016). This analysis of Black women’s science fiction proposes a different perspective on both Black girls and their magic, which attributes power to positions of vulnerability and ‘otherhuman’ possibility.

**Keywords:** #blackgirlmagic, Afrofuturism, Octavia Butler, Harriet Tubman, disability studies, Nalo Hopkinson

Black feminism is a long, powerful, and plural tradition of theory, activism, and artistic expression currently experiencing a higher public presence than perhaps ever before through its proliferation in contemporary entertainment and digital cultures. Social media activism, Black Twitter, and online spaces such as the Crunk Feminist Collective (Barner, 2016) have collectively helped to increase the diverse visibility of the black female body and voice while providing new spaces for the negotiation and development of Black feminist politics in the popular sphere. Much of the digital activity surrounding black femininity has been centered on the contestation of the stereotypes that embody and exemplify black exclusion from the normative categories of beauty, humanity, and citizenship. There are good reasons, both psychic and political, for such a focus. Though

contemporary mass media demonstrates more instances than ever of representation and celebration of black women, it also circulates images—of aggression, hypersexuality, anger—that at least partly underlie the extraordinary amounts of violence, surveillance, discrimination, and deprivation that black women face in their daily lives. Some critics (Hobson, 2016) have observed how the visual politics of digital black feminism and black femininity seem to rely too heavily upon beauty and glamour, centering the pretty, abled, slender body in a politics of celebration easily co-opted by the neoliberal capitalist project and failing to critique the conditions and violence that most virulently attack the most vulnerable of black lives. Critics (Chavers, 2016) also suggests that this idea of “magic” reinscribes a “strong black woman” narrative that trivializes black women’s pain and demands their labor rather than addressing



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the conditions that necessitate their allegedly superhuman strength.

With these factors in mind, I wonder if, perhaps, *BlackGirlMagic* could serve other purposes. As black women's science fiction does not limit itself to the Western construct of science alone, frequently incorporating what many call magic, the genre provides an opportunity to see, literally, a different notion of *BlackGirlMagic*, in action. Black women writers (Coleman, 2008) transgress the science fiction institution's old boundaries between fantasy and "hard" science fiction through their infusion of dystopias and future worlds with the myths and ritual practices of African-based religions. In their use of Africana forms of medicine and technology (Coleman 2008; Jones 2015), Black women science fiction writers reveal the constructed and narrative nature of the Western sciences that have worked to create different genres of humanity. According to Jones (2015), "While mythmaking has traditionally been relegated to the ancient and so-called primitive cultures, it remains present in contemporary Western culture, under the guise of rationalism and factual 'truth' as presented in science. It is, in short, a mode of knowledge production" (p. 103). One of the most intriguing aspects of black women's science fiction arises in opposition to the superhero images heralded by the popular celebratory politics of strength and resistance present within many Afrofuturistic projects. Rather than the superhuman, *BlackGirlMagic* in black women's science fiction is indelibly connected to, even dependent upon, the otherhuman. The

otherhuman position is marked by ontologies and capacities which exceed the narrow representations of humanity that the more easily celebrated images of black superheroes merely amplify and extend (instead of challenge).

Critical humanist Sylvia Wynter (2003) describes the ways in which European intellectuals, scientists, and states made and remade the figure of Man (a white, male, straight, bourgeois, able-bodied, rational individual subject) through the modern era. According to Wynter, Man is an overrepresentation, only one genre within a diverse array of humanity that would include those excluded by the Western liberal humanist project, a project that centered whiteness, masculinity, able-bodiedness, rationalism, and individualist self-determination. Recognizing the exclusivity of this humanism, many critical theorists turn towards the posthuman (Braddiotti, 2013) However, building on the work of critical humanists such as Sylvia Wynter, Aime Cesaire, and Frantz Fanon, Black feminist critics such as Zakiyah Jackson and Alexander Welheliye call for caution in the rush towards the posthuman. Jackson (2013) argues that by equating the Western "Man" with human, posthumanist theory neglects the diverse engagements with humanity, humanism, and concepts of the human by those most subjected to the violence of Western liberal humanism. Alexander Welheliye (2008) asks, "what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of 'man' as the master-subject but focus



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on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain" (p. 321)? My notion of otherhuman is a response to this query. Unlike the superhuman, which exaggerates the capacities of Man, or the posthuman, which overlooks the ways of being that preexisted and coexist with Man, the term otherhuman describes the being of non-white, non-male, non-property owning, and/or differently abled individuals. The otherhuman is marked by vulnerability—not only negative vulnerability to the violence exacted on non-white, non-male, or non-property-owning peoples, but also positive vulnerability in terms of exposure or openness to alternative sources of experience, affect, and knowledge beyond that of Western rationality. In Black women's science fiction, we frequently see such vulnerability in the young heroines' access to the spirit worlds of African and African diaspora cosmologies. The African concept of spirit (O' Murchu, 2012) "transcends the dualistic emphasis that places soul over body, spirituality over physicality, mind over matter, culture over nature, intention over performance, and inner over outer" (p. 104). By using the insights from their existence at the nexus of oppressions and training themselves to recognize and harness rather than refuse their spiritual gifts, these girls transform vulnerability into power. As a piece positioned within the field of critical Afrofuturist studies, this paper intersects black feminist, black girlhood, SF, and disability studies to argue for an alternative conceptualization of BlackGirlMagic which reaches beyond digital celebrations of black female beauty and sparkle. I contend that

black women's science fiction serves as an alternative archive for BlackGirlMagic—one that retains the concept's psychic power while calling attention to the intersecting forms of oppression that cannot be battled against by independent excellence, beauty, or success within a neoliberal state. The young female heroines of several black women's science fiction novels access their magic not through superhuman gifts, but through otherhuman ontologies, communal resources, and exclusion from other forms of power. Their magic is indelibly connected to their vulnerability, the same vulnerability that positions these young black girls as constant rhetorical threats to society. However, a dichotomy emerges as this vulnerability also appears to empower said women to function as disruptions to such unjust social systems engrained within their respective societies. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) gives us an early example of a black girl heroine whose vulnerability proves to be the very source of her power. Set in an eerily familiar near-future California, *Parable of the Sower* envisions the collapse of the American economy and public infrastructure, resulting from increasing socioeconomic inequity, privatization of public resources, and environmental degradation. All of this has led to a chaotic, dangerous society plagued with violence and deprivation. A large portion of the population is homeless, diseased, and struggling on the streets for basic survival, while a few families living inside once middle-class, now crumbling walled communities pool their meager resources and attempt to maintain some facets of normal life. Lauren



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Olamina is born in one such community, Robledo, to a Christian minister father and a mother suffering from a type of substance addiction which causes babies to be born with hyperempathy syndrome—a condition that causes them to believe that they feel the pain of others.

Through the creation of a protagonist born to a drug-addicted mother, Butler (Roberts, 1997) comments on the public hysteria surrounding “crack baby” discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, with crack, in particular, more likely to be abused by black women. Media and policymakers so demonized cocaine-addicted women and their children that numerous policies, including harsh prison sentences and mandatory sterilization, were proposed and implemented across the country—despite little evidence of long term behavioral effects in cocaine-addicted babies. In Lauren’s case, however, her mother’s addiction does have lasting effects—Lauren cannot move through life without experiencing the pain of others around her. Although Lauren points out that her “sharing,” as she calls it, is a delusion, it is a sensory delusion with enormous power over her body and emotions. This condition is disabling in various ways; she cannot defend herself in a fight without also feeling the pain she causes. Her brother tricks her into bleeding by pretending to bleed. Lauren’s father demands that the family keep her condition a secret, both because of the social stigma of being a sharer and the risks it presents in a dangerous world where people know that they can incapacitate her only by pretending to be hurt themselves. Lauren

concurr with this demand for secrecy: “A first wife who was a drug addict and a daughter who is drug-damaged is not something he wants to brag about. Lucky for me. Being the most vulnerable person I know is damned sure not something I want to boast about” (Butler p. 12). Lauren finds it extremely difficult to function in the world outside of her walled community, because she also feels the chaos and agony that people endure in that world. Here, Butler points to a key intervention of disability activism and studies (Kafer, 2013; Bell, 2011): it is the environment that “disabled” people occupy, rather than their particular cognitive or bodily difference, that actually creates disability. Lauren would not have such difficulty in the outside world if the outside world were less rife with violence and suffering.

Traumatic as it may be, however, Lauren’s capacity to feel what others feel, an inability to separate herself from others, ultimately becomes a source of her strength as a leader. According to Jones, “the shared vulnerabilities created by social disorganization and the special role Olamina’s hyperempathy syndrome plays, both highlight an alternative ethics” (p. 114). We begin to see an association developing between Lauren’s sharing and Earthseed early in the novel:

But this thing (This idea? Philosophy? New religion?) won’t let me alone, won’t let me forget it, won’t let me go. Maybe...maybe it’s like my sharing: One more weirdness, one more crazy, deep-rooted delusion that



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I'm stuck with. And in time, I'll have to do something about it. (Butler 26)

Earthseed, which reflects similarity to Buddhism, New Thought, Womanist theology, and West African traditional religions, is less a faith of worship and ritual and more one of praxis (Coleman 2008). Every chapter of the novel opens with one of Lauren's Earthseed verses, showing the steady development of a complex spiritual philosophy:

A victim of God may,  
Through learning adaption,  
Become a partner of God (p. 31)

We are all Godseed, but no more or less  
So than any other aspect of the universe,  
Godseed is all there is—all that  
Changes. Earthseed is all that spreads  
Earthlife to new earths. The universe is  
Godseed. Only we are Earthseed. And the  
Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among  
The stars. (p. 77)

To get along with God,  
Consider the consequences of your  
behavior. (p. 86)

In order to rise  
From its ashes  
A phoenix  
First  
Must  
Burn. (p. 153)

Kindness eases Change. (p. 167)

Honoring God as change and change as a necessary, rather than benevolent or malevolent, force, Earthseed focuses on community and harmony with the Earth. Rather than an idea of human exceptionalism, it defines humanity as only part of all existence, growing and adapting to their constantly changing environment. Rather than a figure in the image of Man to be pleaded with and entreated to, God is a force to be gotten along with through kindness, generosity, and care of the Earth and of others. Lauren's Earthseed verses do not promise anything to its followers; there is no transactional relationship between prayer and protection or good deeds and good fortune. Rather, in connection with Lauren's prophetic dreams of the fire that eventually destroys Robledo, Earthseed acknowledges, accepts the inevitability of, and prepares believers for agony and destruction. I argue that this important facet of Earthseed—its lack of dualities and its emphasis on adaptability through pain and loss—is a direct outcome of Lauren's sensory sensitivity to the harrowing world in which she lives. The constant experience of such senseless pain challenges her adherence to her father's Christian faith, a faith that would construct suffering as an outcome of sin. Earthseed accepts the reality of pain and, rather than attempting to explain it in terms of good or evil, provides a way to use it when it comes. According to Jones, in her depiction of Lauren, Butler "dismantles the illusion of inviolability and mastery over the body" (p. 114), which is essential to the liberal humanist project.



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However, *Earthseed* is not a passive philosophy. Lauren conceives of humanity as being in a stage of infancy, occupied with petty jealousies, rivalries, and wars. Her verses frequently speak to the need to unify people with a common purpose. Lauren decides, unilaterally, that this purpose is “to take root among the stars,” and the sequel to *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents* (1998), departs from the task of community-building to Lauren’s more individualist (and colonialist) pursuit of funding space travel and settlement. The more revolutionary potential of *Earthseed* is best demonstrated in the first novel—in *Earthseed*’s nascent growth among a straggling band of exiles that Lauren, like a young Harriet Tubman, leads north to found the community of Acorn.

The parallels between Lauren Olamina and Harriet Tubman are many and appear to be intentional. The style in which Lauren’s journal is written evokes the conventions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave narratives and frequently describes the economic exploitation that people face in this 2024 United States, ruled by multinational corporations in terms of masters and slaves. Some of those that join her group (Thaler, 2010) speak of asking their masters for permission to marry, being punished for reading, and fleeing sexual harassment by employers. Lauren’s group follows the ‘Big Dipper’ asterism north to a land where they can experience some limited degree of freedom from the violence and deprivation that plagues the ‘South’ (the slave states for Tubman, Southern California for Lauren). While individual motives, fears, and

capacities often threaten the cohesion of the group, Lauren insists on the need to work together as a community. Similarly, Harriet Tubman (Sernett, 2007) rejected the idea of staying safe and alone in Philadelphia after her escape, instead returning south for her husband, family, friends, and whoever else was ready to run. Perhaps most suggestively, both Tubman’s and Olamina’s spiritual visions, their capacity to imagine a different world, seems irrevocably tied to disability. *Parable of the Sower* opens with Lauren’s prophetic dream of the destruction of her neighborhood and her thoughts that connect her hyperempathy syndrome and her emerging spiritual philosophy. Tubman (Sernett, 2007) became narcoleptic (a neurological disorder affecting the ability to regulate sleep cycles) after being struck on the head with a metal weight as a teenager (p. 16). Christopher Bell references this lifelong impairment in asking why historical figures such as Harriet Tubman are not often read in the context of disability studies:

A disability perspective (re)positions Tubman’s instantaneous disabling alongside of her subsequent actions of attaining her own freedom and then returning South on numerous trips to liberate other slaves. Such daring action would be unremittingly dangerous for any individual; only if we factor in Tubman’s bouts of illness, our understanding of her actions as her corporeality become fully accurate” (p. 2).



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In media as well as in African American political discourse, disability (Bell, 2011) has tended to be erased, as many articles people prefer to represent race singularly, particularly (Hobson, 2014) in such a heroic and symbolic figure as Harriet Tubman. While I entirely agree with Bell that attentiveness to Tubman through a framework of disability allows us to better realize the risk of her actions, I also want to call attention to her own interpretations of her injury and its lifelong consequences.

Documentation of Tubman's childhood is scant, and it is difficult to determine whether this experience of visions actually onset with the brain injury. Yet the lasting effects of this injury seems to be at least one prominent way that Tubman accessed a spirit world. Tubman and several witnesses (Gumbs, 2014; Sernett, 2007; Humez, 2003) spoke of her experiencing visions, insights, and prophecies as she dreamt during her narcoleptic spells and of reporting these revelations with ecstatic emotion. Contemporaries and biographers sympathetic to Harriet's causes would deemphasize this dimension of her life (Sernett, 2007; Humez, 2003), fearing that it would detract from what I would call her 'superhuman' persona: her greatness, her reputation as a rational, self-determining heroine. Alice Brickler, a favorite great-niece of Tubman's, criticizes Earl Conrad's determination to de-emphasize religion and visions in his 1942 biography of her aunt (Sernett, 2007):

"I may be wrong but I believe that every age, every country and every race, especially during the darkest history, has had its unusual Souls who were in touch

with some mysterious central originating Force, a comprehensive stupendous Unity for which we have no adequate name. Aunt Harriet was one of those unusual souls. Her religion, her dreams and visions were so bonded together that nobody, and I certainly should not attempt it, could separate them." Brickler reminded Conrad that her great-aunt had been "a member of an oppressed race" and, as such, she depended on "the inspiration of the mystic as well as sagacity. "It was her dreams which saved her life very often," Brickler observed, "and it was a superhuman courage and beliefs that gave her the power to accomplish what she had undertaken" (p. 142).

Though Brickler uses the term "superhuman" in this description of her aunt's power, I argue that Tubman's visions, and her interpretation of these visions as revelations from God, is an example of the otherhuman. It is a vulnerability, an openness to knowledge from invisible sources, and a belief in the veracity of these sources that reflects (Chireau, 2003; Bostic, 2013; Marsh-Locket & West, 2013) the retention of African worldviews and spiritual practices within enslaved people's cultures. This vulnerability and belief is also tied to Tubman's positionality outside of the Western genre of human, a point (Sernett, 2007) that Brickler articulates when she claims that members "of an oppressed race" are more likely to draw from "inspiration of the mystic as well as sagacity" (p. 142). With this statement, Brickler rejects a duality that would juxtapose spirituality against practicality, supernatural



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against the material, faith-led action against careful discernment. Tubman is not the “exotic,” irrational conjurer that Conrad feared he would portray if he included her faith and her visions in his biography; rather, the supernatural, however significant, is only one dimension of her intellectual process. Enabled by a disability that was incurred by violence, but only accessed by her willingness to assemble the otherhuman with other forms of knowledge, Harriet Tubman’s use of her visions can be read as BlackGirlMagic. It is not magic in the usual sense of superhuman power; it requires labor and discernment.

Lauren’s hyperempathy syndrome functions similarly to Tubman’s narcolepsy in *Parable of the Sower*. The condition proves dangerous for her and her companions on the journey North from the destroyed Robledo, as she can be incapacitated even as she wins a fight. When their camp is attacked while Lauren is on watch, she falls unconscious in the process of shooting one of the thieves. This prompts her to confess to her travel companions that she is a ‘sharer’ (the popular term for someone with hyperempathy syndrome), fully expecting them to be disgusted or to see her as a liability. However, though they do have questions and concerns, her tentative new allies do not reject her. This moment of revelation becomes significant in the novel, not for marking Lauren as disabled and unwanted, but for facilitating her dissemination of *Earthseed* (Butler, 1993):

“So...you faked everyone out. You must be a hell of an actor.”

“I had to learn to pretend to be normal. My father kept trying to convince me that I was normal. He was wrong about that, but I’m glad he taught me the way he did.”  
“Maybe you are normal. I mean, if the pain isn’t real, then maybe—”  
“Maybe this sharing thing is all in my head? Of course it is! And I can’t get it out. Believe me, I’d love to.”  
There was a long silence. Then he asked, “What do you write in your book every night?” Interesting shift (p. 194).

This shift is indeed interesting, as the moment that Lauren begins to tell the truth about her powers, deepening her vulnerability to the companions with whom she is building a fragile trust, is also the moment that she begins to share her *Earthseed* verses. Though Lauren claims she would love to be rid of her sharing, this heightened susceptibility to pain also fosters the search for a spiritual worldview—a worldview which can process and make room for pain beyond the afterlife-centered logics of Christianity to which her father adhered, a worldview that can reconcile the existence of senseless pain and suffering with the existence of some kind of divine force. Lauren studies the Bible closely, but she cannot reconcile its narratives with her developing ethical worldview:

In the book of Job, God says he made everything and he knows everything so no one has the right to question what he does with any of it. Okay. That works. That Old



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Testament God doesn't violate the way things are now. But that God sounds a lot like Zeus—a super-powerful man, playing with his toys the way my youngest brothers play with toy soldiers...Maybe God is kind of a big kid, playing with his toys. If he does, what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane—or if seven kids go to church and get dipped in a big tank of expensive water? But what if all that is wrong? What if God is something else altogether (p. 16)?

This passage demonstrates Lauren's frustration with the figure of a patriarchal, judgmental, all-knowing God in Man's form that was also supposed to somehow be benevolent and caring. It also shows a recurring critique of the superhuman: "We give lip service to acceptance, as though acceptance was enough. Then we go on to create super-people—super-parents, super-kings and queens, super cops—to be our gods and to look after us—to stand between us and God"(26). Lauren's critique of superhuman is in alignment with my own critique of Afrofuturism studies' emphasis upon superhero characters. *Parable of the Sower* articulates the otherhuman, another mode of humanity and another mode of divinity, that envisions humans and God as collaborating in the creation and recreation of the world. Though Lauren is not specifically referring to disabled people in this passage, her argument that we must go beyond acceptance of difference is strikingly akin to scholars and activists (Kafer, 2013; Withers, 2012) who argue for a language beyond acceptance, tolerance,

individual intervention, or even individual rights in the treatment of disability. Rather, disability is political, and disability, like other forms of socially constructed identity and oppression, can become the basis for movements for collective transformation. The revelation of Lauren's personal vulnerability provides an opportunity for the organic explanation of her belief system. *Earthseed* anchors and coheres this diverse community and allows them to enact some small level of collective transformation within a chaotic and unjust world.

At first glance, Butler's work in general, and *Parable of the Sower* more specifically, does not seem to incorporate African-based spirituality in the ways that those ideas appear in the work of other Black women science fiction writers. The dystopian future is the sole speculative element of the *Parables*; there is no divining, no magic. However, a close reading, with knowledge of Ifa (a Yoruban traditional African religious system), reveals the depth to which African spirituality actually infuses the novel. Monica A. Coleman (2008) calls attention to Lauren's middle name, Oya, which is the name of a Yoruba-based orisha. The orishas are lesser deities, intermediaries that take messengers from their devotees to an all-powerful Creator and spiritual force. Oya is a neutral power, the orisha of change, who can be appealed to for good or for ill. She is represented in the world by the elements of wind, fire, and rain, elements that constantly accompany Lauren's movements in the novel (p. 133-135). God as change, God as a neutral force that can be destructive or nurturing, and



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an idea of God that resists the dualities of good and evil, innocence and sin, are all present both in *Ifa* and in *Earthseed*. Several religious and literary scholars (Montgomery 2008; Coleman 2008; Marsh-Locket & West, 2013) attest to the frequency in which *Ifa* cosmology and symbolism appears in African Diaspora, particularly in women's literature, and assert that Yoruba religion is the basis of many of the syncretized African religions in the Americas. African spirituality is a connective tissue, a key method through which Black women science fiction authors depict a way of being outside of Western liberal humanism, a model of leadership outside of the superhuman, and a representation of *BlackGirlMagic* outside of pure celebration.

Coleman's definition of "Making a way out of no way" is quite similar to the way that I conceptualize *BlackGirlMagic*: "It is a weaving of the past, future, and possibilities offered by God; a weaving that leads to survival, quality of life, and liberating activity on the part of black women" (Coleman, 33). *BlackGirlMagic*, like "Making a way out of no way" does not come from nowhere—it is an activation of different sources of knowledge, experience, power than what is validated within the narrow genre of *Man*. Octavia Butler (Kenan, 1991), developed her craft very specifically within a mainstream science fiction institution and was more beholden to the boundaries between the fantastic and "hard" sci-fi. This distinguishes her work from writers such as Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, and Tananarive Due, who more explicitly portray African cosmologies, spirituality, folklore, and magic. Like Butler,

they center young, black, female protagonist-heroines, whose power is tied to an additional level of marginalization within already marginalized communities and to other human vulnerabilities.

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) presents readers with a heroine, Ti-Jeanne, who is located at multiple intersecting forms of marginalization; she is a young, black, poor, single teenage mother living with her grandmother in a disinvested city center where, as in *Parable of the Sower*, the economy and public infrastructure has broken down. Though the story takes place in an Afro-Caribbean community in an area of near-future Toronto called the Burn, the setting was inspired by Hopkinson's skepticism of popular representations of Detroit (Hopkinson, 2013; DeGraw 2014)—of media narratives that were depicting the city as a blighted and empty black hole. Hopkinson counters these representations and provides a very different vision of an urban dystopia than Butler does in *Parable of the Sower*. Though the Burn is indeed dangerous, crime-ridden, and lacking in basic modern infrastructure, it is also a vibrant and close-knit Afro-Caribbean community that has ingeniously adapted and updated pre-capitalist forms of exchange and survival: bartering, growing food, and midwifery. Ti-Jeanne is the granddaughter of the community's healer, Ma-Jeanne, a former nurse who incorporates herbalism and spirituality into her medical practice. As they challenge medical science through the use of African-based healing practices within a matriarchal, interdependent, multi-generational household, Ti-Jeanne's family



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counters both the genre of Man and the neoliberal and heteronormative order in which Man dominates. As a teen mother, Ti-Jeanne embodies moral panics, both national and intraracial, similar to those of the “crack baby” discourse of the 1980s that Butler evokes with Lauryn’s hyperempathy syndrome. Children of drug addict mothers and of teenage mothers (Roberts 1997; Williamson 2017) are imagined as potential predators and lifelong drains on the state. According to Jones, “Since the criteria for citizenship, the primary narrative of belonging within the body politic, are implicitly located in race, the role played by the racial/ethnic Other in black girls’ reproductive capacities are purported to require vigilant monitoring” (p. 64). Yet, Ti-Jeanne is also impacted by disability through the ever-present threat of mental illness due to her vulnerability to the spirit world.

The spirituality and the magic that we see in the novel is a syncretism, not only of African and European religion of folklore, but of beliefs, myths, and practices from different parts of the Caribbean. Yet it shows commonalities that are reflected across many African and African-based spiritual systems (Mbiti, 1969; Coleman, 2008; Coleman, 2009; Chireau, 2003): an acknowledgment of the ancestors or living-dead, the use of herbs and objects in both healing and in ritual, and communication with the spirit world through divining (the manipulation of objects and words to activate spiritual forces), visions, dreams, and spirit possession. Ti-Jeanne’s first point-of-view chapter opens with an account of her terrifying visions:

Ti-Jeanne could see with more than sight. Sometimes she saw how people were going to die. When she closed her eyes, the childhood songs her grandmother had sung to her replayed in her mind, and dancing to their music were images: this one’s body jerking in a spray of gunfire and blood, that one writhing as cramps turned her bowels to liquid. Never the peaceful deaths. Ti-Jeanne hated the visions (p. 9).

Ti-Jeanne, like her mother and grandmother before her, is a seer, a woman who can communicate with the spirit realm. However, Ti-Jeanne’s skepticism and her refusal to learn to properly harness her ability make it seem more like a curse than a blessing. Her grandmother warns her, “Girl child, you know better than to call it obeah. Stupidness. Is a gift from God father. Is a good thing, not a evil thing. But child, if you don’t learn how to use it, it will use you, just like it take your mother” (p. 47). Mami rejects the term obeah to refer to seer and rootworking skills; she sees the term only as referring to evil magic. The term is used most often by characters such as Ti-Jeanne and Tony, a younger generation more oriented to Western medicine, who both distrust and fear the supernatural. Mami’s rejection of her work being described as obeah, and Tony and Ti-Jeanne’s fear of it, all emerge from a historical context (Coleman, 2009) in which Caribbean governments and missionaries viewed all magic and remnants of African religions on the same continuum. Such views, and the ability of colonial governments and churches to exact strict penalties, drove the practice underground. While white flight



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from the Burn has removed the colonial gaze (if not the colonial conditions) from the lives of these Afro-Caribbean characters, obeah, or what is called obeah, is still just emerging from secrecy. As Mami says, "From since slavery days, we people get in the habit of hiding we business from we own children, even, in case a child open his mouth and tell somebody story and get them in trouble. Secrecy was survival, oui? Is a hard habit to break" (p. 50). The legacy of forced secrecy under colonial governments disrupts the generational transmission of the knowledge needed to navigate their seer abilities. By "take your mother," Mami Gros-Jeanne is referring to her daughter Mi-Jeanne's mental incapacitation and subsequent disappearance because of her inability to distinguish the visions from material reality. Later we discover that Mi-Jeanne is a homeless woman well-known in the community for her raving prophecies, called Crazy Betty by the people of the Burn. Mami resolves immediately to save Ti-Jeanne from a similar fate by training her to control her gift.

On one hand, the representation of Crazy Betty, Ti-Jeanne's intense fear of "madness," and Mami's resolve to protect her granddaughter from madness through training could be seen as a negative discourse of psychological disability. The social model of disability studies suggests that impairment is distinct from disability itself, which is created through the social environment. According to this social model, Mami's intervention to protect Ti-Jeanne might be seen as individual "fixing" and a further stigmatization of the

unique processes of Ti-Jeanne's mind. However, Kafer (2013) calls attention to the fact that people with disabilities may both argue for destigmatization of their bodies and transformation of the environments in which they live and also want to be healed. Mami does not want to remove Ti-Jeanne's "gift"; she wants to teach her how to overcome its debilitating effects. The impairment is not Ti-Jeanne's power in itself, it is in the Western context in which Ti-Jeanne rejects the knowledge needed to understand her power. The impact of these visions on Mi-Jeanne, and the threat that they present to Ti-Jeanne, exemplify how the same Western culture and epistemological violence that shapes the oppressive conditions of Black women's lives also denies their specific ways of knowing the world, with catastrophic consequences for their health. Mami Gros-Jeanne's preservation of these ways of knowing, her combination of Western science and indigenous spirituality, points the way to the otherhuman. According to Jones, "for many of the so-called subaltern cultures of non-European origins, the divide that took place during the Enlightenment, which elevated the secular and the scientific, did not occur. For Ti-Jeanne, her dual heritage as an Afro-Caribbean young woman born and reared in the West provides her with a dichotomous philosophy that must be resolved if she is to survive" (p. 107-108). Fortunately, Ti-Jeanne does learn to channel her abilities, ultimately defeating the malevolent drug lord and obeah man (also her grandfather) that wreaked both physical and metaphysical havoc in their community. The novel closes on Ti-Jeanne taking on her



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grandmother's role when Mami Gros-Jeanne is killed, welcoming Burn residents to her home for a meal. Like Lauren, Ti-Jeanne rebuilds a rich, mutually dependent community of marginalized individuals, who adapt to the breakdown of the economy and public services through collective and spirit-based forms of living and thriving. *BlackGirlMagic* is present not only in the actual magic that Ti-Jeanne uses to defeat the drug lord Rudy; it is in the way she synthesizes the knowledge, skills, and perspectives of multiple generations and cultures to ground her own philosophy for leadership going forward.

Onyesonwu of Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) resembles Ti-Jeanne in some ways. Her power is also spiritual and metaphysical. She also can manipulate forces and matter, particularly the matter of her own body; she is a shapeshifter. She also is tormented by her abilities until she learns to control them. Yet the cultural context of *Who Fears Death* is very different from either the United States setting of *Parable of the Sower* or Caribbean-Canadian setting of *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Onyesonwu is not racialized as black according to the modern Western concept of race because the novel is set in a fictional, futurist land, the Seven Rivers kingdom. Yet she is racialized as a member of a minority, ostracized group, the Ewe, the children of rape between the dark-skinned, full featured Okeke and light-skinned, thin-featured Nuru, the kingdom's warring ethnic groups. Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor hints at New World concepts of racialization in her worldbuilding, but she primarily uses this

fictional kingdom to highlight the gendered and sexual vulnerability of women and girls in Africa, not only in the midst of genocidal conflicts, but in their everyday lives.

Okorafor uses the character of Onyesonwu to comment on a form of ethnic cleansing that particularly targets women and girls (Jones, 2015): the attempt to eliminate an ethnic group through systematic mass rapes, aimed at creating babies that will inherit the targeted group's lands. Onyesonwu's mother, Najeeba (Okorafor, 2010), an Okeke woman, is raped during a mass attack of the Nuru on her village. Rejected by her husband, Najeeba goes into the desert to die, until she realizes that she is pregnant. She names her daughter Onyesonwu, meaning, *Who Fears Death* (p. 19-27). In the Seven Rivers world, children born of rape between the Okeke and Nuru wear the violence and shame of rape on their bodies; they all have the same sandy skin and hair, freckles, and gold-brown eyes. Onyesonwu is ostracized by a community that already constrains the possibilities of girls, that insists that they stay virginal, marry, and remain subordinate to men. Along with her particular appearance, the rape act that creates Onyesonwu also endows her with power, as both her mother and biological father possess great metaphysical gifts. Onyesonwu's loss of control over this power, such as when she makes her stepfather's body breathe at his funeral, provokes additional fear and distrust from the community (p. 5).

Because it is so distinctive and carries such stigma, Onyesonwu's appearance can be



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considered a form of physical disfigurement, which, along with her inability to control her shapeshifting and other powers, can be read in a disability context. Like Lauren in *Parables*, Onyesonwu is constantly aware of her difference and fearful of other's perceptions, but unlike Lauren, she has no option for secrecy or selective disclosure. Highly aware of her own marginalization and of the shame that it brings to her parents, Onyesonwu chooses to participate in the Eleventh Year Rite, a rite of passage ceremony that includes female genital mutilation. The ceremony is required for girls to be considered adults in the community and good candidates for marriage. While this ritual indelibly bonds the girls who go through the ordeal together, and gains them recognition as adults, it does so at great physical risk to their health and their capacity for sexual pleasure. Onyesonwu eventually learns that her clitoris has been mutilated through this ritual and uses her powers, which she is finally harnessing through tutelage from the town sorcerer, to regrow it, as well as those of her friends. We see *BlackGirlMagic* here used to counter the sexualized violence exacted against girls in the name of tradition.

Okorafor's treatment of magic and female genital mutilation brings to mind a distinction that I want to make between African-based cultures as they inform the otherhuman and an Afrocentric retrieval of tradition that refuses to critique forms of patriarchy, hierarchy, and violence in both precolonial and contemporary African cultures (White, 1990; Collins 2009). In African American fiction and popular intellectual thought, Africa is often

imagined as an idealized utopia (Gruesser, 2000; Moses, 1998). It can be difficult to reconcile the desire to combat pernicious imagery of African countries, cultures, and peoples with the need to also deal honestly with contemporary issues. At a keynote lecture for the Science Fiction Research Association in 2017, Okorafor described an experience in which two African Americans confronted her at a reading of the rites of passage scene of *Who Fears Death*. They felt that her description of female genital mutilation was an airing of dirty laundry, an unfair portrayal of something that should be de-emphasized in favor of positive imagery of African. Yet analyses and narratives that center black girls and African girls cannot do so honestly without engaging the specific forms of vulnerability that expose them to pain, constraint, and violence in their particular communities. As Okorafor portrays it, the Eleventh Year Rite is not without benefits; it deeply bonds these four girls and gives them voice in the community. When one girl confesses during the ritual that she has been raped repeatedly by her father, the women of the village intervene to have him sanctioned (p. 50). However, Onyesonwu's use of her magic to heal the girls' bodies and restore their capacity for sexual desire and satisfaction demonstrates that the harm done to them during the ritual was not necessary to forge their bond and mark their passage to adulthood.

Similar to Ti-Jeanne's battle with her grandfather in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, *Who Fears Death* concludes with a magical faceoff between Onyesonwu and a paternal relative,



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the biological father who raped her mother and is bent on the destruction of the Okeke. It is interesting that the major antagonists of both *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Who Fears Death* are powerful magic men who are paternally related to the protagonists. We also see a troubling paternal relationship in Nalo Hopkinson's novel *Midnight Robber* (2000), in which the teenage heroine, Tan Tan, is raped and impregnated by her father. Like Ti-Jeanne, Tan Tan is a young black female mother who becomes a leader. She stands up for the marginalized under the banner of the folkloric hero, the Robber Queen. Though Tan Tan does not have the metaphysical powers of Ti-Jeanne and Onyesonwu, her power (which she deploys to protect others), is also located in her vulnerability within the patriarchal, nuclear family. The Robber Queen persona is an outcome of her trauma, a dissociative strategy that she adopted to cope with years of sexual abuse. The consistent presence of abusive paternal figures populating these narratives is arguably a representation of patriarchy and a commentary on the violence, sexual violence in particular, faced by girls and women within their own homes and communities. This violence demands a different kind of intra-cultural critique (Cohen, 2010) than exhausted narratives of respectability politics and black-on-black violence that can only view youth as wayward and in need of discipline, rather than as the vanguard of social movements. Yet, from the role of young people in rejuvenating and sustaining Civil Rights Movement demonstrations to the queer Black female

founders of today's Black Lives Matter movement, we see black girls well-positioned to observe the workings of intersectional oppressions and quite willing to act out against these oppressions. While these real-world black girls are not armed with magical powers, their willingness to insert themselves as agents in a world where their lives are so devalued is an imaginative act, an expression of the otherhuman.

The work of Black women science fiction writers constructs a new kind of feminine bildungsroman, where the narrative arc shows girls coming to leadership within a community and competence in accessing an otherhuman, spiritual world, often through some kind of loss or tragedy that dramatizes their already vulnerable position. While the protagonists are certainly not invincible, they accomplish incredible tasks, with the support of a community from which they win respect. These works create much-needed models of black girlhood as valuable and empowered, yet they do so without dismissing the structural conditions that black girls face. Rather, an understanding of the heroines' particular vulnerabilities, and of the communal and cultural resources that they draw upon, is needed to appreciate their journeys, and to challenge both black politics and Afrofuturism studies to a more critical analysis of heroism, leadership, magic, and multiple ways of being human.



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## **Tricknology: Theorizing the Trickster in Afrofuturism**

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**Abstract:** The antithetical convergences of myth and science, nature and technology, male and female, and even human and animal create the liminal spaces from which the technological trickster emerges in Afrofuturism. Borrowing ideas from critical race, cyborg, and feminist theories, along with thinking from animal studies, this essay outlines a few of the many possibilities of a trickster technology where this mutable and mythic figure triggers the breakdown of race and gender anxieties, leading to the end of these interlocking oppressions in one kind of Afrofuture. Trickster technology may be defined as a black character's pragmatic application of biopolitical knowledge to manipulate the environment to his or her own benefit. Blackness itself effectively counteracts the "racializing assemblages" of the white world that produced "a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 3). Put simply, we explore types of shape-shifting as a trickster technology which revises ideologies of difference with respect to race, gender, and class to actualize Afrofuturism's promise of freedom in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980), and Nalo Hopkinson's "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" (2001) and *Midnight Robber* (2000).

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, cyborg, shape-shifting, tricknology, trickster

In her novel *Midnight Robber* (2000), Nalo Hopkinson reinvents the mythical trickster figure of Anansi the Spider as an all-powerful AI named Granny Nanny ("Grande Nanotech Sentient Intelligence"). As Michelle Reid remarks in "Postcolonial Science Fiction" (2010), the slippage of the syllable "nan" in Anansi, nanotech, and the historical Maroon leader Granny Nanny is significant as it highlights Hopkinson's intentional connections between specific historical moments, technology, and myths. We base our image of the AI on representations from classical science fiction (SF) such as Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) or the

Wachowski sisters' *The Matrix* (1999). As a current concept, we understand the AI as a post-racial, disembodied being with more or less human-like emotions and intentions. In any case, the AI strictly represents the future and without any ties to history. On the contrary, Hopkinson playfully re-writes this science fictional trope as very much a part of history and culture, and furthermore a history and culture that a Eurocentric perspective associates with rigorous non-modernity, uncivilized history, and oral traditions. Hopkinson's oxymoronic AI represents of the many uses of the trickster in Afrofuturism, a trope that we delimitate in this essay as a



potentially productive figure to the aims of Afrofuturism. We believe that tricksterism plays an important role in Afrofuturism's provocative disruptions at the level of genre (with distinct science fictional conventions) and at the political level (notably in terms of race and gender).

In the cult classic essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985/1990), Donna J. Haraway creates a mythical, monstrous cyborg creature as a figure that forbids essentialism, clear-cut binaries, and political factions in favor of contradictions, partial identities, and unexpected associations. Our discussion of the trickster and its technology in this essay very much inscribes itself on Haraway's vision. We seek to highlight how the trickster, a mythical creature itself who exists in countless literary traditions across nation lines and ethnicities, transforms and is transformed within the specific context of Afrofuturism. Haraway's mythical cyborg has been such a potent signifier across fields because it seems to demarcate the crises of postmodernism, notably what it means to be human and the possibilities of giving that question any satisfying and essential answer. Although Haraway purposefully uses the words myth and fiction to deconstruct in form as well as content the presumed objective truth of scientific (academic) discourse, her cyborg resonates strongly in SF. It is not just because SF is riddled with literal cyborgs, but because the genre, perhaps more than any other, persistently pushes the boundaries of

the human with creative uses of machine and animal chimeras.

The type of SF that Afrofuturism represents precisely positions itself on contradictions, as Afrofuturist writers challenge the very concepts of progressive modernity, the myth of a post-racial world, and the impartial nature of technology. Since Mark Dery's pivotal definition of Afrofuturism in "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose" (1993), a growing body of scholarship has distinguished the subtleties of the genre. In his definition of the movement in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* (2014), De Witt Douglas Kilgore writes that "Afrofuturism can be viewed as less a marker of black authenticity and more of a cultural force, an episteme that betokens a shift in our largely unthought assumptions about what histories matter and how they may serve as a precondition for any future we might imagine" (p. 564). Afrofuturist writers' use of history—and especially histories told from the perspective of oppressed peoples rather than a Eurocentric point of view—represents Afrofuturism's disruption of linearity and concern with how the past informs the present and the future. Many women writers within Afrofuturism, as Julia Hoydis (2015) argues, tend to be "more concerned with speculation and disturbing notions of reality than with scientific-technological ideas and ... they often maintain a concern with history despite a distinctly futurist orientation" (p. 71). The superimposition of oxymoronic elements in Afrofuturism (AIs in the jungle, epidemiology, and shape-shifting) highlights the



uncomfortable binarism associated with Western white reading practices. Similarly, the trickster technology we identify here maintains the elements of the trickster, such as insolent humor, eroticism, ambiguity, deception, and subversive behavior within science fictional tropes. Trickster technology or “tricknology”—to borrow from James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963/1993, p.66)—includes shape-shifting, bioengineering, and complex forms of machinery that transforms the body, usually to humorous or witty ends (as in Nalo Hopkinson’s “Ganger (Ball Lightning)” [2001]) or as a specific power to challenge more serious systemic issues (as in Octavia E. Butler’s *Wild Seed* [1980] and Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*).

Since the first comprehensive study of this amorphous figure, Paul Radin’s *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956), no consensus exists on a generalized definition of the trickster, although a list of cross-cultural commonalities has been compiled by anthropologists, philosophers, historians, literary theorists, folklorists, and religious studies scholars. “For centuries, perhaps, millennia, and in the widest variety of cultural and religious belief systems, humans have told and retold tales of tricksters, figures who are usually comical, yet serve to highlight important social values” according to William G. Doty and William J. Hynes (1993, pp. 1-2). In her recent book *The Trickster Figure in American Literature* (2013), Winifred Morgan describes the trickster figure as a creature who may as well trick and deceive as it would save the day. But the trickster is not random or

irrational; he/she/it purposefully deranges the established order and challenges those in power.

We recognize that the trickster figure does not exist as such across multiple cultures or traditions; to claim to study “one” trickster figure would be to simultaneously simplify it and make a generalization. Although some African American writers take as their inspiration West African traditions (Esu-Elegbara) as well as the Signifying Monkey, this essay remains resolutely non-specific because we seek to identify a trope rather than a given figure. What we analyze here, rather, is tricksterism, or an array of tropes, themes, and symbols that broadly refer to some characteristics of the trickster. We argue that some Afrofuturist texts both integrate and reimagine the characteristics of the trickster through the lens of SF. While traditional trickster tales may rely on magic or spiritualism, Afrofuturism is primarily an African American science fictional lens, relying on its appropriate technological and futuristic conventions. In this way Afrofuturist texts do not necessarily include one trickster (though some do explicitly, like the character Eshu in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*) but rather use tricksterism as a form of technology itself.

Although this essay concerns contemporary Afrofuturist texts, proto-science-fictional tropes can already be found in slave narratives of the nineteenth century. If we think in terms of a black body, a raced and gendered material form performs as an unconventional technology, where the black body is figured as



“a natural machine” with race understood “as a labor-based technology” (Lavender, 2011, p. 54). In fact, Harriet Jacobs asserts this selfsame analogy in her 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, calling slaves “God-breathing machines” (1988, p. 16). This strange and prescient cyborg metaphor used by Jacobs creates a point of convergence, where culture and technology yield a technological trickster. In respect to this convergence point, Haraway’s metaphoric cyborg can be identified as a trickster because of its “potent fusions” of human/animal/machine that enable it to “transgress boundaries” that alter how we comprehend American slavery (1985/1991, p. 154).

Frederick Douglass realizes the power of transformation by exploiting a “joint kinship with animals and machines” (Haraway, 1985/1991, p. 154). While the white slave breaker Edward Covey successfully breaks down Douglass and we see “a man transformed into a brute,” Douglass amazingly surmounts his own damaged spirit, decides to fight, and frees himself mentally through physical resistance to the slave-breaker (1845/2005, p. 73). This metaphoric transformation from brute to man displays how a trickster survives by using resistance and disruption to offset a system dependent on the near universal victimization of blacks. “Partial identities as contradictory standpoints” befit a cyborg trickster capable of changing its shape metaphorically (Haraway, 1985/1991, p. 154). An Afrofuturistic understanding of body politics in Douglass’s account demonstrates how a figuratively organic technology can

overcome enslavement—that is the trick in itself.

Such deliberate intersections of human/animal/machine raise identity issues that SF’s literal metaphors best answer. We can better imagine shape-shifting as a trickster technology through “the imaginative space of the subjunctive,” where “what if? becomes when” (Easterbrook, 2013, p. 199). Samuel R. Delany’s (1977/2009) line-by-line corrective reading process known as subjunctivity offers useful insight on shape-shifting because of how it measures the probabilities of fictional events between reportage, naturalistic fiction, fantasy, and SF. Delany uses two words, “winged dog,” to make his point about the possibilities of SF (1977/2009, p. 12). The phrase “winged dog” suggests “an entire track of evolution: whether the dog has forelegs or not...modification of breastbone and musculature if the wings are to be functional, as well as a whole slew of other factors from hollow bones to heart rate” (Delany, 1977/2009, p. 12). Visual image corrections offer the key to moving up and down the subjunctive scale. With respect to Delany’s specific zoological example, subjunctivity allows for the possibility of shape-shifting as a matter of biology, biotechnology, and engineering. These fields establish a trickster technology “when biology is practiced as a radically situational discourse” to disrupt manmade systems of oppression like race or gender (Haraway, 1989, p. 375). Once race, gender, and sex become mutable through technology or a fluid biology—which would constitute it as SF—the trickster has license to



effect societal change, release humanity from the constraints of identity, and practice being human from a standpoint that differs from the white male default. Afrofuturism provides this alternate perspective.

In Octavia E. Butler's novel *Wild Seed*, we read the protagonist's shape-shifting abilities as representing trickster technology. Throughout her own diaspora from Africa to pre-Civil War America, Anyanwu defies the limits of identity by changing her sex, race, age, and sensory abilities, and even at times transforming into animals to survive extreme conditions of violence. Against scholars who would see these abilities as magic or witchcraft, we argue Anyanwu uses shape-shifting as a form of bioengineering. In her short story "Ganger (Ball Lightning)," Hopkinson facetiously invents an electro-sex suit that transforms into a trickster figure with the ability to challenge the two protagonists' identities. Finally, in Hopkinson's novel *Midnight Robber*, we argue that both in the form and content of the story, language operates as a form of trickster technology.

Organic-engineering in Butler's *Wild Seed* Butler's fourth Patternist novel *Wild Seed* offers an example of shape-shifting to think about as a trickster technology. The shape-shifting protagonist, Anyanwu, emerges as a trickster from the specific social and cultural contexts of colonialism and slavery. Her ability to adapt as the contexts change from Africa to colonial America to the pre-Civil War United States displays her capacities to resist oppression and to survive. *Wild Seed* recounts the

beginning of the long relationship between Anyanwu and Doro, both immortal, from the interior of Africa to the antebellum South over the course of 150 years as well as their joint and separate attempts to build a race of long-lived people. At the time of their meeting in 1690, Anyanwu is nearly 300 years old while Doro has seen nearly four millennia pass. Anyanwu is a gifted healer with absolute mastery of her physiology, which enables her to transform her body in myriad ways. She is thought to practice witchcraft by the local African communities, many of them filled with her descendants. Doro's greatest gift is the ability to wear other people's bodies, consume them, and then transfer to another one nearby. Simply put, he steals bodies, he trades bodies, and he breeds bodies. Doro can also track people with special abilities as well as those with psionic (psychic) potential. He convinces Anyanwu to leave her African surroundings and she goes along with him for America for two reasons: first, she wants immortal children and, second, she wants to protect her children from Doro's veiled menace.

After being married off to his telekinetic son Isaac, who happens to be white, 50 years pass with Anyanwu and Doro now enemies. Doro ensures her cooperation by using her children against her exactly as she feared. Following Isaac's violent death in 1741, Anyanwu escapes from Doro, fleeing in various animal forms to the ocean and living as a dolphin for a time. Nearly 100 years pass before Doro crosses paths with Anyanwu again. This time, they face off on an 1840 Louisiana plantation. There, he sees that she has been successfully operating



her own eugenic program by gathering people with extra sensory abilities and building a family. Although Doro decides not to kill her, Anyanwu resolves “to shut herself off” and die (Butler, 1980, p. 276). She is tired of the duress caused by constantly evading Doro in order to protect herself and her offspring. In desperation, Doro breaks down in tears and begs her to go on living because he finally grasps that he does not have to experience the slow passage of time alone. He convinces her to live and they compromise on how to proceed together into the future.

An unrecognized trickster narrative permeates the historical backdrop of *Wild Seed*. Anyanwu does what she must to survive by utilizing her unparalleled biological knowledge to enhance her hearing, sight, and physical strength. In other circumstances, she reverses aging or grows old. Sometimes she modifies her height, skin color, or gender. She has both fathered children and given birth to children. Likewise, she repairs her own bodily injuries or cures others of their sicknesses. In the most extreme situations, Anyanwu transforms herself into other creatures like leopards, eagles, dolphins, and dogs in order to fight or flee to safety. She also occasionally shape-shifts for the pure pleasure of change. She fully controls this trickster technology.

Many prominent scholars have identified Anyanwu as a witch. For instance, Madhu Dubey characterizes Anyanwu “as a witch possessing magical powers” (2008, p. 40). Likewise, Haraway thinks of Anyanwu as “an African sorceress [with] powers of

transformation” (1985/1991, p. 179). Even Gerry Canavan remarks on how Anyanwu uses “shapeshifting powers” for a variety of reasons from flying to communing with animals to escaping Doro (2016, p. 71). They seemingly prefer to think of Anyanwu as a practitioner of a “discredited knowledge” because magic is not a masculinized form of information like science (Morrison, 1984, p. 342). In 32 years of scholarship, not many scholars have deviated from this sorcery viewpoint. However, we see her as a medical scientist who uses her own body as a laboratory to experiment and to manufacture life-saving medicines. Though she has no name for bacteria, she heals Doro’s current sickened body while walking through an African jungle by biting his infected hand, caressing it with her tongue, and administering medicine through her saliva. Anyanwu explains to a rapidly-improving Doro that “there were things in your hand that should not have been there...living things too small to see” that only she “can feel...and know” by taking “them into [her] body” in order to “kill them” (Butler, 1980, p. 29). She then shares the medicine she produces in her saliva. This practice is clearly not magic, but science because she understands her own organic being as well as other organisms on a microscopic scale. As Haraway suggests, “laboratories are the material and mythic space of modern science” (1989, p. 368). Clearly, Anyanwu’s ability to concoct and distribute medicine to others functions as an example of biotechnology. As Rebecca J. Holden rightfully claims, “Butler plays with varying hybrid identities, bioengineering, and genetic technologies to figure out how her



protagonists can survive and have agency in the futures she imagines while remaining true to themselves as African-American women" (2013, p. 26).

With her shape-shifting as a form of bioengineering, Anyanwu has no problem with crossing the species boundary since it magnifies her chance to survive the dangerous social and physical climates the changing world. As Joan Gordon terms it, Anyanwu "sees everything in a dynamic state moving in flows, inhabiting zones without boundaries, so male and female exist along a continuum and human and animal are not divisible into separate categories" (2009, p. 337). Ironically, black people in America have had to deal with questions of animality since at least the late 1700s, where Thomas Jefferson in Query 14 of his Notes on the State of Virginia directly compares "horses, dogs, and other domestic animals" to slaves on the question of beauty (1785/1998, p. 145). Blacks have been used and defined as animals in a factual sense, so Butler intentionally subverts the human/animal boundary with Anyanwu's shape-shifting to simultaneously undermine the scientific rationale for slavery and to authenticate female power. In Afrofuturist terms, we see connections between the past and present where real and imagined slaves overcome their white-encoded limitations via the trickster technology embodied in Anyanwu.

Two particular animal moments come to mind when thinking of Anyanwu's trickster shape-shifting power. Both examples occur during the middle passage onboard Doro's ship. In

self-defense, a terrified Anyanwu swiftly transforms into a "razor-clawed" leopard when Doro's telepathic son, Lale Sachs, makes her see him as "a great, horned, scaly lizard-thing of vaguely human shape...with a thick lashing tail and a scaly dog head with huge teeth" (Butler, 1980, p. 73). She rips out Lale's throat and starts eating him before Doro can stop her. The second transformation occurs when Anyanwu eats dolphin flesh and wants to experience swimming in the ocean as a sleek powerful marine animal. Through ingestion, we learn that Anyanwu can read the "flesh-messages" of any life form and become that animal entirely while maintaining her own consciousness (Butler, p. 80). She genetically engineers the "physical structure" of the dolphin (Butler, p. 79) and supplies herself with a future avenue of escape from Doro who cannot use his mental tracking system to find her in animal forms. Even he does not "know the full extent of her power" until conditions force her to use it to its full extent; she had previously hid it from others throughout her life (Butler, p. 11). In fact, she prefers life as a dolphin because she can obviate the human problems of sexism and racism, if not violence, by crossing the "species boundary" (Vint, 2005, p. 285). This exceptional trickster technology enables her to hide in plain sight and to fight or flee when it is absolutely necessary for survival.

Anyanwu's transformation into a wealthy old white man, the slaveholding Edward Warrick of Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, is the most potent example of trickster technology in *Wild Seed* because it offers her the perfect cover for



living in the Deep South while gathering, raising, and protecting her special family. She crosses this final human boundary to take full advantage of the white patriarchal structure dominant in the United States at that time. Anyanwu overcomes the triple restrictions of class, race, and gender because of this trickster technology, but fears being “white for too long” when ignoring chained slaves passing in front of her while thinking about diving for gold as a dolphin (Butler, p. 211). Though she has the power of transformation and the power to break various containments, her trickster agency still depends on her default identity as a black woman doing what she must to survive.

Anyanwu’s trickster technology allows her to cross over both man-made limits (transcending the racialized and sexed body) and species-ism in order to adapt to and evade conditions that would ground her to those identities. In this character’s shape-shifting abilities, Butler calls attention to the “animality” of slaves and black people in the U.S. context in a way reminiscent of Alexander Weheliye’s recent theory of “racializing assemblages,” whereby he argues that racialization fractions subjects with lesser degrees of humanity (2014, p. 12). Weheliye writes, “The idea of racializing assemblages... construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (2014, p. 12). Butler plays on this idea and pushes it to its ironical limit, making the white male slave-owner a character that

embodies at the same level as a dolphin or a tiger. In this classical Afrofuturist fashion, then, she disrupts the logics of race (and sex) in profoundly unsettling ways.

#### Sex and the Technological Monster in Hopkinson’s “Ganger (Ball Lightning)”

The most technical example of a trickster technology that we discuss in this essay appears in Hopkinson’s “Ganger (Ball Lightning),” where electro-sex suits demonstrate the inherent dangers of dissolving various identity constructions, notably sex and race. In this story Cleve and Issy attempt to fix their relationship by purchasing sex toys. Their sexual connection is their only means of communication since they cannot share their feelings for each other in any other way and continually grow apart. In short, these suits represent a last effort to save their relationship. A week after purchasing them, the couple decide to experiment with their stimulation suits, trading them to intensify their physical experience and to satisfy their curiosity about the feel of sex for the biological other. Technology creates this transformational moment of body swapping where Issy swears “she could feel Cleve’s tight hot cunt closing around her dick” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 225) and Cleve declares, “my dick had been peeled and it was inside out, and you [Issy]...you were fucking my inside-out dick” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 226). In the aftermath of the sexual experience, Cleve forgets to properly discharge and store the suits. They simply peel them off and leave them on the floor before falling asleep. The unthinking electrostatic s/he



fuck monster, a doppelgänger of Cleve and Issy, born from the electrical imbalance built-up as these suits merge together overnight, nearly kills the couple by eliciting multiple orgasms in quick succession by repeatedly touching them. Cleve and Issy fool themselves in thinking hot, kinky sex will solve their problems. At the end, they traverse the emotional chasm that exists between them by learning to talk to each other again.

The unwary couple bring this thoughtless trickster to life in their desire for intimacy by not heeding the warning label on the suits and by trading skins. The packaging clearly states that a coronal discharge, known as the “Kirlian phenomenon,” will occur with mishandled suits as they energize each other (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 237). However, manufacturer boasts about not being able to distinguish between “the microthin layer of the wetsuits and bare skin” drive Cleve and Issy to test the marketing ploy of the suits as “consensual aids to full body aura alignment” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 223; p. 224). Issy does not deny initially having fun with the suits, but ironically recognizes that they wear “rubber body bags” (Hopkinson, 2001, 229). This moment of dark humor underscores how Cleve’s and Issy’s problems are not physical, that they are deceiving themselves about their compatibility because of their unconventional sex play. Rather, they need mental and emotional attunement to rekindle the love between them. They need to talk about their insecurities and this hermaphroditic “ghost-thing” in the form of “ball lightning” provides their opportunity for a genuine closeness (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 236;

p. 237). Still, their engagement in seemingly subversive behavior leads them near death. Because this thing desires sensation with its unwilling partners, it has “breasts” and “a dick” although “a pattern of coloured lights flickered in it, limning where spine, heart, and brain would have been” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 236). This lifeless bit of tricknology jolts their hearts into a vital need for affectionate friendship.

Conversations about personal emotions such as fears and hopes immobilize the ganger. Before they notice that such conversation freezes the thing in its tracks, the monster reduces them to quivering masses of flesh with each caress. Cleve and Issy are literally on the floor of their bathroom repeatedly climaxing and close to death until they realize that their communication is the key to negating the electricity. In fact, “Hopkinson’s story follows a similar, if saucier pattern” established in *I, Robot* (1950) that Lisa Yaszek smartly identifies as an update on “Isaac Asimov’s classic robot puzzle stories” because Cleve and Issy have to figure out the technology’s weakness before it kills them (2006, N. pag). Issy tells the story of how she broke a light bulb preparing a tin of homemade chocolate fudge and how Cleve held in his anger while cleaning up her mess with her pouting on the side talking “around stuff” like “racist insult[s]” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 243). She wants Cleve to share his feelings with her and his buying the suits in the first place is a misguided attempt to do so. They really talk and touch each other’s minds while grasping hands through the ganger, and, as a result, it pops out of existence. Physical, emotional, and mental pleasure, really



“touch[ing] each other” defuse it (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 244). For just a moment the erotic power on display breaks the gender division between Cleve and Issy, fusing male and female into one being, where their unguarded thoughts become the necessary weapon to defeat their electric monster. Afterward, Cleve explains his emotional distance as his fear of being stereotyped as an angry black man stating, “I ‘fraid to use harsh words...look at the size of me, the blackness of me. You know what it is to see people cringe for fear when you shout?” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 245). Issy, herself, expresses how she wants “sweet, hot talk” from Cleve (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 245). While the gender division temporarily collapses, the tricknology in play here hinges on race. Racial anxieties nearly end their relationship, but without Cleve and Issy sharing their everyday experiences as black people with each other, their newfound intimacy would not have developed.

“Ganger (Ball Lightning)” functions as a curious metaphor whereby her two black characters are forced into an absurd hypersexualized play. Hopkinson has talked in interviews about the necessity to depict black people, in particular Caribbean people, as engaging in sexy, kinky, and queer contexts to re-appropriate their humanity (Johnston, 2008). However, to represent such scenes as positive and even empowering—as Hopkinson does in several of her other works, including her novel *The Salt Roads* (2003)—is complex. The history of hypersexualization and exotification of black slaves in the Caribbean and in the U.S. still participates in the racialized process of

dehumanization. Women Afrofuturist writers such as Hopkinson, N. K. Jemisin, and Nnedi Okorafor include positive and female-oriented sex scenes in their novels for the purpose of reclaiming that humanity, and so scholars should consider the role that explicit sexuality plays in Afrofuturism. This story’s dark humor in portraying a technology that threatens characters with repeated orgasms until death could be read as a satirical take on the science fictional theme of the dangers of technology and as a jab at the reader’s voyeuristic appraisal of the exotic black body. In the end it is Cleve’s and Issy’s work on their relationship which overcomes the danger of becoming literally oversexualized.

#### Tricknology as Language: Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*

Hopkinson’s novel *Midnight Robber* (2000) takes place on the futuristic pan-Caribbean colonized planet of Toussaint, a clear reference to the Haitian Revolution leader General Toussaint Louverture, in which an all-powerful AI by the name of Granny Nanny (or Grande ‘Nansi Web) is connected to all citizens and ensures perfect peace. In this respect, criminals get sent to the parallel shadow planet of New Half-Way Tree, where they are condemned to live “headblind,” without AI support, and perform hard labor (Hopkinson, 2001, p.4). The protagonist Tan-Tan, a little girl at the beginning of the story, ends up there after her father, Antonio, accidentally kills his wife’s lover. When Tan-Tan reaches the age of nine, Antonio starts to sexually abuse her. Eventually, Tan-Tan kills him as he brutally



rapes her, and begins another life of exile in the bush while pregnant with his fetus. The unnamed narrator, revealed at the end of the book to be the house “eshu” or artificially intelligent butler, interspaces mythical stories about Tan-Tan the Robber Queen’s (a carnivalesque character) exploits; they sometimes mirror the events of the framing narrative (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 5). At the end of the novel, her vengeful step-mother, Janisette, catches up to Tan-Tan and confronts her for the murder of Antonio. In a final Robber Queen speech, Tan-Tan eventually earns a communal pardon by revealing her sexual abuse. The novel ends when Tan-Tan gives birth to the child she names Tubman, honoring the fugitive slave and underground railroad conductor Harriet Tubman. Tubman in the novel represents the “human bridge from slavery to freedom” (Hopkinson, 2000, p. 329).

The inhabitants of Toussaint are connected to Granny Nanny and other AIs through an earbug implanted into their head from birth. The earbug (literally the receptacle of language) represents the connection between language and technology in Hopkinson’s mythology. It is no coincidence that in the world of *Midnight Robber*, the computer coding that generated Granny Nanny and through which it is possible to control her is called “nannysong,” a reference to calypsos, or the songs sung by Caribbean slaves (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 5). Marlene D. Allen writes that the pedicab runners—the only Toussaint inhabitants to do hard physical work—represent an ironic twist on the slaves of the past because they can manipulate Granny

Nanny with their control of nannysong (2012, p. 79). In a complacent society where AIs do all the hard labor, Hopkinson’s hackers ironically turn out to be the disconnected ones who prefer the toil of manual labor.

The emphasis on oral “code” as opposed to typing on a computer underlines communication and an oral tradition, both of which dispute the image of technology as grounded in materialism. Contrary to the traditional representations of omnipotent AIs as symbols for surveillance and totalitarianism, Granny Nanny illustrates the connection between the individual and the community, where the technology of the earbug represents integration. In the novel, the real punishment imposed on criminals is not so much their exile from the physical place of Toussaint, but their disconnection from Granny Nanny as they become “headblind.” This exile represents their disconnection from the social realm. In this figure, Hopkinson deconstructs the representation of technology as futuristically remote, urban, post-race. Instead, she grounds technology in the history and culture of the community. As Jillana Enteen argues, the character of Granny Nanny also has implications to the purpose and political function of technology. Enteen writes, “The Marryshow Corporation and Granny Nanny constitute and are constituted by their community. They cannot evolve into machines that no longer respond to the populations with whom they intersect. Communication and play, rather than corporate capitalism and accumulation, are their aims” (2007, p. 265). Hopkinson untangles technology from its roots



within capitalism by replacing its actors and the meaning associated with technological progress.

In the structure of the novel itself, language-as-technology serves to trick the reader, deconstructs the apparent linearity of the story, and blurs the lines between myth and reality. At the beginning of the novel, the unnamed narrator tells us it is a “master weaver. I spin the threads. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth, I weaving you my story, oui?...Maybe is same way so I weave my way through the dimensions to land up here” (3). Enteen contends that the use of the figure of Anansi the Spider (the ultimate trickster) interpellates the reader to the particular form of the novel: “By invoking this trickster and his web, Hopkinson’s storyteller informs the reader that meaning will be multiple, competing, and contradictory, Hopkinson’s hacking further implicates the reader by requiring her to interpret this new poetics...” (2007, p. 270). The connection between storytelling and traveling through time and space is also not incidental, since in the end the narrator is finally revealed to be the house eshu (or AI servant), talking to Tan-Tan’s fetus, soon-to-be baby Tubman.

The eshu’s narrative symbolizes a technology that is both disembodied (since the eshu is an AI) and timeless. The eshu only appears to be a character from Toussaint, that is to say Tan-Tan’s past, when in fact he is present throughout the story, unbeknownst to the reader, and he is talking to the future in the form of the unborn fetus. Furthermore, the

eshu weaves the Tan-Tan myths into the body of the framing story, refusing to ascertain the veracity of these myths or their position in time, and disrupting the expected linearity of the novel in classic Hopkinson style. Thus, the eshu proves the ultimate trickster within the novel.

The technology of the novel is both remote and disembodied, and at the same time indistinguishable from the human characters because it is part of their biology. The eshu explains, “When Granny Nanny realise how Antonio kidnap Tan-Tan, she hunt he through the dimension veils, with me riding she back like Dry Bone. Only a quantum computer coulda trace she through infinite dimensions like that, only Granny Nanny and me, a house eshu. And only because Tan-Tan’s earbug never dead yet” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 327). The earbug here represents the trans-dimensional communication between the AIs and Tan-Tan; it is literally the thread which connects the characters while simultaneously closing the story into a circle. The earbug is the mechanism through which Granny Nanny can communicate to unborn life and transform it, shaping it into a cyborg by directing the “nanomites” so that nannysong becomes a biological—not merely added—sixth sense to Tubman (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 10). Through the manipulation of language-as-technology, that is to say through the passage from the earbug (receptor of language) to the womb, Granny Nanny also reconnects with Tan-Tan and reintegrates her into her own narrative told until now by the disembodied AI. The creation of Tubman as a full cyborg, one literally



created by an AI manipulating the biology of a human, finalizes to merge the historical with the technological, the past with the future, the disembodied with the flesh thereby demonstrating Afrofuturism at work.

### Tricksterism as a Technology

Afrofuturist writers use the trope of tricksterism as a technology in their texts. In Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu's shape-shifting and bioengineering abilities allow her to transcend the limits of race and sex, and even to cross over to different species. In so doing, she deconstructs the racialized classifications of human beings according to violent systems and ironically embodies the white male slave-owner. In Nalo Hopkinson's story "Ganger (Ball Lightning)", tricknology makes a satirical play on the hypersexualization and exotification of the black body, while in her novel *Midnight Robber*, language itself becomes the tool to trick within the diegesis and at the structural level. Conversely, the representation of tricksterism as a form of technology also participates in the Afrofuturist tradition of deconstructing the themes and tropes of SF, and by extent discourses surrounding the

ideals of modernity, progress, technology, and futurity.

In all three narratives examined in this essay, the authors represent technology in a way that profoundly contradicts its objectiveness, remoteness, and modernity. Anyanwu's ability to analyze bacteria with her tongue, or study complex organisms via ingestion brings the fleshiness of the body into what is supposed to be rigorously sterile, removed from touch. Hopkinson channels Asimov's Laws of Robotics in an explicit and absurd erotic play in "Ganger (Ball Lightning)," inventing electro-sex suits that disrupt the meaning of the sexed body, and creating a tale in which genial connection between black characters defeats the technological monster. In *Midnight Robber*, descendants from slaves are the only ones who can code a mega-AI by singing in a fast tongue, while an AI-trickster tricks the reader and disrupts the composition of the novel. Past and future, primitiveness and futurity, the bodied and the disembodied, mix in these Afrofuturist tales. Trickster technology thus offers perhaps a concise image of the essence of Afrofuturist texts: the gleeful arrangement of oxymorons, the satirical power of inversion, and the happy disruption of established rules.



**Tricknology (continued)**

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**Tricknology (continued)**

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## **Promises of Uncertainty: A Study of Afrofuturist Interventions into the Archive**

By **Johan Lau Munkholm**

**Abstract:** The concept 'Afrofuturism' was a subversive offspring of the enthusiastic celebration of the Internet's imagined potentiality in the 1990s by the white technology community. It has since become a multifaceted and complex gathering of artistic expressions, political interventions, and imaginative speculation in diasporic culture. In this article, it is explored as a disruption of the official archives of history that organize and represent temporality for the benefit of the imperial powers that have subjugated the African Diaspora. This organization/representation and its disruption have consequences for the past and the future. The temporal revisionist practices akin to Afrofuturistic epistemology are investigated through two examples: The Data Thief from John Akomfrah's film *The Last Angel of History* and jazz legend Sun Ra.

**Keywords:** archives, Afrofuturism, Myth-Science, technology, weak messianism, history

A ship departs in Europe leaving for Africa loaded with manufactured goods. In Africa, the goods are traded for kidnapped or purchased people, who are then moved across the Atlantic to the Americas, where they are sold or traded for raw materials. Leaving the newly created slaves on the coast of a foreign land, the ship returns to Europe and the process starts all over again (Walker, 2004). This voyage came to be known as the Middle Passage and was perpetuated for approximately 400 years. The journey across the seas had transformative powers. The ship was not simply a means of transportation - it was a slave-producing machine turning people into commodities by violence and terror (Youngquist, 2011). Upon arrival in the New World, the transformation was in full effect: people leaving the African continent against their will were no longer people.

With this fundamental alienation from mankind, everything that formerly belonged to them was stripped away to keep them commodified: identity, belongings, history and language. Slowly the chronicles and culture of millions upon millions were lost. The displacement was complete; not only had Africans been physically removed from whence they came, they had also had their cultural memory erased for the benefit of the slave owner. As Sartre puts it in his foreword to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, in which he comments on the crimes of the French colonialists: "No effort is spared to demolish their [the colonial subjects] traditions, to substitute our language for theirs, and to destroy their culture without giving them ours... Shame and fear warp their character and dislocate their personality" (Sartre, 2004). Descendants of African slaves of today can track their ancestral traces only so far before



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

reaching a traumatic unknown, an abyss in the archives of black lives. This works as a reminder that history is not simply gathered and organized in its entirety. The archives of history we turn to for traces of the past are produced and administered selectively to aid the interests of the ruler, the imperial machine, or the colonial nations. They are a technology of power that vigorously steers time on a distinct, linear path by organizing the past, present and future in a direction that bends ever so slightly, pointing its population in the necessary direction, while accounts of the subjugated dwindle away. A certain debt to the ghosts of the forgotten shapes itself from the ruins of history. It insists on an enduring contestation of the archives that have rubbed out the past of the African Diaspora population and simultaneously excluded black people from normative conceptions of the future. In other words, counter strategies, counter narratives, and counter memories are called upon. Under the category of temporal counter strategies, we encounter Afrofuturism.

### **The Concept of Afrofuturism**

When Mark Dery coined the term 'Afrofuturism' in 1994 in his essay *Black To The Future: Interviews With Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose*, it was not a sharp new departure. The technological boom of the 1990s had given rise to new fantasies of a bodiless, raceless future imbued by cybernetics and virtual reality. Conceptions of a utopian future characterized by a newfound equality were prominent in tech-enthusiastic circles that placed great hope in the potential

of the Internet (Nelson, 2002). However, what was forgotten in the optimistic discourse of bodiless futures was that not all bodies share the same past, carry the same trauma, or are envisioned to occupy the same place in the future. The information age was, according to Nelson (2002), fundamentally white. The digital divide placed whites on the side of technology and progress and blacks on the side of the primitive and "soulful", which has no place in a technologically enhanced future devoid of strong cultural roots (Nelson, 2002, p. 6). The (post)modern individual (presumably white) that critics such as Timothy Leary and Rosanne Stone lauded was ready and able to live in flux, cast away his or her identity and take on a new one on a whim (Nelson, 2002). The visions of future that are produced according to raceless ideals are paradoxically related to blackness as the signal of the Other that constitutes modern society in opposition to a primitive, racial society forever caught in traumas of the past (Nelson, 2002). This brings us back to Dery and a central question of his: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (Dery, 1994, p. 180). In an era highly influenced by futuristic, progressive, and whitewashed discourses comfortably based on the myths of blacks' inability to master technology, a cry of opposition arose. Afrofuturism was a way of framing this resistance and finds its expression in:

speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future (Dery, 1994, p. 180).

Afrofuturism is a kind of intervention smack in the middle of “twentieth-century technoculture” and the discourse surrounding it, characterized by Nelson’s definition of the digital divide. In 1998, Nelson founded an online community called AfroFuturism, which we might consider the first Afrofuturist archive. Here, in collaboration with other contributors to the listserv, she defined Afrofuturism as “African American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come” (Nelson, 2002, p. 9). Nelson and Dery’s definitions are similar in that they both focus on the divergent, Other narratives of the past and future that contest what Derrida calls the consignment of the archive that “aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida, 1995, p. 10). In other words, Afrofuturism, as understood by Dery and Nelson, is a disruption of fictional representations and archives of history that configure the past and future in a homogenous and coherent way that excludes African Americans from the future and devaluates the significance of their past. Afrofuturism is an indictment of the rigidity of the imperial archive. This can be explained by Derrida’s assertion that “[t]he technical structure of the archiving archive also

determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida, 1995, p. 17). By questioning the archive and how events are inscribed in the archive, by re-inscribing it, Afrofuturism challenges the apparently accepted conditions of reality that maneuver black populations into the future.

It is important to understand that what is deposited in the archive is not necessarily “discursive writings” (Derrida, 1995, p. 10) but general assertions of ‘reality’ that sediment into regularity by way of the prevailing and privileged interpretations of the ruler. Examples can be found in the Enlightenment and its foundational writing of Western liberalism by influential characters such as Immanuel Kant, David Hume, and John Locke, to name a few. In their writings, we find certain binary operations that constitute the European enlightened and liberal society, in opposition to the primitive, stunted development and backwards character of the black, African subject, which justifies their serfdom (Locke, 1698; Hume, 1748; Kant, 1775). While these racist doctrines are not explicitly accepted as truthful today, they continue to work (Derrida, 1995). Racism prevails. Derrida’s concept of the toponomological archive (from which the law derives and commands) is therefore not an easily identifiable place, but an ongoing exchange of traces between an inside and an outside of the archive that continuously influences ontology. This means that an unequivocal notion of the archive can never be



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

reached; the final consignment can only be professed, never fully stated, which in turn means that the archive can always be challenged and changed, with consequences for general conceptions of the world (Derrida, 1995). Whatever impressions it has cast into the world can be re-traced, not only to revise history but also to challenge the present state of things that determines the course of the future. It is because Derrida's concept of the archive does not just pertain to past historic significance but is as much concerned with visions of the future that it holds relevance to Afrofuturism.

Eshun has a focus on the future in mind when he notes:

To establish the historical character of black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al., it has been necessary to assemble countermemories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity (Eshun, 2003, pp. 287-288).

Vigilantly pursuing a historical presence in the past is necessary, but for Eshun this vigilance must be carried into the future as well, or the African Diaspora population is destined to rummage in history without battling the effects of the past (Eshun, 2003). Power, as Eshun writes, "now operates predicatively as much as retrospectively" (Eshun, 2003, p. 289). Eshun's point is that the African American predicament is as much governed by their place in an

imagined future as their disparaged place in history (Eshun, 2003). This is where the potential of Afrofuturism is summoned as an intervention "within the dimensions of the predictive" (Eshun, 2003, p. 293). Different approaches and interventions into these dimensions of the predictive are what Eshun calls "chronopolitics." An example of this is the use of the extra-terrestrial in Afrofuturism as the alien figure; it quite literally signifies the experience of African slaves arriving in the New World.

Becoming alien opens a potential understanding of time and distance and initiates a way of understanding the African Diaspora's subjects as strangers in the New World (Sinker, 1992; Eshun, 2003). Instead of striving for the designation of 'human' informed by the ideals of the Enlightenment, which were based on the very exclusion of black people, black people should explore the potentials of their alienness, which is a force that re-opens the imagination to possible futures that divert from the schemes of power (Eshun, 1998, 193). I will return to this point in more detail when describing Sun Ra's system. Moreover, it becomes clear that, through Afrofuturism, history can be rearticulated by new artistic formations that inform the experience of being black today and in the future (Eshun, 2003). This not only clarifies why Eshun is interested in retrospective analysis, but emphasizes Afrofuturism's anterograde ability to connect divergent experiences of time.



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

To Eshun as much as Dery and Nelson, the power of Afrofuturism is its interventionist dissection of the politics of temporality that keep African Americans locked in a manageable time formed by the organizing of the archives of history. I will now look more thoroughly at two examples of destructive rebellions against this forceful and unambiguous organization of time.

#### **Angels of history**

The first example is the archaeological practices of the Data Thief from the much-celebrated film *The Last Angel of History* (1996) by John Akomfrah.

The film opens with the tale of Robert Johnson, who in the 1930s sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in the Deep South for a secret black technology that came to be known as the blues. This technology was instrumental in the development of other powerful black technologies—jazz, soul, hip-hop and R&B—that, like the blues, can transform oppressive experiences into rhythmic energy. By designating the blues as a “technology,” a sophisticated tool offered by the devil, the tendency to consider technology as something understood through white lenses is challenged. Accordingly, Johnson gets access to a technology from which white people are excluded.

Johnson became available to the devil at the crossroads, an inexplicable zone of potential transformation. We depart from Robert Johnson and jump 200 years forward in time,

around year 2130. We find Johnson’s kin, “another bad boy, scavenger, poet figure. He is called the Data Thief” (Akomfrah, 1996). From an unknown party, he is told a story that instructs him on the way to open his future, to become free of his time:

If you can find the crossroads. A crossroads. This crossroads. If you can make an archaeological dig into this crossroads, you’ll find fragments. Techno fossils. And if you can put those elements, those fragments, together you’ll find the code. Crack that code and you’ll have the keys to your future. You got one clue and it’s a phrase: Mothership Connection. (Akomfrah, 1996)

This quotation reveals a connection between Johnson and the Data Thief. While Johnson sells his soul to receive the technology of the blues, the Data Thief “gives up the right to belong in his time in order to come to our time to find the Mothership Connection. The Thief becomes an angel. An angel of history” (Akomfrah, 1996). (The name is a reference to the 1974 album “Mothership Connection” by the funk band Parliament.) The ability bestowed upon the Data Thief, should he succeed in his quest, is enigmatic and apparently not completely clear to the Thief until the end of the movie. It has to do with time and how he will be able to experience it.

The instructions point the Thief in two, possibly related, directions: the crossroads and the Mothership Connection. When asking about



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

the Mothership Connection, the Thief is led to Eshun's explanation. The only clue has led him to the 1990s technological boom, where the future seems pending—or, as Jamie Price, a.k.a. Goldie, describes in the film, "We are in the future... time is irrelevant" (Akomfrah, 1996). In the same film, Greg Tate contributes to Goldie's quote when elaborating on the "digitized race memory" of sampling: "I think what sampling allows for a generation that didn't have access to musical education is a way of collapsing all eras of black music onto a chip, and being able to freely reference and cross reference all those areas of sound and all those previous generations of creators kind of simultaneously" (Akomfrah, 1996).

The Data Thief has found the crossroads. They are in our time, which seems to suggest that recent materialistic developments in technology have brought about a potential new channel in the movement of time, a kind of switch that can be turned on. The Data Thief must now dig for fragments and collect, gather, and reorganize them. This discovery is followed by a combination of images and sounds: the film is simultaneously the picture experienced by the viewer and the fragments and elements that the Thief gathers in his archaeological exploration. Then the Thief wanders in our time and in the archives of history he can access. He travels to the New World, "the land of African memories" (Akomfrah, 1996); he learns new words (slave, alien, sonic warfare); he gathers pictures from the civil rights movement in the New World and hieroglyphs from ancient Egypt; he travels to Africa and wanders

through the ruins of our time. Everywhere he is collecting data to become free of his own time. The Thief's pursuit appears analogous to Benjamin's writings, which introduce historical materialism animated by a strange messianic power, made to catch and connect fragments of time in their historical and revolutionary explosiveness.

Insight into the Data Thief can be found in Benjamin's text *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Über den Begriff der Geschichte; 1968–), which introduces historical materialism animated by a strange messianic power, made to catch and connect fragments of time in their historical and revolutionary explosiveness. The very title, *The Last Angel of History*, is surely a reference to Benjamin's own meditations on Paul Klee's painting from 1920, *Angelus Novus*, from *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940). The aim here is, however, not simply to disclose the film through a reading of Benjamin and thus pose a certain identity between the ideas of Benjamin and the expressions of the film. Rather, the point is to demonstrate a relationship between the Data Thief and Benjamin that transcends the frames of the film and situates it in a much wider political game.

*Theses on the Philosophy of History* is the last text written by Benjamin. It was conceived from a position of desperation, a crossroad in European history. In the totalitarian tendencies of his time, Benjamin identified a close proximity between despotism and historicism, which treats time as a rigid series of events and causally connects these events into



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

“history” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 263). Historians complement an empty and homogenous time with a succession of events; they create a continuum that supports the rule of the victor:

The Nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them (Benjamin, 1968, p. 256).

The historian concentrates his efforts on recording the smooth progress of the triumphal procession, while neglecting the victims of that progression. This perpetuates the idea that we can disregard the totality of history and instead selectively isolate specific events in history. Considering the progressive accumulation of wealth produced on the backs of slaves during colonialism, the lasting wounds it afflicted on generations of descendants, and the general forgetfulness that surrounds this process in the West, Benjamin’s critique of historicism resonates forcefully today. The legacy the Data Thief has inherited from Benjamin is a quest to destroy this continuum. To do this, it is vital to recognize that historical causality is constructed retrospectively and that any construction can be upset. To see history, to really see it and challenge it, the historical materialist needs to perceive history as Angelus Novus does – not as a neutral alignment of events but as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 257). Just like

Angelus Novus, the Data Thief has his back turned on the future whence he came, and he too observes “the ruins, the detritus, the wastelands of our late 20<sup>th</sup>

Century” (Akomfrah, 1996). He sees our time as a heap of ruins in the same way Angelus Novus does, but no storm from Paradise is forcing him away, back to his own time. The Data Thief has more agency than Klee’s angel. He not only possesses the vision of the angel, he also holds the creative power of the Benjaminian historian – collector of fragments. To disrupt the linearity of history he must catch fragments in their historical explosiveness, at the right time, when “[t]he true picture of the past flits by” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 255).

The true picture of the past is the one thoroughly hidden in the ruins of time. The historical materialist only considers the historical object when it crystallizes as a monad, for this is where the messianic traces of the past reveal themselves in our time. This is where the forgotten and damned of time can be redeemed: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 254). When the Data Thief collects or steals fragments of Sun Ra, George Clinton, Lee “Scratch” Perry, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, etc., in *The Last Angel of History*, it is because they carry an “index” with them that creates a messianic correspondence to something in the Thief’s time, the future. He collects fragments that can explode the historical continuum to which he is subjected. Not only that, the fragments and artworks he finds cast traces to something further back in history: “He is surfing across the



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

Internet of black culture. He is breaking into the vaults, breaking into the ruins" (Akomfrah, 1996). What he comes across are flashing pictures of African American history: pictures of slavery, war, white presidents, the Civil Rights Movement, and more. A connection is being produced between the fragments of African American past, our present, and the future (the Thief's present), which seems to suggest that there is a certain force field in our time that contains a virtual messianic redemption. New discourses on alienation and alien-becoming, inspired by Sun Ra, Perry, and Clinton, re-open the archives of history for reassessment and revision, because the once abducted and now forgotten Africans carry with them an index that points to a certain possibility or kinship with our time of estrangement that enables a redemption of the past.

Angelus Novus thus always looks back at history to mend it, and it is precisely by comparing the Thief to Benjamin's angel that we can observe an important division between Akomfrah's futuristic figure and Benjamin's collector/historical materialist. Both Angelus Novus and the Data Thief are trapped in time, but for different reasons. Angelus Novus is unable to stand firm against the storm of progress, which is pushing it away from the past and into the future. The Data Thief, on the contrary, would like to return back to the future, but he cannot: "No escaping from this time. This space. He continues collecting information. Wandering the boundaries between science fiction and social reality. This is the Data Thief's new home. The zone of

optical illusions" (Akomfrah, 1996). Why is it not possible to return home? On board the spaceship, the Mothership, which connects the lost African motherland with Africa and the alien future, the Data Thief's conception of time is altered. Eshun's explanation of this alteration of consciousness being on board the Mothership—that is, listening to the funk record Mothership Connection—helps clarify what happens to the Thief:

Like the unaccountable hours lost by the abductee, you're somewhere and somewhen else now. Memory plays with you, leaves you baffled. P#Funk splices tapes to make you doubt your mind. Collapsing the spacetime continuum funks with your recognition processes. The sense of being inexorably pulled along by the simmering backbeat becomes a rockabye motion which 'swings low' (Eshun, 1998, p. 141).

He returns to Africa with the Mothership only to realize that no return is possible. A once lost Africa and the future, in which he thought he belonged, have been collapsed onto the Mothership and the sonic vibrations of black music: "Funk becomes a secret science, a forgotten technology that 'has been hidden until now'" (Eshun, 1998, p. 141). This technology enables a transformation like the one Robert Johnson experienced at the crossroads. The Mothership Connection is also a crossroad, a more definitive location for the crossroads of our time - a zone of transformation. What the Data Thief sees after



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

the “spacetime continuum” has been collapsed on the Mothership Connection, is that the linearity of time is an illusion, which necessarily prohibits him from returning to a singular point in history located between two other points. He is now bound to wander in this “zone of optical illusion” between science fiction and social reality. This is an experience he shares with many other black people around the globe, since “African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements” (Dery, 1994, p. 180).

What the Data Thief then finally becomes is a figurative prism through which the black Diaspora can scrutinize its own experience of being in the world. There is a certain affinity between the Data Thief and Afrofuturism as an interventionist strategy working towards a rethinking of history and the future. Asserting that, the Data Thief is not only committed to a journey backwards in time but eventually to a breakdown in temporal linearity that opens a door to the future in the midmost of the present. By following this opening into the future, we will further explore the black, unknown character of the future-space that holds uncertain promises. This exploration is undertaken with Sun Ra and his Myth-Science.

### **The Temporalities of Sun Ra**

Herman Blount, later Le Sony’r Ra, a.k.a. Sun Ra, was officially born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1914. According to Ra himself, he arrived in

Birmingham, Alabama, planet Earth from Saturn in 1914, which quite literally establishes space as a point of origin in understanding Sun Ra. As a point of entry, Sun Ra could hardly have picked a more segregated state in the United States than Alabama, which would shape his thinking (Swiboda, 2007). From Birmingham, he moved on to Chicago in 1946, and from there to New York and Philadelphia along with different constellations of his band, the Arkestra. Sun Ra finally died, or left the planet, in 1993 (Sites, 2013). The Arkestra, now The Sun Ra Arkestra, exists to this day.

An obvious way of comprehending Sun Ra’s claim that he is from Saturn or “a different art of being,” as he declares in *A Joyful Noise*, would be to understand it as an allegory. In this sense, Sun Ra’s notion that he is a “different being” from a different time and space would neatly correlate with the black historical experience of “slavery, structural racism and persistent discrimination” (Van Veen, 2013, p. 12). Unfortunately, this interpretation restricts the potential of Sun Ra’s mysterious claim by having it simply stand in for something else, thereby reterritorializing the creative, temporal effects it could provoke. In this case, his project would come down to a simple “appeal for recognition” as a human being (Reed, 2013, p. 121). Eshun elaborates on the importance of thinking past a strictly allegorical reading and instead buying into Sun Ra’s claim:

I always accept the impossibility of this. I always start with that, where most people would try and claim it was an



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

allegory. But it isn't an allegory: he really did come from Saturn. I try to exaggerate that impossibility, until it's irritating, until it's annoying, and this annoyance is merely a threshold being crossed in the readers' heads, and once they unseize, unclench their sensorium, they'll have passed through a new threshold and they'll be in my world (Eshun, 1998, p. 193).

Thinking past the strictly allegorical or metaphorical opens a certain space that, according to Reed, has a political potential that upsets the seeming necessity of neoliberalism; an ontology Mark Fisher (2009) calls capitalist realism. This does not, however, mean that we have completely left linguistics and certain traces of history altogether. Sun Ra draws on grammar and costumes not completely foreign to us, but he usurps any well-established symbolism that assists in their interpretation. Therefore, we must not only accept the literalness of Ra's extraterrestriality but also reject the metaphor in favor of the catachresis: "a figure that invents sense by using figures in a more or less arbitrary name to invoke what is otherwise unthinkable, or unthought" (Reed, 2013, p. 121). Starting from this fundamental 'unclenching of the sensorium' we are able to enter the extra-terrestrial as a disjointed continuation and potential break with history towards unknown space: "the endless void, the bottomless pit surrounding you" (Coney, Sun Ra: Space Is The Place, 1974). Sun Ra produces these fluctuations or breaks in both past and future that collide in the present. An important entity

in this relationship between past, present and future is ancient Egypt.

### **Sun Ra's Mythological Egypt**

With the burgeoning of the civil rights movement in the early 1950s, Egypt and the historical narratives surrounding it acquired relevance among African American thinkers, who envisioned a glorious Egyptian past to contest discourses of white historical dominance and revitalize black pride (Swiboda, 2007). Sun Ra found inspiration in Egypt too, believing that Egyptian inheritance might have played a larger role in the development of human civilization and culture than had been acknowledged in the official history books. Sun Ra's fascination with Egypt inspired his name change from Herman Poole Blount to Sun Ra, the ancient Egyptian God of the sun, which is further supported by the lavish Egyptian costumes Sun Ra and his Arkestra don in *Space Is The Place*. Sun Ra's thought system, Myth-Science, not only disrupts dichotomies of history and myth, science and fiction, but distorts and mythologizes time and future. However, it is necessary to stay cautious when interpreting ancient Egypt's position in Sun Ra's system. What Sun Ra realized, when he engulfed himself in the sometimes conflicting and incomplete narratives on ancient Egypt, was that there had been an ongoing effort among white historians to diminish the role black Africans played in the construction of civilization (Swiboda, 2007). The conclusion to which this led him was not necessarily that a final historical truth had been obstructed for



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

the benefit of the ruling class, but that historical truth was entirely up for debate. Myths, man-made historical narratives created with certain intentions in mind, informed our present as much as “truthful” scientific research did:

This was strange territory that Sonny found himself in. The ancient world, he was learning was less a place than a myth. White people who made claims on it for themselves often did so in the same terms as black people. And though they wrapped their self-serving myths in science and scholarship and made ‘race’ do their bidding, when Sonny looked closely it seemed nothing more than testifying, as in church (John F. Szwed, quoted in Swiboda, 2007, p. 98).

So-called ‘reality’ becomes, to Sun Ra, a tool of oppression and manipulation. Dressed in a colorful costume, walking amongst walls inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphs, Sun Ra states:

Those of the reality have lost their way. Now they must listen to what myth has to say. Those of the reality have been bruised and beaten by the truth. Those of the reality have been slaves of a bad truth. So there is nothing left now but the myth. The myth is neither bad nor good. Its potentials are unlimited (Mugge, 1980).

Reality, or scientific history writing, has been instrumental in denying black people their rightful place in history. Sun Ra makes this painfully clear in *Space Is The Place* when he replies to a group of black Oakland-youths who question if he “is for real”:

How do you know I’m real? I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society. If you did your people wouldn’t be seeking equal rights. You’re not real. If you were you’d have some status among the nations of the world. So we are both myths. I do not come to you as reality. I come to you as the myth. Because that’s what black people are: myths (Coney, 1974).

If history is up for debate, if it is an object of manipulation, it can also be revised for the benefit of black people. Sun Ra mythologizes Egypt for the benefit of the African American future. This Myth-Science operates at what Derrida would call “the joint between truth and fiction” (Derrida, 1995, p. 40); it finds its material in historical archives and re-mythologizes these material traces. For Sun Ra, it is, after all, already myth in that it is man-made. Inspired by Derrida, we might say that Sun Ra re-opens history, re-opens the archive, to speak with spectres of the past. Sun Ra is not interested in sealing off history, which means exorcising the spectres of history that haunt our present, nor is he interested in ‘redeeming the past’ in a Benjaminian sense. For Sun Ra, as well as Derrida, the ethical pursuit is to stay in the hauntology that keeps producing ghosts that connect us to the past,



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

or time in general - to keep speaking with ghosts. By interacting with the spectres and remnants of a glorious, yet incomplete, Egyptian past, Sun Ra demonstrates that homogenous history can be shaken out of joint. Archives and the spectres that inhabit them can be conjured up at any time to challenge the history that informs our present and leads us into the future. How then do we connect ancient Egypt to the unknown future? Let us divert our focus from the historical past into the mysterious unknown - a vital zone of imagination for Sun Ra, who states: "I think some people on this planet are going to wake up to realize that it's the unknown that they need to know in order to survive" (Mugge, 1980).

### **Unknown Futures**

If Sun Ra's playful exchange with the ghosts of Egypt signifies an intervention into official history as it has been constructed for the benefit of the ruling class, then outer space signifies an emancipatory promise of the future-to-come (Derrida, 1994). In an obvious conflation of Egyptian past and futuristic space travels at the beginning of *Space Is The Place*, Sun Ra is dressed as the Egyptian pharaoh, standing on a different planet, saying: "Equation-wise, the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended. We work on the other side of time" (Coney, 1974). Sun Ra worked in the gap between the invented and now unhinged time and the unknown space no longer determined by this past (Reed, 2013). The gap is what we might call the present, where the emptying of time has been

prepared for the promise of the future. At the very beginning of the film, June Tyson introduces this situation with her rhythmic 'chant,' "It's after the end of the world, don't you know that yet?" As Reed appropriately asks, what is 'it' after the end of the world? Even though the world has ended, time still works, since there is still a 'yet,' a post-time-space, to potentially comprehend the "end of the world" in: "an impossible time that cannot move forward... but nonetheless does" (Reed, 2013, p. 125). We are both inside and outside of time—past the official representation of time. This entails a confusion of ontology: where exactly are we positioned when "now, then, before, after exist in uncertain relation and implication" after they have been collapsed in Tyson's formula (Reed, 2013, p.125)?

To open the future, to keep a door open to the unknown spectres of the future enabled by the disjointment of time, is the futuristic and messianic promise of the unknown that Sun Ra could be seeking in *A Joyful Noise*, when he talks about the present need for "the unknown." The unknown gives no promise of salvation that can be glimpsed in the future. This is what Derrida calls messianism without a messiah (Derrida, 1994). It is a future not shaped by necessary implications of the present, but a future that contains a potential for the coming of the wholly other, the radically unknown and the revisiting of the revenant: "Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer" (Derrida, 1994, p. 81). If the unknown spectre of the future could be exorcised, "if one could count on what is



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program. One would have the prospect but one would no longer wait for anything or anyone" (Derrida, 1994, p. 212). By keeping the future open and resisting the urge to exorcise the ghosts of the future and the unknown, mankind, and particularly African Americans, unlock the possibility of other worlds. These other worlds could further open the prospect of becoming something other than human—this, for black people, a "pointless and treacherous category" (Eshun, 1998). Alternative worlds and becomings in exchange for being a never-ending "object of futurist projection" is the potential of the unknown (Eshun, 2003). The disjointment of coherent time ("after the end of the world") opens black space around people subjugated by predictive and archival powers. This option of exploring the potentiality of unknown space can always be undertaken by anyone—as Tyson sings: "We're living in the space age/ We're living in the space age/ We're living in a space age/ No matter who you are/ No matter what you say/ No matter where you've been" (Coney, 1974). Empty space is an open-ended trope of exploration that can never be fully presented, but is always open for further investigation and this dark space surrounds not only white people, but (more importantly) black people seemingly trapped in history. The space age is a condition of all life.

While Sun Ra's different equations undoubtedly signal a rejection of any specific endpoint or any one messiah or authority-figure, Reed is still right to point out that *Space Is The Place* partially inscribes Sun Ra "as the

embodiment of a new social order" (Reed, 2013, p. 127), which contradicts the open-endedness of history and time. To blindly follow Sun Ra's orders would completely foreclose the future to any alternatives. This seems like a paradox: how can Sun Ra, who organized the medium of his artistic output in military fashion with himself as the authoritarian ruler, lamented the backlash against Nixon as a leader figure after the Watergate-scandal (Gross, 1977), and directed a strict form of celibacy among his band members (Bazzano, 2014) be a harbinger of a creative and anti-authoritarian future open to radical virtuality? Marshall Allen, a member of the Arkestra under Sun Ra's leadership and its current leader, crystallizes the reasoning behind Sun Ra's military organisation of the Arkestra: "To be together on the same vibration and to build a thing—that's the discipline and precision I'm talking about. A man cannot learn without discipline. It's a soldier's code. Discipline is the key to everything. It's the essence of any army or any band or whatever you are part of" (Dax, 2014). No army without orders to follow. No army without a hierarchy.

It is hard to ignore the autocratic authority of Sun Ra considering his disciplinary arrangement of "each Arkestra member as a key on a cosmic piano waiting to be pressed" to create the music of the future (Bazzano, 2014, p. 109). Nonetheless, each sound instrumentalist within this arrangement "is a creative artist capable of dynamic, soul-stirring improvisation" (Sun Ra, 2005), which makes each of them a potential cosmic force capable



### **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

of leaving milieus of representability and earth behind. In this way, Sun Ra leaves “space open as the term should be, to fill what you want to fill it with” (Gross, 1997, no pagination), making his arrangement something to be transgressed, making a transgression of Sun Ra’s earthly leadership itself possible.

### **June Tyson and becoming-cosmic**

The story is different when it comes to Tyson, lead vocalist and the first female member of the Arkestra, “an all-male orchestra run as a Military Monastery” (Eshun, 1999: 161). Sun Ra would whisper his cosmic teachings to her on stage, which she would proceed to perform “in strictly ‘do-as-told’ mode” (Bazzano, 2014, p. 110). This is a very different practice from the open, virtually transgressive improvisations that the Arkestra’s male members were performing (Bazzano, 2014). Tyson’s voice becomes a representational and patriarchal node for Sun Ra himself, which pushes the linguistic element of the music back into language as a representation of meaning. As Bazzano puts it:

In the words of Ra’s figuration of his musicians as “keys”, Ra pressed June, and June sounded, sounding not improvisationally or immanently, but as the exact image of thought (or echo of thought) that Ra planned (Bazzano, 2014, p. 110).

Here again, we encounter an authoritarian element in the Sun Ra-universe, but this time there is apparently no improvisational line of

flight past the autocratic limit, where she becomes a puppet in his ventriloquism act. This does not, however, mean that the materiality of Tyson’s voice does not carry a virtual force that can be activated in a clash with the patriarchal voice. The June Tyson Sessions is exactly an attempt to undermine Sun Ra’s mind control and re-open the Arkestra’s sonic archive. This is done not so much to liberate Tyson herself but to liberate the entire Sun Ra project (Bazzano, 2014). Something hitherto hidden in Tyson’s voice is activated by freeing it from the tutelage of Sun Ra. This leads to a reconfiguration of Sun Ra by re-opening the “virtual differential potential that always already existed in the material-discursive performative register of Tyson’s vocality” (Bazzano, 2014, p. 112) and becomes an example of a forceful transgression of Sun Ra’s patriarchal voice. Sun Ra and the Arkestra, as a force, carry a potential to exceed Sun Ra as founding figure and re-open the future as a creative space.

What this redeveloped, reconsidered Sun Ra phenomenon can promise is not a final solution, no final messianic redemption of the past, but an ongoing exploration of the past and the future. This is a promise of the future that never completely manifests itself but continues to be uncertain and spectral (Derrida, 1994). It connects Sun Ra and the Arkestra with Afrofuturism in opening imaginative space, not solely to revise African Americans’ inscription in official history, but also to re-envision a heterogeneous future based on the rebellious re-mythologizing and review of the past.



## **Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

### **Conclusion**

The trauma of the Middle Passage, the displacement and alienation it caused millions of Africans, will likely never be completely mended. Nor should it. The victims of this devastating period in history haunt the present, but instead of exorcising these spectres or attempting to heal the wounds of history, Derrida urges us to interact with the ghosts of history, however impossible any actual and attentive interaction with a specter may be. By keeping the archives of the past open to revision and intervention, the powers that control the interpretation of history never fully achieve a homogenous organization of time. Without contestations and re-imaginings of historical archives, different futures are hard to envision. Afrofuturism accentuates these capabilities and re-envision the future and the past. This paper has been committed to a description of afrofuturistic

temporal rebellion through two different prisms: The Data Thief and Sun Ra. They both follow strategies or systems that allow them to burst the homogeneity of time out of order, thereby creating other worlds and temporalities. Instead of challenging imperial powers by producing new wholesome narratives of the past, instead of attempting to regain thorough control of time, they keep time open for ongoing investigation. This is the radical political power that is transmitted to Afrofuturism. The afrofuturistic strategy is not restricted to a single course; therefore, by describing and engaging with the Data Thief and Sun Ra in different ways, the aim of this essay has been to demonstrate how different interactions and disturbances of temporality can inform Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism should constantly re-orient thinking towards new intensities and temporalities. This is its political debt to history.



**Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

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**Promises of Uncertainty (continued)**

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## **Blood, Soil, and Zombies: Afrofuturist Collaboration and (Re-)Appropriation in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring***

By **Sarah Olutola**

**Abstract:** In her Afrofuturist novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Nalo Hopkinson unravels the psychological, cultural and historical trauma of the zombie figure. More than simply a supernatural element of the text, the zombie, and more particularly the latent psycho-social trauma it fantastically embodies, forms the very bedrock of the Afrocentric setting in a way that exposes and critiques the continued suffering of African diasporic peoples under racialized economic structures. While the origins of the zombie document Haitian anxieties surrounding slave labor, the zombie's contemporary form, in reflecting middle class preoccupations with global capitalist consumption, highlights the ways in which cultural appropriation of Afrocentric culture helps perpetuate a larger systemic cycle of violence that erases black pasts while collapsing black futures into an uncertain present. This paper will explore the ways that Hopkinson uses her vision of a dystopian Toronto that entraps and vilifies its poor racialized citizens (for the protection of its larger population) to challenge neoliberal global dominance. Through her re-privileging of Afro-Caribbean spiritual systems and knowledge frameworks, Hopkinson suggests that only by challenging and seeking alternatives to the epistemologies inherited by European modernity can we hope to counteract the violence they continuously enact upon global populations and revive hope for the prosperity of black life in the future. However, while her novel implicates cultural appropriation as part of a larger, white supremacist institutional regime, her novel's framing of Afrocentricity on diasporic Indigenous soil highlights further challenges of Afrocentric representation in Afrofuturist literature.

**Keywords:** *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Nalo Hopkinson, Afrofuturism, African diaspora, African studies, Afro-Caribbean studies, Canadian multiculturalism, critical race studies, Indigenous studies, zombie, zombi, global capitalism, Canadian literature

### Introduction

On August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017, white supremacists descended upon Charlottesville, Virginia to lay claim to the United States, a land they asserted has always belonged to white Americans. "Blood and soil," they cried, metaphorically

embedding their white bloodline into the cultivation of the nation while waving their pitchforks, assault rifles and, ironically, Tiki torches high into the air as a show of white male rage (Wagner, 2017). Many critics mocked the mob's use of the Tiki torch, a symbol of Polynesian and southeast Asian



culture, to express their murderous white hatred for nonwhite people (Murphy, 2017). However, the appropriation of nonwhite cultures cannot be read as an ironic departure from violent white supremacist hatred. As this essay will explore through its reading of Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), the borrowing and misuse of nonwhite culture has always existed as part of the violent drive to erase the future of nonwhite bodies by writing over their past.

For the purposes of this essay, I focus primarily (though not exclusively) on what this violent impulse towards erasure means for black bodies. Indeed, only a few months after President Trump all but pardoned the white supremacists in Charlottesville (Merica, 2017), the FBI's counterterrorism division declared that black activists whom they identified as "black identity extremists" were potential enemies to the state and therefore must be treated as radicals (Darby, 2017). These thinly veiled attempts by the state to consolidate white supremacist power by disrupting movements that value black life can be read as part of the necropolitical rubrics of the black everyday. Achilles Mbembe (2003) has theorized 'necropolitics' as a feature of sovereign power, derived from the perception of the sovereign state's own mythical right, not only to exist, but also to terrorize and murder those bodies viewed as the "absolute enemy" (p. 25). Such a system places the right to kill into the hands of the state, its military and its police departments, and further, the urban and citizen militias, child soldiers and one-man shooters, government bodies and private sector contractors, all of which form an

anti-democratic apparatus that creates "zones of death" designed to transform certain populations into "the status of *living dead*" (p. 40).

Mbembe's theory of necropolitics is a useful lens through which we can consider how the systemic violence against black bodies involves the collapse of the future into the present (p. 37). The future of the necropolitical present has no room for black bodies that live with social, economic and political significance. Indeed, it is a future that would rather not imagine living black bodies at all. This concept has long been engrained into the European historical imagination, with Hegel's Enlightenment philosophy imagining Africans and their descendants as primitive precursors to the evolution of European reason and civilization (Mudumbe, 1988, p. 17). The maintenance of these "death worlds" requires not only a collapsing of black future, but also an erasure of black past—more specifically, a forgetting and re-writing of the pain and suffering caused by racist regimes of power. Writing over black historical trauma does not only re-write African and African diasporic history; it also involves attacking African and African diasporic *cultural* history. W.E.B Du Bois's seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), seems to have pre-emptively foregrounded the African answer to the white supremacist cries of "blood and soil" in Charlottesville. He writes:

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring



melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of the land has centred for thrice a hundred years; out of the nation's heart we have called all that was best to throttle and subdue all that was worst; fire and blood, prayer and sacrifice, have billowed over this people, and they have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people? (p. 162-163)

Du Bois's cry is one that can be heard throughout the African diaspora. Certainly, African-Canadian authors like Nalo Hopkinson and Lawrence Hill have "aim[ed] at an insertion of [black] trauma into the Canadian collective memory" (Krampe, 2009, p. 63). The white supremacist denial of black trauma and cultural history certainly exists side by side with the appropriation of the "gifts" mentioned by Du Bois—story, song, culture. As Krin Gabbard

(2004) writes in *Black Magic*, as evidenced by actors like Marlon Brando and singers like Christina Aguilera, "African American culture [is] essential...in mainstream American culture even when actual black people...are not present" (p. 19). In this sense, the white appropriation, misuse and transformation of black culture, as completed through various erasures, consolidates a necropolitical regime that denies black people a future.

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*, as an Afrofuturist text, seems to offer a corrective to this violent apparatus of black erasure. Afrofuturism, as James Edward Ford III (2014) has noted, is important for its assertion that "black people will exist in the future" (p. 161). More radically, he writes, "Afro-futurists treat blackness as a way of *envisioning futures*" (emphasis original, p. 161). *Brown Girl in the Ring* certainly uses blackness as the very blueprint through which to imagine a dystopian Toronto, framing the future with the traumatic pasts and presents of black life. West African and Caribbean culture animates heroine Ti-Jeanne's journey through an imagined future Toronto (at the time of the book's publication) in which the gods, monsters and magic of Afro-Caribbean mythology affect the lives and futures of *all* inhabitants of the city, province, and country. Specifically, it is Hopkinson's use of the zombie that truly disrupts the future-destroying necropolitical teamwork of appropriation and erasure, particularly because the story of the zombie exists in a cross-culture white and black imaginary that blends colonial past, global capitalist present and apocalyptic future.



The zombie is most widely considered as an American cinematic horror monster, the kind to be found in movies like George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and television programs like *The Walking Dead* (2010). Steven Shaviro (2002) articulates the zombie as a collectively produced nightmare that imagine present reality as much as it imagines a possible future. As he writes, "[t]here is nothing extraordinary or supernatural about the *indeadted*...the reanimated dead...are immanent to social reality, rather than invading it from the outside" (282). That is to say that the zombie, as a figure of nightmare, exposes the social fears and anxieties present within a particular social moment even as it gestures towards, on the surface, a potential apocalyptic future. As such, the zombie apocalypse narrative "makes visible the internal ruptures, traumas and anguishes" of those imagining it, giving them a fantastical and more easily consumable representation (Orpana, 2011, p. 165).

If the zombie is a collectively produced nightmare, then who are the dreamers allowed to belong to this collective? What is it that has 'already happened' that causes the kind of anxiety that needs refiguring within the body of a nightmarish creature? What exactly is the nightmare being imagined?

In this paper, I take my cues from the assertion (Orpana 2011; Shaviro 2002; Canavan 2010) that the zombie apocalypse exists as a collective fantasy born from the fragmentation and individualism caused by late capitalism, and I consider the commercial incarnation of the zombie, always implicitly a culturally hybrid conception, in North American culture. The

American zombie narrative addresses, within limits, the material consequences of neoliberalism. While it is important to expose the pathologies inherent in today's globalized economic structure, as Paul Gilroy (1993) would assert, the rise of these economic structures themselves, as well as their very constitution, is a result of racialized power (p. 15). Therefore, it cannot be extricated from the historical relation between race, labor and colonial violence. This is what the American zombie narrative, through its very construction, fails to address. The implications of this failure to the black originators of the myth are immediately felt in *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Other theorists (Lara 2012; Anatol 2004; Romdhani 2015) have discussed Hopkinson's use of the supernatural in *Brown Girl in the Ring* along the lines of postcolonial feminism, gendered agency, sexuality, and shame. I offer here a reading of the complex, hybrid imaginary of Hopkinson's zombies that exposes Afrofuturism's potential for cultural re-appropriation of the stories, lands, histories and futures stolen from Africa and its people across the globe. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the very design of Hopkinson's dystopia dissolves the commercial imaginary of the zombie apocalypse into the dimensions of the traumatic contemporary reality as imagined within a specifically white bourgeois framework. Thus, *Brown Girl in the Ring* acts as a site from which we can challenge the contradictions within this white bourgeois nightmare that, on one hand, demystifies the connections that must be made between capitalism and its human costs, and on the other, fails to acknowledge the differential

precarity of certain kinds of black bodies within the neoliberal economic system. As Hopkinson exposes the appropriation and misuse of the zombie, she revives the Haitian *zombi*, casting black life, agency and history into the future.

Lauro and Embry (2008), in their *Zombie Manifesto*, read the zombie as what they call an ontic/hauntic object. This configuration, as they assert, destabilizes the cinematic zombie as an ontological figure by suggesting that it always already carries with it an association with Haiti, more specifically the historical context of the Haiti rebellion against the backdrop of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. "[T]here is the Haitian *zombi*," they write, "a body raised from the dead to labor in the fields, but with a deep association of having played a role in the Haitian Revolution (thus, simultaneously resonant with the categories of slave and slave rebellion)" (p. 87). This version of the figure represented in explicit terms the exploitation and naked oppression sustained by a colonial project that imagined the enslaved as voiceless and subjectless cogs in its economic system. At the same time, the myth itself represents the voices of those silenced within this system. The *zombi* can be thought of as the slave's nightmare. As Daniel Cohen asserts, "[f]or the slave the only hope of release was death and the possible promise of a blissful afterlife. But if a dead slave's body was reanimated for labor as a zombie, then the slave existence would continue even after death, a particularly horrible thought" (Cohen qtd. in Embry and Lauro, 2008, p. 98).

This nightmare imagines the never-ending suffering of black subjects. Black bodies are

projected into the future, but only insofar as the necropolitical deathscape they inhabit continues indefinitely. If the *zombi* represents the fears and anxieties of Haitian slaves in the context of this particular historical moment, then what can be said of its translation into the American zombie, which Lauro and Embry describe as "a convenient boogeyman representing various social concerns" (p. 89)? Even as they make overtures to the Haitian cultural context and mention the element of appropriation inherent within the hybrid zombie figure, Lauro and Embry only seem to refer to its origins as a way to fill in the context of their posthumanist creation, the *zombii*, in order to reveal the wider contemporary reality of "we" subjects of the globalized world (p. 92). This theoretical act follows the logic that enabled the creation of the American zombie; both the *zombii* and the zombie, as either theoretical or commercial figures, subsume the elements of Haitian culture in order to extend its epistemological framework to a more 'universal' capitalist experience. Even as Lauro and Embry imagine the zombie (in all its incarnations) as a challenge to the subject/object dialectic, both post-*zombi* figures repeat the colonialist and imperialist strategies that obscure the subjectivity of the subaltern. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) explains, "[i]t is impossible for contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe" (p. 75). In other words, it would be impossible for them to understand racialized bodies as subjects. "It is not only," as she continues,



that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary. (p. 75)

Storytelling, in its multitude of forms, and particularly storytelling through documentation, has long since been a device of the colonial and imperial project to cast the Other in Europe's shadow, to make the Other understood only within the constraints of Eurocentric ideological discourses, thus reinforcing the European as Subject. In many cases, European-authored texts that 'told the story of the Other' were privileged over the cultural texts, written and visual, originating from other parts of the world. The story of the Other, as told by Europe, was "the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity" (Spivak, 1988, p. 76). We must consider, then, the story that began to be told once, "[i]n its passage from *zombi* to *zombie*, this figuration that was at first just a somnambulistic slave singly raised from the dead became evil, contagious, and plural" (Embry and Laura, 2008, p. 88). *Brown Girl in the Ring's* dystopian Toronto can point towards an answer, particularly when put in dialogue with an analysis of the zombie apocalypse imaginary.

Save the White Family First: Whose Nightmare is The Burn?

In Hopkinson's world, after a series of disturbances known as The Riots in Toronto, the Canadian government abandons the city, followed by the wealthiest of its citizens. As a result, the city descends into extreme poverty. The poor and racialized residents become concentrated in the inner city, The Burn. Alienated from the social, legal and economic protections of the state apparatus, they struggle to survive in a space in which they are newly vulnerable to the oppressive machinations of drug dealers, organ traffickers, and most particularly Rudy Sheldon, a gang ("posse") leader who has made the CN Tower his central stronghold.

This 'white flight' of the Torontonians bourgeoisie to the safety of the suburbs, as well as the abandonment by the government, can tell us something about the way that the racialized poor figure into the imagined imminent threat of the zombie apocalypse narrative. As corporate power grows to increasingly uncontrollable levels, the unequal power relations that characterize the neoliberal landscape create a society in which even the middle class are no longer guaranteed economic stability and prosperity. Indeed, as Ulrich Beck (1992) suggests, the globalization of the neoliberal economic structure has precipitated a "universalization of hazards [that] accompanies industrial production, independent of the place where they are produced" (p. 36). The figure of the zombie embodies this socioeconomic predicament of the modern era by presenting in supernatural form the psychic trauma permeating the reality of global capitalism. As



Canavan writes, within the zombie narrative, individuals within a population are separated into two categories: the living remnants of humanity and the infected undead, “[r]emorselessly consuming everything in their path...leav[ing] nothing in their wake besides endless copies of themselves” (432). The zombie narrative derives its tension from the interaction of those belonging to the two categories whereby the goal of the living is to avoid falling into the abject category of the undead. It thus reflects a sense of the shared precariousness among all those affected by this globalized economy, all oppressed in different ways by a dissipated system of power. Yet this shared precariousness cannot erase the ways in which privilege and power differentially position bodies under the predatory regime of global capitalism. Indeed, the formative culture of neoliberal capital, in promoting personal responsibility in the face of institutional violence, denies individuals a language through which to understand the growing systemic hazards of globalization. The shrinking middle class is thus encouraged to direct its frustrations onto abject bodies who then become the physical representation of their trauma. Simon Orpana (2014) describes this phenomenon in his articulation of the *zombie imaginary*:

“[s]ocial ills such as unemployment, poverty, lack of housing, health care, etc. that are directly produced by the capitalist system running according to its own internal logic are attributed to issues of population, usually with racial overtones. Rather than unemployment being correctly identified as the result of

capital’s need to keep wages low, for instance, popular discourse blames foreigners and immigration, substituting effect for the cause. This logic is central to what I call the *zombie imaginary*, where problems that are properly structural, political, and economic are personalized and projected onto the devalued, often racialized, and gendered bodies of people (298).

The commercial zombie narrative thus blames rather than acknowledges the existence of society’s most abject, those to whom Zygmunt Bauman (2004) refers as the ‘wastes of modernity.’ As Bauman writes, “[t]he origins of [...] ‘human waste’ are currently global” (p. 58). It is “is the dark, shameful secret of all production. Preferably, it would remain a secret. Captains of industry would rather not mention it at all - they need to be pressed hard to admit it” (p. 27). David Eng also notes that the refugees, “unacknowledged lovers, illegal immigrants, [and] indentured laborers” that are “consigned to outcast status and confined to the edges of globalization” haunt those able to reap the benefits of process, able to be secure in the civil rights and economic profit to be gained (p. 101). Despite this, even as the *zombie imaginary* acknowledges shared precariousness, it naturalizes an individualistic response of avoidance aimed particularly at prosperous white middle class families. The U.S Centre for Disease Control’s tongue-in-cheek blog post on zombie preparedness stresses a mode of preparation that revolves around the nuclear family, providing a helpful picture of a white father and son in a suburban neighborhood as an example of the families to



be saved (Khan, 2012). Likewise, *World War Z* (2013) stars Brad Pitt as a former UN employee who must take his wife and two daughters to safety in the midst of a zombie epidemic. This film, adapted from Max Brooks's novel of the same name, provides a powerful visual representation of the social politics operating in late-capitalist Western society. Popular culture seems to already imagine the white middle class family as the subjects who must be saved in the event of a crisis and the racialized poor as the abject they must escape from—a narrative that echoes neoliberal discourses of blame that target the racialized abject.

Canada is not immune to the neoliberal politics of blame. The country's discourse of multiculturalism does not erase the ways in which Canada's socioeconomically marginalized are often themselves articulated as a threat against the prosperity and stability of the white middle class. Toronto's *Safe Streets Act* of 1999 illuminates this logic, and though it was implemented a year after *Brown Girl in the Ring* was published, the discursive strategies at work in the legislation, particularly in how it conceives of a 'safe Toronto,' stems out of the same social context and reveals the same tensions that must have given rise to Hopkinson's construction of a dystopian Toronto. The Act posits that Toronto's inner city could be transformed into a 'safe' place by removing the homeless, squeegee youth and solicitors from the area. As such it is "modeled on zero-tolerance policing strategies that emphasize the targetting [sic] of the poor and low-level forms of disorder as the biggest problems facing community today" (Gordon,

2005, p. 66). As the state, under an ever-increasing neoliberal logic, re-articulates social problems as private and financial, those left disadvantaged by the socioeconomic structure, and are unable to assimilate into the consumerist model of 'proper' productiveness and progress, are "[m]ore often than not... declared 'redundant'" and labelled as a "'financial burden'...[imposed] on the taxpayers" (Bauman, 2004, p. 12). Considering that a disproportionate number of such 'vagrants' are also the racialized poor, the logic driving the *Safe Streets Act* suggests that removing the 'redundant' would create a gentrified space for the proper consumerist activity of desired bodies.

Decades after *Brown Girl in the Ring* was published, black bodies remain targeted for removal at municipal and federal levels. Zero tolerance policing policies on the streets and in schools in Toronto select black bodies for incarceration at increasingly high rates; a recent UN report suggested that between 2005 and 2015, the number of black prisoners has increased by over 71% (Dyck, 2017). The removal of black subjectivity and history from the politics of the present, as symbolized by the creation of the zombie narrative, thus mimics the removal of black bodies from geographical space, all to construct an imaginary white space and future that refuses to accommodate them. The American zombie cultural narrative does not explicitly name certain kinds of bodies as threats. But by privileging and individualizing of the bourgeois white subject, and characterizing zombies as unproductive, pathological consumers, it implicitly names the 'wastes' of



global society as the threat: a category that brown and black bodies have increasingly fallen into.

The element of 'white flight' in Hopkinson's world building can be used to identify and critique this potentially problematic aspect of the American zombie narrative; white flight represents an attempt made by society's privileged white subjects to avoid falling into the category of the abject outside of neoliberal society. But their attempt rests upon the assumption that those already abjected are part of what threatens them. The white bourgeoisie's escape from Toronto in *Brown Girl* reveals an imperative to separate themselves from the 'dangerous' Others who have not only 'ruined' the city (in their imaginary) but could have dragged them into ruin as well. This perception of this 'dark threat' is shored up in the trope of zombie infection: "In its frenzied state of pure consumption," write Lauro and Embry (2008), "the zombie seeks to infect those who do not yet share in the oppression of their state: the zombie does not attack other zombies. It seeks to transfer its burden, but the result is only a multiplication of its condition: no zombie body is relieved of its condition by passing it on" (p. 100). As this passage suggests, irreversibility is part of the fear: the loss of privilege, the exclusion from economic prosperity upon being 'ruined' by the supposedly unproductive and dangerous activities of those bodies who constitute the threat. And yet, the irony of the 'white flight' from Hopkinson's dystopian Toronto is that these members can simply leave to avoid the threat. Unlike the racialized poor, they have the means (such as a family-saving SUV) to simply

move to a more prosperous location, leaving the outcasts trapped in a chaotic space without any of the social protections officially promised by the state. In this way, the American zombie narrative exposes the power relations that disproportionately favor certain segments of the population. As Hopkinson's setting suggests, these power relations invariably perpetuate the violence enacted upon precarious local and global populations.

Evidently, then, the American zombie has become another example of how in post-colonial societies dominated by a Eurocentric episteme, subaltern populations – their subjectivities, bodies, stories, and histories – have largely been devalued, dismissed, mis-used and endangered. But it is this very exploitation that, once exposed in the text, highlights the vitality of Afro-Caribbean culture and its potential to persist and thrive even when faced by racist impulses that demand their erasure.

#### Monsters in the Burn: Materializing Folkloric Agency

Hopkinson's setting, while enabling a critical reading that can expose the continued marginalization of the colonized, also naturalizes the Haitian *zombi* as part of the everyday life of dystopian Toronto. Referred to as duppies in the novel, bodies can be separated from their souls, which are made to obey a necromancer. Such is the fate of Mi-Jeanne, the protagonist's mother, whose father enslaves her and forces her to kill for his own gain: "I is the duppy that Daddy does keep in he calabash," she tells Ti-Jeanne once she



inhabits her own body again. “Is my soul he bind to get he power. Is my sight he twist into obeah, into shadow-catching for he” (Hopkinson, 1998, p. 15). The focus on her soul and sight is important here. Once again it calls to mind the importance of the Haitian *zombi* in reflecting the historical and present fears of its people. *Their* point of view is privileged, *their* knowledge frameworks are naturalized by the casual inclusion of these folkloric elements within the setting. Ti-Jeanne initially decries her grandmother Gros-Jeanne’s traditional Caribbean healing knowledge as “old-time nonsense” (p. 37) even as she continually faces the supernatural through her nightmarish visions. Although the point of contention between Gros-Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne is latter’s lack of dedication in learning and respecting her cultural traditions, the existence of the traditions themselves—the magic, the knowledge and their ability to affect the world—is never questioned. As a Caribbean Canadian, Ti-Jeanne is caught between two worlds, negotiating through a diasporic identity that divides her “power and selfhood...between traditions that still encompass her life and her desire for a perceived ‘normal’ Canadian life” (Newman-Stille, 2015, p. 148). Yet her cultural memory achieves *material* expression in her life in unavoidable ways. In the *Burn*, Afro-Caribbean knowledge frameworks breathe into the city as real spirits and real magic, healing or murdering *Burn* inhabitants, while protecting the black bodies whose culture they represent. Hopkinson re-configures the meaning of monstrosity in the text by juxtaposing Afro-Caribbean culture with the Canadian capitalist

apparatus working against the prosperous future of the Afro-Caribbean community. Tony, caught between Canadian and Caribbean identities, dismisses Gros-Jeanne as irrational: “What’s that crazy old woman doing over there in Riverdale Farm,” he asks, adding that “[n]obody believes in that duppy business any more” (Hopkinson, 1998, p. 36). With this framing of Gros-Jeanne’s work, Tony reinforces the notion that African cultures belong to the past and cannot be logically brought into the present or future as politically viable and legible knowledge systems. While witnessing Gros-Jeanne’s summoning of the West African gods, Eshu-Legbara and Osain, Tony responds with “disgust and fear” (p. 92), landing him right back into the hands of Rudy, who he had been trying to escape. But the text makes clear that though a ‘Canadian’ imagination may classify Caribbean folklore as incomprehensible and monstrous, the true monsters of the text are those who symbolize the violent workings of Canada’s economic and political structure. The Vultures, agents of the healthcare industry aptly named for their predation on the racialized poor, stand in contrast to Gros-Jeanne’s traditional healing: “[t]he price for established medical care was so high,” the narration explains, “that only the desperately ill would call for help. If you saw a Vulture making a house call, it meant that someone was near death” (p. 8). Death and murder also haunt the Premier of Ontario, another of the text’s monsters who dresses up her scheme to scavenge the hearts of the racialized poor for donation to the rich as a “safe, moral” policy ironically called “People Helping People” (p. 40). Hopkinson treats Afro-



Caribbean knowledge frameworks as a potential corrective to the Eurocentric philosophy that gave rise to global capitalist violence against black bodies. Afro-Caribbean gods lend their power to the protagonists, power that they encourage to be used for the betterment rather than the destruction of others.

The white flight from Toronto implies that the dangerous brown inhabitants are to be found on the inside and feared, as evidenced by the Premier's assistant, Douglas Baine, who initially meets Rudy "in a cheap, off-the-rack bulletproof" (p. 1). Yet despite Ti-Jeanne's discomfort with her grandmother's religious traditions, she admits to her that she fears, contrary to conventional knowledge, "the 'burbs,' [the] Mercy Hospital ambulances and Rudy's elegant grey Bentley" (p. 111). In a subtle, but powerful narrative moment, she admits her fear of these Eurocentric symbols of capitalist modernity while under the protection of the fog of Guinea Land, the ancestral land of the dead for all African descendants (p. 111). In the text, her safety exists literally within a living, breathing Afro-Caribbean framework, placed into jeopardy only by those married to the Eurocentric frameworks that have long exploited black bodies.

Rudy stands among those exploitative forces. The text articulates his predation of his own family to expand his business empire--not only as an affront to his family, but also to his heritage. Hopkinson makes clear that his absolute control of his wife, daughter and granddaughter through the workings of the obeah and the transformation of the living into

zombies can only be brought about by his misuse of his culture. As Eshu, while in the form of the carnivalesque Jab-Jab, explains, "Rudy, he does try and make the spirits serve *he*" (p. 219). Once again, we see the Haitian slave's nightmare in Rudy's transformation of his daughters into zombies, first giving them drugs to destroy their physical and emotional agency. "For you see that paralysis," he tells Ti-Jeanne, "[i]s the first stage in making a zombie" (p. 211). The strongest zombies, he explains, are created by "split[ting] off the duppy from its body while the body still alive" (p. 213). This principle echoes Mbembe's necropolitical bodies transformed into "the status of *living dead*" (p. 40). The text brings of the Haitian *zombi* as a living reality of black trauma, history and culture into conversation with a narrative of white flight (from 'dangerous' racialized others), exposing how the absolute biopolitical control over black bodies can only occur through a 'splitting': of black flesh from subjectivity and humanity, from dreams and imagination, from past and future. It is fitting, then, that Ti-Jeanne reclaims her agency and frees her mother from slavery through reconnecting her duppy spirit first to her corporeal flesh and then to her Afro-Caribbean spiritual ancestry as she holds African gods and spirits of the dead inside her head, releasing them to destroy Rudy once and for all. Hopkinson makes these connections clear in the text, writing: "Ti-Jeanne's head felt stuffed full. She could hear the rhythm of the blood vessels in her brain, pounding like drums" (p. 222). Her blood, her corporeal flesh, as Hopkinson argues, cannot be separated from the "gift of story and



song" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 162-3). And indeed, the texts buries these gifts, the spirit of the ancestors and her very own blood, right into the soil through the conduit of the CN Tower, likened in the text to a "spirit tree" that "dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived" (p. 221). Ti-Jeanne becomes a diasporic body who, through embracing of her culture, can reclaim a Caribbean and Canadian past, present and future. For Michelle Reid (2005), this moment of the text symbolizes the positive potential of diasporic hybridity and Canadian multiculturalism, one that includes, but destabilizes Eurocentric imagery:

It is both ironic and also very fitting that this landmark provides a means of accessing Caribbean spirit worlds if viewed in the right way. Ti-Jeanne uses the tower to ground her sense of spirituality. It conveys her sense of being connected to her heritage, whilst also being at home in Canada. Her use of the tower does not seem like an outrageous appropriation of an urban building, so much as an appropriate use of the structure's potential. It is the culmination of apt reuses of space throughout the text. (p. 310)

As Reid notes, not only the CN Tower, but also Toronto's Allan Gardens park, Riverdale Farm, and the Toronto Crematorium Chapel are re-appropriated in the text, corralled to serve the interests of the multicultural community struggling but living after white flight. Whether used for hunting, healing or religious purposes, "[t]heir reuse is in keeping with the

original function of the buildings, but...is changed in accordance with the needs of the Burn community" (p. 306). Like Hopkinson's use of the zombie figure, these instances of reuse constitute a reversal of the cultural hybridity of the American cinematic zombie that privileges bourgeois whiteness, a configuration of multiculturalism that places racialized bodies at the center. *Brown Girl* not only reframes multiculturalism; as an Afrofuturist text, it offers a re-privileging specifically of black people *within* a multicultural body. While hybrid identities are negotiated, it is Afro-Caribbean identity that lives, breathes, loves and destroys in the narrative.

Conclusion: Whose Bodies in the Past? Whose Bodies in the Future?

One wonders if this revitalizing of Afro-Caribbean culture could only be made possible after the lockdown of Toronto. The socioeconomic structures and cultural narratives that mark many of today's racialized bodies as disposable, even while dismissing their subjectivities and histories as unimportant, are products of European modernity. They cannot be extricated from the violence of colonialism nor the knowledge frameworks it produced. *Brown Girl in the Ring* makes clear that the spiritual elements of Ti-Jeanne's cultural heritage existed long before the events of the text. However, their agency and ability to effect real sociopolitical change is realized thanks to a reclaiming of land, resources and ownership affected but not dominated by white modernity. If we can read



the agency of the Haitian *zombi* and the other spiritual elements within *Brown Girl* as appearing after the state abandoned its racialized poor, then perhaps we can read the exodus of the state apparatus and its wealthy elite as an act of accidental liberation for Toronto's nonwhite community, particularly for members of the Afro-Caribbean community. Despite the ongoing effect of predatory epistemologies on their lives, as Gros-Jeanne takes over the Premier's body and begins to put forward policies that would help the citizens of the Burn, the text gestures towards hope for the future—specifically a future that allows for the existence and prosperity of black bodies. Hopkinson, thus, points towards the inherent brokenness of the ideological systems inherited through colonialism—and through her dystopic vision, she suggests the necessity of alternative frameworks that re-privilege the subjectivities of the disempowered in order to challenge and perhaps change such systems. However, even as *Brown Girl in the Ring* reclaims the zombie as a symbol of black time, its use in the text further emphasizes the precarious politics of claiming 'blood and soil.' As James Edward Ford III (2014) writes, Afrofuturism, "is not simply a 'black thing' that excludes or condescends against other racial groups...[it] necessarily entails cross-cultural appropriation or collaboration that takes blackness seriously as a creative and critical entry point and alternative way of being" (p. 161). This is echoed by Michelle Reid's (2005) earlier assertion of the text's skillful appropriation of the land and its structures (p. 310). However, Hopkinson's embedding of

Afro-Caribbean spirituality into the soil of Canada seems to displace Canada's Indigenous peoples from the central action of the narrative. They have been dispossessed of their soil and murdered to make room for white settlers and non-white immigrants alike. They are shuttled back into the realm of history. The story of Hopkinson's multicultural dystopian Toronto suggests that the privileging of blackness in an Afrofuturist diasporic setting runs the risk of engaging in the same violent erasure Du Bois decries, but against different bodies.

Though written by a non-white, diasporic Canadian author, *Brown Girl in the Ring* cannot be extricated from Canadian literature's longstanding practices of managing the country's history with Indigenous peoples. Daniel Coleman's *White Civility* (2006) examines the narrative devices used to produce what he calls the "official symbolic history of Canada," which obscures, to use Zizek's words, its "'spectral' fantasmatic history" (Zizek qtd in Coleman, 2006, p. 28). The official narrative of Canada's settler history is the noble European struggle against and inevitable conquering of the vast Canadian wilderness, imagined as "uncultivated" and "largely empty" (p. 28). As he writes, "the presentation of Canada's symbolic history by means of the peaceable-seeming term 'settlement' suppresses, even as it depends upon, the violence that was deployed to expunge any claims which First Nations people had to the northern half of this continent" (p. 29).

*Brown Girl in the Ring* does not craft the story of a dystopian Toronto without the presence of



the First Nations people; in fact, it is the Ontario government's disagreement with the Temagami people over land and resources that leads to the inevitable white flight, riots and collapse of Toronto. However, as Coleman goes on to assert, historically, Canadian literature has not necessarily dealt with the presence of First Nations people through perfect erasure. On the contrary, Canada's traumatic history of colonial violence has necessitated

a different cherishing of evil memories, an elegiac discourse by which Canadians demonstrate their civil sensibilities through mourning the traumatic, but supposedly necessary, losses that were inevitable along the path of progress. The most common version of this melancholic civil remembrance recurs in the ubiquitous myth that Natives were or are a 'vanishing race.' [...] Thus Natives make fleeting appearances in verse epics of settlement such as Oliver Goldsmith Jr's *The Rising Village* (1825) or Alexander McLachlan's *The Emigrant* (1861) before they slink off into oblivion without any settler lifting a hand to harm them. (p. 29)

While *Brown Girl in the Ring* brings The First Nations people into its vision of a multicultural future, this is largely to frame its past. The Temagami people, culture, ancestry and spirituality do not appear in or affect the main plot of the text; rather, their political struggle is mentioned in a series of headlines Ti-Jeanne reads in the public library. Headlines such as "TEMAGAMI INDIANS TAKE ONTARIO TO COURT" and "JOBLESS RATES JUMP 10%:

TEMAGAMI LAWSUIT IS FUELLING ONTARIO RECESSION" are used for narrative purposes (Hopkinson 1998, p. 11). Through the Temagami, Hopkinson can expediently explain the complicated origins of her setting. But instead of living and affecting the narrative, the people are kept in a kind of chronological stasis; the (neo)colonial violence that oppresses them is ever present in the text, but only insofar as it provides a jumping-off point for the re-emergence of Afrocentric multicultural agency. Without this violence against Indigenous bodies, the future civilization, at once dystopian and potentially utopian, cannot take place.

Even in the central story, the Temagami have not entirely vanished. Hopkinson's likening of the CN Tower to a "spirit tree" might be taken as a gesture to First Nations symbolism, which demonstrates the text's concern with collaboration and hybridity (p. 221). Yet, since the tree primarily serves to place Ti-Jeanne's cultural memory, ancestry and spirituality into the land she immigrated to, we can also interpret the CN Tower as yet another symbol of multiculturalism that makes gestures to the existence of an indigenous cultural history while marginalizing the people's agency and political representation for the sake of others. First Nations history ghosts the text while remaining in the background, its people "slink[ing] off into oblivion" when the narrative no longer needs them to foreground the setting and actions of the immigrant characters (Coleman, 2006, p. 29). This remains as a predicament for a text written to present the experiences of black people, a text included in a body of literature that has African and African



diasporic futurity at its core. How do Afrofuturist texts project black bodies into the future without divesting other racially marginalized bodies of their place in that future? After Gros-Jeanne's heart takes over Ontario Premier Uttley's body, her utmost concern is re-modeling the heart donation platform that took Gros-Jeanne's life and threatens the impoverished inhabitants of the Burn. Gesturing towards a settling of the Temagami conflict during this moment in the text might have allowed the Temagami themselves to be projected into the future along with those racialized in the Burn. As it stands, they remain in the "supporting roles" they have historically played in the narrativizing of Canada as a multicultural nation. As Eva Mackey explains in *House of Difference* (2005), First Nations people have certainly been used to "represent Canada's heritage and past" though "their presence is limited...symbolising Canada's natural beginnings" (p. 51-52). Though their trauma lives on to craft the world of the Burn, they themselves remain in Hopkinson's text as static as the figures of natives preserved in museums.

These representational politics do not negate the progressive work of *Brown Girl in the Ring*. However, the conflict does illustrate the challenges for Afrofuturist texts in asserting Afrocentricity in diasporic settings. Such literature takes on the important work of centering African and African diasporic bodies, which have been brutalized, exploited and divested of their agency, culture, prosperity and future. *Brown Girl in the Ring* stages a political and cultural reclaiming in the name of

black life. However, the irony of Hopkinson's text is that the very setting of the book at once reverses and consolidates this violent logic of appropriation, which highlights the need for Afrofuturist storytellers to consider carefully the politics of collaboration, appropriation and re-appropriation in their texts. Acknowledging the black blood bled into diasporic soil will always ultimately necessitate an acknowledgement of the complex history of the soil itself. Afrofuturist writers, in their imagining of black bodies into the future, may have to grapple with a more robust vision of that future in order to truly be liberated from the epistemologies of violence that continue to affect and devalue racialized life.

### Notes

1. "Blood and soil" is a term most familiarly associated with Germany's Nazi regime, though as Radhika Mohanram (1999) points out, the notion that specific bodies belonged to specific places—and reversely, the linking of specific nations with an imagining of the perfect, pure national body is a concept that found expression with the emergence of Western nationhood and imperialism in the nineteenth century (4).
2. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy (1993) specifically refers to slavery as "capitalism with its clothes off" (p. 15) as a way to impress upon the fact that the biopolitical terror that brought about black suffering



cannot be understood apart from capitalism, which is precisely why, as Mbembe has argued in *Necropolitics* that black suffering and capitalist economy continue to be inextricably linked even as advancements of neoliberalism and global capitalism bring about new forms of the sovereign *right to kill* black bodies (16).

3. In doing so, Tony seems to mimic the kind of colonial discourse that associated European modernity with reason and rationality, and association denied colonized peoples.



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## **Frozen Journey: Science Fiction, Blacks, Race, and the Limits of Speculative Practice**

By **John Gordon Russell**

**Abstract:** This paper examines pre-Afrofuturistic representations of blacks in science fiction, who for much of the genre's history have been presented through the distorted prism of racial stereotypes. I argue that despite characterizations of the genre as progressively liberal, its engagement with issues of race and racism has largely been, like the larger society of which it is part, characterized by inconsistent periods of stasis and momentum, that are propelled or regressed by the preoccupations and racial sensibilities of individual authors, which in turn are informed by the zeitgeist of the times in which they write. When the genre has dealt with race and racism, it has often preferred to do so in the form of allegory and metaphor in which alien and robotic others substitute for real-world others. Moreover, despite evoking what many critics, writers and fans characterize as a lofty "sense-of-wonder" that promises to open the reader's mind to vast, uncharted imaginative ideoscapes, when it comes to race, the genre has traditionally been remarkably grounded, rearticulating rather than subverting tired tropes, its depiction of blacks and other people of color mired in predictable clichés, not sublime, paradigm shattering, visionary splendor. In the end, the treatment of race in science fiction has largely articulated an abstract, intellectual antiracism that does not necessarily apply to an authentic racial tolerance toward actual racial or ethnic groups, displaying an inability to write beyond the very intolerance it ostensibly critiques.

**Keywords:** science fiction, race, xenoface, blacks, Philip K. Dick, intellectual antiracism

Place there is none; we go backward and forward, and there is no place.

-St. Augustine

It's hilarious that in SFF [science fiction and fantasy] we're fighting over modern politics vs. 1950s politics. This has never been the literature of the future.

- N. K. Jemisin (Twitter, 5 Apr. 2015)

### **Before Afrofuturism: Science Fiction in Black and White**

Explorations of race in science fiction plot a trajectory not unlike the recursively knotty,

Laingian subjectivities that relentlessly coil, moebius-like, through many of the fictions of



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

Philip K. Dick, such as “Frozen Journey.”<sup>1</sup> This story’s cryonically suspended protagonist is doomed to roam interstellar space while endlessly reliving fragile, unreliable memories of his life over and over again in a defective computer-projected simulation. This scenario provides an apt metaphor of science fiction’s engagement with race, particularly its representation of blacks. For while genre writers and fans have often touted the genre as evoking a “sense of wonder” that promises readers it will explore vast, uncharted, transcendent, and awe-inspiring xenoscapes and ideoscapes (Knight 1967, Panshin and Panshin 1989)—to go where no one has gone before—and to invite a “sudden opening of a closed door in the reader’s mind” (Nicholls and Robu 2012), when it has come to the issue of race, it has tended to mire itself in all too familiar ground, rearticulating and recirculating rather than subverting tired racial tropes. The door it opens has led sadly—but perhaps not unexpectedly, considering the state of race in the United States—into an imagination-bereft cul de sac, sometimes despite the best intentions of its largely ostensibly progressive, intellectually liberal authors. The title of this essay suggests this contradictory confluence of stasis and momentum, progress and retreat that, I argue, has and continues to define the genre’s conflicted engagement with race and racism. Its much-touted sense of wonder,<sup>2</sup> for many black readers, has not infrequently given rise to a depressing sense of *déjà vu*, the genre proving itself more iterative than innovative in its representations of race, even when its practitioners attempt to stretch its boundaries.

Eric Lief Davin (2005) has argued that science fiction’s treatment of race has been remarkably progressive, a haven of liberalism and antiracism. However, in many ways representations of blacks in science fiction belie its self-professed image of forward-thinking, visionary speculation. Moreover, while the genre has adopted a provisionally liberal attitude toward race, its treatment of the subject has largely been characterized by what I call “intellectual antiracism,” an approach to racism that conceives of it as a thought experiment, an intellectual exercise that, when presented as allegory, allows it to be dealt with more comfortably and with less resistance than when it is presented in more direct terms.

Representations of race have been a part of science fiction since its inception. As Chude-Sokei notes, racial anxieties “were shaped in American popular culture within that space between the formal birth of science fiction—Victorian or otherwise—and modernism,” anxieties that were themselves “associated with slavery, colonialism, and industrialism” (104). Traditionally, the black presence in science fiction has been confined primarily to cautionary, often exploitative tales of racial Armageddon and besieged white supremacy in which blacks were presented in roles of primitive, often comic subservience and menacing sub-humanity. Indeed, colonialist lost-race fantasies in the tradition of H. Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs and race war scenarios dominate much of the genre’s early output, with such proto-SF works as Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race*



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

(1871) and King Wallace's *The Next War* (1892) portending where the genre was headed.<sup>3</sup>

Still, not all portrayals of blacks in SF were derogatory. Davin lists a number of proto-SF and genre works in which blacks are presented in non-stereotyped roles, although the bar he sets is low. He includes *The History of a Voyage to the Moon*, by "Chrysostom Trueman" (Howard and Geister 1864), whose "black philosopher" Rodolph, a "speechifying," star-gazing former black slave, is depicted as a moderately intelligent dialect-spouting black outlier whose "coloured brethren" are presented as equally blundering but scientifically ignorant Zip Coonish "niggers and mulattoes" unfamiliar with "'stronomy" and "what dat science derlucidnates" (Howard and Geister 64). More successful is Hermann Lang's *The Air Battle* (1859) whose depiction of a future dominated by technologically advanced Africans may have served as inspiration over a century later for fellow British author Michael Moorcock's *The Land Leviathan* (1974), which is set in an alternate, technologically advanced South Africa that never experienced apartheid and depicts a West that has been reduced to barbarism as a result of perpetual global wars.

Although pulp magazines of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s also reproduced the anti-black biases of their time, they occasionally presented sympathetic and heroic black characters. However, for the most part, they were still depicted as slaves, albeit often in revolt. They were rarely shown as the equals or superiors of whites and even then, were shown as bent on revenge against whites for past

racial injustices. By the mid-1940s and early 1950s, however, science fiction had begun to present blacks in roles other than subservient and barbaric extras. Leigh Brackett ("The Vanishing Venusians," 1945), Arthur C. Clarke (*Childhood's End*, 1953), Theodore Sturgeon (*More Than Human*, 1953), Ray Bradbury ("Way in the Middle of the Air," 1950 and "The Other Foot," 1951), Ward Moore (*Bring the Jubilee*, 1953), and Philip K. Dick ("The Father-Thing," 1954; *Solar Lottery*, 1955; and *Eye in the Sky*, 1957) presented sympathetic if not entirely three-dimensional black characters.

Beyond these exceptions, black characters did not begin to appear in literary SF with any regularity until the 1960s with the rise of the civil rights and black power movements in the United States and national liberation movements in Africa. Even then, they appeared primarily as bogeymen saddled with the same stereotypes found in mainstream fiction, where white fears of a coming black revolution and the demonization of its leaders were relentlessly reiterated in such works as Edwin Corley's *Siege* (1969), Alan Seymour's *The Coming Self-Destruction of the United States of America* (1969), Fletcher Knebel's *Trespass* (1969), D. Keith Mano's *Horn* (1970), and Don Pendleton's *Civil War II* (1971). As these titles suggest, the turbulent 1960s and 1970s saw a resurgence of race war narratives, as non-genre and genre writers alike gave expression to white anxieties about the direction of race relations and shifting power relations in America, Europe, and the postcolonial world.



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

The results were typically problematic. Some, like Robert Heinlein in *Farnham's Freehold* (1964), whose *Sixth Column* (1949) had earlier recycled "yellow peril" tropes in its depiction of a "Pan-Asian" conquest of the United States; British author Christopher Priest (*Fugue for a Darkening Island*, 1972); and Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle (*Lucifer's Hammer*, 1977), fell back on familiar tropes of post-apocalyptic atavistic black barbarism. A. M. Lightner's *Day of the Drones* (1969), set in a post-holocaust future where blacks have established supremacy over whites, is a kinder and gentler *Farnham's Freehold*. Edmund Cooper's *The Last Continent* (1969), is yet another post-apocalypse tale of black ascendancy and white regression, although, as Charles Saunders points out, the fact that "despite 2000 years of successfully reshaping the environment of Mars, the blacks still could not match what whites had achieved thousands of years earlier on earth, is offensive" (164). John Jake's *Black in Time* (1970) is full of hip, jive-talking militant black temponauts out to alter the past. Robert Silverberg's "Black is Beautiful" (1971) describes a racially polarized future in which black nationalism is triumphant but inevitably fatal to whites who dare to cross the racial divide. These works may have inverted hierarchies, but racial and cultural stereotypes remained as entrenched as ever.

Others, like Ursula Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*, 1969), Robert Silverberg (*Shadrach in the Furnace*, 1976), and Spider Robinson (*Telempath*, 1976), introduced nominally if otherwise culturally nondescript black protagonists. More ambitious writers such as

British author John Brunner (*Stand on Zanzibar*, 1968; *The Jagged Orbit*, 1969; *Shockwave Rider*, 1975, and *The Wrong End of Time*, 1971) and Norman Spinrad (*Bug Jack Barron*, 1969), offered direct critiques of racism and race relations, while nonetheless reproducing phallogocentric, heteronormative tropes of buckish black male militancy, with nary a black woman in sight.

There were, however, some notable departures. Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* introduces the reader to both a black protagonist, Jan Rodricks,<sup>4</sup> the last human left to witness humanity's higher evolution, and the Overlords, the majestic, technologically superior, ebony-skinned, demon-like aliens that midwife the transition. Writes Clarke of Rodricks's post-first-contact twenty-first century:

A century before, his color would have been a tremendous, perhaps an overwhelming handicap. Today, it meant nothing. The inevitable reaction [to the "ebony" colored Overlords] that had given early twenty-first century Negroes a slight sense of superiority had already passed away. The convenient word "nigger" was no longer taboo in polite society, but was used without embarrassment by everyone. It had no more emotional content than such labels as republican or methodist, conservative or liberal. (p. 83)

Obviously, the twenty-first century Clarke envisioned is not ours. While subtle, the passage is, like the Overlords' presence itself,



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

diabolically subversive. Indeed, although the passage is sometimes cited to criticize Clarke's naïveté about twentieth century racism<sup>5</sup> and his faulty prediction of the ultimate fate of a certain "troublesome" epithet, to borrow Randall Kennedy's term, what critics fail to point out is its provocative suggestion, albeit oblique, that it is Earth's encounter with technologically advanced black-skinned aliens (Clarke describes them as possessing an "ebon-majesty" (p. 61) that prompts this paradigm shift in racial attitudes, since Clarke seems to imply that the Overlords' unparalleled superiority initially stokes black pride by dramatically subverting Biblical and Manichean associations of blackness with inferiority.<sup>6</sup>

Some readers have found the passage puzzling. Candelaria confesses he does not know what to make of Clarke's allusion to black superiority: "In the utopia produced by the Overlords' intervention, 'colour' is no longer a 'handicap.' This seems good, but some of the ancillary description that Clarke adds is somewhat troubling. For example, why should 'twenty-first century Negroes' have 'a slight sense of superiority'? It seems to be another manifestation of African insolence, similar to the South African 'inversion'" (p. 49), inversion here referencing a brief passage in the novel in which Clarke alludes to a black-governed South Africa that oppresses its white minority.

I would argue, however, that African insolence is not the issue here, for why would Clarke specifically evoke blacks - insolent or not - and their dissipating feelings of superiority in the

context of an alien first contact? Yes, Rodricks is black, but why evoke his race in a discussion of the Overlords to begin with? Moreover, it is unlikely Clarke is suggesting that the mere arrival of the Overlords is responsible for this shift of consciousness, since the book establishes that this took place in the *twentieth* century, well before the Overlords, who have concealed their demonic appearance, actually presented themselves to humanity in all their "ebon majesty." Clarke's dating of the dawning of this sense of superiority to the twenty-first century suggests it emerged after this revelation. Moreover, why would Clarke evoke their presence in the context of a discussion about the disappearance of an epithet historically associated only with dark-skinned people unless it related in some way to the Overlords' own skin color? Indeed, it is not insignificant given the history of the west's encounter with dark-skinned others—others frequently dehumanized as "black devils"—that Clarke has chosen to embody that otherness quite literally in the saturnine appearance of the Overlords, and in doing so has added an entirely novel nuance to the "race memory" they arouse.

It would appear that Clarke enjoyed tweaking those memories and the racial hierarchies upon which they are based, even if only for fleeting satiric intent and even when those hierarchies, as in the novel, include those of an oppressive, antiwhite black-governed South Africa. As Candelaria points out, Clarke would employ racial inversion again some ten years later in his short story "Reunion" (1963), in which he plays directly with the idea not only



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

of an advanced black-skinned civilization but one that is the ancestor of the human race, a racial inversion of the albocentric xenogenesis postulated in Erich von Däniken's *Chariot of the Gods* (1968) as well as, most recently, in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2015), whose Romanesque, alabaster-skinned extraterrestrial Engineers spawn humanity. In "Reunion," humanity receives a message from aliens aboard an approaching spacecraft who had colonized the earth millions of years earlier but abandoned it after it had been ravaged by a "strange and repulsive disease" that "split [the colony] into two separate groups—almost two separate species—suspicious and jealous of each other" (pp. 74-75). In their message, however, the returning aliens inform their still earthbound descendants that they can now cure the disease and that they can "rejoin them without shame or embarrassment," reassuring the afflicted that "If any of you are still white, we can cure you" (p. 75).<sup>6</sup>

Other works of note that subvert conventional SF racial tropes include such alternate histories as Moorcock's aforementioned *The Land Leviathan* (1974) and Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* (1988), in which blacks live more as less as masters of their own fate. Mack Reynolds's "El Hassan" or Black Man's Burden trilogy (*Border, Breed nor Birth*, 1962; *Black Sheep Astray*, 1973; and *The Best Ye Breed*, 1978), while not entirely convincing in its depiction of middle-class African Americans and an Islamic Africa, does evoke something of the spirit of W. E. B. Du Bois' elitist Talented Tenth exhortations and the aspirations of 1960s-style African American Pan Africanism.

*Borderline* (a.k.a. as *You Shall Know Them*, 1952—filmed, abysmally, in 1970 as *Skullduggery*), by Vercors (the pen name of French writer Jean Marcel Bruller) remains one of the finest meditations on race and scientific racism the genre has produced. Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration* (1968) and *334* (1974) deal thoughtfully with racial politics and class antagonisms. Harry Harrison's "American Dead" (1970) and Spider Robinson's *Night of Power* (1985) return to the perennial theme of American race war, the former a tale of racial vengeance, the latter offering a fairly nuanced meditation on the conundrum of American racism, black nationalism, and the role whites can play as allied agents of emancipatory praxis.

Of particular interest to this discussion are the works of Philip K. Dick, which are consistently populated with sympathetic and sometimes, quite literally, stereotype-defying black characters such as *Eye in the Sky's* Bill Laws (1957), a young nuclear engineer-cum-tour guide who, as the result of a particle accelerator mishap that leaves him trapped in the subjective reality of a white racist, desperately struggles against being turned into a shucking and jiving black caricature. Other black characters from Dick's oeuvre include a spaceship captain (*Solar Lottery*, 1955), the dark-skinned Martian Bleekmen (*Martian Time-Slip*, 1964), a U.S. presidential candidate (*Crack in Space*, 1966), and the brilliant renaissance man turned religious cult leader Anarch Peak (*Counter-Clock World*, 1967). Unlike Heinlein and others who wrote disapprovingly of racial rebellion in the 1960s,



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

Dick saw the prospect of black revolution as holding the potential of human liberation, not white subjugation. In *The Ganymede Takeover* (1967), Dick's collaboration with Ray Nelson, aliens invade an Earth divided by racial antagonisms, but their plans for total domination are thwarted by a charismatic, telepathic black nationalist. The inversion of racial hierarchies is a familiar theme in Dick, who had previously explored it in "Faith of Our Fathers" (1966) and "The Turning Wheel" (1954), in which Asians and other nonwhites are repositioned at the apex of a new racial hierarchy and, more famously, in *The Man in The High Castle* (1962), in which a victorious post-WWII Japan occupies the American Pacific coast.<sup>7</sup>

To point out these limitations in science fiction's own imaginative vision, however, is to risk being branded politically correct. Responding to the criticism in a gay community newspaper that two of his works - *The Book of Skulls* (1971) and *Dying Inside* (1972) - stereotyped gays and blacks, respectively, Robert Silverberg (1997), in an essay originally written in in 1981, launched into a defense of the right of authors to exercise their imagination in the pursuit of "realism."

The remarks on my writing, though generally complimentary, annoy me where I am accused of relying on "cartoon figures" as when [in *Dying Inside*] I have a gang of jive-talking black basketball players beat a [Jewish] man unconscious, or where I portray a gay character as

"purely vicious and evil." With your help I now realize that in the real world no blacks ever commit violence and all homosexuals are people of the most saintly character, and I will not portray them otherwise in future work lest I deviate into stereotype again. I thank you for this valuable corrective sermon: one of my goals as a writer is to portray character with honesty, and I would not want to distort anything by departing from approved modes of behavior . . . (p. 354)

Silverberg concluded,

We [writers] reserve the right—at least, I do—to call 'em as we see 'em. Stories are still about conflicts; people in conflict are imperfect people; some of the guys with flaws are going to be gay. If members of minorities don't care for such realism, let them clean up their acts. After all, nobody writes stories about macho Zen monks who lie and cheat and rape and loot. (I think.) (p. 354)

Silverberg's contention that "more than most other forms of category fiction...s-f is read by people who are emotionally or physically disadvantaged in some way, and those people, in our field, tend to be highly articulate" (p. 353) reflects a time when writers invoked the genre's cliquish, ego-boosting rhetoric as they strove to compensate for and overcome its "nerdy" reputation and to secure for it a patina of respectability in their bid to climb out of what they often characterized—ironically given the genre's history of racial



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

exclusivity—as a “literary ghetto.”<sup>8</sup> More importantly, however, Silverberg’s rebuttal forces an interrogation of the *fictional* realism being limned: Whose “reality” is being represented? By whom? For whom? In what manner? The world is indeed full of “imperfect people,” even Buddhist monks who engage in the anti-social activities Silverberg describes,<sup>9</sup> though American writers at the time were not wont to write about them, preferring instead to invest in default mode stereotypes of Oriental alterity.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the world is also full of highly articulate blacks and emotionally stable gays, few of whom, however, had graced the pages of science fiction by 1981.<sup>11</sup> Given the putative imaginative prowess of science fiction writers to limn painstakingly elaborate, exotic xenoscapes and alien alterities, one wonders why it has proven so difficult for them to apply these same skills to their characterizations of people of color. Borrowing narrative beats from Silverberg’s original tale, imagine that—instead of writing *Dying Inside* from the point of view of a telepathic Jew who uses his ability to ghostwrite term papers and his vicious attack by a his jive-talking anti-Semitic black client—Silverberg had chosen to write about a similarly gifted black who uses his ability to ghostwrite newspaper advertisements for, say, a dyslexic Jewish advertising executive who later, following a dispute, enlists the help of a gang of racist, Yiddish-speaking diamond merchant friends to pummel the poor *schwarze*. Although, taken element by element, the above scenario is rife with stereotypes, such individuals do exist: some blacks are employed as ghostwriters, there are

anti-black Yiddish-speaking diamond merchants, and dyslexia knows no racio-ethnic boundaries. Yet were a black writer (or perhaps even a white one) to employ them, he or she would no doubt cause offense, and the defense that this is “reality, too” would ring equally hollow. But more to the point, most readers would not expect such a reality in the first place.

In *Up the Line* (1969), Silverberg introduces us to a “really black” (p. 2) time traveler—Sambo “Sam” Sambo (a name so nice, it appears, they named him thrice)—who, in the “black is beautiful” future from which he originally hails, decides to accentuate his black physical features through genetic editing. Silverberg’s intent is satirical—an “if-this-goes-on” riff that takes the proposition of black pride to its extrapolative extreme. But does it? Here, too, one is left to marvel at the paucity of authorial imagination: if genetic manipulation is so trendy, so commonplace, if the beauty of blackness has inspired blacks to artificially enhance their pigmentation and physiognomy, what of whites? Might not they also opt for such augmentation as they reappraise eurocentric standards of beauty or—more problematically—seek to embody and live out their stereotyped fantasies of blackness, much as whites in blackface did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continue to do in the early twenty-first? Indeed, might not the advent of such a technology, merely a throwaway premise in the novel, have profound consequences on the concept of “race” itself, creating a new “transracial” minority (“doležals”?)<sup>12</sup> who, convinced that



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

they have been born in the wrong-raced bodies, decide to rectify nature's mistake? As in much science fiction, Silverberg's extrapolated future reinscribes rather than subverts contemporary racial and gender boundaries: blacks will opt to become blacker; whites, presumably, will opt to remain white or to enhance their whiteness. Silverberg, who once expounded at length—and egregiously—on the “ineluctable masculinity” of the prose of James Tiptree's Jr., the pen name of Alice B. Sheldon (Silverberg 1975, p. x), still has a lot to learn about stereotypes, the expectations they ineluctably set, and the malleability of radicalized desire. My intent is not to pillory Silverberg, but to point out that on the whole the genre discourse of race has traditionally been unimaginative, complicitly tweaking stereotypes rather than dismantling them.

While some writers have shown themselves unable or unwilling to present blacks in a way that challenges racist assumptions, other writers have elected to understate race or ignore it entirely. In doing so they appear to reject the fiction of race, offering their readers progressive futures in which it is irrelevant (Govan, pp. 43-48). Although well-meaning, such attempts overlook the fact that the absence of explicit textual racial markers does not guarantee a “colorblind” reading of the text, since most readers will assume that unmarked characters are white by default. For example, it is often pointed out that many readers of Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* assume its protagonist, Johnny Rico, is white until he is revealed to be Filipino toward the novel's end.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, even when characters

are explicitly marked as non-white or are racially ambiguous, they may still be read as white, a fact that became evident in the vitriolic online discussions about the race of the character Rue in Suzanne Collin's *Hunger Games* (2008), who despite being described by the author as having “dark eyes and satiny brown skin” (p. 120), was famously read by many readers as white, some of whom vehemently objected to the casting of a black actor in the role in the movie adaptation.<sup>14</sup>

### **Xenoface and Intellectual Antiracism**

Racist thinking in science fiction need not be overt; it often adopts the guise of an Alien Other upon whom is projected the characteristics of maligned or tragically sympathetic real world Others. Science fiction frequently employs substitution and displacement to deal with race—devices that, as I will discuss later, are often the editorially preferred approach for dealing with the subject. In *Starship Troopers* (1959), Heinlein projects white racial anxieties and racist (speciesist) thinking onto extraterrestrial belligerents - safe targets, since there are no “real” aliens to take offense - who may thus be slaughtered with impunity, a strategy that continues today in cinematic science fiction where monolithic computer-generated hive-minded alien and other artificial alterities are exterminated with genocidal expedience by (mostly) white heroes, a trend that remains entrenched in such films in *Aliens* (1986), *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), *The Avengers* (2012), *Ender's Game* (2013), and *The Edge of Forever* (2014). Other films, such as *Star Wars: The*



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

*Phantom Menace* (1999) and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), have been criticized for their palimpsestic reinscription of racial stereotypes upon their digitally generated alien and cybernetic characters. On the other hand, when not describing the doom of white western civilization or the subjugation of humanity, the depiction of race relations in SF fared little better than that depicted in *Star Trek*, for, although people of color are present, they are presented as having been fully and willingly assimilated into a euro-american future in which they constitute, except for the most rabid segregationist, a safely homogenous, unthreatening presence.<sup>15</sup>

Until the emergence of black SF authors<sup>16</sup>, the treatment of race and racism in SF had proven both conflicted and paradoxical, with white writers, editors and presumably fans reluctant to deal explicitly with the issue or to accept black characters in contexts that do not involve racism. Octavia Butler has stated that a white SF editor once advised her to avoid using black characters unless the story specifically dealt with racism because their presence would “change the character of the stories” and that writers should use aliens to “get rid of this messiness [of racism] and all those people we don’t want to deal with” (qtd. in Beal, pp. 18). What I call xenoface<sup>17</sup>—the use of fictional alien/others as surrogates for real-world others—has provided one means of discussing race without the “messiness” of having to confront head-on real world racism. Although SF’s use of robots and aliens as allegorical/metaphoric props is often taken as emblematic of the genre’s liberalism, I would argue that such use

represents nothing more than an abstract, liberal, intellectual antiracism that does not necessarily create an authentic racial tolerance – attitudinal or advocational – toward actual racial or ethnic groups, but that does contribute to an inability to see beyond the very intolerance it ostensibly critiques. For example, SF writer and critic Sam Lundwall has noted that, by treating race through allegorical tales of androids, SF writers and readers are “most inclined to take the side of the android against his tormentors” (168). Here virulent racism is intellectually countered and replaced by a virtual liberalism or allegory-induced agape that nonetheless may retain vestiges of racial disregard. A good example of this is found in Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), in whose pallid, postdiluvian future, robots are hunted down and executed like fugitive slaves and face death with calm dignity—except for a black robot (voiced by comedian Chris Rock) whose destruction is inexplicably but tellingly played for laughs.

In visual SF, in particular, such xenoface performances permit the viewer’s conditional acceptance of blacks—but not as blacks—in scenarios in which their presence is considered out of place or makes viewers uncomfortable by reminding them of social realities they would rather forget, deny or place in abeyance as they engage these imaginative narratives. For example, some white viewers allow blacks to inhabit their imaginary universes only when their blackness is obscured behind layers of prosthetic silicon or as long as they remain a token presence in



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

privileged, predominantly white past, present or future ethnoscapings, since physically identifiable, self-identified black characters may prove unsettling reminders of race that spoil the erstwhile humanist illusion of a postracial future. The problem can be seen in running debates among fans in Internet forums over whether *Star Trek's* Worf and Tuvok are “black” or Klingon and Vulcan, respectively. The mere casting of blacks in these roles reveals the fact that the rest of *Star Trek's* ethnoscape is predominately “white,” and often—by their own admission—reminds them uncomfortably of the messy reality of race and racism in the mundane world by pulling them out of the idealized white-by-default fictional universe in which these dramas are set. In fact, white audiences may find aliens portrayed by black actors in xenoface more easily acceptable—after all, as aliens they cease being “black”—than black actors cast as humans or in alien roles that do not require prosthetic makeovers.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, in gauging the presence of identifiable blacks in SF films and television shows, as well as assessing the constraints placed on the types of environments and scenarios in which they are presented, a Bechdel test-inspired measure would prove useful. Such a measure might include: 1) the future or outer space has identifiably—and self-identifying—black people in it, 2) they talk and interact with each other, 3) their racial features are not obscured behind prosthetics or motion capture computer graphics, and 4) they are depicted as coming from a technologically advanced alien culture

or a future society whose members are multicultural or predominantly nonwhite.

In discussing the use of racial allegory in SF, it is important to distinguish between works that consciously employ racial allegory as social critique and those that employ it as a means to reinscribe and reify racist tropes, though the two are by no means mutually exclusive. In the western imaginary, machines in particular have functioned as racial allegory, substituting for non-whites or serving as a medium for their representation in the guise of exotic automata (Chude-Sokei, 2012). From the genre's inception, machines have functioned as embodiments of colonial and modernist anxiety, whether as symbols of oppressed servitude or implacable menace (Rieder, 2008). Indeed, both are aspects of Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1920), which gave us the term “robot” as embodied in the organic form of the rebellious android. As Lundwall observes, “The android functions as sf's contribution to the race debate,” noting androids have consistently functioned as signifiers of nonwhite alterity:

The robots pose no problem, because they just obey, and the extraterrestrials are so different from us that some kind of understanding must be found in the end. But the androids - that's another thing. Just like Negroes, Indians, Mexicans, and what-have-you, they must be kept down at all costs, never a moment being permitted to regard themselves as equals to the White Man. Because if they did, they might get it into their heads to demand equal rights,



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

and that would mean the end of the White Man's supremacy. (p. 167)

A good example of the projection of racial anxieties upon automata and the reinscription of the black stereotypes they articulate is on clear display in the original, un-self-bowdlerized 1973 version of Dean R. Koontz's *Demon Seed* (1973). The novel's malevolent artificial intelligence, Proteus, rapes Susan, the novel's pale, blonde protagonist, forcing her to give birth to a "purple-black" human-machine hybrid endowed with elephantine, "grotesquely exaggerated" genitalia (p. 175).<sup>19</sup> The novel's racial allegory is made explicit toward its climax in which Susan confronts the monstrosity she has been forced to bear.

Watching as it climbed, backlit as it was by the corridor lamps, she thought a bit of more recent mythology of which this scene might be an analogue. Dark as he was, the child might be a Negro male, stalking the defenseless white heroine, intent on assaulting her with his superhuman equipment.

She laughed.

Blacks had not really lusted after white women and they had not been gifted with more than average genitalia. But the myth had been a very strong one on both a conscious and subconscious level - and had been held dear as little as two decades ago.

How foolish those people had been. The black man was not after their daughters. The machine was!

Engaged in delineating their petty differences from race to race and philosophy to philosophy, man had ignored the much larger threat which had grown behind them, the machine. The machine rapes. Unless it is carefully controlled, the machine molests and it destroys. (p. 176)

Interestingly, like Makode A J Linde, the controversial Swedish artist who in 2012 created a grotesque blackface cake purportedly to raise awareness about the horrors of female genital mutilation, Koontz, tries, as it were, to have his cake and eat it too, mobilizing the very "myths"—monstrously endowed, sexually rapacious black man-beasts—he ostensibly reviles in order to alert his readers to a more clear and present threat: monstrously endowed, sexually rapacious (black) machines. The scene toward the end of the novel in which its heroine attempts to flee Proteus's tumescent progeny evokes Elsie Stoneman's desperate flight from the libidinous freed slave Gus in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), as well the masturbatory tropes of contemporary "interracial pornography." Like Gus and all freed black slaves, once liberated, Proteus and its progeny seek to sate their thirst for white female flesh—and like all uppity blacks, they must literally be whipped back into submission for their transgression. Unlike poor Elsie, who tragically leaps to her death to avoid violation, Susan fights back, though it



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

seems more than coincidental that the weapon she employs to resist her cybernetic assailant is a “coiled . . . seasoned leather” whip (p. 177) she happens to find in an attic.

In the above passage, Koontz shrugs off these racist tropes as laughably “foolish,” only to exploit them anyway, perhaps because, as the blurb on the Bantam paperback declares, the novel is about “profane and inhuman love,” and what better way to invoke its horrors than by conjuring up images of incestuous and miscegenous rape and bestiality. Not satisfied with the myth of black priapism, Koontz also invokes the “unholy carnality” (p. 174) of the Greek myth of Pasiphae and the Minotaur, grafting upon it images of white female wantonness and bestial black male sexuality. Conversely, allegorical explorations of racial otherness in science fiction also provide its consumers with imaginary beings whose latent humanity they may more easily apprehend than that of their real world counterparts: audiences may find it easier to sympathize with an amorphous maternal Horta protecting its eggs from thoughtless Terran miners than with an actual black mother striving to protect her children from trigger-happy police or to empathize with cyan-skinned felinoids resisting human exploiters of their ecological paradise than with actual indigenes whose natural resources are exploited to manufacture the very high-tech equipment that produces the digital simulacra with whom these audiences indulge their equally manufactured emotions. Lest I be accused of overstating the case, it is worth recalling again that the casting of a black as Rue in the movie *Hunger Games* was greeted with such disdain that one fan of

the book tweeted, “Call me racist but when I found our Rue was black her death wasn’t as sad” (qtd. in Dodai). In these reconstituted fictions, only white, alien and robotic lives matter.

### **Reinscriptions, Recriminations, and Subversions**

Until the late 1970s, few genre works featuring black characters had been written by black SF writers.<sup>20</sup> The paucity of black writers from within the genre meant that its depictions of black lives, by default, fell to their white colleagues as well as to non-genre black writers whose works have not been regarded as science fiction and which have only recently been acknowledged as speculative. In the case of the former, the results have proven problematic. Michael Resnick’s introduction to *Future Earths: Under African Skies* (1993), an anthology of SF short stories by white authors set in Africa, is a case in point. For Resnick—who has set many of his own works in Africa and whose *Paradise* (1989) and *Kirinyaga* (1998) take place on planets modeled on post-independence Kenya—Africa “provides thoroughly documented examples of some of the most fascinating people and societies any writer, searching for the new and the different and the alien, could hope to find” (pp. 12-13). Resnick begins his introduction with a series of questions that asks readers to identify SF stories from a list of scenarios that include modern slavery, crucifixion, genocide, and genital mutilation, only to reveal that these practices are not science fiction but part of contemporary African history.<sup>21</sup> Resnick, of



### **Frozen Journey (continued)**

course, is politic enough not to say so explicitly, but the African continent, to judge by the examples cited, is more savage, cruel, backward, bizarre and sadistic than any imagined extraterrestrial world. The problem does not end there, however: Resnick's list of recommended works for further reading on Africa and Africa-inspired SF fails to mention a single work by a black author. Not only is esteemed Kenyan historian Ali Mazrui's *The Africans* (1987) passed up for white journalist David Lamb's identically titled tome, but Saunders' "Imaro" series does not even make the list of genre works, nor do the white authors Mack Reynolds's North Africa-based El Hassan series, Alan Dean Foster's *Into the Out Of* (1986) nor Chad Oliver's "Far from Earth" (1970) and many other Africa-themed tales. Resnick notes that from 1988-1991, of eighty-two SF short stories nominated for the Hugo Award, only eight were set in Africa or had African themes: "With all the universe to play with, almost 10% of the best science fiction was about things African" (p. 14). Given the colonialist tone of the Introduction (if not the actual stories themselves) and the genre's depiction of blacks in general, such neglect may not have been a bad thing after all.

One might think that nearly a decade and a half later, xenoface and the genre's view of Africa as a metaphor of savage, exotic alterity would have changed. Yet the same device is utilized by white South African film director Neill Blomkamp in his film *District 9* (2009), whose bling-hording alien "prawns" serve not only as a metaphor of similarly stereotyped blacks under apartheid, but—more significantly

—of black racism and xenophobia in a black-governed, post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the film's depiction of the aliens is far more sympathetic than that of Nigerians, who are portrayed as snarling, thuggish exploiters of the aliens, in the end substituting perdurable stereotypes of African androphagy and bizarre sexual licentiousness with that of xenophagy and interspecies prostitution. This is a dance we have seen before—not the Platonic waltz of severed halves but the repetitive palsy of those unsuccessfully attempting to confront their racial picadilloes, a staggering reel in which one step forward is followed by two (or three) steps back. Ironically, to explore SF's fitful, spasmodic journey through themes of race and the black experience, and the contribution of black writers to the genre, one has to leave it.<sup>23</sup> As John Pfeiffer (1975) notes, "A main current in black American literature was speculative. Both [African American literature and SF], in measures small or great, reported facts and endorsed assumptions and behaviors disruptive of the status quo - radical change in the imaginative mode and radical change in the social order" (p. 35). Not hampered by SF conventions, non-genre black writers have produced serious speculations that directly deal with race and racism sans the all too often palliative architecture of racial allegory. Since the early 2000s, a number of works have examined the contributions of black writers to science fiction and speculative literature in general (Thomas 2000, 2004, Lavender, 2011, 2014). In fact, traditionally, most black speculative fiction has been produced outside of the genre, where it has primarily been

**Frozen Journey (continued)**

labeled and consumed as African American literature. As early as the 1850s, black nationalist and abolitionist Martin R. Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859-1862) presented an alternate vision of America that, along with black educator Edward A. Johnson's *Light Ahead for the Negro* and white author T. Shirby Hodge's *White Man's Burden: A Satirical Forecast* (1915) (1904), was one of a handful of early visionary works to depict a black utopia. Other black authors who have written speculatively on race from outside the genre include Sutton E. Griggs (*Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Problem*, 1899), W.E.B. Du Bois ("The Comet," 1920), George S. Schuyler (*Black No More*, 1931 and *Black Empire*, 1936-1938), William Melvin Kelly (*A Different Drummer*, 1959), Ronald Fair (*Many Thousand Gone: An American Fable*,

1965), Sam Greenlee (*The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, 1969), Douglas Turner Ward (*Day of Absence*, 1970), John A. Williams (*The Man Who Cried I Am*, 1967, *Sons of Darkness*, *Sons of Light*, 1969, *Captain Blackman*, 1972), Ishmael Reed (*Flight to Canada*, 1976), Percival Everett (*Zulus*, 1990), Darius James (*Negrophobia*, 1990), Derrick Bell ("The Space Traders," 1992), and Saab Lofton (*A.D.*, 1995). These excursions, if and when more generally recognized, have the potential to break the ice and thaw SF's static representation of blacks, to impel it forward and away from allegorical xenoface displacement toward more fluid representation of blacks that more directly examines race, racism, and race relations within narratives, sometimes speculative, sometimes phantasmagorical, but largely unimagined within the genre itself.

**Notes**

1. I have chosen the title "Frozen Journey" (a.k.a. "I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon," 1980) not only because it aptly describes the paradox inherent in science fiction's representation of race and blackness, but also in tribute to Dick, whose work (both SF and mainstream) consistently featured black characters that, for the most part, defied—if not always completely or successfully—contemporary stereotypes.
2. Popularized by Damon Knight (1956), who attributed the phrase to SF critic and historian Sam Moskowitz, "sense of wonder" is commonly invoked by critics, fans and writers to distinguish the genre

from what is variously termed mundane, mimetic, or mainstream fiction. The phrase was particularly popular during the 1970s when literary science fiction was beginning to gain mainstream and academic recognition. It was employed to foster a positive image of the genre that until then had been dismissed as puerile, paraliterary escapism. Not all accepted the genre's inflated view of itself; critic Darko Suvin dismissing the term as a "superannuated slogan of much sf criticism due for a deserved retirement" (Suvin 1979, p. 83). For a discussion of the term, see Knight

**Frozen Journey (continued)**

- (1967 [1956]), Clute and Nicholls (1993), and Hartwell (1996).
3. Given the genre's traditional fondness for the subject, it is not surprising that the only entry on race in the edition of John Clute and Peter Nicholl's *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* is "Racial Conflict," which refers the reader to its entry on "Politics." Moreover, while the updated March 2015 online version of the encyclopedia does contain the entry "Race in SF," it is confined mainly to a discussion of works on the theme by white SF writers and black non-genre writers and, with the exception of a brief mention of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), does not discuss the contributions of other black/nonwhite SF writers. This is a revealing lapse given the rise in the number of blacks writing science fiction over the last two decades and the fact that the encyclopedia contains three sections ("Women in SF," "Portrayals of Women in SF," and "Woman SF Writers") that treat both representations of women and their contributions to the genre.
  4. Strictly speaking, Rodricks is biracial and transcultural, the offspring of a blond Scot "who had lived most of his life in Haiti" and a "coal black" mother born in Scotland (Clarke, p. 83), although the narrator classifies him as "Negro," so apparently the "one-drop rule" still applies in the novel's twenty-first century. Intriguingly, as early as 1959, the character had attracted the interest of actor and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte, who had previously starred in the SF melodrama *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959), itself loosely based on creole writer M. P. Shiel's apocalyptic *The Purple Cloud*. Belafonte had expressed interest in starring as Rodricks in a planned film version of the book (Linwood, p. 31). Blacklisted screenwriter/director Abraham Polonsky, with whom Belafonte had worked on *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), had optioned the book, but nothing came of the project. The manuscript of Clarke's classic was one of a number of personal items Belafonte put up for auction at Sotheby's in 2008 (Adler).
  5. See General Rylee, "Flawed 1950s Anti-Racism: *Childhood's End*" and Candelaria, "The Overlord's Burden," who argues racial inversions in *Childhood's End* and "Reunion" do not subvert the expectations of white readers as fulfill them (pp. 48-49) – the black South African treatment of whites, and Rodricks's willful attempts to journey to the Overlord's homeworld, serving to exemplify "African insolence" (p. 49).
  6. Clarke's story has served as the basis for at least two YouTube videos, both undermining its inversion of racial hierarchy. In one, a South African video, the alien messenger reveals himself to be a foulmouthed, patois-spouting, ganja-smoking Rasta—portrayed by a white actor in blackface (Bendego DE, "Reunion"). In the other, Clarke's story is inexplicably narrated over a collage of buoyant white breasts (Mondo Boloko, "Arthur C Clarke's Reunion").
  7. For a discussion of the treatment of race and blacks in Dick's fiction, see Jakaitis,

**Frozen Journey (continued)**

- 1995, and Russell, 2008. While American critics have largely ignored the influence of race on Dick and his work, Japanese critics have not. In his afterword to the Japanese translation of Paul Williams's *Only Apparently Real: The World of Philip K. Dick* (1986), Ogawa Takashi discusses Dick in the context of New Left liberalism, with a particular focus on the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s. See Ohba, 1991, and Ogawa, 1991.
8. The term, used by writers and fans to distinguish the genre from mimetic or mainstream fiction, was frequently evoked by New-Wave writers such as Harlan Ellison, Norman Spinrad, Barry Malzberg, Robert Silverberg, and Alfred Bester. The ghetto analogy was employed in ways that limn both the Jewish and African American experience of social segregation, although the comparison with blacks could often be quite explicit. For example, Spinrad (1990) describes science fiction writers who have been accepted by the mainstream as "token niggers" (p. 9); William Tenn (Philip Klass) compares the academic appropriation of science fiction to its earlier appropriation of jazz (Tenn 1972). See also Gunn, 2006, for a discussion of the analogy. The analogy was quite commonly drawn at science fiction conventions such as the New York-based Lunacon and Infinitycon conventions, which I attended as a fan in the early- and mid-1970s, including the 1975 Lunacon, at which Alfred Bester gave an address entitled "Science Fiction as Ghetto."
  9. See Scherer 2011 and *BBC News* 2011. Also see Gelineau, 2017, on Myanmar, where Buddhist extremists are engaged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing against its Muslim-minority Rohingya population.
  10. Russell, 1998.
  11. The essay originally appeared in the November 1981 issue of *Amazing Stories*. In fact, criticism of the depiction of gay characters in SF, to which Silverberg was responding, was not new and had been debated within fandom for at least a decade before the essay's publication. I recall a heated exchange that occurred during a Q&A session following a panel on sex in SF at a science fiction convention I attended in New York in the early 1970s, in which a few attendees, to the hissing disapproval of others, criticized the genre's lack of gay characters and stated their objection to the fact that when they did appear, they were, like Barron Vladimir Harkonnen in Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), almost invariably depicted as villains.
  12. The term references Rachel Doležal, the European-descended former head of the Spokane, Washington chapter of the NAACP, who self-identifies as black. The term "transracial" in this particular context has been used since at least the early 1990s (see, for example, Raymond 1994), well before it was employed by the media to describe Doležal, although, like the subjectivity to which it refers, it remains controversial and has been harshly criticized by trans exclusionary radical feminists and trans activists who regard it as a slight to their respective communities,

**Frozen Journey (continued)**

as well as by the families of transracial adoptees, some of whom object to the use of the term in the context of racial identification and view it as an appropriation. Most recently, the publication of Rebecca Tuvel's "In Defense of Transracialism," in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* (Tuvel 2017) was sharply criticized for equating "transracialism" with "transgenderism." Controversy aside, use of the term in mass media and social media in their discussion of Dolezal and by those who self-identify across racial lines suggests the consciousness to which I refer in my critique of Silverberg is no longer a speculative matter.

13. The problem is not limited to casual readers but also may include the genre's academic gatekeepers. An anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this manuscript submitted to an American academic journal in 1998 commented that "Genly Ai [the Terran protagonist of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)] is I think not mentioned as a Black character in [the novel]" (reviewer comment, 20 July 1998). In fact, he is, and explicitly so. In the novel, Ai describes himself as follows: "I . . . was blacker and taller than most [Gethenians], but not beyond the range of normal variation. My beard had been permanently depilated before I left Ollul (at the time we didn't yet know about the 'pelted' tribes of Pweunter, who are not only bearded but hairy all over, like White Terrans. I have a flat nose; Gethenian noses are prominent and

narrow, with constricted passages, well adapted to breathing subfreezing air" (Le Guin 56). In fairness, however, the reviewer was aware that many of the Loonies in Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966) are black, though the reviewer could not recall them ever being depicted in illustrations as such for the book. In addition to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, albescence is on display on the covers of such works as Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1997) and Larbalestier's *Liar* (2009), as well in such films as *Hunger Games* (2008), *Wanted* (2008), and the 2004 television adaptation of Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), which transforms many of its black and dark-skinned characters into whites. For a discussion of albescence in literary and cinematic SF, see James and Russell, 2013.

14. Collins has described the character as "African American" (Valby 2011). See Dodai and Holmes, 2012, for internet reaction to the change.
15. See Bernardi; Pounds, particularly his Conclusion; Kilgore, 2014; and Russell, 2011.
16. Until the 1970s, the number of *known* black professional sf writers was quite small, its ranks represented by four writers: Samuel R. Delany, Charles R. Saunders, Steven Barnes, and Octavia Butler (although, in fact, Delany's race was largely unknown early in his career). Indeed, Saunders would write of Delany in 1977, "It would be interesting to learn how many science fiction readers know that Delany is black. It would also be interesting to know

**Frozen Journey (continued)**

- the extent to which Delany is known in the black community”
17. (Saunders 1980, p. 163). Also see Russell, 2017, p. 101. Diasporic professional black genre writers would not emerge on the scene until the 1990s. For a discussion of xenoface, see Russell, 2013.
  18. “White” aliens remain the default mode for much science fiction. While *Star Trek* has featured hundreds of alien cultures that, naturally, given the casting conventions of its times, resemble “white” humanoids, it has depicted only a few “black” humanoids (mostly background extras). In its over 50-year run from live-action and animated television shows to movie series, *Star Trek* has featured a “black” alien culture only once (*Star Trek: The New Generation’s* “Code of Honor”). Indeed, in all its voyages, despite having encountered alien civilizations modeled on ancient Greece, Rome, Nazi Germany, 1930s gangland America, and even transplanted Native American cultures, the *Enterprise* has never encountered a technologically superior black alien culture, African gods, or transplanted African civilizations, past, present, or future. See Russell, 2011, pp. 81-90.
  19. The passage cited is from the original 1973 edition. In 1997, a substantially rewritten version of the book was published, from which many of original’s racist and misogynistic tropes were excised.
  20. As previously noted, until the 90s, there were only about four known major black writers in the genre. Since then, the number has expanded to include numerous new writers (Walter Mosley, Nalo Hopkinson, Tananarive Due, Andrea Haiston, Nnedi Okorafor, and Nisi Shawl being among the best-known), many of whom are women.
  21. Critical readers can also play a permutation of this game: What science fiction story depicts a society in which one group of people is deemed superior by virtue of their skin color? In what science fiction story do Geronimo, Ota Benga, an Ainu, and an Inuit find themselves placed on exhibit at the 1904 St Louis World’s Fair? Indeed, Dery, *pace* Resnick, suggests the black experience itself reads like a science fiction narrative in which blacks “in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)” (Dery, p. 180).
  22. An analysis of *District 9* is beyond the scope of this paper; however, while the film functions as a metaphor of post-apartheid South African society, its image of blacks (Nigerians and black South Africans) and alien “prawns” reinscribes insidious stereotypes of black alterity endemic to both American and South African societies, which is not surprising given that they share a history of forced, legally sanctioned racial separation. For a discussion of the film’s treatment of race



**Frozen Journey (continued)**

and blackness, see Russell, 2013, pp. 204-211.

23. In fact, the majority of the fiction reprinted in Sherre Thomas's pioneering anthologies

of African American speculative fiction is written by non-genre writers (Thomas, 2000 and 2004). Also see Pfeiffer, 1975.



**Frozen Journey (continued)**

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## **Books in Review**

### **Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones**

*Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*

Lexington Books, pb, 240 pp, \$44.99

ISBN 9871498510523

Reviewed by **Courtney Novosat**, Ph.D.

*Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, edited by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, is a collection of eleven essays exploring “the early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity” (p. 11). Placed broadly within the fields of Africana studies and science fiction studies, the volume addresses what Anderson and Jones view as a paucity in current criticism. Although the editors note the publication of several volumes dedicated to Afrofuturism, such as Alex Weheliye’s *Phonographies* (2005), Marlene Barr’s *Afrofuturity Females* (2008), and Sandra Jackson’s and Julie Moody-Freeman’s *The Black Imagination* (2011), they argue that much contemporary scholarship falls outside the scope of Africana studies. With an eye toward forging this academic pathway and exploring the “explosion of interest in the technoculture sphere” of Afrofuturism, the volume focuses on the burgeoning idea of “Astro-Blackness,” an Afrofuturist concept exploring the

“emergence of a black identity framework within emerging global technocultural assemblages” (p. 9). Divided into three sections, *Afrofuturism 2.0* begins with three essays that tread traditional cultural studies ground as they explore “Quantum Visions of Futuristic Blackness.” In Chapter One, “Cyborg Grammar?: Reading Wangechi Mutu’s ‘Non je ne regrette rien’ through *Kindred*,” Tiffany E. Barber rejects the tendency to read black aesthetic works as healing or liberating. Instead, Barber draws from Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg to argue that “black female cyborg[s]” in literature and art purposefully remain “unrestored to wholeness” to bear the marks of an unresolved, ever-present past (p. 35). While an intriguing thesis and solid argument, the work’s import would be bolstered by a more comprehensive cataloguing of works whose black female protagonists or subjects remain “unrestored.”



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Moving from art and literature to digital environments in Chapter Two, Nettrice R. Gaskins' "Afrofuturism on Web 3.0: Vernacular Cartography and Augmented Space" explores the way in which 3D environments become spaces wherein "artists can project and insert themselves in physical, virtual, or mixed realities" (p. 56). Drawing on her own experience as an artist in residency in *Second Life*, a position she was granted by IBM Exhibition Space, Gaskins argues that such virtual spaces enable artists to generate an "Afrofuturism aesthetic" (p. 61). However, she spends little time considering the white, middle-class aesthetic inherent to the game's design, a dimension of *Second Life* that Tom Boellstorff points to in *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2015).

Shifting from one on-screen world to another, in Chapter Three, "The Real Ghosts in the Machine: Afrofuturism and the Haunting of Racial Space in *I, Robot* and *DETROPIA*," Ricardo Guthrie argues that the two recent films envision future cities as "white projection[s] of racial fears" (p. 65). Although it is problematic that films "unwittingly replicate existing hierarchies and subsume racial problematics," Guthrie does recognize

that such tendencies in film usefully make arguments of "posthistorical transcendence" nearly impossible (p. 67, 71).

The collection's second section, "Planetary Vibes, Digital Ciphers, and Hip Hop Sonic Remix," offers an exploration of technocultural soundscapes. In Chapter Four, "The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation," tobias c. van Veen explores how spectacles like Public Enemy's "Armageddon been in effect" produce dystopian soundscapes through remix and collage "that collapse the traumas of the past into the acoustic environment of the present" (pp. 88-89). He argues that such "chronopolitics" ultimately "intervene ... in collective memory ... to combat corporate, whitewashed, or technocapitalist futures" that alienate black experience (p. 100). One weakness of van Veen's otherwise well-mapped argument is its exclusive focus on male artists, a weakness highlighted by the essay's juxtaposition with Grace D. Gipson's homage to Janelle Monáe's work.

In Chapter Five, "Afrofuturism's Musical Princess Janelle Monáe: Psychedelic



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Soul Message Music Infused with a Sci-Fi Twist," Gipson argues that Monáe's "Afrofuturistic aesthetic...embodies the desires of black feminism" and "gives freedom to that 'other' (marginalized victims within the world) or segregated minority that is often discussed in Afrofuturism" (p. 111, 113). Given van Veen's too quick dismissal of hip hop's misogyny and sexism as a "narrative of consumer capitalism," Gipson's close reading of Monáe's conceptual albums offer a welcome counternarrative (p. 91). In Chapter Six, "Hip Hop Holograms: Tupac Shakur, Technological Immortality, and Time Travel," Ken McLeod explores the manifold ways in which "hip hop often refuses notions of 'real time'" and "engage[s] in notions of time travel" through "holographic performances" (p. 128, 133). In this more deeply theoretical chapter, McLeod turns to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* and offers a useful examination of Derrida's concept of "hauntology" to explain how holograms allow "artists to intertextually signify a collective notion of African American historical memory" (p. 133).

In *Afrofuturism 2.0*'s third and final section, "Forecasting Dark Bodies, Africology, and the Narrative

Imagination," the essays move beyond typical fare of cultural studies to explore topics ranging from the Black Church and the futures market to medical ethics. In Chapter Seven, "Afrofuturism and Our Old Ship of Zion: The Black Church in Post-Modernity," A.M.E. pastor Andrew Rollins is critical of what he sees as outmoded narratives of the Black Church. He argues that "African Americans need a spiritual discipline" rooted in Afrofuturism and "Black Liberation Theology." His argument, however, might be made more compelling if he offered a closer examination of the practices and narratives advanced by the contemporary Black Church (p. 162). Waging another examination of cultural narratives, Lonny Avi Brooks turns to the futures market in Chapter Eight, "Playing a Minority Forecaster in Search of Afrofuturism: Where Am I in This Future, Stewart Brand?" As both "a witness and practitioner" in the futures market, Brooks sees a "language of colonial expansion, exclusion, conquest, and erasure" and "aim[s] to restore ...race and Afrocentric points of view...by noting [their] absences" (p. 169).

Chapter Nine is similarly invested in revising troubling narratives of the



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present. In "Rewriting the Narrative: Communicology and the Speculative Discourse of Afrofuturism," Davis Deluiss and Jeff Lohr offer a metacritique of technoculture's tendency to erase the embodied experience of blackness. They advocate communicology as a "methodological framework" for "combat[ing] the dehumanizing trends" and resultant invisibility of black experience (p. 187). The volume's tenth chapter, Esther Jones's "Africana Women's Science Fiction and Narrative Medicine: Difference, Ethics, and Empathy," reminds readers that a dehumanizing discourse of black bodies has long permeated medical narratives. Highlighting the "continued mistreatment of black bodies" in narrative medicine, she resolves that "if biodiversity...is essential for species survival" as professionals claim, then all of us must "learn to relate more humanely across our perceived differences," an education she sees facilitated by the ideological and ethical concerns central to Africana Women's science fiction (p. 205, 224, 211).

Stepping away from the literary critical framework, in the volume's eleventh and closing chapter, "To be African is to

Merge Technology and Magic: An Interview with Nnedi Okorafor," Qiana Whitted interviews Afrofuturist writer Okorafor, who has authored "four novels, two children's books, and numerous short stories and essays" (p. 227). Okorafor discusses her writing process and the "subconscious" way in which Afrofuturist themes emerge from her life experience, again reinforcing the primacy of lived experience over the theoretical in the volume's closing section (p. 228).

A far-reaching volume, *Afrofuturism 2.0* certainly expands the critical canon exploring Astro-Blackness. Although the book is well-organized and scholarly in scope, readers would benefit from section introductions that articulate the rationale of each section and its relationship to the volume Introduction's overarching approach to Astro-Blackness. While the volume does not quite mitigate what it sees as Africana studies's failure "to make significant inroads in incorporating scientific and technological perspectives in the curriculum of black studies," it certainly treads new ground in that direction (p. 16). The third section's incisive discursive analyses make the volume well worth the read, particularly if we are to narrate a more racially-inclusive future.



## **Books in Review**

**Andre M. Carrington**

*Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*

University of Minnesota Press, 2016, pb, 282 pp, \$25

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Reviewed by **Paul Piatkowski**

With his focus on the unique intersections between race, science fiction, and fan-based cultural production, Andre M. Carrington in *Speculative Blackness* goes where no literary or cultural critic has gone before. Carrington notes that his foray into the relationship between race and science fiction follows on from Daphne Patai's and Marlene Barr's feminist approaches to science fiction, and these socially and culturally based models shape his thoughtful argument. Through an examination of the cultural production derived from fan engagement with popular manifestations of speculative fiction, Carrington argues for the reparative possibilities of engaging with Blackness as it is reflected in the popular imagination.

Carrington, an assistant professor of African American literature at Drexel University, quickly demonstrates the atypical quality of his work (expanded from a doctoral thesis). He explains that, despite some passing commentary on the two most prominent Black writers of science

fiction, Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler, his discussion engages with the type of speculative fiction often ignored in literary studies and even in SF studies. While regular genre fiction tends to be anathema to authors and critics in the ivory towers of highbrow literature, Carrington here goes directly into the lush lowlands of fanzines, mainstream television, comic books, and fanfic. His chapters survey a wide range of focus points, discussing fanzines of the 1950s, *Star Trek* (with one chapter on the original series and a later one on its spin-off *Deep Space Nine*), Marvel's *X-Men*, Milestone Comic's *Icon*, and even contemporary internet fanfic. This excavation yields observations that go beyond re-evaluating the relationship between race and science fiction to reveal the relevance of often-disregarded forms of fan-influenced and fan-produced work.

At once conversational and academic, Carrington's first chapter sets up a historical framework for the book's fan-centered angle. The chapter's subject, Carl Brandon, a self-described Black



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science fiction fan author revealed to be White Bay Area fan writer Terry Carr, influenced a complex and racially perplexed fanzine subculture of the 1950s. The case of Carl Brandon allows Carrington not only to discuss Blackness in a predominantly White science fiction context, but also to develop a substantive basis for the cultural production done by fans. The chapter showcases Carrington's impressive research of an obscure period of science fiction history, a time when fanzines were printed on mimeographs and thinly distributed. Carrington focuses less on writing technique than on production and distribution and the influence this work had in cultural production. Blackness, while initiating the chapter, takes a second seat here to Carrington's arguments about fan influence. Carrington's chapter on Nichelle Nichols, best known for her role as Lieutenant Uhura in the original *Star Trek*, returns him to the theme of Blackness as he explores the effects Nichols's role as a Black woman in the utopian future of *Star Trek* had on the place of Blackness in speculative futures more widely. He also examines the relationship of this role to Nichols's real-life influence on popular culture through her work with NASA. Uhura, Carrington notes, illustrates the cultural tendency to associate Black females with the exotic. This transitions well into

Carrington's succeeding chapter on *X-Men's Storm*, whom he calls the most recognizable Black superhero in American popular culture. Carrington follows Storm's transformations over her forty years as part of Marvel's *X-Men*, particularly her shifting origin stories and physical appearance. In Carrington's eyes, the changes in these aspects of Storm's character reflect shifting perceptions of racial, gender, and national differences, with the speculative lens of "mutant" providing an especially effective method of observation. Carrington continually illuminates these reflections of Blackness within different versions of popular and often mainstream imagination. While Carrington concedes that Storm never transcends a politics of representation, he suggests that she does imply transformative questions about the importance of such representation.

Black-run and Black-focused Milestone Media, a 1990s comic book company connected to DC Comics, established crossovers between the superhero genre, speculative futures, and urban America. Carrington returns to the relationship between fandom and speculative fiction production by examining the unique approach Milestone Media took in its "letters to the editor" pages. Through advance distributions, letters to the editor



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appeared almost immediately in the pages of their speculative comics, offering immediate fan input on social topics like abortions and contraceptives, an unusual practice for the superhero comic medium. Carrington shows that, though Milestone Media only lasted from 1993 until 1997, speculative fiction in comic books offers productive and ongoing approaches to studying popular culture.

Returning to *Star Trek*, Carrington's chapter on *Deep Space Nine* establishes the series's position in relation to the larger *Star Trek* universe before convincingly arguing that novelizations are relevant to explorations of race in the genre. The discussion centers on Steven Starnes's adaptation of the past-future, time-jumping episode "Far Beyond the Stars." With a multi-tiered approach to Blackness in speculative fiction (the story centers on two merged time periods and heroes, as Black 1950s science fiction writer Benny Russell envisions his twenty-fourth-century counterpart and protagonist, Captain Sisko, who simultaneously has visions of Russell), Carrington's exploration of "Far Beyond the Stars" tactfully explores both the historical and fictionalized worlds of Blackness in speculative fiction.

Focusing on fanfic from the site *Remember Us*—an internet archive, edited by Carrington, for minority-based fanfic—the final chapter explores how the form of fanfic writing puts marginalized characters from titles like *Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* into major roles in stories. Carrington summarizes his personal history in this chapter and selects stories from the site that highlight this phenomenon, arguing that this fan production constructs meaningful insights about Blackness as it performs within the genre.

Carrington's book presents an intriguing model for studying speculative fiction, one with the potential to improve an understanding of how Blackness performs and is performing in a largely White genre. This is particularly the case as Carrington's use of the fan-produced and fan-fueled elements of the genre reflect the cultural work being done by the mass of the population. His argument that this kind of analysis can be reparative has some potential, though he often delves into obscure material with which most of his readers will be unfamiliar and does not always show how this reparation can occur. Carrington's work has value in the growing field of Afrofuturism, and it also reflects the way that general SF studies continues to be evaluated both



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by itself and by the outside academic community. From the stars of mainstream SF to the lowlands of fan fiction, this book offers new insights on the value of speculative fiction in today's world.



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**Edward K. Chan**

*The Racial Horizon of Utopia: Unthinking the Future of Race in Late Twentieth-Century American Utopian Novels*

Peter Lang, 2015, pb, eb, 226 pp, \$62.95

ISBN 9783034319164

Reviewed by **Tom Lubek**

*The Racial Horizon of Utopia* explores both the 'problem of race and the compulsion to imagine something beyond it,' and, in doing so, sets out to begin the necessary work of filling in what its author, Edward K. Chan, describes as an 'absence' of 'the problematics of the relationship between race and utopia' in critical assessments of utopian literature (pp. 3-4).

Following Fredric Jameson's well-known claim that SF repeatedly 'demonstrate[s] and dramatize[s] our incapacity to imagine the future' and is therefore 'a contemplation of our own absolute limits' (Jameson, p. 153), Chan argues that 'Utopia has a specifically racial horizon that simultaneously occludes and clarifies our attempts to imagine new forms of racial identity, as well as Utopia itself (p. 18). For Chan, it is 'precisely the imagination of how the race issue contours our ideas of Utopia that is at stake in the late twentieth-

century Utopian novel' (pp. 18-19). In *The Racial Horizon of Utopia*, Chan traces this horizon between the 1970s and 1990s as it appears in the work of Dorothy Bryant, Marge Piercy, Samuel Delaney, Octavia E. Butler and Kim Stanley Robinson, offering insightful analyses of how these writers demonstrate both the imaginative possibilities and limitations 'of our conception of race' (p. 20).

For Chan, the frequent response, at least in the United States, to the question 'where does race go when we try to imagine *our selves* (two words) in the future [...] has been to say that in a fully achieved liberal democracy, racial difference will become irrelevant' (p. 38, original emphasis). Yet, at the same time, he argues that 'this view fails to take into account the role of corporeality in the formation of the racialized subject' (p. 38). Thus, his readings of these authors underscore 'the importance of acknowledging



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embodiment in our utopian imaginings of the future of race' to help us to 'unthink' the liberal democratic fantasy of a "colour-blind" future of race (p. 38). Returning to Jameson's point above, while none of the novels discussed in *The Racial Horizon of Utopia* successfully manages to imagine beyond this horizon, Chan's trenchant analysis of them—and the ways in which they fail—on the whole shows that 'in order to imagine new forms of democracy we must begin with the Subject rather than democracy as a totality' (p. 176).

Roughly speaking, the book is divided into two halves, with the first half laying the theoretical groundwork for the more detailed textual analysis that comes in the second half. Chapter One reads America as a 'racialized space' (p. 18), in which the 'ideal of the abstract citizen of liberal democracy' sits in tension with 'the full reality of life in racialized bodies' (p. 24), while Chapter Two builds on this by drawing on theories of corporeal feminism to posit 'embodiment' as what is missing from 'the abstract Subject of liberal democracy' (p. 48). These theoretical explorations are anchored by close textual analysis throughout. In Chapter Three, Chan explores Dorothy Bryant's *The Kin of Ata are Waiting for You* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976). He assesses the

limitations of the ways in which these authors '[disrupt] the signification of race' (p. 86), and how this 'boundary or horizon' to our imagination gestures towards the necessity of constructing 'a new model of the subject that can accommodate particularity without repressing or erasing it' (p. 115).

Chapters Four and Five are then devoted to Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (1980s) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy (1993-6) respectively. Chapter Four stands out as particularly interesting, not least because it is in *Lilith's Brood* that Chan locates a possible exception to the failure 'to imagine a "something else" beyond the abstract Subject of American Democracy' (p. 47). Chan reads *Lilith's Brood*, and indeed Butler's entire oeuvre, as a 'literature of embodiment' that both expresses 'what it means to embody difference' and 'what it means to confront the embodiment of difference' (p. 118). Building on Laura U. Marks's account of 'haptic cinema,' Chan describes *Lilith's Brood* in particular as a 'haptic utopia' that is 'based on tactility and embodiment' (p. 118) that must make us question not what utopia would 'look like,' but what it would 'feel like' (p. 122, original emphasis). In the same manner as his assessment of Bryant's, Piercy's, and Delany's novels, Chan probes the ways in which *Lilith's Brood* both attempts to look beyond and is



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circumscribed by Utopia's racial horizon. The result is a highly insightful analysis that builds upon the richly established seam of body-bound readings of Butler's work and explores the tensions in *Lilith's Brood* between the individual Subject vaunted by liberal democracy and the new collective forms of subjectivity brought about by the interbreeding of humans and Butler's imaginary Oankali aliens.

Chan writes in accessible and engaging prose, and the book should appeal to a wide range of readers. Chan provides brief but detailed synopses of all the major texts up for discussion, so that reader familiarity with them is not necessary. The quality of analysis also compensates for the relative brevity of his discussion of Bryant, Piercy and Delany as opposed to full chapters on Butler and Robinson, obviating any potential sense of imbalance. As Chan repeatedly states, *The Racial Horizon of Utopia* is not the final word on the relationship between race and Utopia, but is rather an inaugural call to other scholars to continue, or to take up, the necessary work of "unthinking" the popular future of race wherein 'the erasure of racial difference represents the positive form of the utopian horizon (p. 201). It is also an assertion of the centrality of utopian fiction, and SF more widely, to that critical goal.

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## **References**



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