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Articles on Language, Literature, and Pedagogy
Creative Writing and Book Reviews
Association News and Reports

THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION



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Special Issue: Afrofuturism: Past, Present, and Beyond

- “What Good is Science Fiction and Fantasy to Black People?”:
Afrofuturism as Hope and Movement** 1
Shelby Crosby and Terrence Tucker
- Dear Mothership [Coasted through ozone]** 4
Marcus Wicker
- Foreword** 5
Contemporary notes on the Black Speculative Arts Movement
Reynaldo Anderson
- Facts and Fictions: *Imperium in Imperio* and the Politics of
Early Black Speculative Fiction** 8
Mollie Godfrey
- Bye, Bye Binary: Reimagining Gender and Sexuality in
*An Unkindness of Ghosts*** 23
Kamri Jordan
- Butler’s “Legacy”: Lauren Olamina as Emancipatory Archetype** 32
Helane Androne
- Decolonizing the Mind: Amari’s Quest towards Allyship in
*Children of Blood and Bone*** 50
Sylvia Barnes

Reflective Futurology: Exploring Black Time Travel & Intergenerational Healing in <i>Lovecraft Country</i> and Beyond <i>Loren Cahill</i>	59
“Hokum and Hackwork” as Crucible for Black Utopian Development: Tracing the Inter/Intra-Racial Critique in George Schuyler’s <i>Anti-Utopian Black Empire</i> <i>Christopher Allen Varlack</i>	74
The Poetics of Hope: Utopian Desires, Afrofuturism, Black Girl Magic, and the Inauguration <i>Brandy E. Underwood</i>	88
Embracing the Sapphire: Black Women’s Rage in Speculative Fiction <i>Jasmine Wade</i>	106
Reversing the Middle Passage: The Afrofuturist Aesthetic of Toni Morrison’s <i>Song of Solomon</i> <i>Ousseynou B. Traore</i>	122
Hagar Revisited: Afrofuturism, Pauline Hopkins, and Reclamation in <i>The Colored American Magazine</i> and Beyond <i>Tanya N. Clark</i>	141
The Oankali Approach to Remembering in Octavia Butler’s <i>Lilith’s Brood</i> <i>R. Nicole Smith</i>	163
Tangible Black Joy and Beyond: An Interview with Isiah Lavender III <i>Shelby Crosby and Terrence Tucker</i>	175
Dear Mothership [Whereas we spit] <i>Marcus Wicker</i>	181
CONTRIBUTORS	182

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The College Language Association, founded in 1937 by a group of Black scholars and educators, is an organization of college teachers of English and foreign languages which serves the academic, scholarly and professional interests of its members and the collegiate communities they represent. Since 1957, the association has published the *CLA Journal*, a peer-reviewed biannual publication featuring scholarly research and reviews of books in the areas of language, literature, linguistics and pedagogy.

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“What Good is Science Fiction and Fantasy to Black People?”: Afrofuturism as Hope and Movement

Shelby Crosby and Terrence Tucker

In the essay, “Positive Obsession,¹” Octavia Butler explores how she became a writer and, more importantly, why she chose to write science fiction (or what we now call Afrofuturism). Terribly shy, Butler’s love of science fiction and fantasy began as a way to escape and build worlds where she could be “a magical horse, a Martian, a telepath.... There I could be anywhere but here, any time but now, with any people but these” (128). To be anywhere but here is part of Afrofuturism’s appeal. While these worlds can explore the realities of being Black in our current world, it also creates new images and feelings about said world. And that’s what we hope this issue will do for y’all—we want these essays to expand your minds and maybe even change how you see the world as the 80th CLA Convention we organized in Memphis in 2021 did for us. That conference inspired us to develop this issue. We want to keep the conversations started there going. The convention’s theme, Afrofuturism: Diasporic Visions, carved out space to discuss explicitly the extensive presence of Black futurity, of race and technology, and of fantasy and science fiction as key parts of African American literary tradition. Black writers have always infused their work with speculative elements even as they chronicle Black life with unmatched forms of realism. And while we see Afrofuturism present in art, music, and fashion, as Isiah Warner III and Lisa Yasezk claim in their introduction to *Literary Afrofuturism*, “such powerful artistic statements derive from a much older entertainment medium: the printed word” which can “extend back to the writing of eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley and nineteenth century abolitionist, soldier, and journalist Martin Delany and continue today with the award-winning SF of Delany, Jemisin, and a host of other authors” (3). Our ideas for the convention and this issue stand on the shoulders of the Memphis native Sheree Renee Thomas, whose 2000 edited collection *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* served as a launch point to study Black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism as traditions that reach as far back as the production of African American literature itself, as well as the history of CLA, itself founded in Memphis and still committed to the study and teaching of Black literature and language. We felt it critical to explore the history this tradition

¹ “Positive Obsession” was originally published in 1989 in *Essence* as “Birth of a Writer,” a title that Butler never liked.

while simultaneously celebrating the contemporary explosion of Afrofuturism in the mainstream, embodied by 2018's *Black Panther*, and the well-known, overdue credit that Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler have begun to garner.

These mainstream, public discussions of what Reynaldo Anderson has termed "Afrofuturism 2.0" appear at a crucial time in the history of Black folks because even as the technological advances and social media platforms that fuel this moment have brought Black people around the world more access, opportunities, and autonomy to be seen and heard, the external forces of white supremacy, colonialism, and market fundamentalism continue to oppress and dehumanize communities. Some of those forces have been emboldened over the last fifteen years as the post-Civil Rights, post-Obama period has failed to reverse the institutional impact of white supremacist hegemony. The persistence of police brutality and the explosion of mass incarceration, the gutting of the Voting Rights Act, and the upsurge of white nationalism into mainstream rhetoric and policy have led many to abandon hope of ever achieving the equity that many have sought for generations. For some, the result has been the descent into the violence and apathy that engulfed the Black community in the 1980s and 1990s. The second, perhaps more insidious has been the abandonment of collective action in favor of an individualism that prioritizes the self-consciousness or assimilation of the one but rejects the philosophies of collective uplift over which activists, intellectuals, and artists battled deep into the 20th century.

Historically African Americans relied on faith traditions, specifically through Black liberation theology and the black prophetic tradition, to resist the nihilism that white supremacist terror encourages in the bodies, minds, and spirits of blacks. As some intellectuals derisively refer to those faith traditions as "magic," the popular exploration of the supernatural in works like Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) and *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* (2019) has arrived as a powerful counter to such a dismissal. We are reminded then that in Literature of the African Diaspora, the spiritual – that fear, embrace, and mastery of the supernatural or unexplainable – sits at the center of literary tradition, from the hoodoo found in works of William Wells Brown and Ishmael Reed, the folktales and stories collected and told by Zora Neale Hurston, the invocation of ancestors and community to drive out ghosts in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In thinking about the Black Speculative Arts Movement that includes Afrofuturism along with other forms of expression that are finally receiving the study they deserve, Anderson reminds us that "We call it speculative because before you can actually physically pursue freedom or build a better future you have to imagine it first. It always starts with your imagination. And so the way you imagine freedom or a better life or a future, will start from your imagination

first” (Anderson qtd in Latief, “Looking to Afrofuturism 3.0”). The importance of supernatural-fueled imagination sits alongside technology and balances the Western assumptions that sometimes accompany proclamations of so-called “advancement” and continues to provide the blueprint for Black communities to see beyond the despair, trauma, and rage caused by the relentlessness of white supremacist assault.

We see this perhaps most clearly in the recent book *God is Change: Religious Practices and Ideologies in the Works of Octavia Butler* (2021), edited by Aparajita Nanda and Shelby Crosby which positions change, as opposed to dogma, as central to maintaining and reclaiming our humanity as faith traditions act as spaces for healing and community building. The vision of change that works of Afrofuturism depict are not idyllic utopias disconnected from the struggles that we currently face, but they are visions that inspire us towards each other and instill the hope we need to avoid the paralyzing despair, extreme individualism, and destructive, enraged silence that many find themselves enduring.

Black people need this escape and creative reimagining in order to survive the hostile world that we live in. We need to be able to think about a future that does not center solely around racism and white supremacy. We need to be able to imagine a future where our children might be free of the isms that run our current reality, “At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what “everyone” is saying, doing, thinking—whoever “everyone” happens to be this year” (Butler 135). Afrofuturism provides a space of infinite possibility and imagination. Maybe George Clinton and Public Enemy had it right all along: seeking a mothership connection and imaging a Black planet are where it’s really at.

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Dear Mothership

Marcus Wicker

after Robert Hayden

Coasted through ozone in chameleon
candy paint SS Eldorado rattled
quad jet exhaust boosters at minimum
vibration Shield maintained Rained 48K
Stankonium rust flakes over rampant
cotton fields 40kHz south of Atlanta

i give to this land a gold record dowry
Diamond futures burned particulate-
clean of blood & gash Pay the toll
when i slip between borders our Shadow
Galaxy their balkanized flyover states

i practice being an american terrestrial male

i spore our toothpick flag embers into earth
before bending the corner of a new world

Foreword

Contemporary Notes on the Black Speculative Arts Movement

Reynaldo Anderson

There is an energy abroad in the world today that is influenced by financialization, digitalization, commodification and globalization that seeks to marginalize presence, erase our memories, and quiet our voices. Yet we persist, we refuse to die, and our persistence has yielded fruit. The Black Speculative Arts Movement is a product of memories that survive in our cultural DNA that remind us of the need for safe harbors to imagine Black utopias for the beautiful unborn and honor the best of our past. More specifically, the Black Speculative tradition gave birth to what we now refer to as Afrofuturism with its roots in 19th century discourses around anti-slavery revolutionary practices, science, and early pan-Africanist sentiment. The cultural critic Greg Tate asserted that *a people without visionaries is a people without an inspirational path to the future*. Black speculative literatures genesis lies in the 19th century with the work of men and women like Martin Delany, Sutton Griggs and Pauline Hopkins. Their work grappled with the intersection of the oppression of African people, scientific racism, esotericism, and politics. Their work and other Black writers paralleled the emergence of the European science fiction tradition.

The origins of the Black Speculative Arts Movement lie in the planning and execution of the *Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of the Black Imagination* curated by John Jennings and I in a 2015 exhibition at the Schomburg library in Harlem, New York. The conceptual and speculative design for the exhibition were heavily influenced by the vision and scholarship of W.E.B. Du Bois and the ideas and material culture produced by artists and intellectuals that contribute to Black speculative culture. However, the social movement dynamism of the Black Speculative Arts Movement reflects historical processes, global in scope, that have historical currents in societal changes that have emerged the last 50 years. Although the movement is indebted to earlier Black diasporic art formations that date back to the early 20th century, it has been heavily influenced by the social changes described as Future Shock, Megatrends, and Acceleration.

For example, what can be described as the Future Shock era of social change of the 60s and 70s aptly described by writer Alvin Toffler and singer Curtis Mayfield. Future Shock, or the social disorientation that accompanied rapid social change in technology and social values shaped the artistic work and production of creatives like Sun Ra, Octavia Butler, Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed and other artists and

thinkers of the period producing work that was in conversation with the global Black liberation struggle and Black Arts movement of the period in question. Moreover, the work of these artists would sow the seeds of creative thought and praxis later generations of creatives would refer to as Afrofuturism. However, the work of these creatives was only the beginning of forecasting the currents of social change that would be referred to by some as the era of megatrends of the late 20th century.

The megatrends of the late 20th century reflected changes in capitalism that were tied to the end of the Cold War and an intensification of the spread of neoliberalism and globalization whose ideas and conceptual origins were reflected in the policies and ideas of Margaret Thatcher, Pierre Trudeau, and Ronald Reagan. Furthermore, during this period of the late 80s and early 90s scholars like Cornel West, Molefi Asante, Henry Louis Gates, bell hooks and others would produce intellectual works that would increasingly reflect a post-civil rights era sentiment among Black scholars. Black feminist scholar Barbara Christian characterized the environment best when she wrote an essay “The Race for Theory” in 1987 that described the environment surrounding the attempt to frame the new environment. During the period in question, Black Studies scholars like Molefi Kete Asante and C.T. Keto at Temple University, wrote about the destiny of African people in relation to time and space, and the need to be futurologists, and comic creators like Dwane McDuffie illustrated futuristic Black sensibilities. During this social milieu cultural critic Mark Dery wrote an article “Black to the Future” that observed the nexus between black speculative creativity and technology and in conversation with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose, coined the word Afrofuturism. The term Afrofuturism captured the megatrend of the times with the impact of the internet during the 1990s and a concern about the digital divide reflecting a lack of access and the increasing influence of personal computers and new technologies on the culture. The Afrofuturism listserv organized by Paul Miller aka DJ Spooky, Sheree Renee Thomas, Alondra Nelson, Anna Everett and others debated these concepts along with likeminded creatives during the 90s and served as an important archival space for the concept. However, after this period Miller would later claim in an interview with tobias van veen, the first wave of Afrofuturism collapsed due to a lack of a philosophical focus.

Following the 1990s, the second wave of Black futurity was influenced by the emergence of social media in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century and the rising impact of climate change, populist movements, and fraying of the socio-political paradigm in the world system established between 1945 and the beginnings of the Bretton-Woods system. In addition to the work of writers like Ytasha Womack in 2013, and recently described by Thomas Friedman as the Age of Acceleration, Black cultural production exists in a period characterized by

digital culture, globalization, and international capital, influenced the reemergence of Afrofuturism or 2.0 and its academic relationship to Africana Studies, and a redefinition of the term during an exchange between Alondra Nelson and Reynaldo Anderson at the Alien Bodies conference at Emory University in 2014.

Fast forward to the aftermath of the *Unveiling Visions* exhibition the decision was made to translate the exhibition into a movement to positively impact the social consciousness of the Black community and the diaspora. Correspondingly, during the exhibition at the invitation of British creative Florence Ifeoma Okoye, I submitted a manifesto on Black Speculative Art that was later published in an edited version by the *Obsidian* journal. With opinions solicited from members of the movement, it was determined *Black Speculative Art is a creative, aesthetic practice that integrates African or Africana diasporic worldviews with science or technology and seeks to interpret, engage, design or alter reality for the re-imagination of the past, the contested present, and as a catalyst for the future.* In tandem with the big bang and global interest generated by the movie *Black Panther* the movement rapidly became an international entity with several different intellectual strands reflecting the diversity and geography of its members. During this phase one of the organizers of the movement Sheree Renee Thomas brought the movement to Memphis Tennessee in 2018 for an event called *Black to the Future: Revival on the River* and the meeting reminded its attendees the Black Speculative tradition is deeply rooted in the histories, narratives and stories of Black people in the southern United States.

Finally, this brings us to why this anthology is so important. This special issue of *CLAJ* organized by Shelby Crosby and Terrence Tucker will build upon the still emerging field of Afrofuturist studies and Black Speculative literature. For example, following the lead of scholars like Isiah Lavender, contributors to this special issue explore, through the work of Martin Delany and River Solomon the prehistory of Afrofuturism and the politics surrounding its emergence and speculate what these systems of oppression may look like into the future, reconceptualizing Black subjectivity and gender in counternarratives. Furthermore, the transgenerational work that appears in this issue ranges between an analysis of the work of Octavia Butler and Toni Adeyemi to the futurological explorations of the show *Lovecraft Country*. Moreover, the recontextualizing of the literary work of writers or poets like Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, George Schuyler, and Amanda Gorman as part of the Black Speculative tradition explores and offers a literary glimpse of the pursuit of utopia, practice of satire, and memory/knowledge systems as forms of resistance or transformation and interconnectedness. In closing, this special issue of *CLAJ* will be noteworthy as it continues to expand the dialogue and history around the Black Speculative literary tradition and its contribution to the growing global dialogue surround the Afrofuturist phenomenon.

Facts and Fictions: *Imperium in Imperio* and the Politics of Early Black Speculative Fiction

Mollie Godfrey

I

This essay examines the Black literary prehistory of Afrofuturism against the backdrop of two opposing pressures experienced by Black writers of the nineteenth century: the political compulsion to speak the truth and the very real risk of violent repercussions for doing so. Martin Delany's *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859) and Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) both use Black speculative techniques to explore the violent overthrow of white supremacist institutions. While such fictions are commonplace in the contemporary genre of Afrofuturism, their emergence in the context of nineteenth-century politics is remarkable. At that time, the political efficacy of Black texts often depended on their perceived truth value, and nineteenth-century Black writers often went to great lengths to demonstrate the credibility of their accounts of slavery and racial injustice. At the same time, revolutionary or radical Black texts that were invested with this kind of truth value practically ensured the author's death, condemnation, or persecution—as with David Walker's 1829 "Appeal," Nat Turner's 1831 "Confessions," and Ida B. Wells's 1892 "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases," the latter of which resulted in death threats, the destruction of Wells's Memphis office, and her relocation to Chicago.¹ What does it mean that some of the earliest examples of Black speculative fiction emerged at a time when Black writers were both politically compelled to and prevented from speaking the truth? How might these speculative texts reshape our understanding of the political stakes of what's been called the "cultural turn" in African American politics in the early twentieth century?

Imperium in Imperio, written just seven years after Wells's pamphlet, self-published, and sold by Griggs himself door-to-door, contains characters who not only condemn lynching and the government's failure to defend its victims, as did Wells, but also call for armed revolution against the United States as a response. The novel is famously ambiguous, dividing critics as to whether it supports, condemns,

¹ Henry Highland Garnet—an abolitionist and an early advocate for establishing African American colonies in western territories, Mexico, Haiti, and Liberia—was also targeted by a mob in 1863.

or refuses to take a side on this revolutionary response.² Rather than intervening in the critical debate about *what* the novel is trying to say, this essay shifts our attention to *how* it is trying to speak. Whereas truth had previously been understood as a key facet of nineteenth-century Black writing, novels like *Imperium in Imperio* showed that fiction could be as politically valuable as fact. And although some scholars have argued that the turn to fictional and other literary modes of writing at the turn of the twentieth century represented a retreat from direct political action to indirect cultural politics, I suggest that the turn to fiction—and to speculative fiction in particular—was a way of speaking a more revolutionary politics than the pressures of white supremacy otherwise allowed.

II

The term Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in 1994 to describe “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture” (180). Although Dery identified Afrofuturism as a late-twentieth-century phenomenon, more recent scholars such as Lisa Yaszek, Britt Rusert, and M. Giulia Fabi have started to explore Afrofuturism’s deeper historical roots.³ Yaszek, Rusert, and Fabi all locate Black speculative fiction’s origins in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, arguing that Black speculative imaginaries are defined by their recovery of, meditation on, and mobilization of alternative pasts, presents, and futures that center Blackness. While Yaszek understands Afrofuturism as an “an extension of the historical recovery projects that black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over 200 years” (47), Rusert focuses on the genre’s critique of scientific racism and its mobilization of scientific tools and imaginaries in the cause of freedom (802).⁴ Fabi, meanwhile, links the rise of speculative and utopian imaginaries in the nineteenth century to the “period of imperialist expansion,” experienced by many as “a veritable narrative race into the future” (87). Where mainstream utopian fictions tended to support white supremacy either overtly or covertly, Fabi argues, Black utopian fictions emerged “in order to oppose the narrative erasure of blacks

² Where some critics argue that “a desired Black Nationalism wins out in the novel” (Lavender 76; see also Moses 204), others read the novel not as an endorsement of separatist violence but “as a warning of possible violence to come” (Fleming 77; see also Briggs 170), while still others conclude that “Griggs’s own position remains unclear” (Bould 59; see also Tal 75 and Veselá 277).

³ See also Zamalin on the associated and equally long history of Black utopian politics (3–6), and Lavender, who similarly identifies hope as the key feature of Afrofuturism, noting that hope has structured “black life from antebellum America to the present” (4).

⁴ Rusert’s term, “fugitive science,” is both broader and narrower than most critics’ focus on Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction, a term she uses to describe both fictional and non-fictional Black scientific and speculative discourses of the 19th century.

from the future American nation” and “to appropriate the literary and cultural power to plan a profound transformation of the nation that was segregating them” (88).

Common to these critics’ accounts of early Black speculative fiction is the idea that the genre functions primarily to critique white supremacist “truths” about the past, present, and future, and to imagine new pro-Black pasts, presents, and futures in their place. But these fictions did more than challenge white supremacist visions of the truth; they also challenged the very compulsion to truth placed on African American writing of this era. As numerous scholars have noted, fiction was rare among antebellum Black writers, for whom, as scholar Andy Doolen puts it, “true accounts of slavery were seen as necessary to undermining its legitimacy and combating the myths of white supremacy” (154).⁵ Thanks to the pressure to “appear trustworthy and credible to a skeptical white audience,” Doolen argues, the reception of antebellum Black novels was often lukewarm and Black fiction only began to flower in earnest after Black “authors were emancipated from the rhetorical and political constraints of abolitionism” (155). Even so, the autobiographical and non-fictional mode remained dominant for some time—though now focused on uplift rather than abolition—preferred by such towering figures as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois, among many others (Goldsby xvii).

Increasingly, however, Black leaders began to proclaim the value of different modes of writing to the Black liberation movement. As Daylanne English writes, “The 1880s and 1890s witnessed the failure of Reconstruction, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the passage of state Black Codes, the peak years of lynching, and, of course, *Plessy v. Ferguson*” (49). At a time when the “nation was not just devaluing ‘Negroes’ but refusing to consider them as individuals at all,” English argues, “African American writers turned particularly and pragmatically to the novel, a form in the business of ‘reproducing modern individuals’” (51). Early proponents of literature in general and fiction in particular included Anna Julia Cooper, Victoria Earle Matthews, and Pauline Hopkins, all of whom saw in literature what scholar Kenneth W. Warren has described as both indexical and instrumental power—counting both as an “index” of Black achievement and as an “instrument” in the fight against Jim Crow (*What Was* 10–11). By 1911, Du Bois had firmly associated the “uplift” of the “Negro” with “a new literature and the faint glimmering of a new Art” (Du Bois, “Editorial” 20), and such arguments would later be codified by leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance such as Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, and Du Bois.

⁵ See also Andrews 23, Foley 245, Yarborough 111.

Scholars such as Kenneth W. Warren and Adolph Reed have described this turn to art and literature as key tools in the fight for racial equality as a “cultural turn” (Warren, *So Black and Blue* 33–34), implying that this turn represented a retreat from “direct political action” to “indirect cultural politics” (31).⁶ Within this “cultural turn,” turn-of-the-century authors are often undervalued by critics—characterized, as Fabi writes, “as meek assimilationists ‘who went a-begging to white America,’ to quote Richard Wright’s famous words” (90). However, the use of speculative modes of fiction in this era complicates such critical accounts of the turn to non-literal modes of writing. After all, it is in these fictional, speculative genres that we see some of the earliest depictions not only of racial egalitarianism (Johnson, *Light Ahead*), but also of all-Black utopias (Hopkins), as well as striking representations of organized armed resistance to white supremacy (Delany and Griggs). Like the long history of antebellum spirituals functioning as a mode of covert communication, early Black speculative fiction functioned as an attempt not just to “beg . . . the question of the Negroes’ humanity” (Wright 99) or win “cultural recognition” from white readers (Locke 15), but rather to skirt white recognition all together—to speak to Black communities about topics that were otherwise too dangerous to speak. Prior to Griggs’s speculative novel, some of the most prominent places where Black calls for organized armed resistance do appear—with the exception of Walker’s “Appeal” and Turner’s “Confessions”—are also in fiction: in particular, in Frederick Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” (1853) and Martin Delany’s *Blake, or the Huts of America*, (1859–62).⁷ Critic Kalí Tal notes that common among most of these fictions is the “authorial decision to withhold judgment” about armed resistance (Tal 75). For these writers, then, the turn to fiction, and especially to the opportunities for speculation and ambiguity that fiction provided, made it possible to openly discuss revolutionary models of resistance at a time and place when even its discussion could mean death.

III

Among early forays into Black speculative fiction, Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) is especially striking for two reasons: first, because unlike its predecessors it “looks forward to a form of [B]lack nationalism which would not be

⁶ See also Reed 130 and, for other discussions of this argument, Jarrett’s “New Negro Politics” 837–38 and *Deans and Truants* 7; English 49–51; and Tate 9–11.

⁷ See Tal 69, Bryant. These examples are distinct from Griggs’s novel, however, in that both pertain to the overthrow of slavery rather than secession from the nation. William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* and Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) also discuss armed resistance openly, if more briefly, and there are moments of individual violent resistance in certain slave narratives, most notably Douglass’s fight with Comey.

seriously considered by many until well into the new century” (Whitlow 35); and second, because it does so at a time and from a place when even existing discourses of Black liberation carried serious risks of white supremacist retribution.⁸ Griggs was born in Texas in 1872. After graduating from Bishop College in Texas and Richmond Theological Seminary in Virginia, he moved to Tennessee, where he served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of East Nashville. Griggs also served as state secretary for the Niagara Movement (a precursor to the NAACP) and organizer of the National Public Welfare League, a prominent society devoted to the cause of “racial uplift.” In addition to his work as pastor, orator, and essayist, he wrote five novels between the years of 1899–1908. *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), self-published and sold door-to-door, was his first. Another novel, *The Hindered Hand*, written in 1905 in response to Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), was one of the most popular Black novels of the early twentieth century. Griggs’s career places him in an interesting and important third position in relation to the two Black leaders whose disagreements dominated turn-of-the-century Black politics, W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. On the one hand, he was deeply invested and involved in Du Bois’s project of racial uplift; on the other hand, he occupied that political position not from the relative safety of the north, but from Washington’s geographic context in the south. As Wilson J. Moses and Gabriel A. Briggs have argued, Griggs complicates the scholarly tendency to follow Alain Locke in locating the rise of the “New Negro” in the north (Moses 203, Briggs 155). In fact, although the term is often associated with Alain Locke’s 1925 essay by that name, it dates back to at least 1895 and appears in one of the final speeches in Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio*: “Before we make a forward move, let us pull the veil from before the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon that he may see the New Negro standing before him humbly, but firmly demanding every right granted him by his maker and wrested from him by man” (163). Written only four years after Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta compromise speech, two years after Du Bois first identified the color line as a “vast veil” (Du Bois, “Strivings”), and twenty-six years before Locke’s essay, “The New Negro” (1925), *Imperium in Imperio* is already articulating the need to “pull the veil” off the image of the “Old Negro” that Washington was so careful to protect, and it is importantly articulating that need from an embattled geographic position in the south, where “pulling the veil” required great personal risk.

Griggs’s politics have therefore frustrated critics accustomed to an easier dichotomy between the northern Du Bois and southern Washington, with

⁸ Whitlow argues that Griggs’s primary predecessors in the genre—Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave” and Delany’s *Blake*—did not imagine new models of Black liberation but rather drew on the “familiar slave-insurrections scheme” (35).

Robert Bone characterizing Griggs's politics as "militant and challenging" and at the same time "conciliatory to the point of servility" (33). Susan Gillman explains that this apparent inconsistency was likely due to necessity. Although Griggs was an active supporter of the Niagara Movement, his work and livelihood "was supported and funded" by whites; like Washington, he needed to be deemed "an acceptable race leader" on their terms (74). As a result, scholar Eric Curry argues, his writings "could be radical or conservative as the situation dictated" (25). Another way to understand the apparent inconsistency or ambiguity of Griggs's politics might be to ask, how is it possible to speak of militant modes of Black liberation while speaking from the temporal and geographical center of antiblack violence? This question—how to speak freely of Black liberation in the context of violent white supremacy—is at the heart of Griggs's first novel, and at the heart of early forays into Black speculative fiction.

The phrase "imperium in imperio" translates roughly to a power within a power, or an empire within an empire. In the novel, this power within refers to a secret African American government operating in the shadows of the American government, "[a]nother government, complete in every detail," serving a population of over seven million people, created to "secure for the free negroes all the rights and privileges of men" and to "secure the freedom of the enslaved negroes the world over" (129). The novel centers on two main characters, Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, whose alliterative names both frustrate readers and, as Maria Karafilis argues, suggest that they "are connected in a fundamental way and not completely divergent" (140). We are first introduced to the Imperium by a third character, also with an alliterative name, Berl Trout, who is a member of the Imperium and presents himself as writing what we are about to read just before his own execution by the Imperium for treason. The book then narrates the life stories of its protagonists, Belton and Bernard—whom many scholars have argued bear some similarities to Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, respectively. Like Washington, "working-class, dark-skinned Belton Piedmont . . . rises from humble Southern origins to become a college president" (Knadler 684) and "in the end places his country ahead of his race" (Gruesser 59). In contrast, "light-skinned, bourgeois mulatto Bernard Belgrave" (Knadler 684) is, like Du Bois, "a Harvard graduate who chooses race over country" (Gruesser 59). Written at the height of Washington and Du Bois's conflicts with one another, *Imperium in Imperio's* invocation of traits particular to each man signals its engagement with their debates.

And yet, as other critics have pointed out, these comparisons are never wholly or singly satisfying. As Karafilis notes, the symbolic naming of Belton's and Bernard's early sites of activity, with "Belton's experiences" located "at Stowe University" while Bernard "finds his peers and partners at the 'Hotel Douglass,'"

suggests that their conflicts over the best strategy for Black liberation have a longer history (127). Furthermore, the positions that both Belton and Bernard stake out are far more radical than anything proposed by either Washington or Du Bois. As Andrew Hebard argues, “the ending is not a struggle between assimilationist and separatist ideas. . . . Both of these options are in fact proposed and rejected in the narrative. Instead, Bernard and Belton propose two different versions of territorial sovereignty” (68)—one violent, and one democratic. Several critics have suggested as possible inspirations lesser-known figures like Henry Highland Garnet and Alexander Crummell, both of whom wanted African Americans to emigrate to the western territories, Liberia, or elsewhere. Closest to Belton’s plan to democratically secure control of the Texas government by emigrating to the state en masse are the ideas of Edwin McCabe, who wanted to create a majority-Black state in Oklahoma.⁹

Bernard’s alternative plan to wage war for Black sovereignty distinguishes him from any of these figures. As Gruesser puts it:

Since the early 1800s, U.S. black leaders had debated the pros and cons of both assimilation into the white race and transportation to Africa or other locations beyond the borders of the United States. However, the possibility of organized violence was not, *for obvious reasons*, openly discussed during the antebellum period, nor was it explicitly raised in the decades immediately following emancipation. Thus the proposals made and the actions taken in Griggs’s novel to respond to the denial of black citizenship with armed revolt represent a notable departure from the writings of his African American precursors and contemporaries. (Gruesser 51, emphasis mine)

Numerous Black writers wrote positively about Touissant L’Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, and Du Bois described him as “the great Negro Touissant” as early as 1898 (*Suppression* 70), but he did not then call for a similar solution to Jim Crow segregation.¹⁰ In other words, the dominant debate among Black leaders of Griggs’s day was over how best and at what speed to pursue Black integration into American society. Griggs’s novel, however, begins with a far less central debate in public Black discourse about whether Black equality can be achieved at all without a Black majority. The novel then pushes beyond contemporaneous public Black discourse entirely to ask whether a Black majority can be achieved without violence. The fictional, speculative, and ambiguous form this discourse takes in Griggs’s novel is precisely that which makes possible its articulation at the temporal and spatial center of antiblack violence.

⁹ See Veselá 277, Gruesser 58, and Peterson 27.

¹⁰ For more positive references to Toussaint L’Ouverture in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Black writing, see Jackson.

IV

In the novel, Belton and Bernard are childhood friends whose different socioeconomic statuses lead them down different paths in life: Belton, dependent on the support of a white patron, becomes the president of a Black college in Louisiana; Bernard, supported by the money and connections of his wealthy white father, becomes a successful lawyer in Virginia and is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. However, Belton, unlike Booker T. Washington, proves too outspoken to hang on to his position at the college; he soon becomes the victim of an attempted lynching, among other assaults, and barely escapes with his life. Later, on trial for murdering one of his white assailants, Belton meets Bernard again, this time with Bernard serving as his lawyer. Bernard, who has led a comparatively privileged life up until this point, argues Belton's case before the Supreme Court and miraculously wins. In a surprise twist, it is then revealed to Bernard, and to the reader, that Belton has long been a member of a secret Black nation within the nation, complete with a fully functioning government, treasury, and over seven million citizens. Before Belton reveals this secret, however, he administers a loyalty test, one in which Bernard must show that he is such a "patriot" to the cause of Black liberation that he will refuse to betray Black people who are organizing a conspiracy against the United States, even to the point of being willingly executed as a "traitor" to the United States. Bernard passes the loyalty test and, because of his pedigree and national renown, is immediately invited to become the first President of the Imperium; he is the Imperium's "George Washington" (134).

Later, in the aftermath of the lynching of one of their members, Bernard—now serving as President—proposes that the Imperium go to war with the United States, perhaps a nod to the revolutionary image of George Washington earlier invoked. Belton, however, disagrees with this approach, arguing that they should instead reveal the existence of the Imperium, "spend four years in endeavors to impress the Anglo-Saxon that he has a New Negro on his hands and must surrender what belongs to him" and, if that fails, emigrate to Texas to claim democratic control of the state government (163). Bernard then proposes a counterplan: "to reconsider our determination to make known the existence of our Imperium, and avoid all mention of an emigration to Texas," to "secretly" purchase all land on the borders of Texas, infiltrate the U.S. Navy and enter into secret negotiations with foreign parties, and then to militarily seize Texas and Louisiana, giving Louisiana "to foreign allies in return for their aid" (168). Belton declares this plan "treason" and asks to resign from the Imperium, which, by their law, means death. He is executed and buried, "shrouded in an American flag" (174).

In the final pages of the novel, our narrator reveals himself to be a man named Berl Trout, who serves as one of Belton's executioners and is now racked with guilt

for having killed off “the spirit of conservatism in the Negro race . . . the last of that peculiar type of Negro heroes that could so fondly kiss the smiting hand” (174). Bernard, Berl believes, having been “reared in luxury, gratified as to every whim . . . was a man to be feared” (176). Fearing “destruction, devastation and death all around,” Berl decides to foil Bernard’s plan by revealing “the existence of the Imperium that it might be broken up or watched” (177). At the end of the novel, Berl awaits his own death as a “traitor” to his race, though as a “patriot,” he says, to “the whole human family” (177), and is hopeful that those who hear what he has done will, in return, “help my poor downtrodden people to secure those rights for which they organized the Imperium, which my betrayal has now destroyed” (177). The novel ends on this ambiguous note, Berl now describing himself as a “patriot” for doing exactly what Belton’s loyalty test had earlier described as “treason.”¹¹

Most critical attention to Griggs’s novel has been devoted to making sense of this ambiguous ending, by either trying to line Griggs up with one of these three protagonists (Gruesser 51), explaining his novel’s critique of each position (Veselá 277), or arguing that the novel embraces the need for multiple “means of resistance” (Kerafalis 140). Instead of ascertaining which of these strategies the novel agrees with, I am interested in exploring the remarkable significance of the novel verbalizing them at all, especially at a historical moment when white communities were increasingly using both legal and extralegal means to police and terrorize Black communities. If Griggs’s novel is remarkable because it stakes out positions more radical than almost anyone else of his era is willing to mention—at least publicly—it is also remarkable for speaking those positions from the geographic position of the south, where speaking anti-segregationist ideas—let alone revolutionary ones—was far more dangerous.¹²

In the novel, this is a lesson that Belton learns when he moves farther south from Tennessee to Louisiana to take a job as the head of a Black college. For Belton, the journey is a firsthand education in the ways in which police- and mob-violence maintain segregation and inhibit civil rights such as the right to vote and freedom of speech. When Belton instructs his students on their “duty to vote” (101), he is quickly informed by a local Black man that he must not “know in what danger [he] stand[s]” when he says such things (101). Belton has already proven himself to be an eloquent speaker on matters of liberty and a successful leader of small-scale

¹¹ For a deeper discussion of treason and patriotism in the novel, see Brown 196–206.

¹² Briggs persuasively argues that much of Griggs’s adaptation of Washingtonian and Du Boisian ideas are easily explained by Griggs’s position as a southern author speaking to a southern audience (156).

Black protests during his education at Stowe University. However, now in the Deep South, he quickly discovers that certain words are too dangerous to speak, even though here—precisely because of the ever-present restrictions and threats—they are all the more urgent.

Against this backdrop of constant threats from white supremacist organizations, the novel emphasizes the strategic value of trickery and secrecy in numerous ways, not least by keeping secrets from the reader. Up until the *Imperium* is revealed, Belton seems to be in political retreat, his speech more and more conscribed by the threat of physical violence, such that when he is finally taken to be lynched, it is for the act of openly protesting Black disenfranchisement in his local community. With the revelation of the *Imperium*, however, the reader realizes that beneath this growing restraint, Belton has been increasingly politically active. He says:

While I was at Stowe University, though a young man, I was chairman of the bureau of education [in the *Imperium*] and had charge of the work of educating the race upon the doctrine of human liberty. While I was at Cadeville, La., that was my work. Though not attracting public attention, I was sowing seed broadcast. After my famous case I was elected to Congress here [in the *Imperium*] and soon thereafter chosen speaker, which position I now hold. (133–34)

Thus, it turns out that the narrator hasn't been telling us the whole story, that the characters don't necessarily mean what they say, and that Belton has been trying all this time to master the art of communicating in the interests of the *Imperium* without "attracting public attention" (134). When Belton is finally taken to be lynched for disobeying the strict limits placed on Black speech in the south, he also feigns death to escape, again showcasing his awareness that secrecy and subterfuge are necessary for survival.

This approach to survival recalls the emphasis on trickery and subterfuge that is so central to African American trickster tales and to the secret operations and communications that ran the Underground Railroad, and it forms the basis of Belton and Bernard's disagreement. Although they disagree, at one point or another, about the value of integration versus separatism, and about the value of the ballot versus the bullet, their final disagreement is about the value of secrecy itself—whether their shared goal of creating a Black state in Texas is better achieved by coming out in the open or by working in the shadows. In the context of the growing power of secret societies such as the Ku Klux Klan to use surveillance, violence, and intimidation to suppress Black communities and Black speech, the *Imperium* harnesses the power of the secret society for the purpose of

Black protection and liberation.¹³ However, Belton believes that the time has come to “pull the veil” and “no longer conceal from the Anglo-Saxon the fact that the Imperium exists, so that he may see . . . that we prefer to die in honor rather than live in disgrace” (163). It is time, he seems to be saying, to speak openly to white America. Bernard, in contrast, wants them to “reconsider our determination to make known the existence of our Imperium” (167); the only way they will gain control of Texas, he believes, is through secret dealings and surprise. Berl’s decision to support Belton by revealing the Imperium also ironically showcases Bernard’s reasons not to do that; by revealing the Imperium, Berl lays the Imperium open to white surveillance and to being “broken up or watched” (176).

Although Belton and Bernard disagree about this question of *how* to speak, for both men the Imperium represents the power of a Black collective that fights and speaks as one. As Belton puts it, the Imperium shows “that each individual Negro does not stand by himself, but is a link in a great chain that must not be broken with impunity” (163). At the same time, their disagreement over how to deploy this collective power shows that they do not stand entirely as one. In this respect, Berl’s betrayal of the Imperium so “that it might be broken up or watched” (176) only continues to break what was already broken. Perhaps the idea of the Imperium, even in the novel, was always a fiction. But, even if so, it was a powerful fiction.

The compulsion to truth imposed on nineteenth-century Black writers attached ideas to individuals, which meant not only that individuals could be killed for their ideas but that ideas could be suppressed by killing individuals. *Imperium in Imperio* refuses this compulsion in multiple ways: by inventing a fantastical reality, by making use of an ambiguously unreliable narrator, by ending without authorial statements on efficacy of either path, and by investing political power in a fictional and collective Black voice rather than a real, individual one. As a result, even if Belton and Berl and the Imperium itself are dead, the idea lives on. Berl says:

If the voice of a poor Negro, who thus gives his life, will be heard, I only ask as a return that all mankind will join hands and help my poor down-trodden people to secure those rights for which they organized the Imperium, which my betrayal has now destroyed. I urge this because love of liberty is such an inventive genius, that if you destroy one device it at once constructs another more powerful. (177)

¹³ Less than ten years after the publication of Griggs’s novel, the FBI was formed and almost immediately began its long program of targeting “race agitators” with similar tactics of surveillance. Niagara Movement members Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois were among the first targeted by the FBI (Choudhury and Cyril).

The Imperium is now more fictional than ever—destroyed, Berl says, but at once imaginatively reborn. It is therefore useful as a fiction, a “device,” an idea of Black collectivity that has been forced into the shadows by white supremacy but has also been revealed by Berl and by this novel, and in its revelation wields a certain power.

V

In a book of essays titled *Life's Demands; or, According to Law* (1916), Griggs described literature as having two primary values: as a powerful tool for enabling “Negroes to be able to talk to the white people in a way to fully reveal the soul of the race” (82), and as an “indispensable aid . . . to the development of the spirit of patriotism” within Black readers (98). *Imperium in Imperio* points to the different needs of these two potential audiences. As Eric Curry puts it, the novel is “part of a cultural pattern occurring through the nineteenth-century [sic] wherein African American writers increasingly address not only a white audience in an effort to engage the discourses and perspectives of white audiences, but a black audience in an effort to consider the discourses and perspectives of the black community as well” (25). Though Griggs told his white audiences that he was using literature to speak directly to them, he was using the new tools of speculative fiction to do this while also speaking differently to Black audiences.

Imperium in Imperio is ultimately less interested in authorizing Belton's position over Bernard's or Bernard's over Belton's than it is in the question of how to make it possible to speak these positions at all. Even if there is no secret Imperium operating in the shadows of the American government, Bernard's revolutionary discourse does indeed operate in the shadows of American discourse, existing in the private conversations within real Black communities. For “obvious reasons” (Gruesser 51), this discourse is never printed, never published, but it is there, a silent and underlying threat that gives potential weight and urgency to the more modest proposals that Griggs and the other members of the Niagara movement would make. This suggests that for many nineteenth-century writers, the turn to fictional modes of writing, and to speculative fiction in particular, didn't represent a retreat from “direct political action” to “indirect cultural politics,” as some have argued, but rather a way of speaking a more revolutionary politics, and wielding a more collective power, than the pressures of white supremacy otherwise allowed.

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Bye Bye Binary: Reimagining Gender in *An Unkindness of Ghosts*

Kamri Jordan

There is no rulebook for navigating oppressive systems, but oppression cannot eradicate discovery and creation. Marginalized groups rely on a multitude of practices to assert their subjectivity against institutions that say otherwise. One such method that has lasted for centuries is the act of storytelling, which for African Americans over the years has taken many forms ranging from work songs, spirituals, and slave narratives to dramas, poetry, and novels. The last of these forms is exemplified by the contemporary counter-story created in Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017). Aboard a spaceship in a post-climate catastrophe future, Solomon presents a society where institutional oppression and slavery remain upheld. With an Afrofuturist structure, Solomon pushes for a new vision of Black people's subjectivity, and agency develops within and against systems that seek to deny them such.

Aboard the *HSS Matilda*, residents are separated into the Upper and Lower Decks. Divided by Solomon's imagined caste system, upperdeckers live a life of comfort, while the lowerdeckers ensure the ship's day-to-day running. However, all are put in peril as a problem with the *Matilda*'s energy source causes a series of blackouts. Amidst the quest to solve the mystery of these blackouts, characters such as the protagonist Aster seek to find their identities. Following the notes left behind by her deceased mother, who was a former technician on the ship, Aster connects the mystery of the ship to that of her own identity. Thus, as the *Matilda* faces the instability and challenges brought on by the blackouts, Aster also takes the time to evaluate her own positionality. Through Aster's exploration, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* becomes a counter-story of gender and sexuality. Under the oppressive caste system and the turmoil caused by blackouts, the lower deck communities become spaces for sexual and gendered violence. However, under this oppression, characters such as Aster fight to understand and claim their gender and sexual identities rather than those forced on them by the oppressive systems of *Matilda*. I argue that the novel offers a space to rethink Blackness, gender subjectivity, and sexual agency. While the characters operate within their own futuristic chattel slavery society, they also engage with conversations on gender and sexuality that dominate our present-day discourse. Thus, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* does not create an idyllic future of freedom and gender and sexual liberation. Instead, Solomon shows that Afrofuturism is a space in which it is possible to reconsider and imagine Black people's relationship with gender and sexuality in the past and present so that the future creates new avenues of subjectivity and agency.

An Unkindness of Ghosts opens three hundred years after the destruction of the Great Lifehouse, the novel's presentation of Earth, with Aster aboard the *Matilda* and preparing to amputate the foot of a lowerdeck child, Flick. Flick and Aster are united through their shared social status; both are lowerdeckers and belong to the Tarlander classification. The Tarlanders are the residents of P, Q, R, S, and T decks, and as Aster describes them, "as close to a nation as anything on *Matilda*" (Solomon 11). The Tarlanders provide the manual labor to sustain life onboard the *Matilda*. Each day thousands of lowerdeckers go to work on the Field Decks. Rotating around the ship's artificial sun, known as Baby Sun or Baby, the Field Decks are described by Aster as being "of varying size, each of them a different field, forest, or orchard" (73). Also, an estimated eight thousand workers reported working the fields during Aster's shift, with two of the Tarland decks represented (70). Though the Tarlanders exist physically and socially at the bottom of *Matilda*'s structure, they are crucial to its operation. They provide manual labor and material resources that keeps the *Matilda* afloat.

Seventy years after the *Matilda* began its voyage, there had been a decline in the Tarlander population (19). Dependent upon the labor of the Tarlanders, this decline was of grave concern to the authorities of the *Matilda*, referred to as the Guards and the Sovereign, who is "Heaven's chosen ruler" (11). Recordings of the Guards' meeting with a scientist, Frederick Hauser, reveal his argument that "It was wasteful . . . to recycle the Tarlanders' defective bodies into *Matilda* when the steady pulse of an electrical current could reanimate them as perfect, obedient workers" (19). Hauser's plan to sustain a workforce is eerily akin to refurbishing a computer after it has died and involves no concern for their well-being, denying the Tarlanders the proper care and resources to ensure a long quality of life. Rather, the plan is no different than what *Matilda* is already doing with the bodies of the Tarlanders. Even in death, exploited Tarlanders are recycled to sustain the ship. Regardless of whether or not Hauser's suggestion is eventually put into action; the authority of the *Matilda* clearly cannot even conceive of the Tarlanders as actual human beings.

Understanding Black people as a technology is of course not a new idea but has instead often been connected with prevailing views held during the transatlantic slave trade. Sheree Renée Thomas, for instance, in her essay "And So Shaped the World" argues that "Black bodies were seen as new world robots, whose production and labor was to be controlled, exploited, and repackaged for others' consumption" (4). Solomon creates Hauser's plan in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* as a fictional representation of this sentiment. Robots and technology do not have the clearly delimited lifespans of humans. A broken computer may be refurbished and resold or have its functional parts recycled. Even in what should be its "death," the computer can still be used to produce goods or otherwise be treated as a

commodity. The fictional conditions of the *Matilda* and the Tarlanders illustrates this idea in the extreme: Tarlanders are material, used to sustain the life of others; they are less than human.

In order to sustain and promote these ideas among the Tarlanders, the authorities on the *Matilda* rely on their majoritarian narratives. Storytelling has the power to challenge and transform the thinking of others. In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic describe this idea in terms of a normative theory, the belief that people “occupy a normative universe or ‘normos’ (or perhaps many of them), from which [they] are not easily dislodged” (46). Coinciding with this idea is the premise “that members of this country’s [i.e., the United States’] dominant racial group cannot easily grasp what it is like to be nonwhite” (45). What results from this thinking is that the experience of an individual or dominant group is universal; erased from the normative universe are the realities of the oppressed. Instead, the stories of the marginalized groups are shaped to fit within the normos or excluded entirely.

As a result, majoritarian stories arise, and dominant groups are sustained through such stories. Legacies of privilege create these narratives. In “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Educational Research,” Daniel G. Solorzano and Tara J. Yosso write, “majoritarian stories are not just stories of racial privilege, they are also stories of gender, class, and other forms of privilege. As such, they are stories that carry layers of assumptions that persons in positions of racialized privilege bring with them to discussions of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination” (28). The majoritarian stories sustain the idea of the normos of the dominant group. These stories allow for the belief that the stories of “whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals” are the standard experiences (28). With majoritarian stories, dominant groups receive constant validation of their experiences. They are depicted as the standard reality; rather than creating space to recognize differences between groups, they instead marginalize all non-normative experiences and perspectives. Solorzano and Yosso, for instance, have explored the implications behind the assertions that violent crimes today do not happen in white middle-class neighborhoods. Explaining how this belief further marginalizes other groups, they write, “The standard story implies that violent crimes such as these are unheard of in white middle-class communities. At the same time, the standard story infers that communities of color and working-class communities may be accustomed to violence” (29). Within the majoritarian stories, occurrences such as violence and crime are not recognized as universal. Instead, dominant groups create and sustain stories in which they define themselves and their experiences as good by saddling the marginalized with undesirable characteristics. Thus, majoritarian stories may become weaponized to create harmful images of the marginalized.

In *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, majoritarian stories aid in the dehumanization of the Tarlanders. Notably, members of the Guard reject Hauser's plan of reanimating the bodies of deceased Tarlanders, basing their opposition on the belief that "every being in the Heavens' creations deserved the dignity of death" (19). However, Hauser rebuts this idea through arguments concerning the physical nature of the Tarlanders: "Tarlanders were not of the Heavens. Even beasts of the field were male and female, were they not? So they might multiply and spread the Heavens' bounty. Tarlanders did not come male and female" (19). Hauser's stance is supported by the dominant theology of the ship, which states, "Tarlanders came from the Realm of Chaos—the world that existed before the Heavens overruled it, replacing nonsense with divine structure. Their demon forms could not conform to the Holy Order set forth by the Heavens" (19). Aster knows the scientific cause for Tarlanders not presenting neatly as male or female bodies is a condition known as "hereditary suprarenal dysregula;" because of hormonal disturbances, "Tarlander bodies did not always present as clearly male and female as the Guard supposed they ought" (20). But Hauser's proposal derives its force from a theory that the dominant group has created about the Tarlanders: they are demons that do not conform to the Guard's cis-normative beliefs of gender. As a result, the Tarlanders are considered subhuman, and the Guards—with their stories that rely on religion to explain the biology and oppressive treatment of the Tarlanders—remove themselves from any responsibility connected with the health issues that plague the Tarlanders. In the novel's opening, Aster is thus placed in the position of having to amputate Flick's gangrenous foot, the result of deficient energy rations on the lower decks (22). Moreover, when Aster goes to collect blood samples from the women who operate the Baby Sun and electricity system of the *Matilda*, she remarks, "Y deck women who worked the Nexus didn't tend to live much past forty" (92). Through these examples, Solomon emphasizes the connection between living, working conditions, and the health of the Tarlanders. And while the authorities have created a narrative to remove themselves from blame, they also bear a burden. Consequently, creating and sustaining their oppressive system forces a reliance upon stories.

Despite this oppressive environment, the Tarlanders still possess spaces in which they assert their agency. In the novel's opening scene, Solomon lays the groundwork for the reader to understand how the *Matilda's* social system relies upon a quite complex amalgamation of different customs and beliefs coalescing around the overarching system of oppression. As Aster prepares for the required operation, she uses the wrong pronouns for Flick, thinking, "Flick as she—he—no, they—shook the starjar. Aster regretted the error. She was used to the style of her own deck where all children were referred to with feminine pronouns. Here, it was they. She'd do well to remember" (10). Through Aster's self-correction, the novel immediately becomes a space that challenges cis-normativity. As Aster explains,

on the deck where Flick resides the correct pronoun for a child is “they.” On the other hand, where she lives, all children are addressed through feminine pronouns. This convention indicates that the *Matilda* does not operate under one set system; rather, the inhabitants of the ship have their own location-based traditions.

Additionally, Aster states that these conventions are applicable only to children and not adults, thus implying that people aboard these two decks may change their gender identity as they age. In just these few pages we see a progressive idea of gender that far outpaces our own reality; gender identity is regional/cultural and flexible over time. The insistence on just two genders is another idea the Tarlanders resists. They establish their own gendered identities that allow them to exist on a spectrum. The Tarlanders could adopt the theology of the Sovereign and Guard and conform to the gender binary practiced by the upperdeckers. Instead, they use their position as “others” to explore and create their own ideas of gender. The Tarlanders are creators of new forms of agency and subjectivity.

The establishing of conventions and a future outside the norm speaks to the significance of Afrofuturism in the novel. Sheree Renee Thomas notes that since the 1990s when the term was first coined, *Afrofuturist* has become, “a catch-all phrase,” for things that are black, weird, shiny, or new, “[a]nd it is the reconstruction of the past and the reimagining of the present to create something new and different that make the work of ‘speculating futures,’ through the Black imagination and the arts, such a vital, promising enterprise” (6-7). “Black speculative art” is given a similar definition by Reynaldo Anderson in “Afrofuturism 2.0 & The Black Speculative Arts Movement,” where he writes, “Black speculative art is a creative, aesthetic practice that integrates African diasporic or African metaphysics with science or technology and seeks to interpret, engage, design, or alter reality for the re-imagination of the past, the contested present, and a catalyst for the future” (231).

But while it may be alluring to focus on the future in Afrofuturism, emphasis on the present is also necessary. In both of the above definitions, attention is given to the present to create ideas about the future. In discussing the power of Afrofuturism, Thomas argues, “When you choose to alter the history and ideology that continues to oppress you, you choose the path of a creator” (4). Solomon takes the path of creator and imagines a future that does not show a solution for or eradication of all injustice. Instead, they highlight the importance of self-discovery amid abuse. Anderson expands on this idea of being a creator with the development of Afrofuturism 2.0, writing, “Or to put it more plainly, future-looking Black scholars, artists, and activists are not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about cultural others, past, present, and future and, challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures”

(228). Establishing their own gender conventions, the Tarlanders participate in a similar form of creation. They resist the story forced upon them to create their own past, present, and future. With cultural practice that moves gender away from the binary, the Tarlanders create further opportunities for exploration and discovery.

Exploration of gender identity also occurs on an individual level in the novel when Surgeon General Theophilus “Theo” Smith comes to Aster in need of medication for his Postpolio syndrome. Although he has access to conventional steroids, he comes to Aster since “the cocktail of drugs she gave him allowed the testosterone derivative to only target the affected muscles” (38). Theo is the son of an upperdeck father and Mesuline Hopwood, a Tarlander woman. His mixed heritage gives Theo a skin that is “whitish, but not white. It was close enough that plausible deniability had allowed him to keep his status when his true ancestry came to prominence during puberty” (36-37). Theo’s ancestry, however, is further complicated by religion. Under the theology of the *Matilda*, Theo is the product of a demonic other and one of the Holy order. His “true ancestry,” then, is one that is actively stripped of an attendant gender identity. On the other hand, the Matildans believe that he is “touched by the heavens” (Solomon 232). But by receiving additional testosterone, Theo could develop a more masculine physical appearance, and a masculine presentation might assist Theo, who has previously faced gendered abuse.

Unlike Aster and Flick, Theo does not experience the cultural practice of the Tarlanders. As a child, Theo faced violent queerphobia at the hands of his father. As Mesuline recalls, “His father beat him, and when I tried to stop it, he beat me too. He called Theo *sissy* because Theo was small and only liked to read and listen to stories” (232). Also, Theo describes himself as being “prone to an unnatural girlishness” (99), and he is punished for feminine gender performance. Raised in the upper decks, Theo experiences a cultural context quite unlike that surrounding the Tarlanders. Whereas among the Tarlanders children are given a foundation that allows for gender exploration, on the upper decks normative gender expectations exist and are harshly enforced. Even as an adult, and in his respected position as Surgeon General, Theo remains ostracized due to his gender performance.

Theo actively resists the gender binary through his appearance. One of Theo’s methods for talking back is refusing standard medications to control the amount of testosterone in his body. In addition, Theo subversively uses his religious beliefs and practices to develop his gender performance. After identifying himself as queer, Theo says,

The more bold among the Guard call me *faggot* when they are drunk, or whispering. Because I refuse to keep my beard. My earrings, though religious in nature, are a practice most other highdeck men have long

ago abandoned. I have three black dots under each of my eyes, drawn there with a coal pencil. It is religious, but still they know that I am off. Because I am an anomaly, because they see me as someone holy, they can tolerate my differences. (108)

As when he was a child, Theo faces queerphobic slurs. However, this abuse does not prevent Theo from shaping his own identity. His appearance is made up of traditional religious symbols from the system that creates the majoritarian story of the Tarlanders's bodies and gender. By adopting these practices Theo counters the theology of the upperdeckers. Although a member of the divine order and revered as the "Heavens' Hands Made Flesh," he does not neatly present as one gender. Where religion is used to demonize his Tarlander heritage, Theo utilizes religion in a rejection of the gender binary. Theo finds liberation through this subversion. Despite the abuse he has faced, Theo marks out his own liberated identity. As he himself states, "I have done at least one good thing: become a person my father would hate" (99).

Where Theo is raised in a culture that embraces the binary, Aster is not. But her background does not prevent her from also challenging ideas of gender. She is Tarlander with hereditary suprarenal dysregula and experiences "hairiness and muscular build despite being born without the external organs that produced testosterone" (20). Also, Aster is from the Q-deck where "all children are referred to as girls. All people—all Q-deckers at least—are assumed women unless there's a statement or obvious sign otherwise, such as the fashions they wear or the trade they choose" (108). Gender is not reduced to genitalia on the people for the Q-deck. Rather, the Q-deckers understand gender as a performance, relying on clothes and trades as identifying features. Unlike Theo's environment that expects a rigid abiding to the binary, Aster's community recognizes the fluidity of gender. This works to Aster's benefit as she explores her identity.

Aligned with Q-decker practices, Aster uses clothes to embody new gender performances. When attending one of Theo's lectures in the upper decks, Aster becomes Aston. At the conclusion of the lecture, Aster remains as Aston to meet Seamus, who works in *Matilda's* Bowels. Even though Aster does not need the disguise, it is the performance that Aster enjoys. Explaining Aster's embodiment as Aston, Solomon writes, "It wasn't the boy part that attracted her. It was the lying part. It was becoming someone else. Her old mistakes were gone because that person didn't exist. She could learn how to be brave again in a foreign skin" (272). Taking on the Aston identity transforms Aster from female to male. Aston provides a rebirth. Taking on this identity, Aster can step outside herself and rebuild. Having this fluidity to go from Aster to Aston creates a space for Aster to provide needed care.

Living under the oppressive slave system of the *Matilda*, Aster finds ways to protect herself from abuse. When Aster was labeled “Fit to Breed” in the ship's manifest, she went to Theo and had a hysterectomy (43). Moreover, prior to her shifts on the Field Decks, Aster applied a salve which, “in addition to its anesthetic component, the concoction provided lubrication for what was—in the words of someone who was not Aster—an uncooperative vagina, should a guard overcome her” (64). Under the conditions of the *Matilda*, Aster is subject to routine sexual violence. As a result, she must find ways to protect herself, and stepping into Aston provides her with an escape and a chance to recover; gender performance becomes a matter of survival. Like Theo, Aster can subvert and challenge the dominant group's idea of gender. By embracing her marginalization and her “demon form,” Aster creates her own identity.

An Unkindness of Ghosts utilizes Aster and Theo to establish agency under oppression. Both have spent their lives living under a racist cis-heteronormative society. They are navigating a system reliant on seeing Black people as automatons, existing to labor in life and death for the benefit of the dominant class. Facing violence under these systems, Aster and Theo talk back. They embrace their labels as anomalies and others. As outsiders, they can disrupt the traditional ideas of gender aboard the *Matilda* since they are already excluded. Even in the face of frequent queer antagonism, Aster and Theo recognize liberation in rejecting the binary. When Aster calls Theo an anomaly of a man, he responds, “Perhaps because I'm not a man at all.” Aster matches this statement, saying, “Me too. I am a boy and a girl and a witch all wrapped into one very strange, flimsy, indecisive body. Do you think my body couldn't decide what it wanted to be?” Theo's response verbalizes what the two have already discovered: “I think it doesn't matter because we get to decide what our bodies are or are not” (308). These two recognize that even under oppression, they are autonomous in deciding who they are.

An Unkindness of Ghosts uses Afrofuturism to imagine navigating oppression. Through the use of fiction, Solomon continues in the tradition of scholars such as Derrick Bell. In his well-known story “The Space Traders,” Bell creates a work of Black speculative fiction in which white people agree to hand Black people over to aliens in exchange for resources. As Bell writes, this story was to “convince a resisting class that the patterns of sacrificing black rights to further white interest, so present in American history, pose a continuing threat” (902). Solomon uses Afrofuturism with a similar purpose. They use their novel to imagine a continued dominance of racial, gender, and sexual oppression. However, this is not the totality of what the characters experience. Rather, the Tarlanders and characters such as Theo and Aster create and assert their identities in the face of subjugation. They live their lives and create their own stories to establish themselves. These actions create more opportunities for those living in the present as well as those who will come in the future.

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Butler's "Legacy": Lauren Olamina as Emancipatory Archetype

Helane Androne

Here were we, her spiritual children numbering in the thousands, come to claim the future. By this time, I'd begun to understand just how rare, and how strange, the mere idea of thinking about the future was, for those of us from marginalized backgrounds. Worse, I'd seen how complicit science fiction and fantasy were in making our futures so hard to imagine. It was time for this to change. We weren't asking for much from our fellow writers: just more than European myths in our fantasy, and more than token representation in the future, present, and past.

—N. K. Jemisin, *Entertainment Weekly*¹

We are a harvest of survivors. But then, that's what we've always been.

—Lauren Olamina, *EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING* Friday, September 17, 2027²

Attend to N. K. Jemisin's character Damaya/Syenite/Essun in the Broken Earth trilogy (*The Fifth Season*, *The Stone Sky*, *The Obelisk Gate*) and you will follow a transformation from a child discovered as extraordinary (with an ability that manifests as power and strikes fear) to her identity as a young woman training to serve an oppressive system, to a mother who actively rebels against that system. You would note that her "ability" is the result of a scourge/de-stabilization of society/civilization, one that can be deadly if uncontrolled. In Nnedi Okorafor's Binti trilogy (*Binti*; *Binti: Home*; *Binti: The Night Masquerade*), you read of a girl who experiences a spiritual and physical transformation and, in doing so, acquires the power to transform a hostile socio-political reality between species. Okorafor also writes transformative experiences of coming of age-to-liberation participation for Sunny (*Akata Witch*) and Onyesonwu (*Who Fears Death*). Thinking along these lines might then bring Nalo Hopkinson's Ti'Jean (*Brown Girl in the Ring*) and Tomi

¹ Canfield, David, "Exclusive preview: Octavia E. Butler's prescient Parable books get gorgeous reissue." *Entertainment Weekly*, Feb. 25, 2019, Meredith Corporation, ew.com/books/2019/02/25/parable-octavia-butler-reissue/.

² Butler, Octavia E., *Parable of the Sower*, Grand Central Publishing, 1993, p. 295.

Adeyemi's Zélie (*Children of Blood and Bone*) to mind. While you can point to the familiar bildungsroman + magic equation found within many public and critical responses to such texts, this formulation continues to lump these texts with the likes of *Harry Potter*, which would obscure what you might suspect is a more complex, under-theorized paradigm occurring within these texts. Below, I will outline how you could be right.

In responding to a question about the most important lessons learned by Lauren Oya Olamina in *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Octavia E. Butler ends her response thus: "She learns to be an activist" (Butler 340). So, let's wonder a bit more about this. What would exploring Butler's text from this activist angle look like? How might doing so provide some theoretical alternative to over-simplified comparisons between black womanist science fiction and fantasy (SFF) texts and popular Eurocentric models? What happens when we de-center the tropes of these theoretical monuments and critically center the unique structures found in black women's texts? Doing so may reveal alternative uses of familiar tropes relative to activism—and finally create room for a more than metaphorical acknowledgment of the integration of spiritual and communal liberation. As Sheree R. Thomas suggests, black women's speculation is "dangerous to the status quo, destroying the old temples of golden ages past, and are stealthily building the world anew in their own remarkable image" (Thomas 37). Let us return to a well-known and relevant case: Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*.

Lauren Olamina's community in *Parable of the Sower* exemplifies how fear can blind and paralyze people into clinging to the deteriorating vestiges of epic failures in social, political, and economic policies rather than investing their creative energy and hope into liberation. Lauren's family and community suffers because the "massive, looming presence" of the wall built around them only compresses their fear and reinforces their panicky hope in the possibility of recovered stability (Butler 5). Lauren, however, has prepared for the inevitability of change and the reality of confrontation with the external world. As Jemisin points out, "Lauren is basically born knowing that racism is systemic and that, as someone born at multiple intersections of marginalization (black, disabled, female, poor), she is doomed if she doesn't work every angle possible" (qtd. in Canfield). Considering such deliberate intersectionality of her identity and our critical wonderings, we must interrogate exactly *how* Lauren learns to be an activist. How does she retain hope and reclaim her body and a space for herself and others within a destabilized state? As suggested above, Lauren exemplifies the kind of intersectional body within oppressive circumstances that is familiar within black women's SFF—and also black women's experiences outside the text. To unpack the idea of activism, given these bodies and contexts, we might look to the structure introduced in Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2010). Sandoval argues that the

nexus of what emerges from U.S. third world feminist movements and cultural theory is an apparatus for “accomplishing sign reading across cultures; identifying and consciously constructing ideology; decoding languages of resistance and/or domination; and for writing and speaking a neorhetoric of love in the postmodern world” (3).³ Taken together, Sandoval argues, these energies form a particular skill set—the technologies necessary for liberation. Applying Sandoval’s critical lens provides a way to inquire as to how Lauren demonstrates or challenges the “dissident and coalitional cosmopolitics” that Sandoval claims prepare for revolutionary movements that can “take their place in the real” (Sandoval 3, 5).⁴

Methodology of the Oppressed: Love and/as Liberation

In the face of what Sandoval argues that Frederic Jameson predicted would be an “irrevocable and tragic fall into despair” due to the expanding postmodern “tragic antinarrative,” Sandoval suggests that “the urgency of the present demands that our scholarly responses not be limited by the confines of imagination” (17, 19). Her response is to look to feminist revolutionary praxis to theorize an apparatus of technologies for “decolonizing the imagination” (Sandoval 69). Particularly intriguing is Sandoval’s assertion that, taken together, the work of U.S. feminists of color⁵ manifested within these technologies “makes visible the provisions of a hermeneutics of love in the postmodern world” (79). *Love* is theorized as a “mode of consciousness” necessary in any apparatus of liberation that agitates for movement and intervention against the neocolonial forces that give rise to postmodern

³ Sandoval also points to Fredric Jameson’s argument that “postmodernism is a neocolonizing global force” as key to understanding how postmodernity creates a dangerous global environment that leads to a threatening “undecidability” (Sandoval 17). It is Jameson’s manifesto about the despair and seeming immutability of global postmodernity—“postmodern entrapment”—that enlivens Sandoval’s position that actual liberation requires “ideological weaponry” (18, 114).

⁴ Interestingly, along with acknowledgement of a plethora of cultural theorists, Sandoval argues the relevance of the method in relationship to what emerges within and from SFF texts when she points to popular films and comics such as *Repo Man* (1982), *Brother from Another Planet* (1984), *Total Recall* (1990), *Thunderheart* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *The Matrix* (1999), and the *X-Men* (69). In other words, while Sandoval’s paradigm seeks to operationalize critical theory as inclusive of activist sentiments found within cultural, gender, and ethnic studies, she clearly makes a connection to the impact and relevance of speculative texts quite specifically.

⁵ Sandoval points to the arguments of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, and Barbara Smith alongside Merle Woo’s assertion that U.S. third world feminism is “created in a community, bonded not by color, sex or class, but by love and the common goal for the liberation of mind, heart, and spirit.” Moreover, she regards Alice Walker’s “womanism” as a “political method” (Sandoval 61).

subjectivity (4). This goal, articulated thus, is immediately attractive to me, given that what seems difficult for traditional critical theory to address is the internal driving force that motivates so many transformative movements. That driving force is not something purely emotional; rather, it is multifaceted, fluid, and tied to intangible psychic and social processes—*ergo*, Sandoval's necessarily rational leanings into a deeply theorized concept of *love*.⁶

Sandoval locates this love operation as demonstrated by five skills for the internal and external processes of "oppositional consciousness" that enable social movement toward liberation. These are the skills, she suggests, that operate as technologies within the methodology of the oppressed: 1) Semiology; 2) Mythology; 3) Meta-ideologizing; 4) Democratic; and 5) Differential Movement.⁷ If operationalized together, Sandoval considers these skills as the building blocks for the enabling apparatus of *love* "with the intent of bringing about not simply survival or justice, as in earlier times, but egalitarian social relations" (83). By describing it thus, Sandoval reaches to capture the inspiration within manifestos and liberationist ideologies to direct attention to the often untenable forces from which change emerges. In other words, Sandoval's methodology provides language and organizational structure for the internal and external actions of emancipatory behaviors and attempts to name the order found within those behaviors.

Sandoval relies on Barthes' work as a space of critical convergence that leads quite specifically to her outlined goals of sign reading, ideology constructing, decoding, and writing and speaking *love*. We should not ignore that Sandoval grounds her method by pointing to the work of Roland Barthes, specifically his 1957 book *Mythologies*, which she considers a first attempt to encode the direction of the method. Because some collective brows might rise at the suggestion that the work of a (white) French post/structuralist should be the foundation for discussion of the significance of third world feminist movements, she points out that Barthes

⁶ Sandoval aligns her conceptualization of *love* with "a mode of consciousness" akin to Gloria Anzaldúa's "*amor en Aztlán*," Jacques Derrida's *différance*, Hayden White's "the sublimity of the historical process," and Barthes' "prophetic love" (Sandoval 4, 5).

⁷ Because Sandoval's method includes its own organizational structure, we approach texts from that foundation, with the caveat that this process is not necessarily operating with linear or chronological functionality within the texts, nor does Sandoval seem to present it as a linear experience. Because SFF texts—and certainly fiction more generally as well—are often written in ways that extend and contract time, my discussion focuses on the presence of the technologies themselves, regardless of the narrative movement of the texts' internal chronologies. In certain cases, particularly in the case of Jemisin's trilogy, it behooves us to recognize the contextual relevance of narrative horology as it is manipulated through memory and identity. Therefore, readers should assume no strict adherence to a chronology implied by this numeric outline.

was “a scholar whose work has contributed to the great world historical movement toward decolonization that marked the twentieth century” (82). Moreover, she argues:

What must be recognized is that semiology developed simultaneously with the process of modernist derealization going on in the confrontation between Western imperial powers and the stubbornly resistant cultures and languages of conquered peoples of color, along with the development in conquered cultures of oppositional forms of consciousness and behavior that emphasize the trans-formality of reality itself. (87)

Thus, Sandoval argues, Barthes’ *Mythology* was influenced by both Franz Fanon and by the actual decolonial activism referenced in the method. I will note too that Sandoval weighs Barthes’ work, attending to “the ways his early ‘science’ of semiotics depends on, articulates, and strays from the collective principles and procedures of this very methodology” (82). In doing so, she leans into a toolbox of anti- and de-colonial theoretical work and transformative other world knowledges of Fanon, Michel Foucault, W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Paula Gunn Allen, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, among others. For example, Sandoval points out that semiotics is actually a sensitivity expounded upon by theorists like Anzaldúa as “la facultad” or what we may recall Henry Louis Gates, Jr., called, “signifyin” (91, 82). Moreover, this way of seeing meaning beyond the surface language is what Audre Lorde pointed to as the “skills and defenses” for survival—the sort of “essential” communication that occurs between people that can be found at the core consciousness of oppressed peoples (Lorde in Sandoval 81). In (t)his semiotic system, Barthes’ science of signs is also a “mode of perception and decipherment” within which Sandoval actually finds all of the technologies for her methodology. For our analysis, semiotics aids in the discussion of the developing form and concept of ideological meaning within the text.

Oppositional Consciousness in *Parable of the Sower*

As an historical preface to describing her technologies that combine into revolutionary struggle, Sandoval identifies and outlines five principal categories of oppositional consciousness, or the “political unconscious” manifested within U.S. liberation movements that characterized the period from 1968-90 as “equal rights,” revolutionary,” “supremacist,” “separatist,” and “differential” (44, 45). Crucial to her outline, however, is the application of differential consciousness

and social movement,⁸ which, she argues, emerges from U.S. third world feminism and “provides the theoretical and methodological approach . . . from which this evocation of a theory and method of oppositional consciousness has been summoned” (45). This fifth form captures the strategies from the previous four, and

focuses on identifying forms of ideology in opposition that can be generated and coordinated by those classes self-consciously seeking affective liberatory stances in relation to the dominant social order . . . the citizen-subject can learn to identify, develop, and control the means of ideology, that is, marshal the knowledge necessary to ‘break with ideology’ while at the same time *also* speaking in, and from within, ideology.... (43-44, emphasis in original)

Close examination of Lauren and her context, alongside Butler's assertion about Lauren's journey toward activism, reveals the connection between ideology, speech, and liberation articulated through Sandoval's framework.

To demonstrate the operation of this framework, let us consider Lauren's ruminations on God as articulated in *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, beginning with an epigraphic entry with final lines that read: “The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God Is Change.” (Butler 3). Lauren's apocalyptic context, her relationships—particularly with her father, a Baptist minister and academic—are impacted by her evolving ideology about God. She admits: “At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church. . . . My God has another name” (7). Lauren indeed operates within the ideological structures of the dominant social order around her; however, we find that within her rite of passage is a quiet, conscious determination toward a liberatory relationship to that order. While her body has been subject to long-standing ideological systems in place within her household and community, she is developing an oppositional consciousness that acknowledges the dynamics of her context.

⁸ Sandoval notes that this concept is not to be confused with the methodology's concept of differential movement, which is “of a different order” (83). It may be helpful to understand that the term *differential* is a descriptive term indicative of a “mode” that involves certain internal and external processes that lead to the sort of oppositional consciousness and social movement described by feminists such as Maria Lugones, Patricia Hill Collins, and June Jordan (Sandoval 3). Sandoval's footnote specifies that *differential* signifies “one specific technology,” but *differential* is also what takes form as part of a specific social movement (200). Sandoval uses “differential consciousness” and “differential movement” interchangeably as descriptors for the technology within the methodology within the first chapter. She clarifies thus: “the methodology of the oppressed is what enables the enactment of the differential mode of oppositional social movement . . . described in the example of U.S. third world feminism as interventionist praxis” (83).

This brings us to the concept of ideological deconstruction, which relies on Barthes' theory of *myth* as ideology, or a *pattern* that "can be perceived, identified, distinguished and reproduced" (91). Sandoval argues that Barthes' definition of the pattern of ideology is "*the process of colonization itself*: the occupation, exploitation, incorporation, and hegemonic domination of meaning—by meaning" (99). Sandoval's position is that Barthes' theory suggests that ideological meaning is actually a "creation and exchange of meaning" (99). It is from this creation and exchange that Sandoval argues the decolonial technology of mythology as providing an opportunity for deconstruction. This deconstruction operates as a "pulling away of consciousness from dominant and grounded meanings" (99). As Hampton argues in his essay "Religious Science Fiction: Butler's Changing God," "In Butler's narratives, the church is a social construct designed to help maintain social order. This social order is often enforced by the employment of fear" (20). This is part of what Lauren consciously processes in her notes in *Earthseed*. While she presents her ideological framework for how to understand God as change and how to design a community capable of operating in a world under that expectation, she moves through the process of examining existing ideologies within her community. Lauren's journey operationalizes an inquiry that begins this pulling away:

The idea of God is much on my mind these days. I've been paying attention to what other people believe—whether they believe, and if so what kind of God they believe in. . . . A lot of people seem to believe in a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God. . . . A few believe God is another word for nature. And nature turns out to mean just about anything they happen not to understand or feel in control of. . . . So what is God? (Butler 15)

This begs discussion of Sandoval's second technology, mythologizing, which describes "the process of challenging dominant ideological forms through their deconstruction" (83). Lauren certainly challenges dominant ideology as she conceptualizes God and *Earthseed* in sharp contrast to the Baptist religious theology she has been raised to believe. The traditional view of God as relational, as the embodiment of love—and as the ultimate judge—is not what Lauren shapes for *Earthseed*: "My God doesn't love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love for or loyalty to my God. My God just is" (Butler 25). The concept of *Earthseed* as a liberated community demands a different conceptualization of God, separate from and relevant to a context that is continuously unraveling. According to Lauren,

God can't be resisted or stopped, but can be shaped and focused. . . .
[Prayers] help us to shape God and to accept and work with the shapes

that God imposes on us. . . . But we can rig the game in our own favor if we understand that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, with or without our forethought, with or without our intent. (25)

Lauren's evolving understanding of God as change responds to her environment and her liberatory attitude. God becomes shapeable, understandable, present in the circumstances of socio-political chaos in ways that can be understood as in collaboration with Lauren's plans for survival and adaptation to disruption. As Hampton suggests, "Lauren's new religion appears to be infinitely malleable and exclusionary only to those who do not value life and survival" (21). Taking a Baptist ideology of God, deconstructing it, and consciously reinscribing it with ideological meaning that reflects her view of personal agency for her survival means that Lauren's act of shaping God is indeed an "ideologization of ideology itself" (Sandoval 109).

Lauren lands on a vision of God that intersects identity, context, and vision: "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars; . . . 'the ultimate human change short of death.' . . . 'I know it won't be possible for a long time. Now is a time for building foundations—Earthseed communities—focused on the Destiny. After all, my heaven really exists, and you don't have to die to reach it. . .'" (222). Her vision for Earthseed is inclusive and includes concrete aims in response to a dynamic reality--all of which emerges from a meta-ideological transformation of God into something shapeable. Lauren's ideology for liberation is operationalized through conscious reflection on her own identity, signifying language, and a communal vision of Earthseed.

Scholars have acknowledged the development of Earthseed as a "lens of philosophical understanding, a blended epistemology of religion, healing, and liberation to reimagine and reshape the world," (Hampton 15). We never forget that Lauren's internal rite of passage occurs within an external context of deep socio-political crisis. During her displacement and journey away from what "home" was, and toward her hopes for an Earthseed community, Lauren exchanges traditional "big"-God characterizations for a sacred ideological being that grounds an apocalyptic, ever-changing reality: "Earthseed deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action. With action, it's only useful if it steadies you, focuses your efforts, eases your mind" (Butler 219). Re-conceptualizing God is a meta-ideologic move that "moves in, through, then outside of dominant ideology," which helps Lauren cope with austere, dangerous, even harrowing circumstances, wherein she operationalizes this epistemology as motivation to seek out space for a liberated self and society (Sandoval 111). She describes the work of Earthseed as "forethought, care, and work; to educate and benefit their community, their families, and themselves; and to contribute to the

fulfillment of the Destiny” (Butler 261). This utopic objective is part of a developing oppositional consciousness that utilizes the methodology of the oppressed in process and product; the aim of Earthseed is a communal, concrete liberation of body and mind. This internal deconstruction and meta-ideologization prepares her—indeed compels her—to fully face the ruin of society with a plan, despite and because of, her own intersectional reality as a black, female, tech-enabled body⁹ existing within and among others who are also processing the destabilization of the state.

How might Lauren’s promise for a new community based on the concept of Earthseed be an opportunity for such differential movement in opposition to the persistent opportunities for fear surrounding her? Through a self-conscious deconstruction of the language associated with Christian religious ideology, Lauren remakes God, but in doing so also acknowledges this remaking as an act that is potentially connected to her own body and operating in contrast to her current world:

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 it’s like my sharing: One more weirdness; one more crazy, deep-rooted delusion that I’m stuck with. . . . And in time, I’ll have to do something about it. In spite of what my father will say or do to me, in spite of the poisonous rottenness outside the wall where I might be exiled, I’ll have to do something about it. (26)

Lauren’s self-conscious connection between her God-shaping, ideological deconstruction, intersectional embodiment, and emerging sense of her own necessary adaptation is a weighted speech-act. Sandoval reaches into Barthes’ acknowledgement of the emancipatory use of language and describes such work thus:

[W]henever we speak in order to *transform reality* and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever language is linked to the making of things and no longer naturalizing them, ideology becomes impossible. A

⁹ My use of this term is to signal the impact of “Paracetco,” a chemical drug taken by Lauren’s mother, which affects Lauren’s neurotransmitters, ultimately leaving her hyperempathic—what her doctors call “organic delusional syndrome” (Butler 12). I invoke *technology* here to suggest the application of science onto Lauren’s body. While I cannot fully explore the relationship here, I offer this as an acknowledgement of the complexities within Butler’s characterization of Lauren that may signify on Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg. While I don’t concede that the text operates within the expectations of the posthuman, there is potential for deeper discussion of Butler’s framing of Lauren’s body, community, and relationship to animals. See also Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (Duke UP, 2018).

pure language of revolution, Barthes argues, cannot be ideologized, then, if revolution is defined as "a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it *makes the world*" (ibid.), in a fashion homologous to the way in which the speech of the oppressed is an act that "makes the world." (Sandoval 108)

If her language substantially transforms understanding for herself and others and results in differential consciousness and social movement of the oppressed (through Earthseed followers), does it not begin to reveal and "make the world" around it? Lauren deconstructs/ meta-ideologizes the concept of God and invests sacred meaning into what is already (differently) sacred through her language. And what of the result of this language? Indeed, Lauren's operationalizing of her speech as within and outside of the more familiar language of her traditional religious practice is an ideological deconstruction, an active exchange of meaning. According to Sandoval, such "movements through consciousness and through the social order depend on the technology of *differential movement*" (112).

Sandoval proposes that the tacticality of these technologies serves "revolutionary movement, the repoliticizing of language—the reconnection of language to action" (111). Lauren operationalizes differential movement, which Sandoval describes as "a polyform" that hosts the internal and external moves made toward oppositional consciousness (83). Lauren exhibits the flexibility of differential movement—the mode through which she self-consciously uses ideology, language, and perception—in how she engages herself and others in the tactics of oppositional consciousness. Lauren's play with the meaning and grammars of change within her journals and conversations re-centers a dominant ideology of God via a lens through which she is able to focus on her context to survive beyond fear. Early on, Lauren has an exchange with her neighborhood friend Jo, revealing her plan to survive and previewing her conceptualization of God:

We can get ready. That's what we've got to do now. Get ready for what's going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterward. Get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more than just get batted around by crazy people, desperate people, thugs, and leaders who don't know what they're doing! (55)

This chapter begins with an entry into EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING and is headed by the epigraph, "Belief/Initiates and guides action— / Or it does nothing" (47). Given that it is Chapter 5 that begins this way—five being a significant number repeated throughout the book—this epigraph places special emphasis on how Lauren's conception of God as change, her refusal to succumb to victimization, is indicative of how shaping God also operates as a partnership in concert with "learning . . . forethought and planning" (31). In this regard, we

can see how Lauren's philosophy intersects with belief to guide her action and thus demonstrates the transitivity between meta-ideologizing and the differential movement that marks an oppositional consciousness.

Despite how functionalist Lauren's concept of God may seem, Sandoval's theory reveals that it is more than just a materialistic approach¹⁰ to religion. Lauren offers Earthseed as an opportunity for differential movement through a self-conscious deconstruction of the traditional lexicon associated with Christian religious ideology. In deconstructing and reconstructing God as change, Lauren participates in the "language of revolution," through the self-conscious deconstructive revision of a religious sign of power, thereby disidentifying with dominant ideology and with a benign "speech of the oppressed." Instead, Lauren participates in the meta-ideologized making of a world within a world through redefinition and the instructive language for Earthseed. Moreover, in signifying on the body of Christ, Butler further situates Lauren within a broader semiology of differential movement that archetypes the activist impulse found within other black futurisms¹¹. Sandoval relates Barthes' suggestion that:

Whether the effort is to *semiotically* take in meanings, to transform those meanings through *deconstruction* or *meta-ideologization*, to reform them under an ethically *democratic imperative*, or whether, Barthes adds, the effort is to poeticize, to try to force 'the sign back into meaning . . . to reach not the meaning of words but the meaning of things themselves' in their presemiological state . . . , all of these movements through consciousness and through the social order depend on the technology of *differential movement*" (Sandoval 112, emphasis in original).

As Hampton argues, "Lauren's pilgrimage up the coast acts as a bodily rite that assists her in outlining the praxis of her beliefs and the symbolic order of the Earthseed religion" (20). Lauren arguably simultaneously occupies a traditional metaphorical representation of Christ¹² as she enacts the ideological deconstruction

¹⁰ See Farah Mendlesohn, "Religion and Science Fiction," *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge UP, 2003). pp. 264-275.

¹¹ See Hampton.

¹² This revisionist mode used by feminists of color of embodying Christ (and the sacred more generally) is also theorized as part of a ritual paradigm of personal and community agency. See Helane Androne, *Ritual Structures in Chicana Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Scholars have pointed to Lauren's body as signifying a Christ figure, represented by the pain taken up within her body (hyperempathy) and also the centering of her transformed self and transformed vision of the relationship between God and humanity. One can argue that even that role is revised through deconstruction and meta-ideologization; she is a prophet for Earthseed who desires, but does not request or require the accompaniment of others. She offers her vision as a material salvation in sharp contrast to the dangers of their current context.

of God into a concept rather than a being whose omniscience is irrelevant and omnipotence is shapeable. Moreover, her God concept deconstructs problematic "big" God binaries of what God is and exchanges those meanings for what God is not. One entry in *Earthseed* reads: "God is neither good / nor evil, / neither loving / nor hating. / . . . We must find the rest of what we need / within ourselves, / in one another, / in our Destiny" (245). But Lauren does not completely reject all of the structures of traditional religious practice; she does decide that God is "both creative and destructive," which is in line with much religious teaching, (270) and that "Once or twice / each week / . . . gathering" together is important (214).

While these exchanges may seem to center Christian worldviews, scholars (and Lauren) are also aware of the Buddhist influence in Butler's work. For example, Christopher Kocela argues in "God is Change, Impermanence is Buddha Nature: Religious Syncretism in Butler's *Earthseed* and Dōgen's Zen" that *Earthseed* becomes "a religious response to social, political, and environmental crises," which points to the Soto Zen school in medieval Japan that particularly valued the understanding of impermanence within their concept of "skillful means" (45). The interdisciplinary, liberationist and coalitional foundation in Sandoval's framework makes important room for Kocela's point that *Earthseed* actually represents a syncretic religion that uses a Buddhist hermeneutic strategy of 'skillful means' "to inspire faith in the capacity for personal and communal adaptability, liberation, and healing" (45-46).

Notwithstanding the import of this utopian vision, personal liberation as an intersectional being within a destabilized state is key to Lauren's impact on and through *Earthseed*. A step backward will reveal the complexity of how who she is directly influences the ideological framework through which she reaches for the liberation of herself and others. When we first join her journey, it is Lauren's fifteenth birthday. She is three years into an internal shift away from the Baptist belief system of her family, in an enclosed neighborhood surrounded by a massive wall designed and built for safety from the stark poverty, violence, and arson beyond. Lauren sees it as "a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than protective" (Butler 5). We also come to understand that she has hyperempathy syndrome, because she is "drug damaged" and burdened with a physio-psychological experience of the pain and pleasure of others (13). Hiding her hyperempathy means that Lauren is doubly punished physically and psychologically through the developing resentment of both inflicting pain and perceiving it when it is inflicted. Within her context, both inside and outside the wall, even at a distance, Lauren's body-mind connection could not help "seeing—collecting—some of their general misery" (11). The intersection of race, sex, gender, ability, and age all make Lauren's body a signifier for 21st-century liberation. She

expresses her age in connection with her father's because they share a birthday. Lauren does love and respect her father and, in spite of herself, plans to "try to please him—him and the community and God" (3)—a familiar paradigm of black womanist experience. Her age is also significant: she is turning fifteen and her father is turning fifty-five. There is such significant use of fives in the text that it cannot be coincidental, since the number five tends to represent concepts like freedom, curiosity, and—importantly—change¹³.

The characterization of Lauren's body is also exemplary of what Sandoval points out as characteristic of U.S. third world feminist writing, which "insist[s] on the recognition of a third, divergent, and supplementary category for social identity. . . . These 'sister outsiders' (1984) . . . who inhabit an uncharted psychic terrain" challenged white hegemonic feminism that regarded a homogeneous awareness of oppression as women, while leaving the significance of such intersections as "tacked on" (Sandoval 46-47). This characterization of Lauren's adolescent body within a rite of passage through which convene challenges to ideology, empathy, and the symbolic order of oppressions is representative of an interventionist praxis within black womanist SFF writing that arguably emerges from the feminists of color activisms Sandoval identifies as part of the methodology.¹⁴ Sandoval's technologies demonstrate what she calls a "'coalitional consciousness' in cultural studies across racialized, sexualized, genderized theoretical domains [within which she includes] 'white male poststructuralism,' 'hegemonic feminism,' 'third world feminism,' 'postcolonial discourse theory,' and 'queer theory'" (79). Lauren's intersectional reality as black, female, "disabled,"¹⁵ and poor within a destabilized context reveals systemic circumstances accounted for within the cultural theories from which coalitional consciousness emerges to encourage coalition and differential movement.

Archetypal Implications

Not only do Lauren's rites of passage into leading Earthseed situate her not only as a signifier of/for black liberation, but the resonance of Sandoval's (now: emancipatory)¹⁶ technologies also provide a framework for understanding how

¹³ The number five is significant across religions and scientific knowledges, including Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism, and astronomy.

¹⁴ Sandoval notes many such feminists within her discussion, including Paula Gunn Allen, Toni Morrison, Velia Hancock, bell hooks, Amy Ling, Maxine Hong Kingston, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Maxine Baca Zinn, and Cherríe Moraga.

¹⁵ I would problematize this term with regard to its representations within black womanist SFF.

¹⁶ Sandoval notes the change from oppressed to emancipation within the progression of her framework (2, 96, 105, 27).

Butler's character is archetypal of a specific black womanist interventionist praxis. Within the rites of passage Lauren experiences in *The Parable of the Sower* each of Sandoval's five technologies is at work.¹⁷ Lauren: 1) develops the survival sensitivities to and for language and image that Sandoval finds characteristic of oppressed peoples; 2) rejects a mythology, but develops and expounds upon a new attachment to the sacred that revises existing concepts and provides opportunity for 3) meta-ideologizing her understanding of the sacred; 4) invests wholeheartedly her hope and active movement toward democracies through the agro-community Earthseed; and finally, 5) actively moves and encourages internal and external differential movement whereby liberation can manifest for herself and a willing community committed to the principles of Earthseed. We see that Lauren has clearly taken on dominant ideological forms of family and society and spirituality and actively pulled away from that to re-appropriate the work and persona of God. What Sandoval calls "democracies" which "gathers, drives, and orients . . . with the intent of bringing about not simply survival or justice, as in earlier times, but egalitarian social relations . . . with the aim of producing 'love' in a decolonizing, postmodern, post-empire world," sounds like Earthseed (83).

Ultimately, this discussion leads to speculation on how Sandoval's technologies reveal similar constructs in other black women's (SFF). As Sheree R. Thomas argues,

These black women speculative fiction writers are dangerous muses. . . They use and retool genre conventions to revise long held meanings imposed on black women's bodies and amplify their voices, creating characters that become the heroines of their own adventures, the creators of their own unforgettable tales. Their choice of characterization, language, themes, and setting do not reinforce traditional notions of whose stories are worth telling, nor even how stories should be told. (Thomas 37)

This sentiment—alongside the expressed appreciation of and reverence for Butler's work by other black SFF authors aptly exemplified by the claims of "spiritual children" made by Jemisin in the quote provided as an epigraph for this essay¹⁸—has always made Butler's work an important touchpoint for theoretical inquiry. If Sandoval's framework is indeed a useful construct for thinking about the transformative experience of Lauren Olamina as an intersectional black woman protagonist within a destabilized state, and if Sandoval's framework reveals similar protagonist activisms within other texts, then this discussion may also

¹⁷ The irony of Sandoval having five technologies is certainly not meant to be ignored within this discussion.

¹⁸ Moreover, Nalo Hopkinson has been called an heir to Octavia E. Butler (see Thomas in Lavender and Yaszek).

provide the groundwork for arguing that Lauren actuates an important archetype in SFF by black women. Butler presents Lauren as she develops an oppositional consciousness within an intersectional body, with deep focus on the revision of a dominant ideology to survive within a destabilized state. Butler positions Lauren as a signifier of black liberation, while Sandoval's methodology reveals Lauren's "dissident and coalitional cosmopolitics" (Sandoval 3).

Butler was first to gain SFF recognition within and outside the genre for constructing and centering black women surviving, arguably de-centering the invisibility of the unique experience of black women within texts that traditionally center white subjects. As Jemisin notes, "*Parable of the Sower* works beautifully as an examination of how smart resistance functions—and I, growing jaded with respectability politics, black patriarchy, and other shallow solutions to the problem of racism, needed that badly" ("Foreword"). A Lauren archetype accounts for the vitality and relevance of a collective consciousness inseparable from its intersectional identity and contexts of power. Butler centers in Lauren such complex identities and contexts as at least integrated and interdependent. Such an archetype demonstrates that collective consciousness is traumatized and motivated by a very specific relationship to race/gender/ability/sexuality-based power dynamics. Further, if Lauren's characterization demonstrates Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness that is repeated within subsequent black womanist characterizations, then this suggests a paradigm shift toward recognition of an archetype with deeper significance. Lauren's impact as archetype is not, as can be argued about other Jungian archetypes, possible to accomplish without a specifically intersectional experience. From N. K. Jemisin's *Essun* to Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* to Nalo Hopkinson's *Ti'Jean*, black women have and are actually textualizing the kind of intersectional theoretical methodology that Sandoval identifies as praxis. The implication is that these authors, as Thomas states, "have not only been starblazing a path for themselves but they are birthing a black womanist future for us all" (Thomas 38). Applying Sandoval's framework as we have here reveals how the activism and liberationist sentiments developed through feminist movements indeed warrant attention to the activist synchronicities between and among black womanist SFF texts.

To lessen the burden of applying the full density of Sandoval's theory to other SFF texts, I posit Lauren as an archetype to recognize the legacy of Butler's authorial role as genre progenitor of this particular intersectional characterization. Both chronology and accomplishment lead my preference for Butler's Lauren as the *legacy* archetype that reflects Sandoval's methodology, which we might simplify thus:

- ***Intersectional rite of passage.*** An intersectional protagonist moving through a rite of passage in development of an oppositional consciousness within a destabilized, oppressive state (including and demonstrated by individual, familial, communal trauma).
- ***Physio-psychic ability.*** A protagonist with an inherent, embodied physiological and/or psychic ability or affect that is both the result of and answer to destabilization and/or oppression.
- ***Ideological deconstruction and meta-ideologization of the sacred.*** Internal and external (individual and communal) participation in ideological deconstruction and meta-ideologization of the sacred (mythologies, signifiers, etc.).

Sandoval's thorough theoretical work notwithstanding, what she also elucidates is how certain black protagonists signify the operations of a well-established activist sensibility. Recognizing the apparatus of *love* within that trajectory of activism provides a revolutionary language for similar structures operating within other black womanist SFF narratives.

While we cannot lay bare the details of this archetype in as many texts as would be necessary for a complete navigation of the methodology, I will attempt to summarize two significant representations to at least suggest its application. N. K. Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy might just suggest an alternative theoretical framework of metaphysical speculative realism; however, if we consider the *legacy* possibility of Damaya/Syenite/Essun, it turns our analysis toward centering orogene experience to theorize technologies of liberation present in the narrative. Whether Jemisin's work is accurately defined as speculative realism or not, our attention turns to how the narrative reflects a larger apparatus of oppositional consciousness, emancipatory practices, and affinity to past and present decolonial discursive practices. Jemisin's black female protagonist moves from her identity as a child (Damaya) discovered as an orogene,¹⁹ to her identity as a young adult (Syenite) training in the Fulcrum to serve an oppressive system she eventually rebels against, to an adult (Essun) who unwittingly finds herself personally entangled in opposition to that system once again. Again, Damaya's "ability," which is easily deadly and at least debilitating if uncontrolled, is the result of a technological scourge connected to the destabilization of a civilization. There is a clear ideological use and eventual deconstruction of the sacred guiding stonelore ideology, which governs behaviors and survival, by Syenite/Essun, Alabaster, and the members of Castrima. Essun has suffered profound personal/familial crisis through the murder of her son

¹⁹ Orogens within the world of the Stillness have "the ability to manipulate thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events"—and can also cause them (NK Jemisin *The Fifth Season* 462).

and the kidnapping of her daughter, which sends her into wandering/seeking and experiences wherein she must use the tactics Sandoval relates as differential consciousness and social movement, which “depends on the practitioner’s ability to read the current situation of power and self-consciously [choose] and [adopt] the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations” (Sandoval 60). There are certainly nuances unique to Jemisin’s ingenious world-building approach within the text, but I would argue that each technology is indeed represented.

In *Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor, we are in Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib’s journey from Black girlhood to womanhood. Binti occupies an intersectional identity that includes expectations in conflict with the potential of her inherited ability of “mathematical sight,” which her mother had used “to protect the family” (Okorafor, *Binti* 16):

I was the first Himba in history to be bestowed with the honor of acceptance into Oomza Uni. The hate messages, threats to my life, laughter and ridicule that came from the Khoush in my city made me want to hide more. But deep down inside me. . . . I *needed* it. I couldn’t help but act on it. The urge was so strong that it was mathematical. . . . And those numbers added up to the sum of my destiny. (14-15, emphasis in original)

An analysis of Binti’s journey, her ability that is both deadly to the Meduse and operationalized to transform her into an ambassador to them, and her attendance to the sacred otjize, belief in the Seven and masquerade cosmologies, might also point to *legacy*.

From here, I invite speculation into what we learn from and about the protagonists in texts by Nalo Hopkinson, Tomi Adeyemi, and other black female SFF authors. Sandoval’s five technologies applied to these narratives become a “mode of perception and decipherment,” as operationalized on and within black womanist SFF (Sandoval 91). Sandoval’s method recovers the patterns of global, strategic revolutionary struggle and redirects and extends our thinking, showing us how we might center the intersectional experiences of black women in SFF to support that broader effort toward liberation. We know the mechanisms of liberation are there, in so many parts and so many characters, and so we continue to mine these narratives for meaning, for answers, and for some connection to our own trauma. Perhaps what we realize when we do this is what we’ve known all along: liberation can indeed unfold into “the real” if we are willing to adapt, to shape change, and to employ every technology of *love*.

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Decolonizing the Mind: Amari's Quest towards Allyship in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*

Sylvia Barnes

Colonization isn't a thing that happens just geographically. It also affects the mindset of the colonized and the colonizer. In *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi, Amari undergoes the process of decolonizing her mind. Once Amari can leave her home that she had been trapped inside, she is able to experience things from a different perspective and from a mindset that is not synonymous with the life that she had previously left. Amari's relationship, or budding friendship, with Zelig is one that has growing pains. Zelig is quite hesitant and reluctant to get close to Amari, but as the novel progresses, their friendship sparks Amari's transition from the mindset of a colonizer to one that instead considers the experiences of those who have been colonized. This is not a simple process for either Zelig or Amari. Zelig's hesitancy towards Amari stems from being on the receiving end of the violence and the degradation that are imposed onto diviners from the Orishans. The foundation for this violence is fear, which is connected to colonialism; however, fear is a double-edged sword. The colonizers have weaponized fear in order to make the colonized subordinates, yet at the same time the colonizers themselves embody this fear; thus "colonial violence, seems to have given way to indirect violence, the colonial order has contaminated the land of the colonizers" (France 8). However, eventually it is actually this violence that allows Zelig and Amari to see that, despite their different backgrounds they in fact have more in common than not.

Construction of the Novel

Children of Blood and Bone was published in 2018 and created a world that captivated readers of various ages. The construction of *Children of Blood and Bone* itself is a large part of the allure of Adeyemi's novel, with different chapters allowing for the voices of her characters, Amari, Inan, Tzain, and Zelig, to be heard individually in an overlapping fashion that emphasizes their different perspectives. It is through this overlapping and layering of first-person perspectives that the reader is able to see a shift in each of the character's mindset. For example, Amari undergoes a process to free herself from the different restrictions that have been previously placed upon her by her father and his indoctrination. Her brother, Inan, will also undergo this shift in mindset. Whenever Inan witnesses Zelig being beaten and having the word "maggot" carved into her back by his father's decree, he starts

to have both empathy and sympathy towards her. Thus, he will learn what truly happened and not blindly believe the information that his father has provided. This difference in perspective can be seen when Zelig explains to him the reality of how things are for those who are not of noble status: "You can't. They built this world for you, built it to love you. They never cursed at you in the streets, never broke down the doors of your home. They didn't drag your mother by her neck and hang her for the whole world to see" (Adeyemi 313). Zelig articulates her pain in this statement, thereby providing Inan with insight about her survived hardships and troubles based upon her status.

At the moment of Inan and Zelig's encounter, he has not been privy to this information. Given his noble status, he has only had access to information that has been censored by his father. Therefore, any information that contradicts his previous knowledge causes him to self-reflect. In the following chapter, the voice shifts from Zelig to Inan. Zelig states to Inan, "Fool yourself all you want, little prince, but don't feign innocence with me. I won't let your father get away with what he's done. I won't let your ignorance silence my pain" (315). Zelig uses her voice to articulate her opinion and her pain. She chooses to force herself, and her people, into the dominant narrative—a narrative that has created an image that is not entirely accurate. Inan has an introspective moment: "In that moment I realized how wrong I've truly been. It doesn't matter if I'm in her head. I'll never understand her pain" (315). Inan's recognition of his privileged position creates an internal conflict that the readers are able to see throughout the novel. As will be made evident in this article, fear is the underlying factor that catalyzes such transformative events in the novel; fear of magic, specifically, is the barrier between the diviners and the Orishans. Such fear is crippling and can only be used in destructive ways. Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* centralizes on the presence of fear, its damaging effects, and also the possibilities for breaking away from fear. Through the use of the Afrofuturistic and Black Speculative Fiction genre, Adeyemi is able to integrate the past, present, and the future.

Afrofuturism grants space and access to things forgotten. According to Thomas, "Afrofuturism . . . imagines that what was once [predetermined] lost, forgotten, soiled, and stripped away can be found, can be reclaimed and resurrected, remixed and revived" (3-4). In doing this, "The spirit and rhythm of a culture is preserved and transformed; the past is not only contested but sacred space" (4). *Children of Blood and Bone* is fueled by the importance of the past and its influence on present status within the narrative. Within the construction of the novel, via characters such as Mama Agba, the past is something sacred and maintained by certain keepers of tradition and culture, which mimics elements of storytelling or counter-storytelling that resonate within Black culture.

While Afrofuturism is a core component within the genre and construction of the novel, Eurocentric influence is also critiqued. As this article contends, there are instances where colonization is mentioned and plays an integral role in present-day Orisha. That said, “Afrofuturism 2.0 is the beginning of both a move away from and an answer to the Eurocentric perspective of the twentieth century’s early formulation of Afrofuturism that wondered if the history of African peoples, especially in North America, had been deliberately erased” (Anderson 228). This erasure is felt in *Children of Blood and Bone* through the erasure of magic on behalf of only one side or perspective of history. Thus, authors such as Adeyemi are “not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about cultural others, past, present and future and, challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures” (Anderson 228).

Idea of Colonization

Parallels of colonization appear in *Children of Blood and Bone* via the relationship between the diviners and the Orishans. The distinction between the diviners and the Orishans is what fuels the plot of *Children of Blood and Bone*; the differences between the two groups are stated early in the novel to prime the audience. During the opening scene, “maggot” is used to identify the diviners, a group of people in Orisha who are not born into noble status. Those who are of noble status are the Orishans. Zelig, a diviner, hears the officers use the term “maggots” and it triggers her: “My jaw clenches as I try to block out the guard, to block out the way *maggot* stung from his lips. It doesn’t matter that we’ll never become the maji we were meant to be. In their eyes we’re still maggots. That’s all they’ll ever see” (10). Unsure of how the turmoil between the diviners and the Orishans started, the reader is provided context by Mama Agba. The maji possessed magic and were the first rulers of Orisha, but once the magic that was given to them started to be misused, and the gods took it away from them: “When the magic leached from their blood, their white hair disappeared as a sign of their sin. Over generations, love of the maji turned into fear. Fear turned into hate. Hate transformed into violence, a desire to wipe the maji away” (15). This is the creation of the mindset that influenced the way the diviners and the Orishans currently interact. It is out of fear—fear of the unknown, fear of difference, fear of losing order and control—hence, the dichotomy between the diviners and the Orishans emerged.

Through the novel’s focus on the divide between the diviners and the Orishans, there are instances where the concept of colonialism becomes important, and the effects of this colonialism are felt. For instance, in connection with the relationship between the diviners and the Orishans, the use of magic is prohibited. Clignet has

previously shown that the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer is influenced by the rejection of old norms and acceptance of new norms or regime: "They will thus demonstrate how the selectivity underlying the recruitment of colonial students and the nature of the curriculum imposed upon them tend to perpetuate existing patterns of domination. At the same time, however, they will minimize the significance of the role played by the cultural traditions of colonial people in their acceptance or their rejection of the experiences attached to colonial educational systems" (297). In *Children of Blood and Bone*, this pattern is exemplified as the maji, the original wielders of magic, were targeted and eliminated due to the stigma of magic being too dangerous and uncontrollable; due to this stigma, the diviners' goal is to survive by abiding by the rules, even if that means paying exuberant taxes. The maji's goal is the same, but they have to be more careful since they are seen as the root of the chaos that had to be forcefully subdued.

Additional moments of colonialism are focused on the ideologies of European colonial empires such as Britain and Spain. Towards the beginning of the novel, Inan has a conversation with his father, King Saran, about the dangers of magic being restored in Orisha. Saran has conditioned Inan to be wary of magic being restored in Orisha based on his previous experience: "When I rose to the throne, I knew magic was the root of all our pain. It's crushed empires before ours, and as long as it lives, it shall crush empires again." (82). The empires to which Saran is alluding are the Briatunís, Pörltöganés, and Spāni. According to Saran, magic is a dangerous force because it cannot be controlled, and leaves destruction and chaos to ensue. The only solution is to destroy magic before it can destroy everyone else: "When I discovered the raw alloy the Bratonians used to subdue magic, I thought that would be enough. With majacite, they created prisons, and weapons, and chains. Following their tactics, I did the same. But even that wasn't enough to tame those treacherous maggots. If our kingdom was ever going to survive, I knew I had to take magic away." (82). Saran mimicked the techniques that he had seen other powerful empires utilize in defense against magic in hoping to save his kingdom, adopting these methods in order to protect what he had inherited and built. But through this adoption of these empires' defense tactics, he also adopted their colonialist mindset. He operated out of fear, and fear brings violence.

Inan's mindset demonstrates the effects of a colonized and colonizer relationship. As Clignet summarizes the views of earlier scholars, "They propose thus that the colonialist attitudes and behaviors of an individual will be determined both by the nature of the regime to which he belongs and by the position that he occupies in political hierarchy" (297). Inan was indeed a firm believer in his father's orders and teachings; he did not question or second guess his father's doctrine, and he was obedient to his father's commands. He also occupied a position within the political hierarchy which, aligns him with colonialist attitude and behavior. Aimé

Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* exemplifies the double standards that are located within such colonialism. According to Césaire, "At this idea: that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased with irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another" (39). Orisha is a sick civilization under the tutelage of Saran. By his decree, Saran has annihilated an entire group of people under the assumption that it provides safety for others. Saran's mindset is rooted in fear. His actions are rooted in fear. He passes this fear on to his son, in order to keep tradition alive. Through this participation, fear sparks violence and violence is at the heart of colonialism.

The Process of Decolonization

To undo what has been done and practiced for years is a grueling process that requires both the colonized and the colonizer. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon states, "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder" (2). Disorder must emerge in order for a new future to emerge. In the article "The Contribution of Frantz Fanon to the Process of the Liberation of the People," Mireille Fanon-Mendés France remarks concerning Fanon's postcolonial vision that, "For Fanon, the construction of a just and prosperous society required that its men and women undergo an integral liberation from the colonial yoke, so it was vital to identify the deficiencies and eliminate the sequels of the devastating colonial presence" (10). Amari's quest towards allyship with Zelig and Tzian requires her to liberate herself from the colonial powers in her life, namely, her father and her family. While Amari physically removes herself from the palace and the beliefs that it represents, that removal does not come easily. Amari leaves after Binta, her servant and confidant, is killed for possessing magic. Binta's magic abilities did not come as a surprise to Amari, as she had witnessed them before: "In the darkest days following the Raid, magic took hold inside my imagination, a monster without a face. But in Binta's hands, magic is mesmerizing, a wonder like no other" (Adeyemi 43). Amari makes her own evaluation about the use of magic instead of strictly following her father's orders. However, Saran's choice to kill Binta stems from his own experiences with magic, where he has seen the harm that magic can cause. Hence, Saran's mentality is rooted in his need to maintain order in order to survive the unknown, a mindset that coincides with findings from Mannoni's research into the colonized-colonizer relationship: "Colonizers and colonized are prisoners of their past and more specifically of their childhood" (Clignet 299). Saran is thus a prisoner of his past as is evidenced by the stories that he tells Inan about the dangers of magic.

Amari, on the other hand, is able to identify how the choice of a few does not have to represent everyone else. Just as Amari is equating Binta's magic with positivity, her father kills Binta: "Blood pools around Binta's innocent face, dyeing her white locks red. Its copper smell wafts through the crack in the door. I stifle a gag. Father yanks off Binta's apron and uses it to clean his sword. Completely at ease. He does not care that her blood stains his royal robes. He doesn't see that her blood stains my own hands" (44). Saran is nonchalant about killing Binta, as he sees this act as a way of protecting his kingdom from the ills of magic. He does not think about who Binta is—outside of her being a maji—or what she may mean to his daughter. He instead chooses violence—a violence that is rooted in fear, hatred, and a colonial mindset. Amari, however, bearing witness to the reality of being Orishan nobility, physically removes herself from the colonial discourse, though she struggles to remove herself mentally from the teachings of her father. Amari joins Zelig and Tzain as she is running away from the kingdom with the coveted scroll. As the group nearly runs out of money, Amari has the option to remedy the situation, but she does not do it willingly:

"I am trying to help you." Amari clenches the skirt of her dress. "I've given up *everything* to help you people –"

"You people?" I fume.

"We can save the diviners –"

"You want to save the diviners, but you won't even sell your damn dress?" (119).

Amari's naivete in this situation demonstrates the process of decolonizing one's mind. Her inability to see the value of her dress in terms of supplying necessities for her, Zelig, and Tzain is only a fraction of the problem; Amari's use of the phrase "you people" also references a class distinction between herself and Zelig. This phrase reifies how colonization affects the colonizer's mentality so that they believe themselves to be innately superior to the colonized. Amari's slippage in her dialogue with Zelig reinforces Freud's commentary on slips of the tongue by which "There is always a return of the repressed" (Barry 122). Freud's theory believes "The underlying assumption is that when some wish, fear, memory, or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, eliminating it from the conscious mind. But this doesn't make it go away: it remains alive in the unconscious . . . and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually" (Barry 122). The fear that Amari believed she had repressed works its way back into the moment causing her to have a Freudian slip and does so at a critical moment for the budding alliance she wants to create with Zelig. She realizes that physically removing herself from her family and everything they

represent will not suffice. Her outburst, in a moment of frustration, demonstrates that decolonization is an active process that takes time.

On the other hand, it is not solely the responsibility of the colonizer to change their mindset; the mindset of the colonized also must change. As the plot continues, Zelig learns that the lifestyle she presumed Amari lived was not actually so picturesque. Zelig sees Amari's scars on her back and begins to feel compassion towards her. To Zelig these scars humanize Amari and separate her from the monarchy that has starkly influenced the way that Zelig and Amari interact: "I shake my head. Where does her loyalty come from? All this time I thought those of noble blood were safe. I never imagined what cruelty the monarchy could inflict on their own" (125). The pain that Zelig senses from looking at the scars on Amari's back shifts the way she interacts with Amari. Amari is vulnerable as she exposes the result of the trauma that she has faced previously. Zelig learns that no one is safe under the guise of colonization. Colonization, along with its lingering effects via colonialism impacts and degrades everyone affected by it. According to Césaire:

They prove that colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeking the other man as *an animal* accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal (41).

The animalistic nature that is being discussed by Césaire is physically felt by Amari through her scars and transfers to Zelig. Saran is animalistic and as such, treats his children like animals. Saran's main goal is conquest—conquest over the maji and conquest over Orisha—and the only way to achieve this aim is by adopting a mindset that eliminates humanity. Amari was raised under such leadership, and Amari fell victim to it. Zelig realizes the differences she presumed to exist between herself, and Amari are in fact non-existent, as they are both powerless in this system.

As Amari and Zelig's relationship grows, it comes to an ultimate test. During the boat fighting scene, Amari is put in a position that requires her to work past her childhood trauma: "But as I pray, the captain breaks through, sword plunging forward. I brace myself for the attack, but then I realized he's not coming at me. His sword aims down, angled to the side. He's targeting Zelig. . . . For a moment, I am too shocked to realize what I have done. But when the captain falls, my blade goes with him" (254). Despite the wounds on her back, from a forceful sword fight against her brother, Amari picks up the sword to protect her newfound ally. Amari's

wounds stem from a swordfight her father forced between her and Inan. Despite Inan being the older and more experienced sibling, he followed his father's orders. This leads to him scaring his sister physically, mentally, and emotionally. Amari works through this trauma as part of the process of becoming a true ally to Zelig.

Amari pushes through her previously debilitating trauma in order to protect Zelig in her fragile state. Amari's initial intention had been to sacrifice herself and her body to defend Zelig during the fight, but once she realizes that this is not a viable option because of the course the captain from the other boat takes, she reacts through instinct to defend her. Despite Amari's earlier horrific encounter with swords, she instinctually grabs one and kills the captain who is trying to kill Zelig. Instinct and duty are the best words to describe Amari's actions as she states, "I am too shocked to realize that what I have done" (254). It had not been something that Amari planned; rather, it was something that Amari was guided to do based on her relationship with Zelig. This action liberates Amari; thus, coinciding with Fanon's thoughts on decolonization: "Decolonization is the true creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power. The 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation" (2). Amari's duty lies with Zelig and Tzain and her actions indicated such. Amari's first step towards decolonizing her mind is to liberate herself from her father, both physically and mentally. Amari physically escaped her home and took an important scroll with her. This was the initial step. The following step she takes is mentally distancing herself from her upbringing. She does not allow an incident that occurred between her and her brother, at the command of her father, to influence her. She decides instead to formulate her own opinions about magic as she creates a path of her own. It is not a supernatural power that creates this transformation; Amari actively chooses to free herself from the restraints placed on her by her father. By removing herself from the nobility, Amari is thus able to forge a friendship and become a much-needed ally to Zelig.

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Reflective Futurology: Exploring Black Time Travel and Intergenerational Healing in *Lovecraft Country* and Beyond

Loren S. Cahill

Ten million viewers mourned the recent loss of the HBO series *Lovecraft Country*, a show that covered many themes amplified through the writers' juxtaposition of science fiction with the violence of Jim/Jane Crow America. In Episode Nine, "Rewind 1921," four characters from the show tackle feats of Black Time Travel and intergenerational healing. Those characters are Atticus ("Tic"), the show's protagonist; Montrose, his father; Lettie, who is pregnant with Atticus's child; and Hippolyta, Atticus's aunt. This collective is tasked with traveling back in time to find the *Book of Names* during the massacre of three hundred Black citizens in Tulsa, Oklahoma, commonly known as the Tulsa Massacre. This racial cleansing event resulted in an entire thirty-five square block radius being burned off of the map. Five hotels, thirty-one restaurants, eight doctors' offices, two movie theaters, four drug stores, twenty-four grocery stores, and over one thousand homes were reduced to ash (Matthews). Over the course of just a few hours, each character not only witnesses destruction but also learns lessons from ancestors, parents, and children that have unconsciously shaped them in the present.

In this essay, I will highlight how each of these four *Lovecraft Country* characters vicariously witnesses this tragedy and intimately learns about collectively-held trauma. Atticus learns more context for the abuse Montrose endured at the hands of his father because of his queerness. Montrose observes as an adult how he has been unable to break his father's cycle of abuse and alcoholism. Letti has a powerful conversation with Nana Hattie, Dora's (Atticus's Mother) grandmother about the tasks required of Black matriarchs. While Hippolyta stays in the present, she uses cyborg technology to open a time portal; in a moment when Hippolyta feels unable to sustain the point of entry, she thinks of her daughter, Diana, and is able to accomplish her task by transforming into Orithyia Blue, a superhero representation of Diana's wildest dreams for her mother. Each person is uniquely making connections to those who came before and from them and are forever changed through the process. I use these examples from *Lovecraft Country* to scaffold a critical need for Black people to develop our own mechanisms of time travel (Phillips and Ayewa) and also our relationships with ancestors and future generations. I call this practice *Reflective Futurology*, a method and epistemological framework that seeks to unravel the processes by which communal memory is seeded and collective memory is spread across time and space, reaching backward and forward in time simultaneously to include everything that has happened and

will happen (Phillips and Matti). I conclude the article by listing practices that will allow readers to trace their family lines, learn more about their history, set intentions, and begin their own archival practice for their future ancestors. Such praxis includes intention setting, ancestry tracing, oral history, and creative nonfiction. Reflective Futurology, through both the examples of cinema and in our lives, allows us to learn about and break cycles and creates the opportunity to chart new paths.

Historical Context

In May 1921, Greenwood was so promising, so vibrant that it became home to what was known as America's Black Wall Street. But what took years to build was erased in less than 24 hours by racial violence sending hundreds of dead into mass graves and forever altering family trees, though for decades what happened in Greenwood was willfully buried in normative educational and national history. The troubles began when on May 30 a situation involving two teenagers in an elevator in the Drexel building in downtown Tulsa morphed into an accusation of sexual assault (Parrish 2). Accounts vary as to what happened between Dick Rowland, 19, a young Black shoe shiner, and Sarah Page, 17, a white elevator operator. One common theory suggests Mr. Rowland tripped and grabbed onto the arm of Ms. Page while trying to catch his fall. She screamed, and he ran away, according to the commission report (Goble 57). The next day, Mr. Rowland was arrested and jailed in the Tulsa County Courthouse. By that afternoon the *Tulsa Tribune* had published a front-page news story with the headline "Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator," which essentially mobilized a lynch mob that showed up at the courthouse (Odewale 131). That clash and others that day marked the beginning of what would become Greenwood's armed destruction. Near dawn, the white mob descended on Greenwood. One major factor that drove their violence was their deep-seated resentment toward the Black prosperity found block after block in Greenwood. Black Tulsans fought back, valiantly defending their families and property. But they were woefully outnumbered. The mob indiscriminately shot Black people in the streets. Members of the mob ransacked homes and stole money and jewelry. They set fires, "street by street, block by block," according to the commission report (Goble 69). Terror came from the sky, too. White pilots flew airplanes that dropped dynamite over the neighborhood, the report stated, making the Tulsa aerial attack among the first bombings of an American city (Ellsworth 78). In the end, the city's African-American population was simply outnumbered by the white invaders. Public officials provided firearms and ammunition to individuals, again all of them white (Goble 193). Units of the Oklahoma National Guard participated in the mass arrests of all or nearly all of Greenwood's residents.

They removed them to other parts of the city and detained them in holding centers. Despite duties to preserve order and to protect property, no government at any level offered adequate resistance (Messer 97), if any at all, to what amounted to the destruction of the Greenwood neighborhood. Not one of these criminal acts was then or ever has been prosecuted or punished by the government at any level: municipal, county, state, or federal.

In the end, the restoration of Greenwood after its systematic destruction was left to the Black victims of that destruction. The numbers presented a staggering portrait of loss: 35 blocks burned to the ground, as many as 300 dead, hundreds injured, 8,000 to 10,000 left homeless, more than 1,470 homes burned or looted, and eventually, 6,000 detained in internment camps (Messer 95). The neighborhood economy was destroyed. Greenwood, where Black success embodied the American dream, was no more, suddenly, dreadfully wiped out. The financial toll of the massacre is evident in the \$1.8 million in property loss claims, \$27 million in today's dollars, as detailed in a 2001 state commission report (Goble 179). But the destruction of property is only one piece of the financial devastation that the massacre wrought. Much bigger is a sobering kind of inheritance: the incalculable and enduring loss of what could have been, and the generational wealth that might have shaped and secured the fortunes of Black children and grandchildren. Today, Black artist collectives are still reckoning with the weight of these murders and destruction; for instance, the Greenwood Art Project seeks to be a catalyst for uniting the city of Tulsa by working with artists, residents, leaders, organizations, and businesses to elevate awareness of Greenwood's history (Lowe). They strive to create art that activates the community towards healing from our history, rebuilding, and re-cultivating Greenwood Avenue in the most beautiful and authentic way. The artistic exploration of this painful event also inspired the "Rewind 1921" episode in the *Lovecraft Country* series, which I will unpack in the next section.

"Rewind 1921"

Episode Nine, "Rewind 1921," begins with Tic, Leti, Montrose, and Ruby (Leti's Sister) watching over Dee, who is dying from the curse placed on her by Captain Lancaster. Tic wants to go to Christina for help in exchange for Titus's pages, the city of Ardham's founder and Christina's ancestor. Leti reveals that she has already traded Titus's pages in exchange for invulnerability in order to ensure the safety of her unborn child; unbeknownst to others in the room, she is pregnant with Tic's child. However, Ruby assures them that Christina will come to their aid if she herself asks, as Christina and Ruby are partners. Christina agrees to help Dee, and after she arrives, Christina deduces from the well-detailed pictures

drawn by Dee that the curse is a combination between Titus's pages and Horatio's stolen ones. However, she cannot remove the curse without the Book of Names, a spell book stolen by Titus's slave. While she can perform restoration and reset the curse's cycle, Dee will eventually die unless the contents of that book is discovered. But Christina will perform the spell only if Tic agrees to come back with her to Ardham on the night of the autumnal equinox so that she can cast a spell to gain immortality. Christina needs the help of everyone in the room to channel the appropriate amount of intention, and she adds that since births make locations ripe for spell casting, it would be better for them to do it in the apartment, where Dee had been born. Before leaving to tend to personal matters, she hands Tic a symbol to trace around the apartment and tells them that the blood of Dee's closest relative will also be needed for the spell. With Hippolyta gone, the task falls on Montrose. Montrose reveals that he may not actually be Tic's father. When Tic finds Montrose in the garage getting drunk off of moonshine, Montrose indicates that if he could go back in time and take that bullet for his brother George, he would. He then reveals that his blood might not be able to save Dee since Tic might be George's son, making him Dee's closest relative. Tic becomes upset at this revelation after years of having wished that Uncle George was actually his father. Leti then joins them to inform them that Christina is back, and Hippolyta also suddenly returns and inquires about Dee's health. Tic, Leti, Montrose, and Ruby stand over Dee as Christina performs the spell with Hippolyta's blood. Christina successfully manages to reset the cycle of the curse, buying Dee another 24 hours. Hippolyta reveals to her family that she had been on Earth 504 for the equivalent of 200 years on their Earth; she acquired infinite wisdom about time travel and intends to use it to save Dee. And so, she, Tic, Leti, and Montrose drive to the observatory in Kentucky to retrieve the Book of Names from Tic's family before it had been lost in the Tulsa riots. Tic and Hippolyta fix the time machine while Leti and Montrose tend to Dee, during which time Montrose reveals to Leti that he and Tic are aware she is pregnant. Tic had not told her because he had also learned that he would die during Christina's spell. Hippolyta programs the multiverse machine and soon gets the time machine up and running. They need to rewind to their Earth's Tulsa in 1921. The computer needs a motherboard to give it instructions, so Hippolyta plugs herself into the machine by using the purple implants in her wrists and then uses the picture of Montrose, George, and Dora from 1921 to triangulate. She warns them not to change anything in the past, and then Tic, Leti, and Montrose travel back in time to Tulsa, 1921. As they jump through the portal, they immediately dress in more time-appropriate clothes, save their contemporary footwear, so as to not draw any attention to themselves. The trio then head over to Dora's house, the last known whereabouts of the Book of Names, which contains the spell that can save Dee's life.

Montrose

Upon arriving at Dora's house, the triumvirate walks up to witness Montrose and George's father, Verton, beating Montrose. As Tic, Leti, and Montrose watch, they come to realize that Verton is hitting Montrose mercilessly with a switch because he had caught him in George's prom jacket with a flower in his hair, which he views as effeminate and outside of the performance of heteronormative masculinity. In this short exchange, Montrose is forced to relive his childhood trauma of abuse and violence. He is also forced to grapple with the fact that he has been unable to successfully break his familial cycle of alcoholism, abuse, and toxic masculinity. This time travel adventure gives Montrose the gift of a mirror reflection on his childhood to inform the current changes he needs to make in his life. A young bereaved future wife Dora exits her house and comes to Montrose's defense, stopping Verton and allowing Montrose to flee. Dora throws George's corsage to the ground, reprimands him, and asks why he hadn't helped his brother; George offers no response. After their dispute, George and Dora decide to go looking for where the younger Montrose ran off to. Through watching this heated exchange, Tic and Leti gain deeper insight into the love triangle Tic's parents were in with his Uncle George. Healing is happening at both the personal level for Montrose and the collective level for Tic and Leti. The pains and secrets kept from Tic for his entire life are unfolding before his eyes in real time. Tic and Leti become so emotionally captivated that they almost miss that Montrose has sneaked away. They both suspect that he's gone to disrupt something in the existing timeline and agree to split up: Tic goes searching through the Greenwood neighborhood for Montrose; Leti stays at Dora's house to look for the Book of Names.

Atticus

Atticus eventually finds that Montrose has stopped near a park. Montrose appears immediately traumatized just by the sight of it. Tic overlooks all of this and instead chastises him for being drunk, scolding him for his poor decision-making. He further berates Montrose for causing him to have suffered for years under his abuse and false projections of toxic masculinity to learn only now that he is queer and may not even be his father. Tic then tells Montrose that after Dee is safe, their relationship as father and son will be officially over. But their conversation is interrupted when they witness the younger Montrose begin speaking with Thomas, a boy close in age to him. Montrose reveals to Tic that Thomas will get shot in the head that night if he does not save him. Until tonight, Montrose had used alcohol to try and completely erase Thomas from his memory, as it was the

only way he could move on from being a bystander to such atrocious violence but given the chance with the wonders of magic, he desires to save him. Tic reminds Montrose that if he saves Thomas, then he may never end up with his mother Dora and he may never be born. However, Montrose counters that he won't allow this to be the case because the only thing he has ever wanted was "to be a man and his father." Tic then also learns about some of the sacrifices Montrose had made to deny his sexuality including on that night telling Thomas that they could not be friends anymore as they could never be together. Tic and Montrose then watch as young Montrose and Thomas are surrounded by a group of white men seeking to antagonize Black folks in a fit of racialized terror and violence. The two young boys are so nervous and intimidated by the show of force that they hold one another's hand, something they had never publicly done before. The white vigilantes mock this action and shoot Thomas in the head. Older Montrose chooses his son again and decides not to intervene to save his first love, Thomas. Atticus holds his father as he silently weeps.

Young George and Dora show up shortly after and the three of them attempt to fight off the white attackers and save Montrose. Older Tic and Montrose watch in horror and wait for the arrival of a stranger with a baseball bat, and event that had been recounted by their family countless times in the years that were to follow. However, their savior never shows. Instead, Tic finally sees a baseball bat on the ground in front of him and realizes that, in fact, he himself is the mysterious stranger who had saved them when they were kids. Tic's knowledge of his impending victory empowers him to race over courageously to save George, Montrose, and Dora, and he ultimately fends off the group of white men. In a scene so rarely shown on television, Black characters are heralded as the victors against white supremacist violence. Tic defeats the entire mob and then looks down and says to his father the iconic words he had been long hearing in his dreams: "I got you, kid." At this moment, Atticus releases the anger and resentment he has held towards his father by making the conscious choice not only to protect him but also to witness all of his complexities, nuances, trauma, and beauty. Atticus is able to receive the healing he personally needed only by beholding and forgiving the experiences of his father Montrose. In that quantum moment, Tic saves not only his father and himself but also their shared future together. Their future only becomes ensured when they reckon with the past. This scene is one of many intergenerational healing moments shared in this pivotal episode. Concurrently, while Montrose and Atticus are processing the impact of communal memory and shared heritage, Leti and Nana Hattie are also having a similar exchange.

Leti

Leti finds herself under attack by a group of white men armed with guns at Dora's House. The white mob chases her down and opens fire, but unbeknownst to them she is bulletproof via the invulnerability spell from Christina Braithwraithe. Verton (Dora's father) nonetheless comes to her aid and shoots back before helping Leti inside, where Nana Hattie (Dora's grandmother), Beulah (her sister), and Martha (her mother) wait. Dora's family asks her about any additional information she might have regarding the men who attacked her. Leti informs them that there is a truck of them at the end of the block. Verton slips out back to find the kids and passes out guns to each of them; the entire family then patrols the house, armed against impending threats. Leti escapes upstairs, but Nana Hattie catches her rummaging through her drawers and holds her at gunpoint. Nanna Hattie remarks that she has never seen shoes (sneakers) like Leti's and asks who she is; Leti reveals that she's from the future, that she is Dora's son's girlfriend, and that she is searching for the Book of Names. She knows that this may be inconceivable to Nana Hattie and attempts to prove it by drawing their family's birthmark on a sheet of paper. When Hattie begins to believe Leti's story, she suddenly realizes that if Leti has come to the past for the book, Hattie and her family must die during the riots. Hattie then looks outside and sees that the house is surrounded. The mob of white men begins throwing Molotov cocktails into the house, and flames slowly start to spread. Leti begs Nana Hattie to allow her to save her family and not change the future even though she has the power to alter it. She explains how Dora survives and gets married to Montrose, and that they have a beautiful son, Atticus, with whom she is in love. She reveals that she is currently pregnant with his child, and the redemption for their family's future lies within the pages of the book.

Hattie finally believes that Leti is telling the truth and opens a wall safe to retrieve the Book of Names. She tells Leti that when her great-great-grandson is born, he will be her "faith turned flesh." As the room fills with fire and smoke, she hands the book over to Leti and tells her that the book is spelled. She was told to protect it but never to open it, and no one in her family has done so since she's been alive. Rather than leaving to meet Tic and Montrose at the portal, Leti then decides to stick with Nana Hattie until the end as an act of gratitude. They both hold hands, cry, and pray to God as Hattie goes up in flames. In being honest with Nana Hattie, Leti is bestowed with mercy by her son's ancestor. Leti and Hattie understand the interconnectivity that exists between bloodlines. This extreme dramatized example showcases how Black people are able to offer support across time and space. Aunt Hippolyta also offers similar insights on spatiotemporality.

Hippolyta

Tic and Montrose successfully make their way back to the portal entrance, narrowly avoiding explosions and gunfire from the growing riots. After Tic jumps through the portal, he notices that Aunt Hippolyta is struggling on the other side to maintain its structure and current, even foaming at the mouth as the energy becomes too much for her to maintain. Meanwhile, Montrose stays in 1921 and watches as Tulsa burns to the ground and actual Black lives and businesses are lost—along with their names. He sees Leti in the streets below, slowly walking and not running as she moves through the fiery explosions of aerial bombs without so much as a scratch because of her armor of invulnerability. Tic pleads with Hippolyta to maintain the portal so that Leti and Montrose do not get stuck in the past, reminding her about the mission's goal of obtaining the Book of Names so that they can save her daughter's life.

Hippolyta finds the strength inside herself to save her daughter and her family's lives by remembering the last comic book drawing Dee had made for her father George before he died. Hippolyta's eyes glow white, her hair turns blue, and she levitates, effectively becoming Orithyia Blue, the superhero her daughter's drawing had depicted Hippolyta as becoming. The portal holds, and Leti and Montrose are able to make it through with the Book of Names. The episode ends with Tic cradling an exasperated Hippolyta, Montrose hunched over gasping for breath, Dee sleeping, and Leti crying but holding the Book of Names. We have experienced over the course of the hour-long episode essentially what it means to witness one's own trauma or the impact of being a bystander to trauma. We have also seen how witnessing can lend protection, mercy, and even ineffable strength. This final mother-daughter exchange centers on not just the pain of the past but also the possibilities for our future that can occur when we fix our visions upon our youth's perspective on ourselves and the world. Each of these critical lessons in this beautiful art are not mistakes, experiments, or just simple fantasy, but, rather, are brimming over with implications for Black people's transnational reflective praxis on our past, present, and future.

Reflective Futurology

Black lives have been policed by white toxic imaginaries (Rankine 135). Routinely, our future has been decided for us under the guise of systems of racialized terror, historical looting, disinvestment, and violent policy. But the Black Radical Imagination (Kelley 4) has attempted to ameliorate our social conditions by exploring healing, sacredness, and freedom. There is an under-recognized archive of Black people who have asserted that we belong in all spaces and all times (Samatar 176). One collective that embodies such beliefs is Black Quantum

Futurism (BQF). Under the BQF intersectional time orientation, the past and future are not cut off from the present; both dimensions influence the whole of our lives, who we are, and who we become at any particular point in space-time. BQF posits that our position from the present creates what that past and future look like and what it means at every moment. I submit that both BQF and *Lovecraft Country* are encouraging Black people to reckon with their past, speculate with their future, and dare to assert that time is creative and can be shifted.

Specifically, BQF has explored how to develop modes and practices of spatiotemporal consciousness that would be more beneficial to marginalized peoples' survival than one dominated by oppressive linear time constructs. BQF is a multidisciplinary collaboration between Camae Ayewa, also known as Moor Mother, and Rasheedah Phillips, founder of The AfroFuturist Affair. BQF's theory, vision, and practice explore the intersections of quantum physics, futurism, and Black/African cultural space-time traditions (Phillips and Matti 15). BQF has created several community-based events, experimental music projects, performances, exhibitions, zines, and anthologies of experimental essays on space-time consciousness. BQF Collective also frequently collaborates with the community to produce literature, present workshops, lectures, and performances. Through various writing, music, film, visual art, and creative research projects, BQF Collective explores personal, cultural, familial, and communal cycles of experience and solutions for transforming negative cycles into positive ones using artistic and holistic methods of healing. Their work focuses on the recovery, collection, and preservation of communal memories, histories, and stories. Through the work of BQF Collective and its collaborators, they are in the process of developing and enacting a new spatiotemporal consciousness (Phillips and Ayewa).

BQF also embodies Black Feminist Hauntology (Jordan-Zachery 62). Viviane Saleh-Hanna states that "Black Feminist Hauntology as the [radical unpacking] of the expanding and repetitive nature of structural violence, a process whereby we begin to locate a language to speak about the actual, not just symbolic or theorized violence that is [racism and sexism]". Black Feminist Hauntology is an epistemological construct that explores the process of Black people's healing from the trauma faced in the present and the past with the hope of changing their future. Black Feminist Hauntology explores the processes involved with channeling anger and trauma that ultimately influence political actions. Moreover, hauntological relationships hold intergenerational narratives of trauma, provide a critique of the state and state-centered violence, and offer a way for healing and achieving justice.

Rooted in BQF's theory of time travel, Black Feminist Hauntology, and *Lovecraft Country's* "Rewind 1921" episode, I offer my own theory of *Reflective Futurology*, a theory which—as mentioned earlier in this essay—is meant to provide

both a method and epistemological framework for unraveling the processes of how communal memory is seeded and how collective memory spreads across time and space, reaching backward and forward in time simultaneously to include everything that has and will happen. Reflective futurology invites Black people to engage in this reflective practice of (re)memory of who they are, where they come from, and what they embody, and it is equal parts science, fiction, and art. Reflective futurology illustrates that black people can view data as “improvisation that at times purposively blurs the boundaries between fact/truth and fiction/drama . . . to synchronously armor and humanize us” (Evans-Winter 2). By intentionally moving through archives, intuitive reflection, and embodied knowledge, we can be equipped to think through how past and future ancestors socially, spiritually, and spatially time travel with us, guiding us closer to love if we dare to listen and learn. In this final section of the essay, I will provide a radical assemblage of practices that will allow readers to trace their bloodlines, learn more about their collective history, set personal intentions, and begin their own archival practice to be studied by their future ancestors. Such praxis includes intention setting, ancestry tracing, oral history, and creative nonfiction. Reflective futurology, through both the examples of television and in our lives, allows us to learn about and break cycles and creates the opportunity to chart new pathways towards freedom and healing.

Praxis

“To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that a line stretches all the way back, perhaps to God or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget: that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love, and die. The grace with which we embrace life in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before.”

—Alice Walker, “Fundamental Difference”

There is an old adage that “there is nothing new under the sun.” So much of our life is inherited. As Alice Walker (Walker, *Revolutionary Petunias*, 1) reminds us in the epigraph, we are gifted our DNA, community, history, struggle, joy, pain, and remedies. The pathway towards nontraditional excavation of the intangible requires creativity. I conclude this article by offering explanations and exercises that have allowed me to practice reflective futurology in my own life, inspired by speculative television, artistry, and organic intellectual theories. I hope that it is helpful for your own time travel and reflective futurology praxis.

Intention Setting

First and foremost, it is critically important that you begin this process by setting intentions for yourself and this body of work. An intention can be defined as a deliberate and deep commitment to experiences you wish to receive. The goal of the request is to gain clarity within yourself that can serve as a reminder of exactly what you are creating. Intentions when ritualized became the blueprint for the aligned action that you will be called to take in order to experience your desired manifestations. When you are about to begin to engage in reflective futurology, you should ask and answer for yourself through mental meditation, artistic mediums, or free writing the following questions:

- What are you seeking to discover?
- How can the past inform your present?
- What kind of future do you want for yourself and others?
- How do you remember other black people inside and outside of your bloodline?
- How do you want to be remembered?
- What cycles are you invested in breaking?
- What new pathways will you walk to lead yourself and others to greater freedom?

These are each deep and nuanced questions, none of which are meant to be easily answered. Feel free to wrestle with them as best you can and return to the process whenever you feel called to.

Oral History

Second, oral history is a special method of interview where the research participants and researcher spend extended time together, engaged in a process of storytelling and listening, respectively (Thompson 118). In other words, it generates a collaborative process of life narration. One of the major strengths of this method is that it uses historical recalling as a mechanism to understand how individual agency is enacted and utilized within the context of social environments that might ordinarily constrain individual agency. When enslaved Africans arrived in the Americas, most slaveholders forcibly suppressed their languages, customs, and cultures (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 402). Similarly, Banks-Wallace explains that despite slaveholders' earnest attempts to extinguish African culture, the Black oral tradition survived. Black folklore gave Black Americans a

genre to create our own representations instead of being represented by others (412). Further, Hamlet writes about the genealogy of storytelling, as being a way to resist racial oppression, by articulating experiences of resistance and struggle and articulating oppositional identities (27). Most importantly, the Black oral tradition has provided a process that preserves culture, imagines new moral possibilities, and persists in spite of diasporic migrations. The Freeman family history explored in episode nine *1921 Rewind* becomes known through its unique opportunity to descendants to witness their past firsthand, their ancestors defining, recovering, protecting and projecting their own existence into the future. A simple exercise to practice oral history for yourself is to try to have as many recorded conversations as you can with family members of all ages. Simply record on your phone voice memos in a quiet location and upload and save the content on your computer later, and if you have the time and patience afterwards, write up the transcript. Write down your own list of questions or begin with these questions for inspiration:

1. Who are you?
2. What is your life story?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. Who was in your immediate family?
5. Where did you hang out?
6. Who were your friends?
7. Can you share a couple of favorite memories as a child?
8. When did you first remember noticing injustice?
9. What's your dream of freedom? Has it changed from when you were younger until now?
10. What is your most prized possession?
11. What is your love story?
12. What are you most proud of in your life? Do you have any regrets?
13. What is one question you would ask an ancestor in the past?
14. What is some advice you would give black people in the present?
15. What is one question you would ask a future ancestor?

The process of “guerilla” oral history asserts that we have a history that deserves to be not only archived but accessed by our family who may find the knowledge and wisdom needed to persist in our words and provocations.

Ancestry Tracing

Third, ancestry tracing has been widely circulated and publicized lately. Various companies including 23andMe, Ancestry.com, African Ancestry, and countless others are beginning to use DNA technology to trace the race and ethnic makeup of their consumers. Be careful because each company has varying policies around their use of your DNA after you submit your saliva sample. Be sure to read the terms and agreements closely before making whichever choice feels best for you. Outside of paying for the saliva sample service, you can use various indexes, archives, and census data to build out your own family tree. I personally opted to use Ancestry.com via their monthly membership to build a digital repository of my family tree. Using census data, military records, wills, marriage licenses, and death certificates, I was able to trace my family tree all the way back to the late 1700s.

You begin by simply inserting information on your parents and grandparents and can continue to input information on other living and deceased family members until you are unable to add any more. Ancestry.com is quite user-friendly. Once you begin to populate the fields it gives suggestions and hints of possibly related information, so you are able to add further details to your tree. Because I am African American, I am personally limited by the poor record-keeping and inhumane assumptions projected into black bodies via the transatlantic slave trade. It was a small feat even to be able to trace that far back in time. I learned about some of the professions, educational pedigree, miscegenation, colorism, addiction, states of origin, causes of death, and blended households that existed with my family. I was able to see pictures of ancestors I had never seen before. I was able to correspond with cousins I have never met. I am now equipped with quintessential pieces of the puzzle and questions that I never knew to ask before. I encourage you to use whatever platform or archival repository feels good for you to discover your own heritage and bloodline. It is truly uncanny to learn the resonances and similarities from the past that trickle down to your own life even today.

Creative Nonfiction

After becoming equipped with your intentions, ancestry, and oral history from your living family members, you will most assuredly have more questions, silences, lost and stolen portions of your communal memory. Honor but do not become stuck in feelings of guilt, resentment, and anger because, fourth and finally to complete your reflective futurology praxis, you can begin a creative nonfiction writing or art practice. You get to be autonomous by authoring a creative and speculative story of blackness that you are proud of that is led by empirical facts that can gift you an entrance to be in conversation with ancestors and future ancestors. Here are a few prompts you can try if this feels new or foreign:

Write short stories that intergenerationally trace how a curse in your family becomes broken.

Create a collage that addresses a silence or unknown piece of your family puzzle.

Write a play or movie scene where some of the names of family members you came across in your research are all in the same house.

Cast away the horrors of the past with healing. Become playful and expansive with your history as you travel across spatiotemporal planes to reclaim a history that was stolen from you. Allow time to be a friend instead of an enemy. If you feel comfortable, tag your experience on any social media platform with the hashtag #reflectivefuturology so that we are able to learn from and with you about how to perfect this practice.

Lovecraft Country's "Rewind 1921" is one of my favorite television episodes because it demonstrates the power that exists in critical examination of the past and manifesting for our future. This hour-long episode has deep synergy and alignment with Black Quantum Futurism, Black Feminist Hauntology, and my own theory of reflective futurology. These actors, writers, artists, and academics each beautifully assert that there is a nexus between research and art that invites any Black people with or without Ph.D./MFA credentials to engage in generative time travel in their own unique fashion. I hope that the exercises included in this article help to jumpstart your own rewinding and fast-forwarding of your imagination to the people and places it longs to be with. May you learn through lines to freedom that exist beyond any constructs of linear time that do not serve you.

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**“Hokum and Hack Work” as Crucible for
Black Utopian Development: Tracing the Blueprint
in George Schuyler’s Anti-Utopian *Black Empire***

Christopher Allen Varlack

The concept of the Black utopia is one deeply rooted in the African-American literary tradition, explored in science fiction and Afrofuturist works by authors dedicated to envisioning potential counter-futures¹ for African and African-descended peoples untainted by the problematic notions of white supremacy and the traumas of repeated anti-Black violence across history. This includes landmark works such as Martin Delany’s 1859 *Blake; or the Huts of America*, W. E. B. Du Bois’ 1928 *Dark Princess*, and Octavia E. Butler’s 1993 *Parable of the Sower*, to name just a few. While “literary utopias have been written predominantly by white men and (to a lesser extent) women” (Veselá 270), the opportunity to erase the color line and to combat the systems of white supremacy that seemed so deeply ingrained in the social, economic, and identity politics of their time moved, and continues to move, Black writers to create in fiction what BIPOC have struggled to create in life, aided by science, technology, and an undying drive for race progress. The history of these projects is catalogued in part in scholarly works such as *Landscapes of Hope: Anti-Colonial Utopianism in America* (2009) by Dohra Ahmad as well as *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (2019) by Alex Zamalin. Each acknowledges the importance of such Black-authored visions of “collective life and racial identity,” for these novels “outlined futuristic ways of being. They warned about the disastrous ways of contemporary life, while espousing radical notions of freedom. . . . They theorized what was scientifically improbable and the new black citizen that seemed impossible” (Zamalin 1). They created that possibility and envisioned a pathway for bringing their utopias to life.

¹ One facet of the Black experience, according to Kodwo Eshun, is the development of historical “countermemories that contest the colonial archive” (288)—a goal of much African-American literature, from the early slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the neo-slave and emancipation narratives constructed by figures such as Butler, Whitehead, and others in the contemporary world. Afrofuturism, however, deviates from this focus, proposing counter-futures, some of which are akin to utopias themselves, in which Black peoples across the African Diaspora are engaged in “the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention” in the trauma they may face (Eshun 301). Though each Afrofuturist text may differ in its approach, one of the core reasons it is difficult to define the aesthetic, the concept of the counter-future is vital to this author’s present study, for the Black utopia is a counter-future itself in that it challenges white supremacy as undisputed fact.

In his engagement with the concept of the Black utopia in fiction, George S. Schuyler—a conservative Black satirist—devoted his work partly to challenging the United States’s obsession with race and not just with the white hegemonic structures in place that consistently work to keep African-American peoples oppressed. From his essay “The Negro-Art Hokum” (1926) to his inflammatory novel *Black No More* (1931), Schuyler also worked to oppose that same perceived race obsession within the Black community, often criticizing figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey and the organizations they came to represent for manipulating Black racial fears and the collective desire for social equity. Because of that opposition, Schuyler, according to Alexander M. Bain, “remains calcified in literary history as an iconoclastic satirist who marginalized himself by denouncing Pan-Africanism, dismissing ideas of ‘Negro Art’ formulated by Langston Hughes and others, and turning virulently conservative after World War II” (938).² Yet, it is exactly that calcification that encourages additional study of Schuyler in the twenty-first century, his dual critique of the machinations of Black and white society providing scholars invaluable insight into the sociopolitical stagnation of U.S. society and, equally as important, contributing hindrances to development of the Black utopia.

Much existing study of Schuyler’s utopian/anti-utopian work then tends to focus on his infamous Harlem Renaissance-era novel *Black No More* and the possibility for radical change explored with the deconstruction of the U.S. color line, if not socially or politically then through technological and scientific means. And while *Black No More* is an important text certainly worthy of additional exploration, especially given Schuyler’s revelations of the improbability of upending the racial dynamics upon which the nation’s very identity was historically based, there are other important works just as vital in their suggestion of African-American counter-futures and experimentation with Black utopia-building in fictional space. For instance, one of his lesser discussed works, *Black Empire*, offers what

² Bain is far from the only scholar to problematize the works of George Schuyler and the noted inconsistencies in his ideological perspectives. In his 1992 piece, “A Fragmented Man: George Schuyler and the Claims of Race,” for instance, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. essentially argues that Schuyler’s “career was not a simple drift from left to right but a complicated, painful journey filled with the sort of ‘double-consciousness’ that continues to raise disturbing questions about what racism does to people in America” (31). This perspective has heavily shaped discourse on Schuyler’s work with “scholars often attribut[ing] the incongruity between the enthusiastic pan-Africanism of the narrative and Schuyler’s snide dismissal of ‘race chauvinism’ to what Gates saw as Schuyler’s failure as an African American intellectual” (Hefner 484). Like Jeffrey A. Tucker, however, this author posits that depicting Schuyler as merely a victim of race/racism “deactivates Schuyler’s agency” (140) in constructing a controversial text intentionally aimed at increasing readers’ sociopolitical awareness on issues of race.

many consider an Afrofuturist satire³ that, on the one hand, critiques structures of white racism that relegate African-descended peoples to second-class status and, on the other hand, critiques the internal problems within the Black community that hinder the unification of the Black world and the rise to utopian power. Once described by Schuyler himself as “hokum and hack work of the purest vein,” *Black Empire*, serialized in the *Pittsburgh Courier* from November 1936 to April 1938 under the pseudonym Samuel Brooks, is intentionally “crowd[ed with] as much race chauvinism and sheer improbability . . . as [Schuyler’s] fertile imagination could conjure” (Schuyler qtd in Hill and Rasmussen 260), and yet it is a work that cannot be easily dismissed, despite its overt descent into violence and depiction of the mass murder of millions of whites and alleged race traitors. Its value rests in its discussion of those forces that impede racial progress both inter- and intraracially, helping us to better understand why modern utopian visions will still likely fail to address the “Negro (or Caucasian!) problem” (Schuyler, *Black and Conservative* 1) dividing much more than just the United States.

The Inter-Racial Divide: Racial Terror and Global Imperialism as Obstacles to Building the Black Utopia

Throughout *Black Empire*, Schuyler chronicles the endeavors of Dr. Henry Belsidus as he attempts to counter the widespread oppression of African and African-descended peoples across the modern world by “destroying white world supremacy,” “cast[ing] down the Caucasians and elevat[ing] the colored people in their places” (10). His plan, eventually enacted by his Pan-African coalition and war machine known as the Black Internationale, begins with the reclamation (what others might characterize instead as theft) of resources to soon be redirected toward the dismantling of the white power structure. His loyal band of thieves then raids the white world of its jewels, gold, and other tokens of wealth, in the process killing all those who would interfere and without any inkling of remorse, for “[t]hey have murdered millions of black men, women and children, and indirectly destroyed millions more by impoverishment, discrimination, segregation, cruel

³ Much of the existing scholarly conversation on *Black Empire* is centered on debate regarding the satirical nature of the novel. Etsuko Taketani, for instance, argues that rather than just a parody of Pan-Africanism, “the *Black Empire* serials can justifiably be read as a parodic running commentary on the Japanese imperialism that the ‘majority of thinking Negroes’—including DuBois and perhaps Schuyler himself—‘favors’” (139). In contrast, Mark C. Thompson raises concerns about reading the novel as satire, declaring such readings inconsistent with his other writings that “espoused a genuine and virulent anti-Italian rhetoric during and after the 1935-36 Italo-Ethiopian War” (189). Under this lens, labeling the novel as satire “negate[s] Schuyler’s deep commitment to direct political engagement and commentary” (Thompson 189). However, for this author at least, Schuyler’s satirical intentions are much less of a concern than the blueprint the novel reveals for constructing a Black utopia.

and inhuman treatment,” particularly within the United States (15). The serials compiled by Hill and Rasmussen in *Black Empire* are also largely inspired by the beginning of the Second Italo-Abyssinian War sparked in October 1935 when Italian soldiers of Mussolini’s fascist regime first attacked Eritrea, over the course of the two-year war spreading mustard gas over Ethiopian provinces and killing hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian people in order to annex the territory. For many, this was only further evidence of a global anti-Blackness and the great lengths white nations would go to in order to colonize all sectors of the Black world. For Schuyler, it was a call to action.

In response, the work of the Black Internationale can be described as a powerful counter offensive against white supremacy or, as Hill and Rasmussen aptly declare in their afterword, “a fictional act of revenge against the white establishment and the social and historical conditions of the time” (280). Part of the strategy of *Black Empire* is to then justify the violence that will later unfold throughout the text by offering, from the perspective of Dr. Belsidus, a scathing critique of the ways in which white society has continuously fostered and participated in the oppression and silencing of Black peoples. For instance, Belsidus laments that “[f]or four hundred years we have seen our civilizations crushed and controlled one after the other by the white man. We have suffered every degradation his fertile mind could invent. We have not only been enslaved in body, but in spirit and mind as well. We have been demoralized” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 30). It is this history of anti-Black violence and the continued threat to Black independence, represented by the Second Italo-Abyssinian War, that drives not only the actions of Dr. Belsidus but also the decision of Schuyler to write, using the realm of fiction as a vehicle “for African Americans to take to the battlefield in the cause of Ethiopia’s sovereignty” (Thompson 185) and the liberation of the Diaspora at large. In other words, the persecution of Black people, the use of violence to further oppress, and the onset of war created the perfect conditions for revolution and the advancement of a utopian vision with massive buy-in from Blacks all around the world.

The social commentary that Schuyler offers throughout *Black Empire* on the concerted efforts toward the subjugation of Blacks and the structures of white supremacy, however, also serve a secondary and arguably more important purpose if we read the novel not as the depiction of a Black utopia or anti-utopia but rather as a site of inquiry into the obstacles that must first be overcome in order to construct such a utopia. For Belsidus, this first entails dismantling the barriers established by white society to racial uplift, including the systems of indoctrination aimed at preserving the racial status quo and the second-class status of African Americans. Here Belsidus encourages members of the Black Internationale to “disobey all laws that hinder our plan, for all laws here are laws of the white man, designed to keep

us in subjugation and perpetuate his rule, . . . to enslave and degrade the darker peoples” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 14). These words speak to the long history of racist court precedents and discriminatory legislation in the United States, such as the infamous Dred Scott decision of 1857, which effectively denied citizenship to all Blacks, free or enslaved, or the nineteenth-century Southern vagrancy laws that incentivized the incarceration of Blacks and expanded the convict leasing system, just to name a few. As Jane Dailey notes in *The Age of Jim Crow* (2009), these laws and social practices “were designed to deny a common manhood to whites and blacks and to place the former firmly above the latter” in addition to “secur[ing] a political and economic order that depended on the disenfranchisement and disempowerment” of the African-American people (xv). What this reveals is that the Black utopia cannot ever exist within such a system, for “white men who control the world were not going to willingly give black men the opportunity to demonstrate their quality or superiority. It just doesn’t fit in with the laws of survival” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 246).

Though *Black Empire* certainly reflects upon the ways in which the socio-political tactics that contributed to the indoctrination and the mental enslavement of African-American people are a perpetual obstacle to the formation of a Black utopia, these are not the only impediments about which the novel is concerned. Toward the end of part one of the novel, Schuyler depicts the takeover of much of Africa and the installation of a new power structure under the direction of Dr. Belsidus. This process, which entails the murder of white political leaders, everyday citizens, and their families, is initially overshadowed by political strife throughout Europe and the very real threat of another world war, all sparked by the agents of the Black Internationale. But what Belsidus eventually realizes is that “[c]onfronted with the loss of all of their colonies, the white imperialist powers would stop at nothing to avert war and send punitive expeditions to Africa” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 131). In the scope of the novel, the backlash of the European powers serves two core functions: 1) to highlight the constant efforts to colonize or re-colonize the Black world in order to preserve control over its valuable resources and 2) to call attention to the global counter-movements to racial uplift across the Diaspora. “The white man,” Belsidus proclaims, “has not hesitated” at any point in history “to use any and every means to degrade the Negro to keep him demoralized” (31). Thus, the punitive expeditions that Belsidus alludes to are aimed at not only regaining power over the land but undermining this new Black empire and suppressing the spirit that enabled the African-American people to ever see themselves as superior in the first place.

The timing of the eventual European offensive in the novel is revealing about the work that must be done in order to construct a viable utopian vision for the

Black world. As noted by Carl Slater,⁴ Belsidus’s secretary, when the threat of a European attack looms, “We had done our best but we hadn’t had time to prepare properly. The whites knew this, I supposed, which was why they were attacking now, before we became strong” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 168). While this passage underscores the efforts of the white political elite to suppress Black power before it can become an insurmountable danger to white power, it can also be read as an urgent message to Black peoples around the world. First, Schuyler emphasizes the unity that emerges in the fight to protect white supremacy and to counter Black racial uplift. “[S]elf-interest, the fear of mutual destruction, brought on early armistice,” notes Slater (190). And thus, as long as whiteness is both property and power, the imperialist forces with which Belsidus is trying to contend will find a way to unify to preserve the status quo. More importantly, however, Schuyler draws attention to the need for the Black community to build up its strength in order to contend with white world powers and to create a perfect world truly liberated and protected from continued assault. Black society must therefore establish its own economic and political capital, educate its citizens to be industry leaders and innovators, and invest in Black communities instead of waiting for racism to die and for Black people to finally be given a white man’s chance.⁵

The Intra-Racial Divide: Accommodationism, Disloyalty, and the Slave Mentality as Obstacles to Building the Black Utopia

While the novel foregrounds critique of the white society and the continued efforts of the world’s imperialist powers to reclaim their lost territory in Africa, true to Schuyler’s form, *Black Empire* also introduces criticisms of the Black community—a key factor in the aforementioned calcification that Bain acknowledges in his 2007 article. Part of this critique is aimed at the wide divisions within the Black world—

⁴ This article, with its focus on the lessons that can be derived from *Black Empire* about the social and political impediments to Black utopia building, offers limited discussion of Carl Slater, though future scholarship on the novel must delve more into this important character and his role in the critique the text advances. Slater, after all, expresses a moral conflict with the tactics and ideology promoted by Dr. Belsidus. That discontentment highlights the shortcomings of the work of the Black Internationale, particularly its borrowing of strategies employed by imperial forces and the Nazi regime. Looking deeper at Slater is therefore an important extension of the work in this article, for his moral perspective may offer invaluable insight into a revision of the Black utopia that Belsidus creates—one not stifled by ableism, the suppression of dissent, and the restriction of Black agency/autonomy under the guise of “the greater good.”

⁵ In this, George Schuyler was certainly not alone. Both Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston expressed their concerns about a social agenda with integration as the core goal, believing that Black people needed to be able to stand on their own two feet and that Black-owned institutions could do a better job of servicing the needs of the community. See McKay 350-52 and also Hurston.

fissures that render such a project as the Black Internationale virtually impossible, thus threatening the realization of a Black utopia in both the fictional and real worlds. In the early stages of his plan, for instance, Dr. Belsidus notes that the “[p]revious efforts of the colored peoples to emancipate themselves from white supremacy have failed because we were not prepared to emancipate ourselves. Every nation of people is destroyed first from within. It must organize itself within if it is to triumph without” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 34). And yet that endeavor is complicated by the internal rifts among the masses—a problem that Claude McKay outlines in his autobiographical work *A Long Way from Home* (1937). Citing the waning or non-existent “group spirit among Negroes” (350) as a central concern, McKay places much of the blame on the Black intelligentsia, who have far too long neglected and ignored the working poor. Colorism has only furthered existing strife, just as the promotion of racial equity over gender equity has divided the Black community at times along gender lines. Though Dr. Belsidus advocates a plan of radical love as the basis for unifying the Black world—“We must not quarrel or contend with each other. Our love must include all black people, all brown people, all yellow people, for together these colored people are soon to rule the earth” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 65)—the divisions tragically prove wide and deep, forcing Belsidus to assert dictatorial control.

Throughout the novel, in fact, Black men and women are all subjected to silencing and violence by the agents of the Black Internationale determined to protect Dr. Belsidus and the plan that will finally free the Black world from oppression. One of the reasons for this, according to Belsidus himself, is that “[e]very colonial government . . . is quite naturally opposed to any such organization as we have affected. Each one has a certain number of colored or Negro police agents to spy on such gatherings and conferences to find out what our people are doing or planning to do. In this way, and also by selling out, the Negro has been betrayed as often by his own people” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 31). Those Black peoples with demonstrated allegiance to the white elite are then eradicated over the course of the text, Belsidus suggesting that “[s]uch men and women cannot be reformed or reconditioned. Once a rat always a rat” (31). This theory applies, for instance, to the Black officials installed in imperialist governments all across Africa in the text. In Freetown, “black officials were generally more loyal to the British imperialist than King George VI” (99). These intra-racial tensions witnessed by Belsidus (and, by extension, Schuyler) are some of the greatest obstacles to a unified Black world; a utopia cannot ever be constructed until these impediments are somehow addressed—an important lesson, though the tactics Belsidus employs specifically exacerbate the violence against the Black community and suppress the diversity of perspectives that makes the Diaspora so unique.

Just as with his assessment of the tactics of imperialism and white supremacy, Schuyler’s critique of Black society is also multilayered, for a unified Black world still ravaged by notions of inferiority and dedicated to compromise and integration cannot protect itself from oppression let alone achieve such a momentous goal as the construction of a Black utopia. As Dailey argues, the disempowerment of Blacks was predicated upon the denial of their humanity throughout the antebellum era and the assertion of their inferiority, degradation, and regression into savagery in the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. This messaging in the social and political spheres of life as well as the U.S. cultural imagination (as evidenced by films such as D. W. Griffith’s 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*) resulted in many displaying vacant esteem and an overwhelming aversion to being connected with the Black community—aspects of what Joy DeGruy has labeled PTSS or Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (108). This, too, is a pervasive issue that Dr. Belsidus strives to tackle through the work of the Black Internationale, noting that “[o]ur business is to prepare; to bring about unity among the colored peoples; to rid them of that deeply ingrained inferiority complex, especially among those who have been most exposed to the white man’s influence” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 36), lest there remain “miseducated Negroes who still favored the rule of white men to the rule of black men” (138) in order to be more closely linked with whiteness.

Belsidus’s utopian vision thus necessarily entails constructing a spirit of race pride so that Black peoples all over could “hold up [their] heads with the free people of the earth” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 166). However, that race pride could not exist in a nation built upon the very ideas of Black inferiority and accommodationism—a deeply rooted ideology in the Black community still influenced by the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and still fearful of reprisal should they openly resist the U.S. race hierarchy. In outlining some of the pitfalls that have hindered the development of the Black utopia throughout history, Belsidus laments the shortcomings of the intelligentsia, declaring that “[o]ur professors, our orators, our politicians have failed us” (46) largely for believing that the race problem could be “solved by compromise, by cooperation, by tolerance” (15). These sentiments are quite similar to Richard Wright’s thoughts in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), where he essentially condemns Black thinkers who “[e]ntered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people” (97). Such behavior was antithetical to the race pride that Belsidus hoped to instill, for it cemented the devastating image of weakness and inferiority at a time when Black people were supposed to be honing their voices, sharpening their skills, and strengthening their resolve—all necessary steps in the longstanding battle against white world supremacy. And thus, as Belsidus proclaims that “[s]oftness is weak. Compromise is disastrous. Tolerance is

fatal” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 14), we must evaluate what he considers at stake: the fate of a unified Africa and the utopia it is intended to represent.

While the aforementioned worries that drive the work of the Black Internationale address the mind and the spirit of people across the Diaspora, *Black Empire* also reveals that the Black utopia cannot be realized without the advancement of Black peoples in the realms of science and technology—the instruments of modern civilization. This space, however, has restricted access for people of color at the time in which Schuyler is writing, Jim Crow limiting the educational opportunities Blacks would need to even train in these fields and gatekeeping available positions for a privileged class of whites. For Belsidus, this is of equal concern as the failure of the Black world to develop until now a strong group soul. After all, the reason he sees that Black people have been unsuccessful in so many efforts throughout history to counter their subjugation is that “subject peoples have tried to match primitive weapons against the latest instruments of warfare. Either that or they have been ill-prepared or unprepared with the industrial organization incident and necessary to the manufacture of such instruments” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 46). The result, according to Belsidus, is that “the Negro [was] doomed to remain a slave of the white man” (96) either through violent oppression, political disenfranchisement, or the commodification of the Black world in the global capitalist system. Though the novel offers no real solution to these barriers, the message is clear in terms of establishing a blueprint for Black utopian construction: African and African-descended peoples need to be the architects of their own new world, “agents in their destiny” (Zamalin 73).

Black “Utopias” Corrupted: The Pitfalls of an Anti-Utopia as Blueprint for Black Utopian Development

Though the sociopolitical commentary that Schuyler offers throughout *Black Empire* on the inter- and intra-racial factors that historically impede the development of a Black utopia is of paramount concern in understanding the long-term value of the text and its diasporic visions, no reading of the novel would be complete without also addressing at least in part the ways in which Belsidus’s empire spirals increasingly into dystopia and full-blown totalitarianism by the novel’s end. As Kohli acknowledges, “The revolution, in fact, will be in the end accomplished by using the crushing mechanisms of white society” (170), the employment of murder, chemical warfare, euthanasia, and other brutal tactics deemed necessary to not only undermine the stranglehold of white supremacy but to build a strong Black nation unhampered by a troublesome individualism, disability, and disease. In the novel, for instance, Belsidus frequently relies upon the murder of whites and Blacks alike to quell dissent and retaliation, to gain territorial control, and to throw

the white world into utter chaos so imperialist forces could no longer interfere with the important work of the Black Internationale. “Of course it’s murder,” he declares in the early pages of the text. “Haven’t they murdered millions of black people? If we murdered one of them every day, it would take us several centuries to catch up” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 11).

As we see here, the political vision that Belsidus expresses encourages murder as well as the reciprocation of violence as systems of self-defense for the burgeoning Black empire, even if this means sowing seeds of intolerance against communities already oppressed. For example, in order to disrupt the eventual efforts of the white elite to combat racial uplift (manifest in the novel through the accrual of Black wealth, advancements in the agricultural industry, and the convening of a major conference of Black leaders from across the Diaspora), Belsidus unearths an aggressive propaganda campaign that targets, in addition to the Catholic Church, the Jewish community and undocumented immigrants. This contributes to a resurgence of anti-Semitism and xenophobia that reflects the longstanding “rivalries and hatreds within the white race” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 78). Recognizing that “[n]o war is as violent as civil war,” Belsidus argues that “[t] here are definite cleavages in the white population of which it would be foolish not to take advantage. . . . Where this hatred and prejudice is somnolent, we shall fan the smoldering embers into flames” (78). This tactic taken from the pages of the white imperialist playbook enables the Black Internationale not only to continue its efforts unchallenged but to dismantle the fragile unity within white society at a crucial moment when the Black community has finally developed its own “group soul” (McKay 268). The result is a reversal of fortunes—the master’s tools used to dismantle the master’s house.

For Kohli, the integration of these endeavors into the agenda of the Black Internationale speaks to the larger value of *Black Empire* as satire, even if “there is something troubling about satirizing an anticolonial black empire that combined elements of Stalinism and Nazism” (Zamalin 73). The aforementioned propaganda techniques, after all, are just part of the strategy Belsidus has constructed, the novel thus “exploit[ing] the tension between utopian and dystopian by calling upon [Schuyler’s] characters and, thus, his readers to be critical about what is done

in the name of progress” (Kohli 171).⁶ This strategy is particularly present in the second portion of the novel. Having successfully taken control of large parts of the continent, Belsidus prepares for the inevitable backlash of the European forces, eager to maintain the image of white superiority so deeply engrained in our global history and to extract the invaluable resources in Africa to aid in their recovery from the world war that Belsidus has sparked. One such tactic employed in defense of the new Black empire is the use of chemical warfare. Here Martha Gaskin, one of the only white accomplices Belsidus engages in his mission,⁷ declares that he “is carrying the war to the white man and he is doing it in a new way. More people are killed during wars by cholera, spotted typhus and bubonic plague than are destroyed by bullets” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 188). Recognizing this, Belsidus orders his air force to drop cages filled with disease-infested rats into the major cities of Europe, and as the illness rapidly spreads, “[d]eath creeps over the continent. The medical services have bogged down. White people are dying like flies” (240), all of which Belsidus notes with his usual grin.

The diabolical laughter of Dr. Belsidus in the face of human destruction and the use of such brutal tactics in order to advance his larger goals then illustrate the ways in which even the Black Internationale—as an agent of utopian development—falls short, “perfect[ing] not democracy, but instruments of mass destruction and extermination” all while “disregard[ing] the intrinsic worth of all human beings” (Zamalin 76, 74). What this reveals is the fundamental flaw of empire-building in the modern world and the improbability of ever constructing a true utopia. Empires, after all, are consistently confronted with the greed of conquest and the

⁶ Kohli notes, however, that *Black Empire* should not be read as “a purely cautionary tale,” citing the celebration at the end of the novel “felt in the purported achievement of utopia and the new advances that were made possible by black industry and genius” (173). This critical approach is appropriate for assessing Schuyler’s work, for Black-authored utopian or anti-utopian novels are not solely focused on criticisms of white supremacy or the intra-racial devolution into despotism that threaten the Black utopia at its core. These works are also productive in that they necessarily provide a blueprint for the Black utopia, such as the building of Black wealth, technological advancements, and education as a precursor to radical change. Readings that ignore this miss an important component of the work that Black utopian/anti-utopian novels do.

⁷ In *Black Empire*, Schuyler foregrounds the racial antagonism of the white community, ignoring the possibility of white allyship beyond the character of Martha Gaskin, hence the almost non-existent role of white people in the Black Internationale. This in turn effectively creates a parallel narrative to “[t]he few [white-authored] utopias that confronted racial issues [by] propos[ing] racist solutions, most frequently imagining perfect white worlds and abjecting the non-white others” (Veselá 270). By employing a similar tactic, focused on anti-white propaganda and the expulsion of the colonizing forces in Africa, Schuyler’s novel raises critical commentary on the dehumanizing, racist treatment that emerges when communities hold prescriptive ethnic notions, whether it be the perceived taint of Blackness on white society or the moral bankruptcy allegedly endemic amongst white people dead set on a campaign of domination and conquest.

threat of subjugation, and thus, they become unsustainable machines, relying upon suppression, manipulation, and even violence to enact control of conquered territory. Under this system, the citizens may cheer the birth of what seems a grand new nation when in reality their freedoms atrophy under totalitarian rule. In *Black Empire*, this manifests when Pat Givens, Commander of the Air Force, addresses their plan for sociopolitical power. “We will recondition the Negro masses,” she declares, “in accordance with the most approved behavioristic methods. The church will hold them spiritually. Our economic organization will keep control of those who shape their views. Our secret service will take care of dissenters. Our propaganda bureau will tell them what to think and believe” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 47). Given the ways in which the aforementioned intra-racial tensions impeded the creation of a Black utopia across time, it is clear that Dr. Belsidus and his leaders in the Black Internationale are wary of the Black masses long oppressed and “evacuated commitments central to utopian freedom: that of justice, where all are treated fairly and with dignity, and the rule of law, which protects dissent and minority rights” (Zamalin 74).

John Cullen Gruesser builds upon this notion, claiming that Schuyler’s *Black Empire* embodies his view that there is “no difference between a black dictatorship exploiting blacks in Africa and either white exploitation of blacks in the American South or white exploitation of whites and other countries” (90). Intolerant of failure, Belsidus silences those whose disloyalty and indiscreetness threaten his cause, eradicates those who refuse to acknowledge him as the “King of Kings” (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 111), and tortures alleged traitors, acid burning their already battered bodies until they are finally willing to divulge their nefarious plans. In the process, he creates a system that some may argue fails to advance “the liberation of Africa but its recolonization,” the continent “divided into 500 departments and 3,000 districts” (Gysin 169), each with systems to broadcast the doctor’s orders and ensure his ever-widening social control. Even the ill are subjected to what Fritz Gysin refers to as the Black empire’s “caustic vision” (167), for those deemed incurable are denied all value to the new world power, “a drain on our all-too-meagre resources” and a constant “worry and strain on their relatives”—a burden that must be erased (Schuyler, *Black Empire* 151). Each of these policies, however, results in the creation of an empire that fails to develop its own moral values and mimics the dehumanizing structures of the very same white societies whose power Belsidus strives so hard to upend; in other words, as Gysin asserts, *Black Empire* offers its readers a portrait of “the successful Americanization of Africa” (178).

Building the Black Utopia: Where Do We Go From Here?

In the end, the novel's great dictatorial figure, Dr. Belsidus, is not successful in building the Black utopia in which the masses were so deeply invested. He merely constructs a Black empire steeled against and protected from the constant threat of anti-Black violence and the resurgence of white imperialist control, maintained through the manipulation and silencing of the very people it was ultimately intended to serve and built upon the very same oppressive tactics of colonization and empire-building that once contributed to the mass enslavement of Black peoples worldwide. This failure to realize a truly utopian dream is not at all unexpected, though; as Zamalin argues, "Schuyler was the first prominent black antiutopian thinker" (64), "examin[ing] not his own vision, but the dominant ideas circulating within American society," particularly that of Pan-Africanism (65). And yet, if we recognize the power of literature in advancing critical commentary about the world in which we live and in holding a mirror so that we can see not only who we are but who we have been, then thinking about *Black Empire* as a mere parody of "the prospect of global black power" (Zamalin 64) is too simplistic of a reading.

Can "hokum and hack work of the purest vein" (Schuyler qtd in Hill and Rasmussen 260) achieve anything deeper than a mocking imitation of the cultural values, progressive dreams, and political plans constructed in the twentieth century in order to tackle the "Negro (or Caucasian!) problem" (Schuyler, *Black and Conservative* 1) that has placed a stranglehold on not just U.S. life? Can it play a role in envisioning—if not possibilities for, then—the obstacles that have historically hindered the realization of a Black utopia? As Zamalin acknowledges, "Schuyler's work . . . insisted that the dream of postracism would be stillborn unless Americans deconstructed entrenched cultural ideologies" (65) while setting aside the goals of empire-building, power, and conquest that have proved so ruinous to the modern world. In other words, *Black Empire* "revealed . . . someone who wanted citizens to appreciate how utopia could be distorted and how it might be reclaimed" (80) so that they could then create that world where Blacks and whites alike do this important work—the foundation for a kind of utopia of which we have only been able to dream.

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The Poetics of Hope: Utopian Desires, Afrofuturism, and Black Girl Magic at the Inauguration

Brandy E. Underwood

“I’m learning that I am not lightning that strikes once. I am the hurricane that comes every year, and you can expect to see me again soon.”

—Amanda Gorman¹

“Art is where and how we speak to each other in tongues audible when ‘official’ language fails.”

—Elizabeth Alexander²

Beginning with President John Kennedy in 1961, only four presidents, all Democrats, have featured poets at their inaugurations. Half of the six inaugural poets have been black women. These three black female poets—Maya Angelou, Elizabeth Alexander, and Amanda Gorman—filled their inaugural poems with an Afrofuturist vision of hope marked by utopian images of environmental sustainability, racial uplift, and global peace. The most recent inaugural poet, Gorman, elicited rapturous declarations that she imbued the otherwise pedestrian inauguration of President Joseph Biden with a much-needed dose of “Black Girl Magic,” a term reportedly created as a Twitter hashtag (#BlackGirlsAreMagic) by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 to celebrate the beauty and successes of black women and girls despite intersectional power dynamics.³ Building on the interdisciplinary approaches to Afrofuturism, affect theory, and utopian studies, I explore the poetics of hope in the inaugural poems by black female poets in order to decode the meaning of these moments and meditate on the question of why these mainstream politicians are so eager to capture some “Black Girl Magic” for themselves. I argue that these poets offer a personification of utopian hope: that they may magically transport the listener to a future place free of the legacies of overt and structural racism.

¹ Obama, Michelle, with Amanda Gorman. “‘Unity With Purpose.’ Amanda Gorman and Michelle Obama Discuss Art, Identity and Optimism,” *Time*, February 4, 2021, [Time.com/5933596/amanda-gorman-michelle-obama-interview](https://www.time.com/5933596/amanda-gorman-michelle-obama-interview).

² Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (Graywolf, 2004).

³ See Julia Jordan and Duchess Harris, “We are Magic and We are Real: Exploring the Politics of Black Femmes, Girls, and Women’s Self-Articulation.” *Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag*, edited by Julia Jordan-Zachery and Duchess Harris. U of Arizona P, 2019, pp. ix-xiv.

The etymology of utopia indicates a location that is actually “no place,” and Jayna Brown tells us that she takes the term to mean “elsewhere” (6). Brown’s work suggests that black visions of utopia, which are intrinsically tied to dialogues of Afrofuturism, look beyond the here and now. One good example of this is the bandleader Sun Ra’s ongoing claim that he was a citizen of the universe and born on Saturn.⁴ Black utopian discourses, I would argue, imagine spaces that reify the concept of black normativity, create the fantasy of equality without racism, and promise to magically heal an environment that has been damaged by unsustainable development strategies. If, as Brown notes in *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of the Other Worlds*, “dreaming in terms of utopia invokes an archive of black alternative world-making, to be found in the practices of black mystics and musicians and the imaginative worlds of speculative fiction writers,” it makes sense that black female inaugural poets conjure magical visions of utopia in their poetry in order to evoke feelings of hope (7-8). The poems that I will explore in this paper are Angelou’s “On the Pulse of Morning” written for President William Jefferson Clinton in 1993, Alexander’s “Praise Song for the Day” written for President Barack Obama in 2009, and Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb” written for President Biden in 2021.⁵ The dialogue established by these black female inaugural poets during historical moments of political transition reflects central issues in the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement concerned with embracing black humanity and redressing social injustices caused by institutional racism. Like other works of Afrofuturism that transcend spatiotemporal boundaries, the inaugural poetry by Angelou, Alexander, and Gorman looks toward a brighter future and embraces cultural memory while working to heal past wounds.

In her insightful work on black female singers, Farah Jasmine Griffin observes that “the black woman’s voice can be called upon to heal a crisis in national unity as well as provoke one” (104).⁶ Similar to Griffin’s singer, the inaugural black female poet takes center stage in the political arena to present an image of racial unity and healing that has been called magical. “Black girl magic” may have become a popular Twitter hashtag in recent years, but the idea of black women possessing

⁴ See J. Griffith Rollefson, “The ‘Robot Voodoo Power’ Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Leith.” *Black Music Research*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2008, pp. 83-109.

⁵ See Elizabeth Alexander, *Praise Sing for the Day: A Poem for Barack Obama’s Presidential Inauguration January 20, 2009*. Graywolf Press, 2009. Maya Angelou, *On the Pulse of Morning*. Random House, 1993. Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*. Viking, 2021.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of black female singers and public performance, see Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality,” *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (Columbia UP, 2004), pp. 102-25. Among the singers Griffin mentions in her discussion is Santita Jackson, who sang “The Star Spangled Banner” at inaugural events for President Clinton in January 1997.

and practicing magic is an old one. If we take a long view of history, it becomes clear that Black women have routinely been associated with magic, specifically through the idea of the conjure woman—someone who practices magic or magic-like-traditions that descended from Africa and the Caribbean. Charles Chesnutt, who grew up in Fayetteville, North Carolina, popularized the notion of the black conjure woman with his collection of short stories, *The Conjure Woman* (1899). These stories were inspired by the plantation tradition of dialect storytelling established by white writers like Joel Chandler Harris with his Uncle Remus tales and Thomas Nelson Page. Chesnutt's tales depict a northern white businessman, John, who moves from Ohio to the South for his wife's health and encounters a formerly enslaved man, Uncle Julius McAdoo, who tells tales about conjuring. William Andrews, the editor of *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*, explains that: "drawing on a hoodoo tale told to him by his father-in-law's gardener in Fayetteville, Chesnutt created 'The Goophered Grapevine' in 1887, a story that . . . centered on an ex-slave's recollections of 'conjure' practices" (ix). Chesnutt's story picks up on the notion that marginalized people have long been associated with magic, and it demonstrates that the performance of magic yields a power that has not been granted by birth or society. Magic can be read as a form of resistance, and "Black Girl Magic" locates power within the grasp of women and girls who have collectively functioned on the margins of traditional power structures.

Not surprisingly, "Black Girl Magic" is a controversial idea; its meaning has been frequently debated. I read "Black Girl Magic" as a self-defining term that celebrates the ability of black women and girls to thrive in a society that has long relegated them to the sidelines. Julia S. Jordan-Zachery and Duchess Harris tell us that #BlackGirlMagic challenges "dehumanizing representations via a practice of self-definition," and "since introduced by Thompson in 2013, the term #BlackGirlMagic has been used widely, and has become part of the lexicon of digital Blackness" (6, 24). They explain that Thompson first used the hashtag #BlackGirlsAreMagic in 2013 "as a way of articulating resistance to the invisibility—cultural, political, and social—of Black girls and women" (4). The term is currently used with and without a hashtag. According to Janell Hobson, "#BlackGirlMagic is the articulation of the resolve and persistence of Black women and girls to triumph in the face of intersectional oppressions" (ix-x). Hobson rightly explains that "the online life of #BlackGirl Magic insists on the visibility of Black women and girls as aspirational figures, and can inspire offline life by fueling the Black feminist imagination to think and see differently in the realm of Black women's present and future possibilities," (x).

Nevertheless, the notion of Black Girl Magic has garnered skepticism, including from the scholar Linda Chavers, who wrote in *Elle* magazine, that "saying we're

superhuman is just as bad as saying we're animals, because it implies that we are organically different, that we don't feel just as much as any other human being." Chavers argues that "Black girls and women are humans. That's all we are. And it would be a magical feeling to be treated like human beings." In a rebuttal to Chavers, also in *Elle*, the writer Ashley Ford asserts that Black Girl Magic is "not about tapping into something supernatural, it's about claiming or reclaiming what others have refused to see." Both Chavers and Ford make compelling arguments. Black women and girls are just like everyone else, but many must also overcome obstacles that their more privileged peers manage to avoid. These women and girls do not need to possess magic to achieve success, but it is helpful to have a self-defining language, like the term "Black Girl Magic," to communicate a sense of self-worth in a society filled with messages that do not always celebrate African American beauty and culture. All this is to say that the term "Black Girl Magic" has caught our collective attention, and it is used widely across both traditional media and digital platforms. Black women and girls who successfully emerge from collective disadvantages are seen as possessing a special unexplainable gift; some call it magic. Incoming presidents have repeatedly called on black female inaugural poets to utilize this "Black Girl Magic" to almost magically link their new administrations with a sense of optimism through the poetics of hope.

The presidential inauguration ceremony offers an unobstructed space where positive feelings of hope have the potential to move through and across bodies. In her discussion of affect theory and sound, Anahid Kassabian argues that the ubiquitous sounds that people encounter every day have the ability to create a kind of collective identity that she calls "distributed subjectivity."⁷ Just as music has the affective ability to foster a sense of collective identity, I argue that the performance of poetry has the power to move crowds and shift the mood of a nation. The framework of utopia sets the stage for inaugural poets to create the fantasy of new beginnings in the same way that every new year seems to begin with a clean slate. Inaugural poets are given the difficult assignment to create original poems that will become artifacts that mark an occasion and also accomplish the practical work of emotional uplift. The job is not to be taken lightly. Although black women have often been selected to fulfill the task, other poets have also produced hopeful inaugural poems. These poems include Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright" written for President Kennedy in 1961, Miller Williams's "Of History and Hope" written in 1997 for President Clinton's second inauguration, and Richard Blanco's "One Today" written in 2013 for President Obama's second inauguration. Although the purpose of my essay is to explore the specific appeal that black female inaugural

⁷ See Anahid Kassabian's *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (U of California P, 2013) for a detailed discussion of sound and affect theory.

poets have for politicians, particularly during their first inaugurations that mark moments of political transition, it is worth noting that the poetry of all the inaugural poets is clearly in dialogue. The dominant language of inaugural poetry is hope; these poets insert the language of hope directly into their work.

New Beginnings in Angelou's Poetry

When Angelou recited her poem at President Clinton's inauguration in 1993, she created a poetics of hope to counter the negative feelings lingering in the country following the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising. In "On the Pulse of Morning," Angelou references the environment to call our attention to the connection between space and time following a moment of strife and discontent made legible by the unrest in Los Angeles prior to Clinton's election. Following the Los Angeles Uprising, it became clear that the inequalities that plagued Los Angeles during the 1960s and paved the way for the Watts Rebellion in 1965 continued to be a problem in the 1990s. By connecting the past with the future, Angelou's inaugural poem shines light on the continuity of time and the need to revisit history in order to move forward. Her work embodies elements of Afrofuturism by building a sense of optimism. Her vision of the future also embodies a black utopian discourse that limns ongoing social injustices that linger from the legacy of slavery and the country's Jim Crow past.

Consider the first line of Angelou's poem: "A Rock, A River, A Tree." Within these references to nature, Angelou highlights the ways the environment withstands spatiotemporal shifts that impact humanity. At the same time, she illuminates the contemporary signs of climate change. Each of these items—a rock, a river, and a tree—carries within it the history of our planet, and, according to Angelou, these natural elements have all served as hosts to extinct animals. In her first stanza, she offers the following eight lines of free verse:

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon,
The dinosaur, who left dried tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages. (1-8)

Angelou's reference to "the dinosaur" and "the mastodon" as "species long since departed" creates a prosody of dissonance, like a moment of jazz improvisation marked by dissimilar musical notes woven together and tangled to the point that sound gives way to meaning and reveals the notion that the "broad alarm" of the past has been buried beneath the joys of the inauguration's new day. While visually lost on the page, the rhyme of "gloom" and "doom" becomes readily apparent in Angelou's actual performance. When Angelou lingers on the words "gloom" and "doom," she seems to emphasize the possibility that such negative social diagnoses are not so far in the past that they should be completely forgotten. Indeed, later in her poem she plainly states that "History, despite its wrenching pain, / Cannot be un-lived, but if faced / With courage, need not be lived again" (80-82). On the surface, Angelou's inaugural poem functions as a celebration, but it also serves as a warning; it reminds its audience that the spirit of celebration should not obscure the fact that the past often repeats itself.

Although Angelou, born Marguerite Annie Johnson in 1928, died in 2014, her spirit lives on in her poems and autobiographical works. Mary Jane Lupton tells us that Angelou "loved to recite the poems of James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Langston Hughes" and these recitations were preparation for Angelou's inaugural poem (77). According to Lupton, Angelou's poem "resembles the informal, irregular pattern of the English ode, popularized by the British Romantic poets during the nineteenth century. It is also an aubade, a lyric poem about the morning, since it is dedicated to the 'pulse of the new day,' to the dawn of a new administration" (85). Alexander and Gorman pick up on Angelou's themes in their own inaugural performances by evoking images of a new day and filling their poems with a sense of hope. Angelou was inspired by Langston Hughes's "A Negro Sings of Rivers" (1921) and Jean Toomer's "Brown River, Smile," according to Lupton, who rightly observes that "like Hughes and Toomer before her, Angelou speaks for all African Americans in their universal quest for peace and freedom, but she speaks through the voice of the sacred river" (86). It is Angelou's tribute to African American culture through nature that interests me most. When Angelou gives voice to the river, which evokes Langston Hughes's seminal poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," she allows the river to highlight its own pain: "Your armed struggles for profit / Have left collars of waste upon / My shore, currents of debris upon my breast" (31-33). By demonstrating how humanity has caused environmental degradation through water pollution, she hints that people have also threatened their own existence. Where Hughes's poem functions as a celebration of the African Diaspora with references to the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi, Angelou's river is one that connects all humanity. She offers a litany of identities to describe those who have made contact with the river in an effort to render a utopian sense of belonging.

Clearly, hope is positioned at significant moments in Angelou's poem where optimism is encoded in the use of forward-looking language like "morning" and "new day." Take, for instance, the last, resounding stanza of "On the Pulse of Morning," which skillfully equates the "new day" with President Clinton's inauguration:

Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes,
And into your brother's face,
Your country,
And say simply
Very simply
With hope—
Good morning. (107-115)

"Morning" marks a hopeful new beginning in Angelou's poem, but, at the same time, Angelou's "good morning" is located at the end of her poem. To hear Angelou perform the last line from her inaugural poem, is to hear something more than a simple salutation. There is a sense of finality in Angelou's use of "good morning" that makes the phrase sound very much like the end of a conversation. Nevertheless, Angelou's poem contains an overall optimistic tone with its earlier imperative "Give birth again / To the dream," which makes an easily recognizable reference to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Civil Rights Movement-era dream (85-86). Her speaker proclaims that today is a "new day," a time that people should embrace with a sense of "hope." Angelou's hope manifests itself as a utopian vision that wipes away the residue of past crisis. The final stanza is specifically directed toward Black people with the familial language: "brothers" and "sisters." These terms allude to the colloquial way some Black Americans greet each other in communities, especially within religious settings; it is a way to acknowledge the messy interwoven heritage of slaves sold without any knowledge of their lineage. In Angelou's poem, the speaker functions as the voice of a Black American populace that had long suffered the injustices of inequality. Although the term Black Girl Magic was not in circulation at the time of Angelou's performance, her long, varied career prior to the inauguration embodies the spirit of what Black Girl Magic is supposedly all about: the hustle and drive to build a successful life with nothing more than talent and grit, but also to make it look graceful and effortless.

Alexander's Praise Song

Alexander's "Praise Song for the Day" marked a monumental moment for African Americans and the world, when President Obama was sworn in as the first Black president of the United States in January 2009. At 46 years old, Alexander was a likely choice for the Obama administration, whose campaign championed the political slogan that advocated for "hope" for a brighter tomorrow paired with the optimistic motto "yes we can." At the time of the inauguration, Alexander had published two books of essays and four books of poetry, including *American Sublime* (2005), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Shortly after being selected to give the inaugural poem, Alexander told the *New York Times* reporter Katharine Q. Seelye, that "writing an occasional poem has to attend to the moment itself, but what you hope for, as an artist, is to create something that has integrity and life that goes beyond the moment." Indeed, it was a difficult moment in the country's history. Obama entered the White House as the nation was struggling with economic turmoil following a global financial crisis, a depressed housing market, and nationwide protest. Obama's presidency began at the conclusion of the tenure of President George W. Bush, who according to Melissa Harris-Perry, has recalled that the low point of his presidency was "the moment (Kanye) West accused his administration of racist neglect of Katrina survivors" in 2005 (11). Meta DuEwa Jones rightly observes that the fact that Alexander was selected to write and recite an inaugural poem for Obama's inauguration ceremony "suggests the powerful presence of contemporary black poets on the national stage—literally and figuratively" (207). Alexander's success as an academic and artist embodied the kind of hope for a better America that the Obama campaign championed.

Alexander, who was born in Harlem and raised in Washington, D.C., received an elite education with degrees from Yale, Boston University and the University of Pennsylvania. In preparation for writing her inaugural poem, Alexander told the *New York Times* reporter Dwight Garner that she had been reading poetry by previous inaugural poets as well as Virgil, W. H. Auden, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Prior to the inauguration, Garner wrote that Alexander's verse would be broadcasted "to more people at one time than any poem ever composed." For many, Obama's inauguration marked a moment to give praise particularly for those who were at the forefront of the country's Civil Rights Movement because it epitomized the equality that people worked so hard to achieve. The title of Alexander's poem, "Praise Song for the Day," immediately situates it among other praise poems. Ryan Cull explains that praise poems have had a constant presence in Black literary tradition, and he notes that "African American poets since Phillis Wheatley have mobilized this political potential within praise, mastering the delicate task of admiring while also critiquing aspects

of American culture” (125). Cull rightly tells us that “an individual’s praise hopes to incite the consent of others, generating a discursive basis for community while also manifesting energies capable of promoting social change” (125). Alexander clearly imbues her inaugural poem with both a praise aesthetic and intellectual references that mirror the style of her earlier work, *The Venus Hottentot*.

Alexander’s thoughtful performance at the Obama inauguration calls to mind the many songs and spirituals of the past that have been used to celebrate important occasions in Black communities. She also celebrates everyday moments in her poem when she writes “each day we go about our business, / walking past each other, catching each other’s / eyes or not, about to speak or speaking” (1-3). For Alexander, everyday moments add up to something spectacular. Kevin Quashie tells us that Alexander’s “poem was true to its name, praise song, not just a song of shouting and glory, but a song telling the story of many” (99). Indeed, Alexander utilizes form to cultivate a narrative that is at once intimate and, at the same time, speaking to collective experience. In the printed version of “Praise Song for the Day,” Alexander fragments her poem into two three-line-stanzas per page, except for the final line, “praise song for walking forward in that light,” which stands alone on the last page. The page breaks between each pair of stanzas mimic the dual nature of African American identity, which W. E. B. Du Bois called “double consciousness;” the idea that black people experience the sometimes-conflicting doubleness of being both American and African American.⁸ Alexander’s recognition of the quotidian moments of life has rightly been celebrated as a reflection of black humanity and a glimpse into the interiority of black lives.

Notions of time and place take center stage in Alexander’s “Praise Song for the Day.” The poet clearly acknowledges the significance of the inauguration of the first Black president when she employs language that transports her audience to the past. In the poem’s final line, “Praise song for walking forward in the light,” Alexander concludes with the idea that the day of the inauguration marks a move into the light away from past challenges. Alexander’s speaker had earlier recalled those past struggles in the following stanzas:

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

⁸ See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, Norton 1999.

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables. (25-33)

In these three stanzas, Alexander's poem almost magically carries its audience on a journey through key moments in Black history when African Americans "laid the train tracks," "picked the cotton," and participated in "the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables." Enjambment in the first line of the third stanza places emphasis on the word "built," which points to the fact that slaves helped construct the nation. The hand-lettered signs recall protests that occurred before and during the Civil Rights Movement. Of course, the image of the kitchen table also highlights the role of grassroots movements. Furthermore, the language of "figuring-it-out" mirrors the poet's own work of writing poems perhaps at the kitchen table. By circling back to the making of the poem, Alexander suggests that these everyday acts have the potential to add up and become beautiful, like artwork. Taken together, these everyday moments are worthy of our collective attention.

Alexander also highlights everyday encounters between people; these interactions represent points of contact and sites where communities might be created. Take, for example, the following: "We encounter each other in words, words / spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed, / words to consider, reconsider" (16-18). With these lines that feature the repetition of the sounds made by *w*, *s*, and *r*, Alexander offers a meditation on how people throughout the country interact with each other over and over again, and her poem seems to ask the question: How should we treat each other? In its concluding lines, "Praise Song for the Day" offers an answer to this question:

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by *first do no harm or take no more*
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance. (34-39)

With these lines, Alexander offers a blueprint for how people should interact with each other. She places an emphasis on the significance of love, and she evokes the language of religion to consider the many ways that people define love. Nevertheless, Alexander's "love" goes beyond religious definitions. The repetition of the word "love" mimics the rhythm of a beating drum. It conjures love by simply repeatedly asserting the word out loud. For Alexander, love should be unconditional and shared by all. Alexander's call for love is like a hopeful, magical spell that has the power to manifest that which it names.

Gorman's Plan

Amanda Gorman is the youngest inaugural poet. Following Biden's inauguration, the media quickly published numerous articles equating Gorman, the then-22-year-old Black woman from Los Angeles, with Black Girl Magic. Take for instance, an article published online with the title: "Amanda Gorman Brought Black Girl Magic and Power to Joe Biden's Inauguration." If there was not enough "Black Girl Magic" at the inauguration with the swearing in of Vice President Kamala Harris, the first Black woman to hold the office, the media clearly felt that Gorman's performance of "The Hill We Climb" filled the void. Perhaps that was because black female poets have become an important representation of optimism and hope at inaugural events. *The New York Times* reporter Alexandra Alter wrote that Gorman "set out to write a poem that would inspire hope and foster a sense of collective purpose, at a moment when Americans are reeling from a deadly pandemic, political violence and partisan division." Despite the challenges of our times, Gorman remains optimistic and she imbued her poem with that sense of optimism that has carried her far. Her resumé includes a litany of monumental accomplishments. Gorman was raised by a middle-school-teaching, single mother who sent her to an elite private school in Santa Monica. In 2014, she was named the first Youth Poet Laureate of Los Angeles before becoming the first U.S. National Youth Poet Laureate in 2017. In 2020, Gorman graduated from Harvard University, and she tells everyone that she plans to run for president in 2036. Clearly, Gorman is ambitious, and she also expressed high ambitions for her audience at the Biden inauguration.

Gorman's inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb," begins and ends with the contrasting images of lightness and darkness that scaffold an Afrofuturistic vision of hope. Gorman specifically renders the image of the shade as a barrier to a brighter future, whereas the darkness might be read as a representation of the contemporary Covid-19 pandemic moment plagued with racial tension, political conflict, and the ongoing impact of global warming. For Gorman, her speaker longs to stand in the light, rather than the shade of God's hand when she says: "When day comes,

we ask ourselves: / Where can we find light / In this never-ending shade?” (1-3). Her speaker is hopeful that “we” as a country will be able to exit the shadows of discontent and disappointment in the contemporary moment. Ultimately, Gorman concludes the poem by returning to the image of the shade:

When day comes, we step out of the shade,
Aflame and unafraid,
The new dawn blooms as we free it,
For there is always light,
If only we're brave enough to see it,
If only we're brave enough to be it. (121-127)

In rendering the shade so prominently in her work, Gorman is picking up on similar uses of these images of lightness and darkness in the earlier inaugural poems of Alexander and Angelou. For example, Alexander concludes her “Praise Song for the Day” with the word “light” as she ends with the hopeful lines: “On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp, / praise song for walking forward in that light” (42-43). In “On the Pulse of Morning,” Angelou also imagines forward movement into the light when she writes: “You, created only a little lower than / The angels, have crouched too long in / The bruising darkness” (15-17). Angelou’s darkness is one that has been overcome; she proclaims the morning of the inauguration as a moment of lightness outside of darkness.

The dichotomy of lightness and darkness has long been used throughout the African American literary tradition. Following the turn of the century, African American writers filled their work with the contrasting images of lightness and darkness. For example, just over a century ago, when James Weldon Johnson wrote “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” a song that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People adopted as its official song, he employed the images of darkness and light to portray hope for a better life for former slaves. In the song, Johnson wrote: “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us. Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us. Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, Let us march on till victory is won” (109). It makes sense for Gorman to similarly adopt these images today as the country faces the challenge of an ongoing pandemic. Gorman’s poem picks up on Johnson’s optimistic vision of a brighter future by addressing the desires and hope of her contemporary audience.

For Gorman, the new day is the digital era, and Gorman is a poet made for the digital age. She has been linked with hope by a variety of sources including First Lady Michelle Obama. In an interview with Gorman for *Time* magazine, Michelle Obama wrote, “the power of your words blew me away—but it was more than that.

It was your presence onstage, the confidence you exuded as a young Black woman helping to turn the page to a more hopeful chapter in American leadership.” It was through weaving a vision of a brighter future in her poetry that Gorman was able to accomplish the task at hand. Obama also told Gorman that “after so much division, hearing your call for unity was something of a balm,” and she noted that “it seemed like the Inauguration hadn’t even ended before folks were calling you a symbol of hope.” The language of “hope” seems to stick to Gorman; the book jacket of Gorman’s latest book, *Call Us What We Carry*, claims that Gorman’s new collection of poems “captures a shipwrecked moment in time and transforms it into a lyric of hope and healing.” Obama’s use of the word “balm” also situates Gorman within the realm of healers, and healers are often linked to magic, especially in fictional works. There is, I think, a consensus that Gorman’s therapeutic performance provided the inauguration with a much-needed optimism and hope associated with the concept of “Black Girl Magic.”

Gorman applies the same sense of optimism found in her poetry to her own life. Prior to Biden’s inauguration, Gorman had long hoped to perform an inaugural poem. In fact, Gorman told Michelle Obama in the *Time* magazine interview that “for the past six years whenever I’ve written a poem that I knew was going to be public or performed, I told myself, write the Inauguration poem.” It seems significant that Gorman’s sense of optimism materialized into reality. For her, she was not writing poems about a president, but something more. Each time Gorman set out to write a poem, she explained to Obama, she wanted to produce something “worthy of a new chapter in the country. In everything you write, write something that is brave enough to be hopeful.” The hope that fills Gorman’s work resembles an Afrofuturistic utopian vision found in science fiction and speculative fiction. Gorman noted her optimism during the interview, adding that “your optimism will never be as powerful as it is in that exact moment when you want to give it up. The way we can all be hopeful is to not negate the feeling of fear or doubt, but to ask: What led to this darkness? And what can lead us out of the shadows?” Here is another moment when Gorman’s optimism resembles elements of Afrofuturism. Her continuous references to darkness and shadows calls to mind an evil that must be overcome with the help of something like a comic book superhero. In her book, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack tells us that “Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future,” (9). Womack also notes that Afrofuturism is “both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory,” and it “combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (9). Like other Black inaugural poets before her, especially Angelou, Gorman renders images of magic realism in her poetry and public persona in order to create an aura of optimism. Gorman’s multiple

influences, from the nation's founders to Martin Luther King, Jr., to Barack Obama, lend her poetry the sense of both recalling the past and looking toward the future. Indeed, Gorman's inaugural poetry embodies the spirit of Afrofuturism in its utopian vision.

Gorman's style also evokes an Afrofuturistic aesthetic. On her website, she appears with her eyes lined in gold to resemble an Ancient Egyptian aesthetic found in art. Gorman's evocation of Egyptian history should remind us of Sun Ra's many cosmic inspired costumes meant to simultaneously recall the Egyptian past and the distant future on another planet. J. Griffith Rollefson tells us that Sun Ra's stage persona reflected a "seeming ambivalence through his donning of what is best described as Pharaonic space garb, consisting of brightly colored dashikis, Egyptian headdresses, and antennaed space helmets" (93). Gorman's sense of style is considerably more Earth-centric, but her fashion echoes the Afropunk aesthetic inspired by artists like Sun Ra that is also favored by performers like Janelle Monae. In fact, Gorman's trendy fashion statements have gotten her as much notice as has her vibrant, politically driven poetry that has earned her impressive titles and commissions. The media coverage of the inauguration often turned its attention to Gorman's style, particularly her unique headband that was positioned to resemble a crown. Karen Attiah, for the *Washington Post*, opined that Gorman's choice to wear yellow and red should be considered a "visual nod to the 1972 campaign materials of Shirley Chisolm, the first Black woman to run for president. Gorman communicated her truth and took her place within the political tradition of Black American woman before even uttering a word." Attiah also echoed Michelle Obama's comments that linked Gorman to a kind of healer, when she wrote: "Gorman spoke her commanding truth to all that power—that healing the wounds of the past should become part of the American identity." Leigh Nordstrom, for *Women's Wear Daily*, gave a detailed account of what Gorman wore, including her "scene stealer" red satin headband, and she noted that "the Los Angeles native, who made history as the first national Youth Poet Laureate, up and stole the show at the inauguration . . . with her message of light and hope." Gorman's style may lend itself to attention, but it is still her language of hope that is most memorable.

In "The Hill We Climb," Gorman uses anaphora, a poetic technique in which successive phrases or lines begin with the same words, to render potential obstacles. She offers roadmaps to transcend each barrier. When Gorman's speaker repeatedly says "that even as we," she immediately offers a positive, alternative. Take, for example, the following lines:

That even as we grieved, we grew,
That even as we hurt, we hoped,
That even as we tired, we tried.
That we'll forever be tied together.

Victorious. (41-45)

Gorman answers negatives like “grieved,” “hurt,” and “tired” with the positives “grew,” “hoped,” and “tried.” In moving from “growing” to “hoping” to “trying,” Gorman expresses the belief that even through failure there is always a lesson to learn and the possibility to thrive. She places emphasis on this particular passage by ending with a visual word play that connects the words “tired,” “tried,” and “tied.” To conclude the passage on a positive note, Gorman inserts the word “victorious.” Gorman also applies anaphora to conclude her poem with the phrase “if only.” In the often-quoted final lines of her poem, Gorman writes: “For there is always light, / If only we’re brave enough to see it, / If only we’re brave enough to be it” (125-127). The punctuation of the word “if” is significant. The capitalized “I” is a call to action for the listener—who cannot respond—to actually become “brave enough,” which is another repeated phrase, to transform into the light. The transformation that Gorman’s speaker requests of her audience is nothing less than magic. It asks the audience to undergo a metamorphosis, like a butterfly, and to become the light that they seek.

Within “The Hill We Climb,” Gorman also offers a lengthy litany that echoes both Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise.” Here, again, Gorman uses repetition to create a sense of community and feelings of hope. The poem reads:

We will raise this wounded world into
a wonderous one.
We will rise from the gold-limbed hills
of the West!
We will rise from the windswept
Northeast, where our forefathers first
realized revolution!
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities
of the Midwestern states!
We will rise from the sunbaked South!
We will rebuild, reconcile and recover. (106-116)

Gorman's phrase "we will rise" should remind us of Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" that repeats the phrase "I rise" throughout and ends by simple stating: "I rise / I rise / I rise." For both Gorman and Angelou, "I rise" and "we will rise" present hopeful assertions of optimism in the face of oppression. Gorman's use of the first-person-plural pronoun privileges collectivity over individuality. To solidify the homage that Gorman makes here to both Angelou and King, she renders the image of various locations throughout the nation to mirror King's "I Have A Dream" speech. King's desire to let freedom ring "from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire" and "the mightier mountains of New York" becomes Gorman's call to rise from the "gold-limbed hills of the West," "windswept Northeast," "Lake-rimmed cities of the Midwestern states," and "sunbaked South." By mirroring King's speech, Gorman evokes nostalgia for King's optimistic address to the March on Washington in 1963. In doing so, Gorman conjures the same optimism and hope that King's speech still carries today.

Black women inaugural poets, like Gorman, conjure an Afrofuturistic poetics of hope at key moments of political transition, but their poetry also recalls the country's troubled history to serve as a warning of what might happen when the promise of hope fades. These poems do not lend themselves to simple hermeneutic scrutiny, but rather invite a careful meditation on current events within the context of the country's past. It is a truism that hope cannot exist without its antonym pessimism, and we live in a time when pessimism runs rampant. A little hope has the potential to go a long way. My goal in exploring the poetics of hope at the inauguration has been to make legible a contemporary trend that partners politics with poetry to create moments that have the potential to bridge gaps between seemingly disparate communities. The language of hope conjures the possibility of a fresh start; it is a language that has long been found in the African American literary tradition. Within the black cultural tradition resides a through line of hope that black women poets bring to the inauguration. Black Girl Magic, as contemporary media has so often labeled Gorman's inaugural performance, is a new way of saying what has always been said about African American literary accomplishment. Black art must push against the constant oppression that would hinder its growth and when it does, it accomplishes something beautiful, almost magical.

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Embracing the Sapphire: Black Women's Rage in Speculative Fiction

Jasmine H. Wade

“Like the monster, the longer I live in these conditions, the more rage I harbor. Rage colors me as it presses in through the pores of my skin, soaking in until it becomes the blood that courses through my beating heart. It is a rage bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival.”

—Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,”

“If this what you truly want. I can wear her skin over mine. Her hair, over mine, her hands as gloves, her teeth as confetti, her scalp a cap, her sternum, my bedazzled cane. We can pose for a photograph, all three of us, immortalized. You and your perfect girl. . . . Why can't you see me? Everyone else can.”

—Beyoncé Knowles, *Lemonade*

Representations of the Sapphire, the Angry Black Woman, are peppered throughout the cultural history of the United States. In television and film, there was the original Sapphire: Sapphire Stevens on *Amos and Andy* (though the stereotype predates her). Other examples include Pam James on *Martin*, Coffy, and Terri from *Barbershop*. Reality shows and tabloid talk shows, like *The Jerry Springer Show*, reinforced the stereotype of the angry black woman (Pilgrim). Within the stereotype, the Black woman's anger is bitter, irrational, destructive, and emasculating. In recent years, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, gymnast Gabby Douglas, and tennis star Serena Williams have all been accused of unnecessary aggression and anger. Even Michelle Obama fought to shake off the label of Sapphire. Throughout history, the Sapphire is presented as a woman whose anger is destructive to her family and her country. The Sapphire persists as a stereotype that presents Black women as pathological “instrument[s] of castration” (Spillers 74). The archetype's primary purpose is to silence and invisibilize Black women. The epigraphs included at the start of this piece suggest embracing an inner monstrosity in order to avoid a sentence of invisibility. In both, rage is an important catalyst in seizing one's monstrous side. In this essay, I argue that Black women are born in rage, which is to say Black women's rage is such a fundamental

part of us¹ that processing it can trigger modes of metamorphosis.² In literature and film, the Angry Black Woman or Sapphire figure has been employed as a means of dehumanization. Black women are often instructed from girlhood to resist appearing angry or at least to be aware of appearing angry. Black speculative fiction in some cases opens the door to subvert this norm and embrace the Sapphire in all her power. This essay explores two examples of Black speculative fiction in which the Sapphire is embraced and Black women's rage is seen as a force of survival. In Victor LaValle's *Destroyer* (a graphic novel), Dr. Josephine Baker fights against processes of dehumanization by expressing a monstrous rage with an appetite for destructive creation to protect herself and her family. In Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country* (a horror television show), Ruby Baptiste's rage against white supremacy is tangled up in her use of respectability as a defense mechanism. That is, until she gets a taste of magic and white privilege. In both speculative works, Black women express their rage and transform into otherly human forms.

The close reading I perform in this essay relies on a theoretical framework that braids theories of rage by Audre Lorde, Hortense Spillers, and Sylvia Wynter. Together, these Black feminist theorists support my claim that Black women are born in rage as a result of historical and ongoing trauma. What might it mean to think of Black women's rage as not only affective but also onto-epistemic through Sylvia Wynter's conception of sociogeny and Hortense Spiller's conception of the flesh? What does Black women's rage have to do with self-definition as a project of Black feminism? My exploration of these questions brings me to the idea of metamorphosis, in which new self-definitions offer different conceptions of what it means to be human. A new human, as Wynter has suggested, is important not only for understanding the situations of Black women, particularly in the United States but also throughout the diaspora, but also for plotting trajectories for Black women's survival (along with their kin).

I bring together rage, science fiction, and Black feminist theories as a way of showing how imagination allows for important epistemic movement. Misha Green and Victor LaValle present new ways of being, ways that suggest paths forward after embracing the Sapphire. Considering Black women's use of anger in historical and contemporary social and political spaces as well as the use of the Sapphire to silence Black women, theorizing Black women's rage in fiction may help add to our understanding of Black life in reality.

¹ Because I am a Black woman, throughout this essay I will sometimes refer to Black women in the first person plural. This is in keeping with Black feminism's tradition of blending the personal and the academic.

² The idea of Black women born in rage is inspired partly by Kiese Laymon's statement that Black boys are born on parole in the essay "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America."

Overview of *Destroyer* and *Lovecraft Country*

Victor LaValle's *Destroyer* features Dr. Josephine Baker, a Black woman who has perfected the science of Dr. Victor Frankenstein and brought her son, Akai, back from the dead. Akai was murdered by Chicago police when he was twelve years old. Before Akai's birth, Josephine worked in a lab run by the Director, a white woman who wanted to perfect Frankenstein's research for a select few. She worked to turn immortality into a "natural resource" and use it to gain ultimate power over the world. Josephine left the lab when she became pregnant with Akai because the Director pushed her out. When Josephine left, she left not only her job but also Pliers, her husband who chose to stay loyal to the Director. Without Josephine at the lab, Pliers subjects himself to an experiment where he merges with a machine and becomes a cyborg known as The Bride. In the present-day narrative, Frankenstein's monster makes his way to the United States causing unintentional destruction along the way. As the Director lures the monster in, she sends two agents to bring Josephine back to complete their work. Those two agents are the first to meet Akai and see how he can manipulate matter and energy. Through a violent exchange, Josephine and Akai escape the agents and head to the lab on their own terms. Josephine reveals Akai is not fully human but is a mixture of human matter, nanobots, and other material. The violence escalates when the monster turns on Akai and Josephine at the lab. Akai kills the monster but not before the monster kills Josephine. Soon after, Josephine reveals she has uploaded her consciousness to Akai's system, so she can continue to be with him always.

Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country* is set in the 1950s, primarily in Chicago. The protagonist, Atticus Freeman, works with his friend Letitia Lewis and his family members to protect themselves from a magical whites-only fraternity. Ruby Baptiste, the focus of this essay, is a secondary character. She is Letitia's sister and wants, more than anything, to get a job at Marshall Field and Company, a high-end department store. Even though Ruby has applied several times, Marshall Field's has not hired her because they have a policy against hiring Black people. However, one day when Ruby goes into the store, she finds they have hired Tamara, a Black woman. She is devastated because she knows the store will not hire more than one Black person. While she is soothing her sorrows at a local bar, Ruby meets William, a white man with access to magic. William shows Ruby his power by transforming her into a white woman. Her transformation does more than change her skin; she becomes a different person. The potion is temporary, and Ruby has to keep drinking it in order to stay in the white skin. Ruby explores having white privilege and gets a job as an assistant manager at Marshall Field's. She is harsh to Tamara until she sees the manager, a white man, try to force himself on Tamara after work. Ruby goes to the manager the next day as a white woman and pretends

to seduce him. Then, she begins to beat him as the white skin falls on the ground in a bloody heap around her. She remains a Black woman after that.

Born in Rage

Black women are born in rage. I use the term rage instead of anger to signify a systemic accumulation of anger across space and time that runs parallel to the accumulation of hatred apparent in structural racism. Black women are born in rage because the hatred and the systems that produce the resulting anger are well underway each time a baby Black girl is born. In "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," Audre Lorde said, "Every Black woman in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers" (145). We are born and live along that "wide curve" of rage that begins before us and continues after us. Lorde underscores the long-standing and intersectional angers within Black women. This rage, the accumulation of multiple angers, exists in her both as a conscious emotion and as a dynamic and ongoing state of existence. It can emerge as a result of multiple catalysts over time or can also point to structures. This accumulation is not inherently confined to an individual life. The rage is a natural byproduct of "metabolizing hatred like a daily bread" not just in our own lifetimes but from the lifetimes of mothers and othermothers before us (152). This rage is relational and is the direct result of a series of behaviors and conditions.

Lorde argues for a dialectic between the hatred embedded in systemic racism, Black women, and Black women's anger (146). The cruelty and harm inherent in that hatred forms an anger as a fundamental part of Black women's existence. Lorde's use of the word "ancient" to describe Black women's anger is indicative of how the angers extend vertically through generations. The "unexpressed" suggests not only a horizontal rippling of these angers in Black communities but also the illegibility of the Black woman's anger in what is currently the United States. Like other Black feminist theorists, I do not feel or imagine Black women's rage as inherently destructive.³ It is a force that prompts action that is likely a combination of destruction and empowerment (Jordan-Zachery 65; Luberecki).

Lorde's approach to anger blends affect and ontology, and Hortense Spillers' epistemological theories approach Black women's rage from a different point. Lorde offers that anger has material consequences and exists within one's experiences with their feelings. When Lorde tells the story about being young and feeling the hateful glare of a white woman on a bus, the white woman has a feeling (hatred) in response to seeing Lorde, and Lorde has feelings (shame, anger) in response to

³ Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and Bettina Judd are just a few of the theorists who inform my thoughts on rage.

the white woman's hatred (147-48). This is her dialectic. Spillers' conception of the flesh points to another potential space where Black women's rage may also exist. "Before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. . . . If we think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard" (Spillers 67). The concept of the flesh allows me to conceive of Black women's rage as part of the Black woman's primary narrative, which was constituted in the Middle Passage. The flesh precedes the body temporally and conceptually; it is a fundamental element "in the vein of the classical quadfecta of earth, wind, (water,) and fire" (Weheliye 44).

Spillers' vocabulary of the flesh facilitates an understanding of the rage of Black women when considered alongside Lorde. Spillers' conception of the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" connects to Lorde's hatred dialectic. "These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (Spillers 67). One interpretation of these markings is that they are the racist and sexist hatred that Lorde speaks of. This manifests as a rage whose justification is "hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color." The narrative around the Sapphire does the discursive work of obscuring the truth of Black women's rage: that Black women's rage is not only justifiable, it is part of a fundamental element (the hieroglyphs that are passed on from generation to generation). Through this lens, rage is a fugitive maneuver that points toward liberatory paths. With rage comes a refusal of or unruliness toward the hatred. Rage can create a path to a life with more agency, one that feels better because the rage prompts a Black woman to uncover, decipher, and move against the hieroglyphics.

Dr. Josephine Baker and Ruby Baptiste exemplify the intertwining of destruction and empowerment as they process their rage and reach metamorphosis. Josephine's impulse toward destruction is a direct response to the powerlessness that results from a lifetime under white supremacy. Her relationship to power is complex; Josephine is highly educated and before the present-day narrative, she worked as a top scientist in a well-funded, innovative lab. As long as she did her work and gave her all to the lab, the Director (the antagonist) channeled power in the form of technology and funds through Josephine. But when Josephine became pregnant with Akai and needed to turn her attention to her growing family, the Director pushed her out of the organization. In other words, Josephine's access to power was contingent on her complete dedication to the Director. When the Director shares her plans to harness the power of immortality, she notes that inequality has always been fundamental to the survival of humanity. "The purpose

of most humans, since the dawn of time, has been one thing only. *Cheap labor*. Nobility needed things and the rest of us existed only to provide" (LaValle Chapter 4, emphasis in original). The Director plans to build on that hierarchal model, using Frankenstein's monster, to turn a select few into a class of gods.

The Director's desire to claim power and Akai's murder mirror each other in the way white supremacy limits and harms Josephine—in one instance because of her womanhood and in the other because of her Blackness. This is the hatred Audre Lorde talked about. It is the desire within whiteness to become a supreme being. Whether that be instituting a racist hierarchy in the streets of Chicago or conquering death, the core of the desire is the same. Josephine confirms this when she asserts, "I don't owe this country a damn thing except the same hate it's always given me" (LaValle Chapter 6). As a child, Josephine experienced that hatred in schools where her intelligence was constantly questioned. She says, "And do you know I was such a fool that I thought I'd eventually get to the top of the wall? I'd finally climb over all their defenses" (LaValle Chapter 6). This quote is accompanied by an image of a young Josephine climbing a long, endless ladder. Josephine ascended the ranks of academia and science only to find that the power that awaited other people on the other side of the wall was still unavailable to her. After Akai's death, Josephine's rage takes the place of her climb. The rage, she argues, is more effective than her intellect. After all, it brings Akai back to her.

In *Lovecraft Country*, Ruby resists a life of powerlessness by arming herself with a certain kind of respectability. She dresses in clothes fitting the sophisticated department store job she desires. She takes classes at the local community center to bolster her resume. She works to be a credit to her race. Her desire to be perceived as respectable and gain entry to the kind of upward mobility available to white women shapes how her anger manifests. But like Josephine, Ruby is excluded from circles of power. Where Josephine fights for access to the upper echelons of knowledge, Ruby contends with the racialized and gendered ways capitalism separates groups into a hierarchy of difference (Melamed 77). In the third episode, "Holy Ghosts," Ruby explains that she wants to work at Marshall Field and Company, where she has applied several times. She has also taken several typing and accounting classes to show she was qualified. When she explains at a house party that she has not been hired despite all this work, a man asks, "You think Marshall Field's hasn't hired you because you're colored?" Ruby responds: "Of course I know that. And I'm willing to work harder than anybody else, if that's what it's gonna take. You know, if more colored folk thought like me, the race would be a lot further along." She says this just before discovering a burning cross on her and her sisters' front lawn. Ruby stands watch as others at the party take a stand with shotguns to guard the house until they hear police arrive. Just before the police arrive, Ruby drives away with the

shotguns in her trunk. In this moment, white supremacist hatred is juxtaposed with the denial of upward mobility for Ruby. With the burning cross, white supremacist hatred is linked to the work of the divine, similar to what happens with *Destroyer's* Director. Resisting racial terror becomes a struggle against not only white humans but also the white-male God's encouragement of that terror.

Ruby's rage is not always confrontational; in line with her respectable presentation, she does not scream or get into physical fights. In episode four, "A History of Violence," she goes into Marshall Field's one day and learns the store has already hired Tamara. Tamara reveals she was hired only a couple days before and that she "applied on a whim" (as opposed to the care and preparation Ruby took). Ruby is devastated because she knows Marshall Field's will not hire more than one Black woman. More than that, she is angry. That evening, when she plays a solo gig with her guitar at a bar, she sings Ma Rainey's "Chain Gang Blues." The song is about captivity and sorrow on the chain gang, and it purposefully reflects Ruby's feelings of captivity within her race and gender as well as the limited station that comes with it in the 1950s. Ruby plays her guitar with short, sharp strokes, pouring her anger into her music. The audience does not clap for her when she's finished, clearly not feeling entertained by the performance. She responds with, "Well, f*ck you too" and then relocates to the bar to describe her woes to a white man who buys her a drink. She says, "She got there first. Would've been me. Should've been me." Ruby's anger mixes with sorrow, so much that the anger seems buried. It is most recognizable in her body language. (It is also recognizable in her relationships with other Black women, which I will explore in the next section.) Ruby's desire to work at Marshall Field's, her educational moves toward upward mobility, and her language about "the race" lacking work ethic suggests she considers herself a respectable woman.⁴ This is likely part of the reason her anger touches only other Black women. Ruby hopes her work ethic, respectable dreams, and deportment will protect her from the label of Sapphire. It does not, though, because of the consistent distorting lens of the archetype.

In their own ways, Ruby and Josephine's rage is a response to their invisibility. This invisibility is more a distortion than an inability to be seen (Browne 11; Collins 79). The women are seen as their opposites—Ruby as unqualified and inadequate for Marshall Field's and Josephine as unfocused and less capable than her white counterparts. Hortense Spillers begins her seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" with examples of these distortions: Peaches,

⁴ Brittany Cooper quotes Candice Jenkins in *Private Lives, Proper Relations* to define respectability in this context: "Black, largely female, generally middle-class desire [and] longing to protect or save Black women, and Black communities more generally, from narratives of sexual and familial pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity" (quoted in Cooper 153).

Brown Sugar, Sapphire, Miss Ebony First, and so on (65). She says, “The nicknames by which African-American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene—the opening lines of this essay provide examples—demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative” (69). These distortions link back to Black women’s captivity post-slavery in that they come to “signify the captive person” (69). While slavery is long over in both *Lovecraft Country* and *Destroyer*, the connected systems of capitalism, knowledge-production (science), and white supremacy hold Ruby and Josephine captive. The label Sapphire, designed to silence them, coils around those systems and forms a kind of cage. However, despite the constricting power of the label, anger is still a powerful force that both women wield to break through that cage.

The Precarity of Kinship

Black women born in rage live with a precarious relationship to kinship. I imagine Lorde’s “wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers” on an edge of heartache. When a Black woman looks over the edge, she sees just how close she is to losing either her own life or her loved ones. Anger can act as a protective force, shielding the heart from pain. Feeling angry can be easier than feeling a perpetual state of wanting or fear (Lorde 153). Spillers names the condition of the Black woman as, among other things, “both mother and mother-dispossessed” (80). I choose to interpret this as both actual motherhood and metaphorical motherhood, so Black girls can grow up feeling their own heartache as well as watching the adults in their lives reflect a potential future pain.

The intergenerational nature of Black women’s rage can create a sense of haunting. Haunting within Black feminist thought bends time so that the past and the present lay over each other in defiance of Eurocentric conceptions of time as linear. Viviane Saleh-Hanna defines Black feminist hauntology as “a counter-analysis to broken conceptions of time and bodies that critiques dominant, White supremacist constructions of colonized/colonizing, enslaved/enslaving and imprisoned/imprisoning bodies, lives, deaths, and histories.” It is an “anti-colonial analysis of time” that can encapsulate repetitive and structural violence (Saleh-Hanna). Black feminist hauntology suggests that time can move vertically in addition to horizontally, which means structural violence, as well as joy and generations of resistance, build up in the present instead of staying in a distant past. Julia Jordan-Zachery describes this haunting as feeling her own pain and “the pain of the women who make [her] Black feminine divine lineage” (64). Part of the precarity of kinship Black women feel involves feeling pain that is not just ours.

Dr. Josephine Baker is a haunted woman. She carries her own experiences with racism, particularly when her intellect was challenged because of her race and gender. She also carries generations of pain. Toward the end of the graphic novel, Frankenstein's monster has gone ahead of Josephine to the lab and killed the Director. When Josephine realizes the Director is dead, she expresses disappointment that she did not kill the Director herself. Akai chastises her, but that only sparks a rant. Josephine says to both Pliers and Akai, "This country has told me exactly what it is. Who it serves and protects. It isn't you [her ex-husband], or me, and it sure wasn't our child. . . . This whole damn country is one big Civil War monument. It's time to tear it down" (LaValle Chapter 6). Here, Josephine connects her rage to the repetitive structural violence that haunts her.

Haunting can lead to rage; it makes it so that the past cannot be ignored or forgotten. This inability to engage amnesia can create an unsettled feeling, or as Jordan-Zachery says, a "something-must-be-done feeling" (65). In this way, rage can be a catalyst for action, even healing. When Josephine embraces her rage, she is able to bring her son back to life and destroy the lab, a site of oppressive systems of knowledge. In this way, haunting can also lead to healing. Akai is a representation of Josephine's determination to heal her grieving spirit. While Josephine is haunted by the specter of Black death, she responds by finding new ways to create and protect Black life. The haunting by systems of oppression can prompt a rage driven to protect kin.

Both *Destroyer* and *Lovecraft Country* demonstrate the social functions of Black women's rage. For Josephine, it is to protect her family; for Ruby, it is to protect her community. Lorde suggests Black women's anger is a "collective expression" that is just as much political as it is anything else (Jordan-Zachery 67). Building on Lorde's work, I argue Black women's rage is a meeting point for kinship, haunting, and hatred (the kind of hatred mentioned in the previous section). In *Lovecraft Country*, Ruby turns her rage on other Black women, namely Tamara (the Black woman who works at Marshall Field's) and her sister Letitia. In "Strange Case," the episode after she has learned that Tamara has been employed at Marshall Field's, Ruby, who has spent the night with a white man named William, wakes up as a white woman. She then takes advantage of the magical transformation to work at Marshall Field's. When Ruby finds out Tamara did not graduate high school, did not have prior experience, and had not taken any typing or accounting classes, she turns on her. While it is clearly not Tamara's fault, Ruby still directs her anger at the other Black woman even though the culprit is the system that only leaves room for one of them.

Lorde identifies this phenomenon, in which Black women unleash their anger most often on other Black women, as a byproduct of Black women's anger. This is

partly because it is safer to be angry at other Black women than to rage at racist structures and people. It is also because of the confluence of kinship, haunting, and hatred. Lorde says, "The anger with which I meet another Black woman's slightest deviation from my immediate need or desire or concept of a proper response is a deep and hurtful anger, chosen only in the sense of a choice of desperation—reckless through despair" (154). The anger rises from the connection, a kind of kinship even if it is fictive, and the interdependence. The "cruelty" and "harshness" Lorde speaks of appears when Ruby, empowered by her newly white skin, snaps at Tamara and belittles her (159). "She wishes the other woman would become someone else, anyone other than another Black woman" (167). Communal love and care is the way to keep Black women's rage from being an infection passed back and forth. At the end of the episode "Strange Case," Ruby turns her anger away from Tamara and toward the white male manager at Marshall Field's who tried to force himself on Tamara the night before. Ruby violently and repeatedly punctures the man's bare skin with the heel of her shoe in defense of herself and Tamara. Ruby's act of rage is also one of protection and community emerging from an understanding of the racialized and gendered violence Black women face.

Metamorphosis

Bettina Judd evokes the Sapphire as an "unwanted avatar" (Judd 178). The Sapphire figure is the Black woman's reflection in a Fun House mirror; her true self is obscured. More than that, the Sapphire is dangerous to Black women. In the white imagination, every Black woman is a Sapphire (unless she is desexualized and therefore a Mammy), and the Sapphire must be met with cruelty, so Black women learn to police their own behaviors to avoid being defined as angry. "To become angry is to become Sapphire, to become Sapphire is to confirm the negative relationship to humanity for which Sapphire is constructed" (Judd 180-181). This is about more than a politics of respectability. The Sapphire is dangerous not because she is damaging to the image of the race. She is dangerous because her perceived anger can invite physical violence. "To express anger places one in danger by the apparatus readied for law and order" (Judd 181). The Angry Black Woman in reality is an inherent challenge to dominant systems.

Judd makes an argument that reads to me more like two requests. First, she asks the reader to "luxuriate" in Black women's anger (186). For this, both art and ritual are necessary. Art and ritual combine to create a kind of ceremony that both reveals and grounds Black women's rage. She suggests that through this kind of ceremony, Black women's rage can be a kind of meditative practice. Second, Judd asks that the reader read Black women with a "methodology of anger" that requires

a different conception of human (183).⁵ The “deep structures” of the Black woman, which Judd defines as the common experiences of humanity that cannot be conveyed or understood through words alone, are misread in Black women (184). This misreading is a direct result of Black women fundamentally not fitting into the dominant definition of human. In this, Judd is bringing both Spillers and Wynter together to offer, as a path forward, a praxis that uses a new grammar to redefine human in a way that allows for the Black woman to do the monstrous thing and define herself. As Spillers says, “‘Sapphire’ might require after all a radically different text for a female empowerment” (80).

Sylvia Wynter offers her philosophies of the human at several points, but what is most relevant to my musings on rage and the flesh is her idea of the sociogenic principle (31). This concept begins with Fanon’s definition of sociogeny, which Weheliye defines as “a symbolic register, consisting of discourse, language, culture, and so on” (Weheliye 25), and calls for a new conception of human in order to account for the process of racialization. Wynter builds on Fanon’s theorization that Blackness exists only in relation to whiteness by arguing that the western concept of Man allows white men to separate themselves from Black men, whom they have deemed subhuman. With regard to the sociogenic principle, Wynter focuses on the fact that the western Man is primarily, almost exclusively, a biological figure. “Wynter summons the explanatory apparatus of neurobiology to elucidate how racialization, despite its origins in sociogeny, is converted to the stuff of ontogenesis; this is what Wynter refers to as ‘sociogenic.’” (Weheliye 26). Instead, she argues, it is important to see man as a hybrid, as both ontology (“the genetic dimension of human action”) and sociogeny (“a symbolic register; consisting of discourse”) (Weheliye 25; Wynter 31).

Though Spillers is thinking more epistemologically and Wynter’s theories⁶ are more ontological, they connect in two important ways for this essay. First, both offer a way of theorizing the origins of the Black woman. Because of the process of racialization, the Black woman does not exist without the white capitalist/colonizer. She is formed because of her biological differences and, perhaps more importantly, because of her sociogeny, the cultural signifiers and narratives that are attached

⁵ Judd offers that a methodology of anger asks “what is at stake? Why wouldn’t this Black woman be silent, knowing the risks of displaying anger? Such a methodology would have in its arsenal a literacy for the craft of communication that texts of rage deploy: that ‘simultaneity of discourse’ that has the capacity to convey clearly and obscure adroitly” (183).

⁶ Wynter speaks of Blackness more generally and within the context of academic disciplines. One of Weheliye’s critiques of Wynter is that she does not prioritize gender as an important marker of hierarchal oppression. I do believe, though, that Wynter would say her arguments around the sociogenic principle still apply to Black women, even if she is not doing a distinctly gendered analysis, like Spillers does.

to her. Wynter's sociogeny is related to Spillers' flesh in terms of the narratives created by and/or about Black women. It is within that relationship (between Black woman and white man) that her flesh and the corresponding hieroglyphics are formed. Second, Spillers and Wynter both argue that a new conception of human is required for the Black woman to be free. For Wynter, the western conception of Man does not allow the Black woman to come into being. The dominant cultural narrative has placed the blame for this on the shoulders of the Black woman. Instead, Wynter argues that a definition of human that accounts for differences not only in biology but on the level of the cultural narratives that get written into and under our skins is required. Spillers similarly argues that a new definition of human is necessary: "We are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name'), which her culture imposes in blindness. 'Sapphire' might require after all a radically different text for a female empowerment" (180, emphasis in original). Instead of "joining the ranks" of the Eurocentric human, Black women can do the monstrous thing of transforming into something else, something insurgent. This monstrosity is outside the bounds of human. Similar to what Stryker suggests in the epigraph, Josephine and Ruby fight against the conditions they were born into, conditions that threaten their physical and psychological survival daily. As Judd suggests, a new definition of human, one that makes room for Black women born in rage and allows those Black women to define themselves and name their rage, would be a step toward liberation, a step toward Black women being human on their own terms. The process of racialization involves sociogeny, the flesh, and biochemistry; a Black woman's rage is also in all of those spheres, which constitute her very core. To ignore this, to try to dampen or erase it, would likely mean pushing the Black woman into proximity to whiteness, to respectability and to Eurocentric humanness. Instead, I suggest this re-definition is the internal process of what speculative fiction illustrates as an external metamorphosis. This analysis of metamorphosis involves a method of stepping into this rage, luxuriating in it, to see what insight comes of it.

Ruby's metamorphosis runs parallel to her process of metabolizing her rage. This metabolization, to borrow from Lorde, is a healing process through which pain and suffering pass through one's body and spirit (152). When Ruby first wakes up as a white woman, she is scared and confused. She heads to the South Side of Chicago to look to Black people for help. To her surprise, she receives all the help she needs from white police officers. In the following days, Ruby comes to understand whiteness as a currency. She trades in it to get everything from free ice cream to the job of her dreams. Ruby tells William: "I don't know what is more difficult, being colored or being a woman. Most days I'm happy to be both, but the world keeps interrupting, and I am sick of being interrupted" ("Strange Case").

Despite Ruby's words that she is content as a Black woman, William's magic opens up a previously closed pathway to power. It taps into a discontent that likely sits under her anger. During Ruby's time as a white woman, she is a different kind of human—a shapeshifter. Even when her skin is white, she is still Black. The magic did not give her an insider's insight into white culture and norms, and she stumbles sometimes by seeming out of place in all-white settings. For instance, when a group of white women, including Ruby, dance in the break room, the other women comment that Ruby moves her hips like a Black person. Ruby's ability to shapeshift gives her a new perspective, allows her to metabolize the hatred of white supremacy, and heals her enough that she is able to accept her true form.

In thinking of the new human (Wynter's human) as a combination of sociogeny/flesh and biochemistry, Ruby's sociogeny and flesh keep her grounded in a lineage of Black women even when her biochemistry changes. Still, her biochemical metamorphosis creates tension that sparks a new narrative. I argue Ruby does not go back to being the same human once William's magic passes through her system. Her sociogeny, which I also think of as her foundational self-narrative, is radically altered. When William apologizes for the pain involved in the metamorphosis, Ruby responds, "That wasn't pain. That was something else. Like being unmade" ("Strange Case"). Spillers describes the hieroglyphics of the flesh as part of a process of ungendering that began on the Middle Passage and continues with each generation of Black women. This is an unmaking process. Ruby's metamorphosis is a different kind of unmaking from the dehumanizing process Spillers describes. It is healing.

Josephine's anger is fuel for her metamorphosis and a method of futuristic knowledge production. For this, I have to point back to Audre Lorde. One important point Lorde raises is that Black women's rage is crucial to their survival. "What other creature in the world besides the Black woman has had to build the knowledge of so much hatred into her survival and keep going?" (Lorde 150). Understanding the hatred and the rage response keeps Black women from making decisions that could endanger their bodies and their progeny. For instance, Josephine points to a long history, preceding the Civil War, which led up to the hatred that took her son from her. Her reaction is rage—not just as a response to the single event of her son's death, though that would be reason enough, but as a natural retort to the accumulation of hatred over centuries. It is Baker's knowledge of this hatred, an understanding that permeates to her core and allows her to generate the scientific advancement that brings her son back. Lorde says, "Anger is useful to help clarify our differences, but in the long run, strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which cannot create futures. It can only demolish the past" (152). Thinking through Black women's rage as inherently

relational (through haunting and kinship) does allow for it to be a productive force of futurity. Josephine's flesh-level rage exists always in relationship to Akai and the Director (and all she stands for). As Josephine does sense-making through the lens of her rage, she is able to create a new life with Akai, one in which he will never have to truly know the sense of loss she felt as she will be with him always. The way Black women use their rage in order to survive and be mothers or othermothers suggests that the rage does, in fact, create futures.

With the future in mind, Josephine, as a Black mother who knows unending grief, redefines the shape and capacity of the human with her kin. Baker created the technology necessary to transform her lover, the father of her baby, into a weaponized cyborg. However, the most evident example of this redefinition is Baker bringing Akai back to life. As Akai and Josephine flee from their home as both Frankenstein's monster and The Director are after them, they have a conversation about what Akai is:

Josephine: "The tech, those nanobots, they're essentially rebuilding you on a constant basis. If decay is like a flood, they are the sandbags."

Akai: "So eventually I could rot away? If the process moves faster than the machines?"

Josephine: "Actually, I think it's more likely the bots will begin to **replace** your flesh. They'll rebuild you literally."

Akai: "Eventually I won't be human at all, then? I'll be entirely made out of the nonmaterial?"

Josephine: "Yes, possibly. I have to tell you, Akai, I know a lot but I don't know everything."

Akai: "I'm your son."

Josephine: "Of course you are. But you're also something entirely . . . new."

(LaValle Chapter 5, emphasis in original)

As Josephine transforms her son into a different species, into something both human and artificial, she uploads her consciousness to him and hopes to open the door to a new ethics. She metamorphoses into a form that will always be with her son. Josephine tells Akai that as a species that is dominant in many ways, he has an opportunity to reshape how humans and other life forms interact with each other. She asks him to consider how he will treat people. The products of Josephine's rage generate the potential for a new system of ethics. In daring to step outside of the western concept of Man for both herself and her son, she opens up a world of exciting (and potentially dangerous) possibilities.

Black women who are born in rage can step into this rage—sit in it, study it, know its contours—and place it firmly in relationship to loved ones in an attempt to simultaneously see what knowledge emerges and also generate a unique set of behaviors that ensures the survival of our kin. This is a project of Black feminism that has been explored at length creatively.⁷ Weheliye suggests that Black studies and Black feminism exist in a space of “liminality, which contains potential exit strategies from the world of Man” (27). LaValle’s Josephine takes one of these exits and finds a new kind of future, where she can soothe her heartache. Ruby takes another exit to find more contentedness in her natural skin. Their transformations are only possible after embracing the Sapphire and harnessing their rage in a generative way. The liminality of Black feminism allows for future explorations of rage, flesh, and humanity that build on the work of Wynter, Spillers, and Lorde.

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⁷ Creative works related to Black women and kinship that inform this essay include Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, Tayari Jones’ *Leaving Atlanta*, and Toni Morrison’s “Sweetness.” Each of these works theorize different ways Black women process (or “metabolize,” as Audre Lorde might say) the hatred of white supremacy and how that process affects their loved ones.

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Reversing the Middle Passage: The Afrofuturist Aesthetic of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Before looking at Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and how it reflects Afrofuturism, it may be helpful first to define that concept itself. According to Alex Zamalin, "[Afrofuturism] has long been associated with science fiction and technology in the future, replete with robots and supercomputers" (10). While there are no robots and supercomputers in *Song of Solomon*, there is plenty about the past, the future, and their complex back-and-forth interactions. Ytasha L. Womack offers the following:

Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturism redefines culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework of critical theory, *Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total re-envisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques.* (9, my emphasis)

Womack's definition has the advantage of being deeply rooted in debates and theories that demarcate the recognizably Afrocentric orientation and also the African and African Diaspora myths, beliefs systems, and traditions of spirituality and magic that inform the aesthetic of *Song of Solomon*. On the other hand, science fiction and technology, as generally understood, admittedly do not play much of a role in the novel. However, in his essay "Black to the Future," African-American science fiction writer Walter Mosley states: that "Any book that offers an alternative account for the way things are catches my attention. . . . This is because I believe that the world we live in is so much larger, has so many more possibilities, than our simple sciences describe" (405). Mosley is critical of the limitations of what he calls "our simple sciences"—perhaps meaning Western or Eurocentric ones—and instead promotes an "alternative account," science fiction, for the way that things in a global world are "so much larger" than the Eurocentric West. Mosley then goes on to list a few major voices in the mainstream of black speculative and science fiction, such as Octavia E. Butler, Samuel R. Delaney, Steven Barnes, and concludes: "There are also flashes of the genre in such respected writers as Toni Morrison and Derrick Bell" (406). Womack and Mosley thus confirm and complement each other's critical thought and open the way for a variety of reflections. Building on the foundation provided by these two critics, I propose to examine what Mosley calls "flashes of

the genre” in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, which I would describe as exemplifying an “Afro-mythic” literary mode within the global theory of Afrofuturism.

In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate is the ancestor. For Morrison, “the concept of the ancestor is not necessarily as a parent but as an abiding, interested, benevolent, guiding presence that is yours and is concerned about you” (Davis 227). Pilate embodies a huge library of West and West-Central African cultures that reflect on the past, the present, and the future; she arrives in Michigan with a green tarpaulin bag containing the skeletal remains of her murdered father and refers to it as her “inheritance” (97; 163-64). But Pilate is also the central bearer of the concept of Afrofuturism in *Song of Solomon* as she becomes its principal activating force that governs Mr. Smith's flight at the beginning of the novel as well as Milkman's soaring jump on Solomon's Leap at the end. Her fantastic “self-birth” and lack of a navel mark her as one not born of a human being but self-created or created by forces beyond human knowledge.

Nevertheless, Afrofuturism as a speculative process in this novel does not involve what is usually described as science fiction and does not depend on Western technology or science. Rather, it is activated by creative African knowledge and memory systems, especially the myth of “Flying Africans” who flew back to Africa as a form of resistance to slavery and a way of reversing the Middle Passage and its aftermath. Two philosophical expressions or models from the African experience come to mind. One is the Akan symbol of the Sankofa bird, feet firmly rooted in the present, pointing forward to the future, its neck twisted backward, seeming to search for and retrieve something left behind in time and space, or holding an egg as a symbol of origins, to better move forward. The other concept, somewhat mirroring the Sankofa gesture, is the ancient Ibo proverb that Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe cites to reflect on African nations' struggle against European Colonialism or postcolonialism and the role of the African writer in it: “There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain started beating them” (8). Being beaten by the rain suggests a harrowing experience or defeat such as slavery, colonialism, or neocolonialism that needs to be studied, understood, confronted, and defeated to create radical change. Referring to a major writer and co-architect of the Negritude movement that militated against European colonialism and the oppression of people of African descent on the Continent and its Diaspora, Achebe adds: “This, I think, is what Aimé Césaire meant when he said that the short cut to the future is via the past” (10). “When I think about this,” he explains, “I always think about light. . . . Light from the past passes through a kind of glass to reach us” (9). Achebe's ideas, the Ibo proverb, the Sankofa bird, and Césaire's thought all possess a sense of Afrofuturism geared

toward radical efforts in the present or future to address or redress an unacceptable situation, which though current may also be firmly rooted in the past.

Morrison points out her connections to African literature, and Achebe in particular, when she states, “I know the impact that African writers have had on me as a reader, the doors that they have opened for me by that contact through literature, because that’s the only contact I had” (Davis 225). She adds that her reading of African literature was “certainly a real education for me. Chinua Achebe was a *real* education for me, a real education” (Davis 228-29, Morrison’s emphasis). Morrison is likely thinking about Achebe’s use of Ibo oral traditions, myths, and proverbs, especially in *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, and his books of essays. Achebe has been generally recognized as “the father” of the modern African novel by many scholars of the genre, especially because of his use of Ibo cosmology, myths, proverbs, and words to bend the medium of English and the form of the novel and force them to carry his African experience.

Milkman: A Product and Agent of Futurity

Early in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead is projected as an instrument of futurity in the face of the seemingly inevitable extinction of the Dead family. During a family car ride when he was a little boy, Milkman experienced a pressing need to pee and Macon Dead, his father, pulled over to the roadside so that Milkman’s big sister, Lena, could take him into the trees on the shoulder of the road to urinate. Lena went off, away from the boy, to pick some flowers and give him some privacy: “At the sound of her footsteps behind him,” as Lena was coming back to get him, little Milkman turned around abruptly before he was through peeing and wet Lena’s dress: “It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were no future to be had. But if the future did not arrive, the present did extend itself, and the uncomfortable little boy in the Packard went to school and at twelve met the boy who not only could liberate him but could take him to the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his past” (35-36).

This boy, Milkman, is symbolically caught in the dynamic, complementary, and simultaneous tensions between movements back and forth into and out of the past and the future in the same way that Pilate is through her ability to mediate the interconnectedness of past-present-and-future, which Milkman inherits as Pilate’s own creation and intended successor. Riding in his father’s Packard dubbed “Macon Dead’s hearse” by the black community (33) and thus suggesting a dead end, little Milkman, pressed on the front seat between his mother and father,

could see only the winged woman careening off the nose of the car. . . . So it was only by kneeling on the dove gray seat and looking out the back window that he could see anything other than the laps, feet, and hands of his parents, the dashboard, or the silver winged woman poised at the tip of the Packard. But riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been—troubled him. (32)

Countering and balancing out the imagery of “riding backward” is the forward-looking movement into the future symbolized by the figure of the silver winged woman poised upfront outside of Macon Dead’s “hearse.” The winged woman, whom Milkman is singularly conscious of and focused on, is clearly a metaphor for Pilate moving the boy she created into the future, the forward/future orientation of the Sankofa bird that frees him from the hermetically sealed structure of Macon Dead’s hearse in which he is imprisoned and squeezed. Milkman recognizes the symbolic meaning of the winged woman after Pilate dies in his place at the end of the novel when he finally understands why he loved her so: “Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (236). Living in the present tense of the novel unlike Solomon the enslaved African-born progenitor, Pilate is thus the mythical ancestral presence that connects past and future in an unbroken cyclical and circular structure, a presence that helps explain the rich and complex system of spheres that governs the invention of Milkman, his birth, and eventually his flight off Solomon’s Leap at the end of the novel. Pilate straddles the past and future, and Milkman is in fact Pilate’s own biological creation, not in a science or medical lab, but through her connectedness with ancient African knowledge and memory systems that offer an alternative to the limitations of Western science.

Milkman’s temporal entanglements are also manifest in the large age gap between Milkman and his two older sisters. “I was breathing air in the world thirteen years before your lungs were even formed. Corinthians, twelve,” his sister Lena tells Milkman when he was in his mid-thirties (215). After fathering two daughters one year apart, Macon Dead had stopped having sex with his wife for fear of begetting yet another daughter rather than the son he longed for, one who would continue the family name into the future and inherit his business. Macon Dead’s sexual abandonment of his wife Ruth is a dead end that threatens to cancel the extension of the family name, a threat amplified by the fact that Pilate birthed a daughter, Reba, who birthed Hagar, a girl, resulting in a genealogy without an ancestral family name able to be passed on from generation to generation. Morrison pointedly dramatizes this crucial origin and identity crisis for enslaved Africans in the Diaspora in a discussion between Milkman Dead and Guitar Baines:

“Sweet Hagar. I wonder what her name is,” [Milkman said]

.....

“You just said it” [Guitar answered]

“I mean her last name. Her daddy’s name.”

“Ask Reba.” [Guitar responded] . . .

“Ask anybody *but* Reba,” said Milkman. “Reba don’t know her own last name” (89).

This absence or loss of family or clan name can be read as cultural orphanage. Morrison dedicates *Song of Solomon* to “Daddy,” her father who had passed before the publication of the book and precedes the text of the novel with “The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names” centered in the middle of a blank page.

The Creation of Milkman

It is Pilate’s foreknowledge of the impending end of the descendants of Macon Dead I that causes her to jump into action to rescue Ruth from sexual abandonment and create Milkman, the missing male child that will assure the continuance of the Dead family name and lineage, while saving her granddaughter from cultural orphanage: “[Pilate] decided to find her brother [Macon Dead II], if he was alive, for the child, Hagar, needed family, people” (151). Ruth eloquently tells Milkman the story of her sexual abandonment and Pilate’s futuristic intervention:

You know, I was twenty years old when your father stopped sleeping in the bed with me. That’s hard, Macon. Very hard. By the time I was thirty . . . I think I was just afraid I’d die that way.

Then Pilate came to town. She came into the city like she owned it. Pilate, Reba, and Reba’s baby. Hagar. Pilate came to see Macon right away and as soon as she saw me she knew what my trouble was. And she asked me one day, “Do you want him?” “I want somebody,” I told her. “He’s as good as anybody,” she said. “Besides, you’ll get pregnant and your baby ought to be his. He ought to have a son. Otherwise this be the end of us.” (125).

Pilate’s last words, “this be the end of us,” are a clear indication that she is aware of the possibility of the future extinction of the Dead lineage after only three generations—with her having but one daughter (Reba) and a granddaughter (Hagar), and her brother Macon Dead having only two teenage daughters. Lena appears to be destined to grow into an old childless maiden, trapped in the house that belonged her maternal grandfather (Dr. Foster). Corinthians will move in with Porter toward the end of the novel, and her children, if any, would not bear the

Dead family name, but Porter's. So, the extension of the Dead family name can only be effectuated by a son that does not yet exist and may never exist if Macon Dead is an unwilling sex partner to Ruth.

Pilate thus gives Ruth "funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in [her husband's] food" (125). She also tells Ruth that the "stuff" is "to be stirred into rain water" (131) before being put in the food. The technology and "science" that Pilate uses are indigenous African "medical" lore, a knowledge of herbs, roots, natural and supernatural elements, and divination. The word "medicine" in African cultures and languages quite often means an item or an entity that has "magic power," as is the case in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where the narrator tells us that the Ibo clan of Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors, and that

It was powerful in war and magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war medicine was as old as the clan itself. . . the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. . . . In fact, the medicine itself was called *agadi-nwayi*, or old woman. It had its shrine in the centre of Umuofia, in a cleared spot. And if anyone was so foolhardy as to pass by the shrine after dusk, he was sure to see the old woman hopping about. (11-12)

Ruth describes the process of creating the medicine Pilate directs her to make in ordinary Western "scientific" terms, which suggests that the African spiritual systems are no less "scientific" or effective than Western ones: "I felt like a doctor," she goes on, "like a chemist doing some big important scientific experiment. It worked too. Macon came to me for four days. He even came home from his office in the middle of the day to be with me. He looked puzzled, but he came. Then it was over. And two months later, I was pregnant," she concluded (125). Speaking of Pilate's role in Milkman's life, the narrator says, "if his mother was right, this old black lady—in her late sixties, but with the agility of a teen-aged girl—had brought him into the world when only a miracle could have" (210).

But, "fifteen years of regret at not having a son" (16) had caused bitterness and despair in Macon Dead, and perhaps fearing that his wife's pregnancy would result in the birth of yet another girl—and also suspecting Pilate's hand in this unwanted pregnancy and his four-day "sexual hypnosis" (131)—Macon tells Ruth to abort the baby. Ruth refuses and Pilate again steps in, resorting once more to the "scientific" methods of her African mystical knowledge. She leads Ruth into the bedroom and wraps her in a "homemade-on-the spot girdle—tight in the crotch—telling her to keep it on until the fourth month and "not to take no mess from off Macon [or]

ram another thing up in her womb.” “Years later Ruth learned that Pilate put a small doll on Macon’s chair in his office. A male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly;” when Macon found the doll, he “knocked it out of the chair and with a yardstick pushed it into the bathroom, where he doused it with alcohol and burned it. It took nine separate burnings before the fire got down to the straw and cotton ticking of its insides. But [Macon] must have remembered the round fire-red stomach, for he left Ruth alone after that” (132).

The voodoo doll is a metaphorical double of the yet-unborn Milkman in his mother’s womb. Morrison’s method is drawn from the same myth matrices of Pilate’s African culture, that I earlier called “Afromythicism,” as connected with a futuristic act, in this case one meant to prevent the end of Macon Dead’s lineage. As Macon tells Milkman after the latter has knocked him down to stop him from hitting his mother, “If you ever have doubts that we from Africa, look at Pilate. She looks just like papa, and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans. A Pennsylvania African. Acted like one too” (54). Importantly, Morrison is emphasizing the genetic and cultural continuity between Pilate, “Pennsylvania,” and Continental “Africans.”

Pilate creates Milkman and determines his male gender for futuristic reasons through the chicken bone between the legs of the doll, a metaphor for the progenitor needed for the continuation of the Dead family’s bloodline. The fire-red circle protects Milkman’s rootedness in the womb and therefore also the umbilical cord that provides his humanizing mark and proof of the navel that Pilate—as the mythic original Ancestor—does not herself have. Pilate, in fact, had instead literally delivered herself without the help of the midwife Circe, who could not feel a pulse and thought the baby was dead “when Pilate’s mother’s legs collapsed;” with her mother having died in childbirth, “the baby, who they had believed was dead also, inched her way headfirst out of the still and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her” (28), “like something God never made” (144). “Bored herself,” Circe declared later (244). As Pilate tells Ruth, “I don’t remember my mother because she died before I was born” (141). In addition to having no navel, Pilate’s skin is “smooth smooth . . . hairless, scarless and wrinkleless” (138); she “was also believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel (94); she speaks to her dead father, “her mentor . . . who appeared before her sometimes and told her things” (150). Pilate’s birth and extraordinary powers are clearly mythical.

Reversing the Middle Passage

A children's song, "Song of Solomon," informs significantly the thematic and structural properties of Morrison's novel. This song celebrates the "myth" of Flying Africans and is sung in its entirety in the middle of the Shalimar chapters of the novel, where the story of the enslaved Solomon's flight back to Africa is told; parts of Pilate's blues version of the song also accompany Mr. Smith's flight in the first seven pages of the novel as well as Pilate's and Milkman's metaphorical flights at its end. Here is the full song:

Jake the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Left that baby in a white man's house
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Heddy took him to the red man's house
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Black lady fell down on the ground
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Threw her body all around
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut
Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.
Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.
Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

O Solomon don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Solomon don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me

Solomon done fly, Solomon gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (303, emphasis added)

In the novel's narration of African-born Solomon's return to Africa—a trip undertaken because he was sick and tired of sharecropping in Virginia after the abolition of slavery—Solomon flies back home over the Atlantic Ocean not on an airplane or some European mechanical contraption. Powered instead by magic utterances from his African language (the lines I have underscored in the first three stanzas), his body is transformed into a flying human “machine,” and he whirls about and shoots straight up like a rocket and touches the sun without disintegrating. The power that fuels Solomon's transformed body is encrypted in the African-language lines “*Come booba yale, come booba tambee / Come konka yale, come konka tambe*” that serve as a password for flight that Morrison borrows from the story told in African-American dialect by Prince Sneed, a descendant of former slaves:

Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabes wut wuzn climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two ub um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, an duh hoes wuz wukin by demsef. Duh dribuh say ‘Wut dis?’ an dey say, ‘*Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe*,’ quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye. (*Drums* 79, my emphasis)

The African-language lines Morrison borrows from Sneed are corrupt versions of original ones in a Mende song from Sierra Leone that survived the Middle Passage, as shown below. Morrison changes the spelling of the lines into: “*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee / Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*.” The fantastic nature of Sneed's story, especially its inclusion of human flight without the use of a mechanical contraction, and the power of magical speech to command hoes to work on their own may be considered part of Mosley's “flashes of the genre” of speculative and science fiction. The enslaved Africans resist the tyranny of their enslavers by using magical linguistic means to make the hoes do their back-breaking labor and, when discovered, utter the “password” for human flight in their purported “native” language. Sneed, a sixty-some-year-old descendent of enslaved Africans, and his source (“Muh gran”) do not know the original language or what the lines mean. African-American linguist Lorenzo Turner collected an original and linguistically correct version of the entire Mende song in Harris Neck, Georgia, from Amelia Dawley, a fifty-year-old descendant of a Mende woman who was captured in Sierra Leone and brought to Georgia (Turner xiv). Here are the two lines from the original Mende with Turner's translation:

i. *a waka mu mone; Kambei ya le; li, le :i tambe.*

“In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet; heart, be cool perfectly”

ii. *a waka mu mone; Kambei ya le; li, le :i ka*

“In the evening we suffer; the grave not yet; heart be cool continually.

(Turner 256)

Comparing Morrison's source, the corrupt Mende lines in Sneed narrative, and Morrison's modifications, it becomes obvious that the three forms of the Mende lines are related. Turner's English translation also shows that the original Mende lines are about death and burial and are part of a dirge performed on the eve of the burial of the deceased and at the cemetery.

Solomon/Mr. Smith: Going Home

Finding himself in the same situation as the enslaved Africans in Sneed's narrative, African-born Solomon adopts a strategy similar to the one his predecessors had used to gain their freedom and fly back home to the continent of their birth. Solomon and his family had taken to sharecropping after slavery, but it did not significantly change their condition. Since he had retained his original African language, culture, and tradition of flight, unlike his American-born wife and their children, he alone knew the magic password and was able to escape the same way the slaves in Sneed's narrative had. As Susan Byrd, a Native American who turns out to be a blood relative of Milkman's tells him: “They were all working in the fields. They used to try to grow cotton here. Can you imagine? In these hills? But Cotton was king then. Everybody grew it until it went bad” (323). She then continues,

“He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from. There's a big double-headed rock [Solomon's Leap] over the valley named for him.”
(323)

It is important to note that Solomon does not jump off the top of the hill but merely performs the empowering magical ritual of a quick, circular movement, probably while uttering or chanting the African magical formula, and “was lifted in the air” like a rocket shooting up into space.

A true cultural heir of Solomon's, Mr. Smith, the insurance agent for his black community and a member of the Seven Days, having reached a crisis point in his work as a member of the group sworn to avenge the death of any person of color murdered at the hands of whites by killing at random a member of the white race

in a similar way, decides to fly away. Stress, guilt, and perhaps frustration led Mr. Smith to escape his situation in a way very similar to the flight of the enslaved Africans in Sneed's narrative and in the case of Solomon. "The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock" and tacked a note on the door of his house that read: "At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all" (3). Speaking from his land-locked state of Michigan, Mr. Smith's language recalls the ancestral flight over the Atlantic Ocean performed by the sharecropping Solomon when he had flown back home to Africa not far from coastal Virginia. Lake Superior metaphorically becomes the Atlantic Ocean in Mr. Smith's discourse, a reading Morrison later reinforces when the narrator tells us, just before Milkman decides to leave Michigan and go on a gold (inheritance) hunt that will land him in Virginia, closer to Atlantic Ocean, that:

Truly landlocked people know they are. Know the occasional Bitter Creek or Powder River that runs through Wyoming; that the large tidy Salt Lake of Utah is all they have of the sea and that they must content themselves with *bank*, *shore*, and *beach* because they cannot claim a coast. And having none, seldom dream of flight. But the people living in the Great Lakes region are confused by their place on the country's edge—an edge that is border but not coast. They seem to be able to live a long time believing, as coastal people do, that they are at the frontier where final exit and total escape are the only journeys left. But the five Great Lakes which the St. Lawrence feeds with memories of the sea are themselves landlocked, in spite of the wandering river that connects them to the Atlantic. Once the people of the lake region discover this, the longing to leave becomes acute, and a break from the area, therefore, is necessarily dream-bitten, but necessary nonetheless. It might even be an appetite for other streets, other slants of light. Or a yearning to be surrounded by strangers. (162)

This lengthy quotation helps contextualize Mr. Smith's Lake Superior as a mini-Atlantic Ocean or a metaphor of it, and the non-mechanized aspect of Mr. Smith's flight is further emphasized through its contrast with that of Lindbergh in an airplane when we are told that "Mr. Smith didn't draw as big a crowd as Lindbergh had four years earlier" (4). The synchronization of Mr. Smith's chosen time and place of flight, Pilate's mysterious appearance on the scene, and the fact that Ruth (pregnant with Milkman and near her term) is walking by Mercy hospital with her two teenage daughters, appears to be manipulated by an unseen and unnamed force or power. Pilate, who had spirit-engineered the baby, knows and predicts the exact day and time of its birth. She stops singing the "Song of Solomon" addressed to Mr. Smith and,

humming the tune, walked through the crowd toward the rose-petal lady [Ruth], who was still cradling her stomach.

"You should make yourself warm," she whispered to her, touching her lightly on the elbow. "A little bird'll be here with the morning."

"Oh?" said the rose-petal lady. "Tomorrow morning?"

"That's the only morning coming."

"It can't be," rose-petal lady said. "It's too soon."

"No it ain't. Right on time." (9)

Pilate, who created Milkman, can predict the exact day and time of his birth, which the medical "science" of her doctors could not. She also shows up promptly at 3:00 p.m. on a day and date set by Mr. Smith.

When Ruth sees "Mr. Smith emerge as promptly as he had promised behind the cupola, his wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest," she drops the basket containing the red velvet rose petals that get scattered all over the place by the wind (5). Since Mr. Smith does not actually spin around, it is the blue wings circling him that become metaphorical representations of Solomon's spinning around at the top of the hill, symbolized by the cupola of Mercy/No Mercy hospital. The timing of Mr. Smith's predicted hour of flight and its location assume a mythic reality, especially as Pilate shows up to sing the insurance agent—who does not himself know the magical password—into flight with lines borrowed and modified from the children's song:

Her head cocked to one side, her eyes fixed on Mr. Robert Smith, she sang in a powerful contralto,

O Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home. (6)

Pilate substitutes "Sugarman" for "Solomon" and already cosigns Mr. Smith's successful flight as a *fait accompli* based on the language of the children song. The near similarity of the two names helps bind Mr. Smith (Sugarman) and Milkman's great grandfather (Solomon) together in the performance of the same mythic act in the past, the present, and even the future at the end of the novel—when Pilate and Milkman both fly symbolically off Solomon's Leap. When Mr. Smith loses his balance momentarily and is about to fall, Pilate, sings again:

O Sugarman done fly

O Sugarman done gone . . . (9)

The language of Pilate's song (done fly/done gone) suggests that Mr. Smith has *already* taken to the sky and flown away with Solomon in soul and spirit back to Africa. By the time the firemen arrive from downtown, "Mr. Smith had seen the rose petals, heard the music, and leaped into the air" (9).

Morrison does not bother to describe Mr. Smith's leap into the air from the copula of the hospital any further, aligning the narration here with later descriptions of Solomon being "lifted up in the air" and Solomon's Leap seeming like a rocket at the top of the hill. Much later in the novel, Corinthians, who had been an eyewitness, remembers the scene:

It was all mixed together—the red velvet, the screams, and the man crashing down on the pavement. She had seen his body quite clearly, and to her astonishment, there was no blood. The only red in view was [the artificial red roses] in their own hands and in the basket. . . A stretcher came at last for the *doll-broken body* (all the more *doll-like* because there was no blood), and finally a wheelchair for her mother, who went straight into labor. (198, my emphasis)

Pilate has everything to do with Mr. Smith's "doll-broken body" that reminds us of the voodoo doll representing Milkman's indestructible body in his mother's stomach that she put in Macon Dead's chair (132). Mr. Smith symbolically flew away and left behind the bloodless doll-like body that housed his soul and spirit just like the voodoo doll is an external symbolic double of the fetus, the yet-unborn body of Milkman in Ruth's womb.

Pilate's Flight: Homegoing

Milkman returns to Michigan, having found out in Shalimar that Pilate had been unwittingly carrying the skeletal remains of her father in the green tarpaulin bag she called her inheritance. "You've been carrying your father's bones—all this time," he tells her. "And, Pilate, you have to bury him. He wants you to bury him. Back where he belongs. On Solomon's Leap" in Virginia (333). True to form, as a descendant of Solomon, Pilate "would not set foot on an airplane, so they drove" Macon Dead's Buick (334). On the second evening of their stay in Shalimar, Milkman and Pilate walk up the road to the path that led to Solomon's Leap, "the higher of two outcroppings of rock. Both flat-headed, both looking over a deep valley." They look for and find an area of earth among the rock faces large enough for a grave. After they bury Jake's remains, Pilate

reached up and yanked her earring from her ear, splitting the lobe. Then she made a hole with her fingers and placed in it Sing's snuffbox with the single word Jake ever wrote. She stood up then, and it seemed to Milkman that he heard the shot after she fell. (335)

As Pilate stands up from a squatting or bending position, thus placing herself directly in front of Milkman behind her, the bullet Guitar intends for Milkman's head rips out her throat instead, Pilate being about a foot taller than him. "Sing," Pilate says to Milkman who lays her next to Jake's grave, "Sing a little something for me" (336). Milkman knows no songs and cannot sing, but is unable to ignore the urgency of Pilate's request:

Speaking the words without the least bit of tune, he sang for the lady,
"Sugar girl don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / Sugar Girl
don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me. (336)

Having been created and mentored by Pilate, who sang parts of the "Song of Solomon" multiple times in his presence at her house back in Michigan, Milkman has been well prepared by his navelless Ancestor to become the heir who will extend the lineage of Macon Dead I further into the future:

[H]e could not stop the worn old words from coming, louder and louder as though sheer volume could wake her. He woke only the birds, who shuddered off into the air. Milkman laid her head down on the rock. Two of the birds circled round them. One dived into the new grave and scooped up something shiny in its beak before it flew away. (336)

Milkman's loud singing of the "Song of Solomon" to the dying Pilate fails to awaken her but "woke only the birds" perched asleep on trees at the very top of Solomon's Leap, which is even higher than the top of Mercy.

Here, Morrison incorporates within her description of the birds' flight patterns an ancient funeral practice observable in many African cultures. The funeral begins with assembled mourners accompanying the deceased to the graveyard as in a funeral procession; then they sing and dance around the newly dug grave in which the deceased has been placed. Eighty-eight-year-old Ben Sullivan of St. Simons Island tells of funeral ceremonies of old Africans he knew when he was a little boy:

Dey go in a long pruhcession tuh duh burryin groun an dey beat duh drums long duh way an dey submit duh body tuh duh groun. Den dey dance roun in a ring an dey motion with duh hans. Dey sing duh body tuh duh grabe an den dey let it down an den dey suckle roun in duh dance." (*Drums* 180)

Another African ritual Morrison subtly introduces into the scene is nighttime burial. As Milkman and Pilate are carrying Jake's remains in the green sack, "Twilight had thickened and all around them it was getting dark" (336), and Milkman "could just make out Guitar's head and shoulders in the dark" (337). Ben Sullivan of St. Simons Island confirms this custom about night burials: "I know dat wen deah wuz tuh be a burryin, dey alluz bury duh dead at night in the plantation. Dey alluz come in from duh tas befo dahk" (*Drums* 182).

The two birds that perform the double funeral and ritual burial of Jake and Pilate, whose spirits have been released from the doll-like earthly bodies they leave behind, are Pilate's spirit double and a metaphor for Milkman. They circle Jake's newly dug grave and Pilate's yet-to-be buried earthly body. The bird that rejoins the flock symbolizing the mourners and members of the funeral procession, after looping once around Jake's grave, represents Milkman—the only living person remaining on Solomon's Leap. The one that scoops up Pilate's earring and flies off to Africa with it is Pilate's just-released spirit double. Pilate's earring was fashioned out of a snuff box that belonged to her Native American mother, Sing or Singing Bird, who died in childbirth as Pilate crawled out of her womb unaided and carrying her own umbilical cord. The earring contains a piece of paper with Pilate's name on it copied from the Bible by her illiterate father and thus becomes a womb/tomb or coffin carrying the spirit forms of Jake and the now-deceased Pilate, or "Pilot," as the name sounded in its oral resonance to her father when Circe read it to him, prompting the illiterate man to ask, "Like a riverboat pilot?" (19). Jake's question produces the double entendre "Pilate/Pilot" that Morrison intends. This process of merging the two words is supported by a source in African-American oral traditions. The following statement by octogenarian Thomas Smith, a resident of Yamacraw, is helpful here:

. . . duh descendants ub Africans hab duh same gif tuh do unnatchul ting. Ise heahd duh story uh duh flyin Africans an I sho believ it happen. . . . Dey could make a buzzud row a boat an hab a crow fuh pilot. (*Drums* 28)

This bird imagery, especially the crow as pilot, helps solidify and highlight a reading of the word "Pilate" as "Pilot." After the hunt and the killing of the bobcat, Milkman asks his newfound friends if they have ever heard of an aunt of his named Pilate Dead. Someone laughs and says "Sound like a newspaper headline: Pilot Dead. She do any flying?" (283).

Pilate's body will, most likely, be buried on Solomon's Leap right next to her father, whom she had fictionalized as her husband when she prophetically claimed in a futuristic story told at the police station that the human bones in her green tarpaulin bag were those of her husband, "Mr. Solomon." She maintained that "her

husband had been lynched in Mississippi fifteen years ago, and that they wouldn't let her cut him down," but that when she went back several years later, "the body had dropped off the cord of its own accord . . . so she just carried what was left of Mr. Solomon (she always called him Mr. Solomon cause he was such a dignified colored man) and put it in a sack and kept it with her. . . . So," she went on, "I thought I just as well keep him near me and when I die they can put him in the same hole as me. We will rise up to Judgement Day together. Hand in hand" (206-7). Here, too, Pilate's fiction proves prophetic or futuristic, as Milkman and Guitar will bury her right next to Shalimar (Solomon), Jake's real name, on Solomon's Leap.

Milkman's Flight

After Milkman memorizes the children's song about Solomon and understands it was about his great-grandfather, he returns to Sweet's house high with a desire to fly and a need for water, the sea, the ocean. "My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam! . . . He didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self! . . . Tell Guitar he went back to Africa" (328); He almost breaks Sweet's door down when he returns from Susan Byrd's house, shouting, "I want to swim. . . . I need the sea. The whole goddam sea! . . . I need the whole entire complete deep blue sea!" (326-27). When Sweet suggests the quarry nearby, "where the kids go sometimes" to swim, Milkman, appalled, responds, "Quarry? You all don't have a sea? No Ocean?" (327). Milkman is conflating two historico-mythical modes of reversing the Middle Passage: shore-to-shore flight over, swim-across, march-on, or through- the waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

ihсан bracy, who writes in the tradition of Black speculative fiction, explores the march through the waters of the Atlantic, and his short piece titled "ibo landing" contrasts strikingly with Sneed's narrative about enslaved Africans who flew back to Africa. bracy's story, like Morrison's use of the flight, is also taken from the African-American oral traditions. Tom Floyd of St. Simons Island, Georgia, reports:

"Heahd bout duh Ibo's Landing? Das duh place weah dey bring duh Ibos obuh in a slabe ship and we dey git yuh, dey ain lak it an so dey all stah singin an dey mahch right down in the ribbuh tuh mahch back to Africa, but dey ain able tuh git deah. Dey gits drown" (*Drums* 185)

bracy's fictional story is clearly rooted in some variant of the "Ibo Landing" oral canon but does not follow the ending of Floyd's version. bracy uses an eye-witness, just as in the Sneed narrative about enslaved Africans who flew back to Africa, to tell the ending for posterity: the slavers run after the Africans walking back to the shore towards the big water and

Then they suddenly stopped, silenced by what they could not comprehend.

Razzberry watched from the hill. it was through him the story was remembered and the truth told.

as they reached the place of the waves, each would grab the hand of the one before.

Stepping over wave after wave, they strode confidently, unhurriedly, past the ship lying in the sunrise.

Nearly everyone in the vicinity of ibo landing that day came to see, before the silent band was lost from sight. (5-6)

Milkman, who seems to have contemplated swimming across the Atlantic, reverts to the flight option modeled by his great-grandfather and starts singing verbatim snatches of the "Song of Solomon" "O-o-o-o-o-o Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home!" (328-29). His own flight off Solomon's Leap is foreshadowed in a dream at Sweet's house after he has plunged into the shallow waters of the quarry:

Milkman slipped into Sweet's bed and slept the night in her perfect arms. It was a warm dreamy sleep all about flying, about sailing high over earth. But not with arms stretched out like airplane wings [read Lindberg] or shot forward like Superman in a horizontal dive, floating, cruising, in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper. Part of his flight was over the dark sea, but it didn't frighten him because he knew he could not fall. He was alone in the sky, but someone was applauding him, watching him and applauding. He couldn't see who it was (298).

Here Morrison rejects the Western white male historical (Lindbergh) and comic (Superman) hero types in favor of the V-shaped arms of the Flying African that signal an alternative Afrocentric paradigm. Additional contrast also is created by the fact that Solomon, Mr. Smith, and Milkman at the end of the novel do not take off like an airplane, speeding along the runway and gradually taking off in a forward up-curving arc to gain enough altitude, the way Lindbergh's plane must have done. Milkman does not fly solo in his dream but is shepherded, guided by an older and more experienced birdman, who, like Solomon, also knows the language that Milkman has prepared himself with by having studied the children game and memorized the song including the African-language password. Milkman's conscious desire for the sea and the ocean when he is with Sweet is clearly symbolic of the Atlantic, in the same way that Mr. Smith's promise or desire "to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior" (3) is metaphorical of his desire for the Transatlantic reversal of the Middle Passage.

Milkman's flight from Solomon's Leap, down to the lower outcropping where Guitar stands unarmed, is identical to Solomon's and Mr. Smith's leaps: "Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar" (337). Solomon and Mr. Smith did not bend their knees either but were lifted straight up into the air like a rocket. Milkman also performs a circular movement in his flight, like a bird or an aircraft flying in a wide circle or curve, just like the two birds did around the site of the burial ceremony for Pilate and Jake. Pilate and Jake being dead, and Macon Dead II not being interested in his ancestral legacy of flight, Milkman takes charge of the futuristic demands of his heritage. This is a lesson he learned from the shadowy grandfather figure that coached him in his flying dream, "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrender to the air, you can ride it" (337), and is also why he loved Pilate so: "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336), like the silver winged woman poised at the tip of the Packard (32), like a pilot, guiding the way into whatever lies ahead.

Morrison on Afrofuturism

Morrison's own comments on Mr. Smith's flight are relevant to my closing comments on the Afrofuturist aesthetic of *Song of Solomon*. She writes:

[Mr. Smith] does not declare, announce, or threaten his act; he promises as though a contract is being executed between himself and others. He hopes his flight, like that of the character in the title, toward asylum (Canada, or freedom, or the company of the welcoming dead), or home, is interpreted as a radical gesture demanding change, an alternative way, a cessation of things as they are. He does not want it understood as a simple desperate act, the end of a fruitless life, a life without examination, but a deep commitment to his people. (Foreword, xiii)

Morrison thus places the aesthetic of *Song of Solomon* in the framework of Afrofuturism, as it demands immediate and drastic action repudiating the present situation Africans in the Diaspora find themselves in, and thereby engineering "a cessation of things as they are" immediately, or in the very near future: "it was 1931, on the day following Mr. Smith's leap from the cupola, before the first colored expectant mother was allowed to give birth inside its wards and not on its steps" (5-6).

Mr. Smith's act may be the proverbial foot in the futuristic door, ensuring that black doctors of Milkman's generation will, unlike Doctor Foster his grandfather on his mother's side, be "granted hospital privileges at Mercy Hospital" (5) and that a descendant of Circe the black midwife who "Birthed just about everybody in Montour County" (245) can, unlike her foremother, be a healer, deliverer, and

“the head nurse at Mercy” (246). That will be the day when “city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city’s landmarks” will rename Maims Avenue “Doctor Street,” in honor of the first black doctor who moved there in 1896 but was not allowed inside the charity hospital blacks dubbed “No Mercy Hospital” (4). Mr. Smith’s “leap” has clearly redirected the trajectory of our future history when black lives matter. All this naturally follows the pattern of ethnic self-memorializing that made it possible for ancestral examples of the creation of such African spaces and monuments that inspired place names like Ibo Landing, Ryna’s Gulch, Solomon’s Leap, and the founding of Shalimar (or “Solomonville”), a mythical space that “was not on the Texaco map” Milkman was given (260).

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Hagar Revisited: Afrofuturism, Pauline Hopkins, and Reclamation in the *Colored American Magazine* and Beyond

Tanya N. Clark

If I found [the *Colored American Magazine*] more helpful to Christian work among your people I would continue to take it.

May I make a comment on the stories, especially those that have been serial. . . ? Without exception they have been of love between the colored and whites. . . . Does that mean that your novelists can imagine no love beautiful and sublime within the range of the colored race, for each other? I have seen beautiful home life and love in families altogether of Negro blood.

The stories of these tragic mixed loves will not commend themselves to your white readers and will not elevate the colored readers. . . .

—Cornelia A. Condict

Colored American Magazine, March 1903

With regard to [the letter from Mrs. Condict] I will say, it is the same old story. One religion for the whites and another for the blacks.

My stories are definitely planned to show the obstacles persistently placed in our paths by a dominant race to subjugate us spiritually. Marriage is made illegal between the races and yet the mulattoes increase. Thus the shadow of corruption falls on the blacks and on the whites, without whose aid the mulattoes would not exist. And then the hue and cry goes abroad of the immorality of the Negro and the disgrace that the mulattoes are to this nation. . . . I sing of the *wrongs* of a race that ignorance of their pitiful condition may be changed to intelligence and must awaken compassion in the hearts of the just.

I am glad to receive this criticism for it shows more clearly than ever that white people don't understand *what pleases Negroes*.

Let the good work go on. Opposition is the life of an enterprise; criticism tells you that you are doing something.

—Pauline E. Hopkins

Colored American Magazine, March 1903

Scholars often overlook or misinterpret the significance of the above exchange between the white *Colored American Magazine* (CAM) subscriber, Cornelia A. Condict, and the magazine's editor and most prolific contributor, Pauline E. Hopkins. Most critics regard it solely in terms of the role of mixed-race characters and interracial relationships in Hopkins's novels.¹ However, it is more than a commentary on white America's rejection of interracial themes. This dispute is a public dramatization of the racial and cultural disagreements that often occur between Black and white America. Moreover, it is an unapologetic, political, and afrofuturist declaration of Hopkins's authorial power to write from her own Black consciousness. In this sense, Hopkins's response represents Afrofuturism as defined by Alondra Nelson as Black voices with "other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come" (9). Reading this exchange through Afrofuturism reveals its value for this examination of the editorial and literary contributions that Hopkins made to CAM. As I will ultimately show, such contributions make the magazine an example of an early speculative text, one that radiates liberating Afrofuturism throughout its pages.

Condict opens her letter announcing that she will no longer subscribe to the magazine due to its content, namely the stories about "tragic mixed loves," ("Editorial" 399) which she views as the writer's attempt to gain favor with white readers and elevate Black ones. Additionally, she presumes to suggest that the writer tell love stories "within the range of the colored race, for each other" ("Editorial" 399). Last, her frame of reference for this suggestion is her own first-hand knowledge of the existence of such relationships through her job as a superintendent at a Sunday school where she "worked among a greatly mixed people, Indian, Negro, Spanish and Anglo-Saxon" ("Editorial 399). Condict's subscription to CAM, her job, and her effort to write and engage the author/editor suggest that she was a white ally who sympathized with oppressed Blacks. However, working in tandem with one another, these aspects reveal that Condict is actually a zombie, someone who shambles along, eating people's brains and spreading "zombie ideas, ideas that should have been killed by contrary evidence," but instead keep persisting

¹ For examples of such interpretations see Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of African-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, U of Massachusetts P, 1991, pp. 7-8; Kristina Brooks, "Mammies, Bucks and Wenches: Minstrelsy, Racial Pornography, and Racial Politics in Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter*," *The Unruly Voice: Rediscovering Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins*, edited by John Cullen Gruesser, U of Illinois P, 1996, pp. 123-24; and Hanna Wallinger, *Pauline E. Hopkins: A Literary Biography*, U of Georgia P, 2005, pp. 145-46.

(Krugman “The Good Fight”).² Her comments show that she was completely unresponsive to *CAM*’s environment as a Black-owned, -published, and -operated magazine catering to a Black audience.

Furthermore, her condescending tone shows that she was predisposed to zombie ideas about blackness and whiteness with their clearly demarcated color lines; therefore, she was not culturally prepared for Hopkins’s stories, which oftentimes showed white characters openly and willingly coupled with racially mixed characters or female, mulatto characters who possessed subjectivity. For example, by March 1903, Hopkins had already published *Hagar’s Daughter* and *Winona*, and *Of One Blood* was about a half of the way through its run; “mixed loves” were central themes in all these narratives. Fed up with the reality that *CAM* and Hopkins posited, Condict first tried to interject her own interpretations and cultural understanding of race relations by claiming to know happy full-blooded Negro families and by accusing Hopkins of trying to gain white approval and status for the African American population. This narrative fit more comfortably with her notions of power and race. Moreover, by dropping her subscription altogether, Condict showed she was most comfortable with ignoring that which did not fit the master narrative. Condict’s actions reflect the sense of superiority inherent in early twentieth-century white society.

Hopkins’s reply to Condict is a direct and forceful rejection this “same old story,” the persistent zombie idea of white supremacy and black capitulation, and as an example of early Afrofuturism, it is quite significant. Hopkins effectively silences the voice of the dominant culture, in this case a disgruntled Condict, thereby revealing her own relationship to power. First, Hopkins dismisses Condict’s objections to her stories by explaining their purpose, which is to highlight the discrepancy between the illegal (and taboo) status of interracial marriage and the increasing number of mulatto births. Hinting at the sexual exploitation of black women, she shows the necessity of bringing society’s real sexual predators to justice and vindicating African Americans. Second, Hopkins implies that white society’s judgment of its Black citizens is not only incorrect but also spiritually offensive. Hopkins’s message to Condict and those like her is clear. Indeed, relationships between full-blooded blacks exist, but these are the relationships that white Americans are comfortable

² I first latched onto the idea about zombiism and zombie ideas while reading Paul Krugman’s *Arguing with Zombies: Economics, Politics, and the Fight for a Better Future*. However, as I continued to flesh out this analysis, I was reminded that analyzing zombies as symbols of larger societal ills is not a recent argument. It stems as far back as George Romero’s 1968 cult classic film *Night of the Living Dead* in which our hero, Ben, played by African American actor Duane Jones, survives the zombie apocalypse all the way to the end of the movie only to be shot by white law enforcement who mistake him for one of the undead. The zombie idea that Black men’s lives are expendable persists.

with because they have no culpability in them. Mixed-race relationships, however, force whites to deal with the legacy of enslavement and amalgamation, which is something Condict shows that she is not ready to do. Condict prefers to detach herself from this history.

Furthermore, in the calling for the “good” (read as “just,” “moral,” and “right”) work to go on, Hopkins is no longer talking to Condict at all but to like-minded readers and other writer-activists who may have been discouraged by Condict’s remarks. She encourages them to continue the fight, to take opposition for what it is, namely validation, and to not let disbelievers (i.e., “zombies”) dictate *CAM*’s content. Her excited utterance that white people do not understand “what pleases Negroes” situates herself and other African Americans as the best spokespeople for the Black experience, placing an African American cultural vision and understanding at the center of the discourse and striking an impressive blow to Condict’s zombie ideas and her will to spread her spiritually depraved sense of white privilege that was undergirded by the racist ideologies of the day.

Last, and most important to this study, Hopkins’s reaction to Condict opens the door to a new perspective from which to consider the magazine’s afrofuturist underpinnings. *CAM* was a magazine whose political agenda of inciting its readership to action and pride through history and literature was couched in a cultural agenda of challenging the status quo and elevating the race. Its content, especially under the editorship of Hopkins, had a “pedagogic function” (Carby xxxv). It schooled readers on arts, literature, science, and politics, and it did so with a matrix of entertaining literature, beautiful illustrations, gripping advertisements, and informative essays. Nonetheless, Hopkins’s reply also reveals the emotional value of the magazine when she criticizes the “dominant race” for the wrongs they have committed and for spiritually subjugating African American people. As she calls for allies to continue their righteous work, she highlights the soullessness of Condict and other zombies like her. On one hand, *CAM* and, by extension, her own work, existed to change ignorance to intelligence and apathy to compassion. On the other hand, it also existed to counter a sense of African American spiritual doom; its purpose was to delight the soul rather than just incite the mind. There was an inherent pleasure principle. Quite different from Hopkins’s very well-known pedagogical perspective on literature, her letter to Condict reveals a divergent yet crucial purpose of literature—to provide African Americans with narratives that simply bring them gratification.

The revelations about Hopkins’s mission for *CAM* and her own work, especially as they center around notions of pleasure, gratification, and hope, show that she was doing Afrofuturism before the term was even coined. Indeed, since Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism in 1993 (“Black to the Future” 180) and

Ytasha Womack published her groundbreaking primer *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (9) in 2013, scholars and writers have been exploring the possibilities that it brings to literary criticism and practice. The work of Isiah Lavender III in *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* stands out from the pack not only due to its focus on early works—antebellum and late nineteenth- and mainstream twentieth-century texts—but also because of its consideration of Afrofuturism as “more a hermeneutic that [allows works to be examined] across centuries on a continuum” (3). Lavender states, “afrofuturism is a set of race-inflected reading protocols designed to investigate the optimisms and anxieties framing the future imaginings of black people” (2). Afrofuturism as a cross-continuum reading praxis is well-suited for the magazine format where novels were serialized over several months and biographical series were featured alongside human-interest stories. The Hopkins-Condict exchange is an example of Lavender’s afrofuturist reading protocol operationalized. It informed *CAM* subscribers how to understand the purpose of the magazine in relationship to the texts appearing amongst its pages. To best understand the significance of Hopkins as the editor, writer, and activist who spearheaded this effort, one must go beyond simply analyzing elements or qualities of Afrofuturism in *CAM* (although this work is important) and also show how Afrofuturism is the mechanism by which readers, past and present, can imagine the future of black people. My study extends a hermeneutic rendering of Afrofuturism across *CAM* as a continuum of black history, black modernity, and black futurity.

Hopkins’s reply is a categorical rejection of Condict’s attempt to assert her white privilege and racist ideologies onto Hopkins and her storylines. Moreover, it is an afrofuturist affirmation of her own power, creative energy, and African-centered worldview. The phenomenon is explained by Lavender’s three interconnected afrofuturist reading concepts that he calls the “trifocal afrofuturism lens,” (14) which can be envisioned as a simple mathematical equation: . Solving for , or breaking the cycle of zombie ideas³ while also building an African-centered worldview, “requires [equals] that the *hope impulse* [b] be generated by a *connected black consciousness* [a] capable of transmitting itself along a different *transhistorical feedback loop* [c]” (14). In this exchange, the *CAM* environment represents the connected black

³ Zombie ideas are like Lavender’s “science-fictional blackness” and the “hyperreal violence loop.” The former term entails the pseudo-scientific, racist justifications that were used to enslave, oppress, and denigrate Blacks. The latter term is the enduring violence and threat of violence against Blacks that has taken place over time and has become so normalized and mythologized that oftentimes Blacks cannot differentiate between reality and simulated reality (9-14). The zombie ideas Hopkins is combatting are represented in the exchange as analyzed above.

consciousness,⁴ that is, variable *a*, that generates variable *b*, the hope impulse, “a charged impulse representing the desire for life, liberty, and knowledge, the essential psychic drive seeding resistance, rebellion, and subversive writing,” (7) that empowers Hopkins to respond to Conduct with such clarity of purpose, namely, to eradicate the threatening and painful moral and racial superiority inherent in Conduct’s letter. The strength of the networked black consciousness and the hope impulse transmit across the feedback loop, that is, variable *c*, transcending time to link the past, present, and future of Black people’s shared experiences, values, and traditions. As the elements of the trifocal afrofuturist lens work together, a sense of agency, camaraderie, and purpose emerge, creating, amongst other feelings, the pleasure that Hopkins herself states is so integral to Blacks’ future success. The afrofuturist lens allows contemporary readers to understand the full significance of this dialogue. Hopkins hoped to confront the experiences of the past, represent that confrontation within the pages of *CAM* through specific, purposeful editorial and literary contributions, and build a better future for the race.

The Hopkins-Conduct exchange is not the only occurrence of Afrofuturism in *CAM*. The value of using an afrofuturist reading practice to understand Pauline Hopkins and *CAM* can also be discerned by analyzing other texts that appear in the magazine. Harkening back to the equation, , the value of *x*, *a*, and *b* are the same; for the purposes of this examination, their values are fixed. To recap, Hopkins, a self-proclaimed race woman, aspires to eliminate the zombie ideas of her era. She represents the hope impulse that is generated by *CAM*’s communal environment. The hope impulse continuously emanates from and within the networked consciousness of Black readers, contributors, and agents. Together, this energy force broadcasts its power across a transhistorical feedback loop as represented by texts in the magazine. However, in this iteration of the equation, the value of *c* equals a different narrative; it equals what I have dubbed the “Hagar narratives,” which are stories that all feature the biblical figure Hagar. Using the “trifocal afrofuturism lens” to analyze three Hagar narratives published in *CAM*—an African-centered retelling of the bible story called “Hagar and Ishmael” by Charles Winslow Hall, the painting *Hagar and Ishmael* by the French artist Hugues Merle, and the serialized novel *Hagar’s Daughter* by Hopkins—I show that

⁴ I analyzed several aspects of the business structure of the Colored Co-Operative Publishing Company, which published *CAM*, in my dissertation *Quilting the Race*. By analyzing such elements as its mission, hiring practices, and marketing strategies, I argue that the publishing house and the magazine operated as a collective and believed that all involved—founders to contributors to agents—were responsible for its growth and success. Major goals of the cooperative were to create, perpetuate, and sustain an image of a singular circulating body that delivered a singular message to Black people from city to city and state to state (Tanya N. Clark, *Quilting the Race: Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, the Colored American Magazine, and the African American Family, 1900-1905*. 2004. Temple U, PhD dissertation, ch. 1, pp. 23-26).

Afrofuturism as a narrative protocol allows *CAM* readers, especially Black women, to look back at the ancient story of Hagar's enslavement, sexual exploitation, and surrogate motherhood as a way to confront their own recent past. The complexities of this character allow Hagar to transcend space and time, "chaining together the cause and effect of the black experience" (Lavender 7).

'Organized Intelligence': The Networked Consciousness of Black Women

A critical component to understanding how Hopkins uses the Hagar narratives relies on seeing the Black women's club movement as the core of *CAM*'s networked black consciousness. Lavender states that a connected consciousness is different from community as it suggests that each member of the collective represents a circuit that links Blacks together and allows them to communicate their shared experiences and hopes across time. Whereas a community is made up of people with common social interests, the connected black consciousness allows its members to tap into communal mental pathways, facilitating communication along the lines of their shared experiences of a painful past and hopes for a better future (Lavender 6-7). The Black women's club movement epitomizes a fully functioning, highly effective networked black consciousness. The movement was spurred by seminal publications, such as Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors*, and Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, each appearing in 1892, and led by Black women activists across the nation, such as Victoria Earle Matthews (New York City), Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin (Boston), and Susan McKinney (Brooklyn). It was marked by a period of vigorous political activity, intellectual work, and community action by Black women.

Pauline Hopkins was certainly tuned in to the circuitry of the club movement, and she was an integral part of the network. She was a member of the Woman's Era Club of Boston, serving as the club's secretary. She also frequently hosted public readings of her most popular novel, *Contending Forces* (1900), for members of the Woman's Era Club and other clubs. She edited two columns in *CAM*, the "Women's Department" and "Here and There," which were primarily for women and featured practical articles about home and club life. She wrote biographical sketches featuring club women, published articles about club activities, and made sure club news and reports were regularly disseminated. Hopkins believed that the race was best served by "co-operation in the form of clubs, thus giving to causes dear and vital to humanity the valuable aid of organized intelligence" ("Club" 273). Thus, for Hopkins, the most appealing aspect of black women's clubs was the organized collaborative work that took place amongst members, and she sought to re-create the club movement atmosphere within the pages of *CAM*. Clubs were spaces where women went to engage one another and the various issues that affected them, their

families, and their communities. In Hopkins's estimation, clubs represented a real-time magazine of sorts that offered a mix of ideas, opinions, and voices, and she liked the physical, psychological, and intellectual space that the clubs cleared out for black women.⁵

If the Black women's club movement represented the political strongarm and organized action of the collective, then the literary and cultural contributions Hopkins selected and contributed symbolize its soul. Such pieces celebrated Black female empowerment and called for expanding the dimensions of Black womanhood. *CAM* was a publishing forum for women writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction articles. It attracted seasoned and budding writers, such as Angeline W. Grimké and Ruth D. Todd, respectively; race leaders who wanted to try their hand at creative writing, in particular Gertrude Mossell and Fannie Barrier Williams; and friends and subscription agents of the magazine, like Alberta Moore-Smith, Olivia Ward Bush, Marie Louise Burgess-Ware, Gertrude Dorsey Browne, Beth Anne Scales, and Georgia F. Stewart.⁶ Their woman-centered stories honored sisterhood among Black women, showcased Black women's intellectual capacities, and praised Black women's desires to work, organize, and fulfill hopes for domesticity.⁷

⁵ For a full analysis of the significance of the Black women's club movement for Hopkins's work and how she incorporates its elements into *CAM*, see Clark, chapter 3.

⁶ See Angelina W. Grimke, "Black Is, as Black Does (a Dream)," *Colored American Magazine*, Aug. 1900, vol. 1, no. 3; Ruth D. Todd, "The Octoroon's Revenge," *Colored American Magazine*, Mar. 1902, vol. 4, no. 4; Ruth D. Todd, "Florence Grey: A Three-Part Story, Part 1," *Colored American Magazine*, Aug. 1902, vol.5, no. 4; Ruth D. Todd, "Florence Grey: A Three-Part Story, Part 2," Sep. 1902, vol.5, no. 5; Ruth D. Todd, "Florence Grey: A Three-Part Story, Part 3," *Colored American Magazine*, Oct. 1902, vol. 5, no. 6; Ruth D. Todd, "The Folly of Mildred: A Race Story with a Moral," *Colored American Magazine*, Mar. 1903, vol.6, no.5; Gertrude Mossell, "Mizeriah Johnson: Her Arisings and Shinings," *Colored American Magazine*, Jan./Feb. 1902, vol.4, no. 3; Fannie Barrier Williams, "After Many Days: A Christmas Story," *Colored American Magazine*, Dec. 1902, vol. 6, no. 2; Gertrude Dorsey-Browne, "An Equation," *Colored American Magazine*, Aug. 1902, vol. 5, no. 4; Beth Anne Scales, "Beth's Triumph (A Two-Part Story), Part 1," *Colored American Magazine*, Aug. 1900, vol. 1, no. 3; Beth Anne Scales, "Beth's Triumph (A Two-Part Story), Part 2," *Colored American Magazine*, Sep. 1900, vol. 1, no.4; Georgia F. Stewart, "Aunt 'Ria's Ten Dollars," *Colored American Magazine*, Jun. 1901, vol.3, no. 2; and Georgia F. Stewart, "The Wooing of Pastor Cummings," *Colored American Magazine*, Aug. 1901, vol. 3, no. 4.

⁷ See Claudia Tate's groundbreaking work *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*, Oxford UP, 1992. Tate argues that white women at this time considered marriage and motherhood restrictive; however, Black women, including Hopkins, politicized the domestic sphere, seeing it as a cornerstone of racial uplift. After rekindling kinship bonds that had been severed during enslavement, Black women did not want to abandon the roles they had just begun to enjoy.

African America's First Daughter: Hagar and the Hope for Black Female Empowerment

While Hopkins was a current in *CAM*'s collected consciousness, it can also be argued that in her role as editor of the magazine, she emerges as the afrofuturist hope impulse as explained above. Even though her name does not appear on the masthead as literary editor and editor-in-chief until 1903 and 1904, respectively, Hopkins held a leadership position at the magazine from its beginnings until her "resignation" in 1904. For example, ignited by her sisters in the club movement, there is no doubt that she solicited the contributions of women whose work focused on Black female identity and agency, a point that is supported by the conspicuous absence of such texts after her departure. In fact, after the magazine was purchased by Fred Moore, an agent of Booker T. Washington, and moved from Boston to New York, the emphasis on arts, literature, and culture established during the Hopkins era changed to business and finance, industrial education, and politics.⁸ It was her vision that dictated the magazine's content from 1900-1904. I contend that her creative and editorial impulses were ignited by the networked Black consciousness and fueled her use of the Hagar narratives.

In her fight against zombie ideas, Hopkins wields the Hagar narratives in powerful and complex ways. As author, she utilizes Afrofuturism as a thematic strategy in her serialized novel *Hagar's Daughter* (March 1901-March 1902). Specifically, in *Hagar's Daughter* Hopkins uses a biblical story to undergird her exploration of the social and moral implications of black womanhood, offering her African American readers an authentic, proud African ancestor—Hagar, the Egyptian slave who was given to her master, Abraham, by her mistress, Sarah, to conceive a child because Sarah failed to have one of her own. The afrofuturist novel offers readers a little bit of pleasure—a connection to an African past and a way to reconcile their present and determine their future. As editor, she astutely

⁸ For analysis of the magazine's history see W. E. B. DuBois, "The Colored Magazine in America," *Crisis*, Nov. 1912, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 33-35; Charles Johnson, "Rise of the Negro Magazine," *Journal of Negro History*, Jan. 1928, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 7-21; William Stanley Braithwaite, "Negro America's First Magazine: How the Colored American Magazine Was Born," *Negro Digest*, 1947, vol. 6, no. 2; Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Mayberry Johnson, "Away from Accommodation: Radical Editors and Protest Journalism, 1900-1910," *Journal of Negro History*, 1977, vol. 62, pp. 325-38; John Gruesser, editor, *The Unruly Voice: Rediscovering Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins*, U of Illinois P, 1996; Hazel V. Carby, editor, *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*, Introduction, Oxford UP, 1988, xxx-xxxvi, 1998; Tanya N. Clark, *Quilting the Race: Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, the Colored American Magazine, and the African American Family, 1900-1905*. 2004. Temple U, PhD dissertation, ch. 1, pp. 15-29; Alisha R. Knight, "Furnace Blasts for the Tuskegee Wizard: Revisiting Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, Booker T. Washington, and the Colored American Magazine," *American Periodicals*, 2007, vol. 17, no.1, pp. 41-64; Hanna Wallinger, *Pauline E. Hopkins: A Literary Biography*, U of Georgia P, 2005; and Lois Brown, *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution*, U of North Carolina P, 2012.

laid the groundwork for her characterization of Hagar a month before it appeared in the magazine by publishing two afrofuturist texts to frame her own work: Charles Winslow Hall's rendition of the biblical story of Hagar and Ishmael and an accompanying reprint of the 1872 portrait of the mother and son by French artist Hugues Merle (see fig. 1).⁹ Undoubtedly, Hopkins chose the story and the painting because they must have been two of the earliest pieces to depict Hagar as African; Merle's painting shows Hagar with clear-cut Egyptian features, and Hall unambiguously states that "Ishmael was born, the son of a Caucasian father and African mother" (304). Not only are the Hagar narratives examples of Afrofuturism, but their significance is heightened by using the afrofuturist reading formula explained above.

The painting shows Abraham banishing Hagar and Ishmael to the desert after giving them only bread and water to survive. Even though it is hard to discern the color of Hagar's skin in the *CAM* reprint, other visibly clear aspects connect her to an Egyptian heritage. She is tall and lean with an elongated face, neck, and nose—all common characteristics of Egyptian ethnicity. Further evidence of her African heritage is the basket she balances on her head as well as her clothing; both are typical of African manners. A cloak-style dress covers her body, and a veil conceals her hair. Merle clearly depicts Hagar as the "tall, stately, graceful woman" that Hall describes (Hall 302). His painting gives life to Hagar's "dark-eyed," "slender," and "keen-faced" Egyptian ethnicity (302).

Also important, particularly for Hopkins's analysis of black motherhood through the Hagar figure, is Merle's portrayal of Ishmael. Hall describes Ishmael as a "lad [who] was almost a man in stature and in thought, and he was broken with the sense of love despised, paternal desertion, and undeserved injustice, so his courage was gone" (302). Merle captures this vulnerable maleness on the canvas. In the painting Ishmael is standing with a slight bend to his knees, and he is turned into his mother, showing only the profile of his body. His arm is outstretched, holding a bow. He is also naked. His face is hidden in the folds of his mother's clothing, and his head is bent into her chest. The visible parts of his body—an arm and leg, his back and buttock—are very muscular. Even though he is around age fourteen when he and his mother are banished, in the painting Ishmael's well-developed body resembles an adult more than an adolescent. Ishmael has the body of a man, but his nakedness, bent head, and hidden face reveal his helplessness; he is obviously distraught over being cast out by his father. Furthermore, the bow that he holds is useless; he has no arrows. Thus, survival is up to Hagar who, in

⁹ The last Hagar narrative appears in *CAM* about six months after Hopkins's serial novel. In September 1902, she provides a biographical sketch of the sculptor Edmonia Lewis and mentions her statue *Hagar*, which was completed in the late 1860s. Hopkins describes the sculpture showing Hagar "in her despair in the wilderness" and being "full of feeling" ("Artists" 364).

response to her child's distress, clings to him with one hand in a protective grip. Her other hand grasps the basket of food and water that she balances on her head. This protective hold on both her son and the food emphasizes Hagar's role as a mother, protector, and nurturer. Furthermore, her stance is tall and firm. Her head is upright, and her eyes are fixed in a serious stare. She is a model of power and strength, and she towers over Ishmael, her man-child. *CAM* readers, especially women, would have no doubt been struck by her regal qualities and her ability to rise out of adversity spurred on by her faith in God and love for her son. This image of Hagar is consistent with the portrayals of African American women that Pauline Hopkins painstakingly developed in *CAM* not only through her fictional characters, such as Talma Gordon, and biographical series, such as her "Famous Women" sketches, but also in other illustrations that she lobbied for, such as the photographs for the magazine's cover, which often featured a young black woman of some merit. Merle's portrayal of Hagar must have appealed to Hopkins because it coincided with her depictions of African American women.



fig. 1. Hugues Merle. *Hagar and Ishmael*. February 1901, *Colored American Magazine*.
Reproduced from *The Digital Colored American*, coloredamerican.org.

Charles Hall's afrofuturist version of the Hagar and Ishmael bible story complements Merle's painting. It recasts the story as a critique of antebellum plantation life, another narrative familiar to CAM audiences. Hall's account of the story is reminiscent of a slave narrative and emphasizes recognizable themes from slavery, for example, the extreme emotional and physical abuse that often triggers the desire to escape and the perilous journey to freedom. The "characters" in these events provide Black Americans with a tangible link to an African past, giving them a psychological boost in confidence, hope for the future, and pride in themselves. The story depicts Hagar as a model of dedicated motherhood and celebrated (African) womanhood. In Hall's story, the "dark-eyed, slender, lissome, keen-faced, low-voiced and accomplished" Hagar develops into a "tall, stately, graceful woman . . . filled with the desire of love and offspring, of wealth and prestige, which no condition in life or sense of dependence [could] ever eradicate or stifle" (302). Despite her circumstances—she is an orphan who was taken away from her home and enslaved—Hagar emerges with her grace, passion, beauty, style, determination, and dreams intact, making her a positive biblical model of African empowerment, femininity, and womanhood. Furthermore, Hall's description comments on the racist presumptions that construct Black women as over-sexed and complicit in their own sexual victimization. Note in the above lines that Hall aligns those qualities that make Hagar beautiful, refined, and desirable with those that make her resilient and capable. Thus, Black female desire is an admirable quality. Hall's presentation of a passionate Hagar resonates with Merle's painting of the fierce maternal Hagar.

In contrast to Hagar, her mistress Sarah is an "impatient, disappointed, jealous, [and] unhappy" mistress "who had not spared to sacrifice a husband's devotions and a woman's chastity to her unbridled desires" (Hall 303). Sarah emerges as the antebellum mistress who takes pleasure in offering up an enslaved black woman to her husband as her sexual surrogate. Making Hagar the object of her mistress's scorn is another way that Hall indicts plantation history. Juxtaposing Hagar and Sarah in this manner also assesses another aspect of American society despised by African Americans. The comparison forces readers, particularly men, to fully examine the question in Hall's text regarding whether Hagar's decision to bear Abraham's child is out of love, a willingness to be his concubine, ambition, desire for wealth and prestige, or spite for Sarah. Hall writes,

Whether Hagar had learned to love [Abraham] . . . or sought a second wife's or concubine's condition through ambition, desire of wealth, hatred of her mistress;—or through several or all of these motives, is not certainly set forth. Neither does it appear whether [Sarah] or Hagar first in effect suggested that the long-desired son and heir of [Abraham] need not necessarily be the very son of the Chaldean princess (302-303).

This question feeds directly into the spin on Black women's identity in Victorian America that believed Black women to be innately promiscuous and immoral. This notion implicates Black women in their own sexual subjugation. However, Hall's statement must be read through the positive view of Hagar that he develops earlier in the story. Viewed from this perspective, Sarah is the culprit. Hagar has desire; however, her loss of innocence is not the result of some unbridled passion but of a mistress forcing her into surrogacy in partnership with a (much older) willing master. Hall's interest in Hagar's role as "concubine" or "victim" speaks to the unfortunate fact that even Black men sometimes questioned whether enslaved Black women willingly entered into relationships with their white masters. Hall's answer is "victim." Hopkins must have believed that Hall's article offered a candid, male perspective on this question.

The plantation story continues with Hagar's escape after Sarah, who "could not bear the pride of coming maternity which shown in Hagar's eyes," starts to treat Hagar with vicious cruelty, and Abraham refuses to protect her from the jealous mistress (Hall 303). This scenario bears some resemblance to the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, which is known for its poignant treatment of black female sexuality. In several jealous rages Linda Brent's mistress, Mrs. Flint, inflicts unyielding psychological and physical torture on Linda in hopes of exposing an alleged affair between Linda and Dr. Flint, her master. Dr. Flint, desirous of Linda yet unable to achieve his nefarious goal, is reluctant to intervene and stop his wife. Hall also describes Hagar's escape: "Hard is that sterile way of the caravans, even to horseman and camel-driver, but the proud, loving, beautiful, stately woman traversed it alone without guard, beast of burden, or provision of food and water heading ever southward toward Egypt" (303). In this scene, Hall explicitly links Hagar to those who, like Jacobs, were enslaved and risked their lives to secure a home and a better life for themselves and their children in the North.

Hall draws on other familiar themes from the history of slavery. When the angel of God implores Hagar to return by promising her a son who would become the father of nations, Hagar returns and gives birth to Ishmael. Sarah eventually gives birth to her own son, Isaac, and true to her role as plantation mistress, Sarah comes to see Ishmael as a threat to Isaac's position as heir. In this scenario, Ishmael is the mulatto child ignored by his white father and hated by his white mistress while his brother Isaac is the adored child. Ishmael begins to understand "that he was no longer loved and honored as [he was] before [Isaac's birth]" (Hall 304). After Sarah observes Ishmael on the day of his brother's festival "neglected, jealous, and angry, mocking the little Isaac," she tells Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son, for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac" (Hall 304). Abraham banishes Hagar and his son with only meager rations for the journey. Hagar, now a free woman, raises Ishmael to become the founder

of nations. In this part of the story Hall shifts to focus on Ishmael, calling attention to turn-of-the-century racist attitudes. Through Ishmael, Hall emphasizes the set of racist ideologies that justify certain social practices (forced miscegenation or the criminalization of interracial marriage) but do not accept the consequences of their own rules (exorbitant numbers of mixed-race births). Sarah and Abraham, sanctioned by Western race policy, conspire to rape Hagar twice: first by violating her physically and second by casting her out for producing a mixed-raced child who dared to consider himself equal to his white brother.

There are moments in the narrative where Hall sticks to the Genesis story, which is also important to this reading of Hagar and Ishmael. The angel of God speaks to Hagar and saves her life. The first time the pregnant Hagar runs to get away from Sarah's abuse, and the angel implores her to return, promising that God will make her son the father of a nation. The second time comes after Abraham casts her and Ishmael out with little food and water, and they are on the brink of starvation. God's angel intervenes again and reassures Hagar of God's plan for Ishmael and reveals a well with drinking water. In both scenes Hagar is lost in the wilderness (literally and figuratively) when God speaks to her, and it is her realization that "God seest me" (Hall 304) that makes her believe that she is not of a forsaken people but of a chosen one. This faith gives her the strength to live and save her son. Hall sticks to the Genesis storyline in these instances to emphasize the messianic prophecy or covenant between Ethiopians (the black race) and God. Ethiopianist followers believed that God would deliver them from slavery and oppression. This covenant marked them as a special, even superior, race rather one destined to enslavement and inferiority as Western lore (and law) dictated.

Merle's painting and Hall's parable interpolate African and African American history into the biblical story of Hagar, and Hopkins planned for *Hagar's Daughter* to be read against such perspectives. By the time *Hagar's Daughter* began its run, readers would have already come to understand Hagar not only within a context of slavery but also within a context of African heritage as a passionate and courageous daughter of Africa. Ultimately, readers associate Hagar with the contemporary race woman who rejects objectification and control and instead fights to maintain power over her circumstances with grace, dignity, and pride. Contemporaneous CAM readers would have read the three texts in a synergistic loop, blending their histories with Hagar and the enslaved ancestors that she represented, seeing their circumstances through Hagar's eyes, and eradicating zombie ideals to build a better tomorrow—just as Hopkins intended.

In *Hagar's Daughter* Hopkins continues to claim Africa for African Americans by claiming Africa for Hagar. This process begins when Hagar, who has been raised as white, comes to learn that she is Black. When she learns the news, Hagar descends into a "black abyss," crying and shrieking so loudly that the servants,

Aunt Henny and her daughter Marthy, declare to one another: “Missee Hagar done gone mad”(82).¹⁰ Her despair is due, in part, to her own racial prejudices. She was raised as an antebellum southern white woman. Slavery “had always seemed right to her,” (83) and she shared white people’s narrow-mindedness about blacks:

Hagar . . . caught [Marthy] by the shoulders and turned her toward the light, minutely examining the black skin, crinkled hair, flat nose and protruding lips. So might her grandmother have looked. . . . Her mother a slave! She wondered that the very thought did not strike her dead. . . . Was she, indeed, a descendant of naked black savages of the horrible African jungles? Could it be that the blood of generations of these unfortunate ones flowed through her veins? (81-82)

Hagar’s association of African Americans with jungle-dwelling African savages would not have been appealing to Hopkins’s Black audience. Initially, readers would have been disapproving of white Hagar’s racism and Black Hagar’s self-loathing. Hagar’s self-derogations hardly endorse such crass beliefs; rather, Hopkins’s intent is to broadcast white America’s deep-rooted and misguided notions about people of African descent, to depict the depth of Hagar’s madness once her white skin privilege is taken away, and to expose the extent of American hypocrisy when race is involved. Stripped of her name, birthright, and husband—indeed those aspects that made her at home in the world—Hagar is left exposed to an alienating and harsh society due to one drop of Black blood, which is a concept Black readers could relate to. During Hagar’s rants she repeatedly emphasizes the quickness with which everything is taken from her. Her life is “shattered [with] one blow” (82). Furthermore, that morning she was the wife of a prominent Southern gentleman, Ellis Enson, but by nightfall she was his slave (83). Also, “the one drop of black blood neutralized all [of] her virtues, and she became, from the moment of exposure, an unclean thing” (86). Viewed in this light, Hagar does not hate blackness; rather, she hates the world that creates shame around being Black.

Hopkins’s move in the next scene from a self-loathing Hagar to a self-accepting Hagar supports this interpretation. Hagar comes to identify herself with the biblical warrior Hagar (the one *CAM* readers were familiar with from Merle and Hall). After belittling herself, she finally concludes, “Horrible fatality that had named her Hagar” (83). This thought shows that she is clearly identifying with Hagar’s lot as Abraham’s concubine. However, she suddenly remembers the lines of a poem about the biblical heroine, and this memory marks her first steps toward accepting her true identity:

¹⁰ When referencing *Hagar’s Daughter*, I will refer to the recent critical edition of the novel and use in-text citations. Hopkins, Pauline Elizabeth. *Hagar’s Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice*. Edited by John Cullen Gruesser and Alisha R. Knight, Broadview Press, 2021.

Farewell! I go, but Egypt's mighty gods
Will go with me, and my avengers be.
And in whatever distant land your god,
Your cruel god of Israel, is known,
There, too, the wrongs that you have done this day
To Hagar and your first-born,
Shall waken and uncoil themselves, and hiss
Like adders at the name of Abraham (83).

Hagar's recollection of this verse links her to Hagar as the powerful symbol of African female resilience, survival, bravery, and pride. The poem is an excerpt from Eliza Poitevent Nicholson's "Hagar," originally published in 1893. In this stanza, Hagar angrily responds to Abraham's rejection by hurling insults and cursing him in the name of her beloved Egypt. Her forcefulness is backed by her great love of self and heritage. Readers who remembered Merle and Hall's interpretations of Hagar would expect this kind of rebellious and fiery response. If we read the "horrible fatality" that gave Hagar her name as a shocking, somewhat ironic fate, then the Hopkins brand of feminist Afrofuturism that she has employed in *CAM* since the entire run of Hagar narratives becomes clear. Even if Hopkins's Hagar has not completely accepted her blackness, she is infused with the spirit of warrior Hagar's resolve and triumph. The expectation is that Hagar will not only persevere as a Black woman and a mother (she and Ellis have a baby daughter, who, of course, follows the condition of her mother) but also come to have pride in her heritage. Her fateful Hagar tag is what fortifies her character.

After Ellis is found dead, his brother St. Clair inherits Hagar and her child since Ellis had not freed them before he died. St. Clair arranges to have the evil slave trader Walker take Hagar and her baby to Washington, D.C., for auctioning. Hagar flees at dusk with her child and is cornered on the Potomac Bridge. She then "[raised] her tearful, imploring eyes to heaven as if seeking for mercy and compassion, and with one bound sprang over the railing of the bridge, and sank beneath the waters of the Potomac River" (96). She is presumed dead; however, she survives and resurfaces twenty years later in Washington, D.C., as Estelle Bowen. She emerges as a survivor like the biblical Hagar.

Even though as the white Estelle Bowen, formerly Estelle Marks, the Hagar identity is suppressed, several aspects point to Hopkins's continued characterization of Estelle as the Egyptian heroine Hagar. First is the heroine's new name, Estelle, the root of which is often understood as related to *stellar*, or "star." The name suggests that she is paying homage to her former identity, and there are several "markings"

to prove it. For example, Hagar has become an angel as symbolized by the diamond star pendant that Estelle receives from her husband, Senator Zenas Bowen, who points out that Estelle has been “pining after [it] for a month” (108). The illustration of Hagar with her child jumping into the river, drawn by the African American artist Alexander Skeete, *CAM*'s regular contributing artist, supports this idea also (see fig. 2). In the picture Hagar seems to soar in the air instead of descending into the water. Skeete draws Hagar as an angel or spirit that looms large in Estelle's present. Hagar may be a fallen woman, made instantly “unclean” by one drop of Black blood, and remanded to slavery, but like her namesake she is not forsaken. God grants her unspoken prayer, and she survives her perilous circumstances. The enslaved Hagar drowns in the water; warrior Hagar ascends to become a protective angel, and Estelle Marks emerges impressed with the lessons and legacies of both identities.

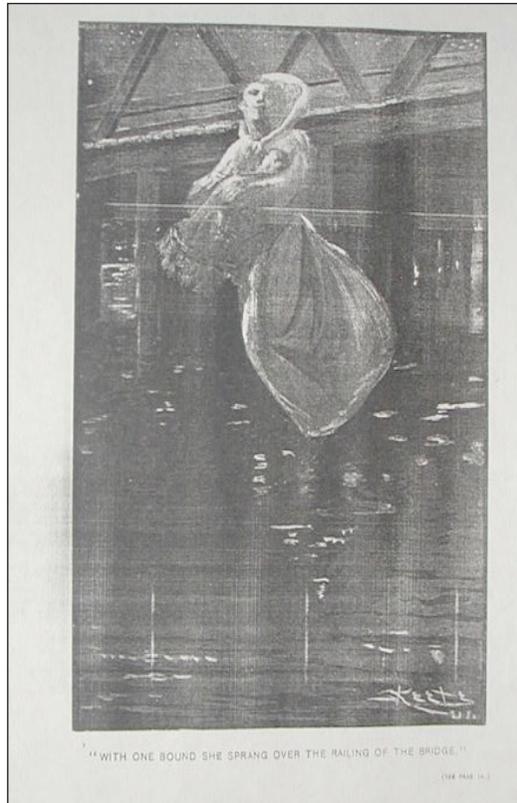


fig 2. “With One Bound She Sprang Over the Railing of the Bridge,” February 1901, *Colored American Magazine*. Reproduced from *The Digital Colored American*, coloredamerican.org.

The second link between Estelle and Hagar is that even though Estelle lives as white, she has a home and a husband who accepts multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. Before moving to the nation's capital, Estelle lives in the West, which Hopkins portrays as a democratic racial Utopia where all the people are racially tolerant like Zenas Bowen. Hopkins describes Senator Bowen as a self-made man from humble beginnings who may himself even be from some multiethnic family: "He had the hair and skin of an Indian" (102). He is a worldly, courageous, and shrewd businessman who "possessed a rare nature," namely his racial tolerance (102). That "he was one of those genial men whom the West is constantly sending out to enrich society" is symbolized in his sincere indifference to race (102). He assures Estelle, "the North Pole, Egypt, Africa—all are one to him" (103). The Hagar in Estelle was still hurting from the sting that her beloved Ellis gave her when he initially rejected her upon learning that she was Black. In fact, at the end of the novel, even when Estelle abandons her new identity for her former one, she still feels the pain of Ellis's rejection. As she praises the now dead Senator Bowen's unwavering integrity, she states, "Ellis had come back to her; yes, but although love forgave, love worshipped at his shrine, love could not blot out the bitter memory of the time when he had failed her" (260). The deep anguish that Hagar experiences would not allow Estelle to make herself vulnerable to racial prejudice again.

Third, Estelle's role as mother to Senator Bowen's daughter, Jewel, is also suggestive of Hagar from the bible. Even though Estelle is Jewel's stepmother, the two women are close. Estelle acts as Jewel's mother and teacher, carefully training her until she goes to boarding school. Of course, Jewel is Estelle/Hagar's real daughter; however, she believes her daughter drowned in the river. A dead child frees Hagar from her maternal responsibilities and allows for her adventures in the West; she works at the Bohemian, "a favorite resort in 'Frisco" (102). Nevertheless, her motherly instincts never completely die. From the time Estelle and Jewel meet, Jewel "had been like [Estelle's] very own" (104).

Lastly, while the fear that drives Hagar to pass as the white Estelle reminds readers of the crazed, self-abnegating Hagar of twenty years ago, Hopkins is careful to construct Estelle's passing as a survival mechanism, not as the result of self-hatred. When she emerges in Washington, D.C., slavery may have been over but racial prejudice remains, as symbolized by the presence of the evil St. Clair and Walker thinly disguised as General Benson and Major Madison, respectively. The two men are very wealthy, but Hopkins shows that while "money can change the complexion of things," (108) it does not change the character of things. In fact, nothing but their names have changed about these two. St. Clair is still the unscrupulous, womanizing, greedy gambler, and Walker is still the immoral slaver as evidenced by his treatment of his daughter Aurelia, whom he uses to entrap

men so he can swindle them out of their money. Aurelia, whose racially-mixed parentage eventually comes to light, serves as Madison's post-bellum sexual slave. Whether Aurelia is his biological daughter, the product of the rape of one of the many slaves he once regularly encountered, or the presumed dead daughter of Hagar, historically speaking, Madison would not have had any regard for her virtue since she is Black.¹¹ The presence of these two evil men in Washington recalls the hellish atmosphere the narrator described during the secession meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, so many years ago, making it necessary for Hagar to hide her identity inside of Estelle. Her identity is hidden under the deep layers of name and race.

While Hopkins makes clear that St. Clair and Walker—now Benson and Madison—are hiding from the public, she is not trying to hide them from her readers. Since the two major exploiters from part one of the novel resurface and remain undetected despite their thin disguises for the better part of the second portion of the novel, Hopkins implies that their chaos can be unleashed upon the world unnoticed. Hopkins argues that white America's willingness to deny the racism that dwells within itself enables people like St. Clair/Benson and Walker/Madison to walk the earth and demonize African Americans. Consequently, Hagar's passing appears as an effort to hide from this innate American racism and self-denial, and the pride she claimed for herself though the valiance of her Egyptian ancestor remains intact.

Of course, Hagar's passing cannot remain a secret if she is to emerge as a true African ancestor that *CAM* readers can identify with and take pleasure in through the figurative home she offers them via her link to Africa. Hopkins uses Hagar to show that a truly self-actualized African American would not hide her or his heritage. Only within the context of the courtroom, a space where the truth is supposed to be upheld because justice is colorblind, does the truth of everyone's (except Jewel's) identity come out. After Hagar's impassioned cry "Ellis! Ellis! I am Hagar!" in response to the confession of Ellis (turned Henson in this part of the novel) that he is St. Clair/General Benson's brother, the two are reunited, and they quickly resolve to resume their life together (248). Her public pronouncement and open acceptance of her identity starkly contrasts with the attitude of the Hagar in the first part of the book who, upon learning of her heritage, locked herself in her room in shame. Conversely this Hagar:

¹¹ Readers surmise from the title that Hagar's daughter survives the river; however, since during most of the novel her identity remains a mystery, Jewel and Aurelia are both likely candidates. Readers could have deduced that mother and daughter were separated by the force of the river and that Walker followed and rescued the baby, a more profitable commodity than her mother, and claimed her as his own. The courtroom scene supports this scenario. When asked if Walker is her father, Aurelia says, "Yes; so I am told" (236). Likewise, Walker skirts the question when it is put before him at the trial. The true identity of Hagar's daughter is not revealed until the end of the novel.

was happy—happier than she had ever hoped to be in this life. True, no callers begged admittance into the grand mansion, no cards overflowed the receivers in the spacious entrance hall, since the sensational items disclosing her identity had appeared in the columns of the daily press; that fact did not disconcert her in the least. (258)

As this passage indicates, Hagar has freed herself to live her life as a Black woman. Even though racial prejudice still exists, Hagar is no longer willing to live with her racial blinders and chooses to fully accept herself and disregard what others think. The impetus behind her decision, Hopkins implies, is that society has begun to rid itself of the St. Clairs and the Walkers of the world, making life easier for African Americans to live and to establish homes for themselves.

According to Dickson Bruce, the reunification of Hagar and Ellis allows for “the possibility of a real interracial love that triumphed over prejudice” (151); however, Hopkins’s readers needed more than the sentimental “happy ending.” As such, Hopkins means to solve the larger issue of racial prejudice. In the closing scene of the novel, Hagar, Ellis, and “a child—a boy” laugh and scream as they chase a butterfly on the lawn of Enson Hall, the property that Hagar’s child stood to inherit, which angered St. Clair and started the whole drama of the novel (266). As the quote above shows, the narrator takes great care to point out that this child was a boy child, resurrecting Hagar in her role as mother (Jewel is dead, and Aurelia, her surrogate daughter, has vanished) and also Ishmael of the Bible. The child is the son of St. Clair and the murdered stenographer Elise Bradford, and he is the last representative of the Enson family. Hopkins returns to the source of the Enson family’s bigoted beginnings, but this time she has a different purpose in mind for the family. Ellis’s secret identity in the second part of the novel is the noble Detective Henson. In making Ellis a detective, Hopkins implies that he can see his inner self clearly; thus, he can see reality better than other white characters in the novel who, encumbered by their racism and denial (like he was in the first part of the novel), project their fears onto African Americans. For Hopkins, the ability to detect and stop this cycle begins with the individual. As father to his brother’s child, Ellis will teach this ability to his son. Moreover, this family is also headed up by a Hagar who is empowered by the acceptance of her racial identity and her African past. She will raise her “Ishmael” to grow up and do great deeds, namely stamping out racism. The ending is emblematic of the Ethiopianist prediction of the fall of Western ideological racism and the rise of equality and with it the African American race.

Thus, the Hagar narratives published in *CAM* demonstrate the force of Afrofuturism as a reading protocol. In her dual role as editor and contributing writer Pauline Hopkins meshes the various fields of religion, history, literature, and art to create a network of afrofuturist texts that offered African Americans

spiritual hope and an opportunity to recapture their lost glory and civilization. Through the compelling symbol of Hagar, Hopkins imparts to *CAM* readers just how liberating this “good work” can be. Further investigation of this transcendent figure may allow modern readers to use Hagar narratives to translate their own experiences along an afrofuturist transhistorical continuum and explore the influences they have on today’s world and beyond. I am certain that Hagar offers valuable lessons to modern feminist, womanist, and Afrofuturist movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #MuteRKelly. Important recent work, such as Nyasha Junior’s 2019 book *Reimagining Hagar: Blackness and the Bible* and the 2020 republication of Pauline Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter* by editors John Gruesser and Alisha Knight with original illustrations from the novel let the good work go on—just as Hopkins intended.

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The Oankali Approach to Remembering in Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*

R. Nicole Smith

In the tradition of speculative fiction, this essay asks, “what if?": What if we reconstructed the path to Black liberation using a new framework for remembering? Instead of navigating *rememory* of the cultural and historical traumas of chattel slavery and colonization, we would prioritize *remembering* these important histories as collections of cautionary tales to be honored, retold, and reinforced. In this model, historical narratives about genocidal pasts would not transmit the emotional trauma of these stories to future generations. Instead, these past accounts would persist as contributions to a data stream that honors the holistic, traumatic experiences of ancestors' experiences and retain these historical narratives as fluid and intentionally instructional information. Evoking the characteristics of Sankofa, members of the African diaspora would engage this information as protected data that shapes liberated, contented Black futures.

There is precedent for employing an ethos of contentment as a framework for liberation. One example lies in activist adrienne maree brown's concept of pleasure activism. The author describes her concept as, “. . . the work we do to reclaim ourselves as whole happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (9). Another model exists in cultural strategist Anasa Troutman's use of love as a philosophical framework for her social justice activism (Troutman, *From Justice to Joy*). The Oankali aliens in Octavia Butler's first-contact trilogy *Lilith's Brood* (2000), originally published as *Xenogenesis* (1987-1989), offer a similarly unique, albeit figurative model for Black liberation through the aliens' approach to memory. For the Oankali, memories are material to be “examined, memorized, and either preserved alive or allowed to live their natural span and die” (693). Their primary view of memories as data does not invite an emphasis on the emotional pain associated with cultural, historical, and related, individual traumas. Instead, the outcome of the Oankali approach to memory engages remembrance as a Sankofa-inspired data stream, a resource that shapes the future. This extraterrestrial model for engaging memory offers a more expedient and sustainable path to healing than rememory.

Toni Morrison introduces readers to the term *rememory* in her novel *Beloved*. Morrison describes this term as “recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past” (*Source*, 323). Morrison continues, “Therefore not only is the major preoccupation of the central

characters that of reconstituting and recollecting a usable past . . . but also the narrative strategy the plot formation turns on the stress of remembering, its inevitability, *the chances for liberation that lie within the process*" (323, my emphasis). Sethe, the protagonist in *Beloved* illustrates this tension in her conversation with her daughter Denver and describes rememory as a remembrance that exists as a tangible image, almost like a photograph. You can even, she tells her daughter Denver, bump up against someone else's rememory - especially if you stand in the place where the memory originated. She calls a person's initial experience with this, a "thought picture" (*Beloved*, 35-36).

For Sethe, rememory lives and breathes and endangers. As such, it can linger in a place, almost like a ghost, and cause psychic and emotional damage (McDonald 36). She warns her daughter Denver to never return to the Sweet Home plantation Sethe escaped from because, "if you go there (you who've never been there) and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again . . . it is waiting for you" (*Beloved*, 36). Here Sethe, like the Oankali, presents to her daughter an approach to memories that she thinks will enable Denver to survive. However, unlike the Oankali, Sethe's approach prioritizes the persistence of the past in the present. In doing so, she paints trauma and its companion, rememory, as temporal fixatives that do not offer psychological or emotional room for sustained healing and future building.

Sethe's narrative becomes unstuck when she gains the ability to instead place emphasis on present experiences. Sethe processes her pain and engages her memories as information that constantly informs her present moments. Following the Oankali model, Sethe examines her memories and determines which ones should be saved and which should be allowed to die a natural death. Reengaging the past primarily as a source of information or a touchstone reinvigorates considerations of strategies for shaping the future. Afrofuturism certainly champions such an approach to futurity. Reframing the past, especially a culturally traumatic past, as a resource for the present and the future marks the primary purpose of an Afrofuturistic practice or perspective. Just as rememory provides a tangible, psychic connection to the past, Afrofuturism and Afrofuturistic texts such as *Lilith's Brood* offer an opportunity to reinterpret this connection through tangible strategies for creating sustainable futures.

Upon initial reflection, one might view *Lilith's Brood* and *Beloved* as incongruent novels within a discussion about traumatic memories. However, their categorization as speculative texts frames them as companionable in this regard. Speculative fiction generally includes literary genres such as science fiction, horror, and alternative history stories (Jackson and Moody-Freeman 2) wherein the writer entreats readers to suspend belief and engage in cognitive dissonance as the author

asks, "what if?" about a particular topic or social concern. David Wyatt offers a contextualized explanation of the impact of this "what if" question. Wyatt describes speculative fiction as a genre that, "takes place in a universe slightly different from our own" and invites readers to "ask relevant questions about one's society in a way that would prove provocative in more mainstream forms" (qtd. in Jackson and Moody-Freeman 2). Sethe's past literally haunts her through *Beloved*, the ghost of the daughter she murdered in an attempt to save the child from slavery. The presence of this specter categorizes the text as speculative.

More specifically, because the author, Morrison, is a Black woman and the plot centers on Black histories and subjects, *Beloved* is a Black speculative text. Morrison's Black speculative novel, inspired by Margert Garner's escape from slavery in 1856, simultaneously offers readers the opportunity to consider the impact of Garner's decision from the perspective of a loving mother and invites audiences to grapple with the concept that a mother would value death for her child over life as an enslaved person. As readers of *Beloved* suspend their belief for 274 pages, one of the challenging "what if" questions Morrison asks us to consider is: What if we experienced personal and cultural trauma that trapped us in a recurring loop of remembering and forgetting for our own psychic survival? Broadly speaking, to consider these inaccessible memories is to contemplate the impact of ancestral memories on the present and to determine one's own methods for psychic recovery.

Afrofuturism, a subgenre of science fiction, extends Wyatt's inquiries to considerations about the futurity of Black people. Ytasha Womack describes Afrofuturism as, "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation" (9). From a similar perspective, brown cites science fiction as a key strategy for liberation, writing, "I believe that all organizing is science fiction—that we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced. . . . Our radical imagination is a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality" (7). Butler's trilogy invites readers to employ radical imagination toward liberation by reconsidering how they process trauma and memory.

Butler's trilogy, composed of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), introduces the reader to the intergalactic alien species—the Oankali. Gene trading is the driving, reflexive force behind the Oankali's survival. They are an ever-evolving species whose history includes the combined past narratives of innumerable other species. Their organ, the yashi, symbolizes the alien species' involuntary biological conviction to gene trade and metamorphose. The yashi acts as a container for interspecies biological material. For example, whenever any members of the Oankali settle on a new planet, they store biological data such as genetic or cellular samples of new plants, animals, soil, and more in their

yashi. Among the Oankali is a segment of the population—the ooloi—who are the genetic engineers and biological archivists among the Oankali. In deference to the ooloi's role in their society, the Oankali eventually, and excitedly, bring their treasure troves of biological data to the gender-neutral ooloi, whose yashi is larger than the rest of the population (Butler 544, 701).

Butler offers an indication of the immense amount, value, and cumulative nature of the biological data stored in this organ in *Imago*, the third novel in the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy. When newly matured ooloi Jodahs receives a copy of its ooloi parent Nikan's biological data, it describes the information as, "immense newness. Life in more varieties than I could possibly have imagined—unique units of life, most never seen on Earth" (693). These geneticist and archivist roles of the ooloi splinter into many functions among the Oankali. The duties include nurturer, healer, creator, doula, and parent. The ooloi are essentially the hub of the Oankali species and the hub of any five-member Oankali-human family structure it permanently joins. Within this family unit, one of the ooloi's primary responsibilities is genetically constructing the family's children. This means it determines, among other characteristics, which human and Oankali features each child will have and which gender the child will become. The ooloi also determine which parent will carry the child they create, the female human parent or the female Oankali parent (70).

With an array of genetic material at their disposal, it is significant that when the ooloi transmit memories of the Oankali's evolution to newly constructed children—also referred to as constructs—they never include the pain from past species' cultural or historical traumas. Arguably, because the hybrid species that the Oankali create retain no emotional memory of species sufferings, the constructs are not fixed in a cycle of rememory, wherein they are trapped in a recursive loop of forgetting and remembering. Oankali do not view the transference of the ache that accompanies memories of trauma as necessary to the proliferation, sustainability, and future of the Oankali species. The focus for the ooloi, and by extension the Oankali, are memories that are useful (Butler 323).

Describing the Oankali as eschewing the emotional pain of trauma does not discount the Oankali's respect for other species' histories or historical traumas. Rather, such an observation emphasizes the Oankali intentionality of not transferring pain through memory. The results of this practice are generations upon generations of sustainable Oankali communities who recognize each other as part of the Oankali interspecies family, express eagerness to learn about each other, and—of course—willingly participate in the gene trade. For instance, one of the historical memories the ooloi transfer to the children they construct enables generations of Oankali to reflexively identify other Oankali—whether

they encounter them within a twenty-, fifty-, or one-hundred-year time span (35). Jdahya, the Oankali alien who awakens the protagonist Lilith from stasis in *Dawn* shares this insight with her about future Oankali: "they'll recognize one another. Memory of a division is passed on biologically. I remember everyone that has taken place in my family since we left the homeland" (35).

Butler provides additional indicators that the Oankali value historical information about the variety of species that collectively comprise their ancestors. Throughout the trilogy, the reader learns about the various physical abilities the Oankali have gained for themselves or their ecosystem from other species. Nikanj, an ooloi, describes the Oankali's first ancestor as living in "great shallow oceans. . . . We were many-bodied and spoke with lights and color patterns among ourselves. . . ." (62). Oankali also remember the ancestors who did not survive. Jdahya tells Lilith that the Oankali gained their ability to fatally sting as a defense mechanism from a group of extinct ancestors, noting that, "Some things were immune to their poison" (28). Jdahya's statement indicates that these ancestors eventually succumbed to predators and became extinct. As with the story of the water-based ancestors Nikanj shares, Jdahya recounts this story about their ancestors as data, material that informs the Oankali's perpetual evolution.

While the Oankali do not prioritize traumatic emotion in transferred memories, they do experience feelings of love, loss, anger, or fear associated with trauma in the present. Readers witness these sentiments in book two, *Adulthood Rites*. During a battle against human resisters, one of the fighters nearly severs the limb Nikanj uses for healing and bioengineering purposes. Nikanj's "left sensory arm had been hacked almost off. The arm seemed to be hanging by little more than a length of tough gray skin. Clear fluid and blood spurted from the wound" (231). Lilith, who has now formed a bond with Nikanj, lay with it for days, lending her genetic material to help it mend. She does so with little regard for how the resister humans will judge her: "Lilith stripped, refusing to think how she would look to the humans still conscious. They would be certain now that she was a traitor. Stripping naked on the battlefield to lie down with the enemy" (232). Later in the novel when Nikanj's sensory arm is healed, it indicates gratefulness and a desire to ensure Lilith that it is well, "'Are you all right?' she asked. It moved the arm easily, normally, used it to stroke her face in an acquired human gesture" (235). Nikanj's intimate gesture indicates both thankfulness and affection.

The reader encounters another example of Oankali emotion in the third book, *Imago*. Nikanj mistakenly creates a human-Oankali ooloi. The Oankali view Jodahs as problematic because it potentially possesses what the alien species sees as the dangerous human contradiction of intelligence and hierarchy, as well as the seemingly paradoxical healing and life-giving qualities of an ooloi. Nikanj

expresses love and protection for its child and advocates against its exile (537-538). When Jodahs expresses fear that it will be exiled from its family, Nikanj tells the human-ooloi construct, “You’ll stay with us.’ No qualification. It would not allow me to be sent away. Yet it had agreed with other Oankali a century before that any accidental construct ooloi must be sent to the ship. . . . But Nikanj would not allow me to be sent away. It had said so” (538). Nikanj’s unconventional pivot away from the Oankali consensus indicates its love and protective instincts.

Each of these occurrences is physically and emotionally traumatic for the Oankali, their human family, and community members. However, when both ooloi, Nikanj and Jodahs, transmit their memories of these incidents to future generations, their children will know how and under what circumstance Lilith saved Nikanj’s life, as well as how and in what manner Nikanj protected Jodahs. Their future construct progeny will conceptually know about the emotional trauma associated with these memories, but these memories will be data rather than emotional weights. They will serve as cautionary tales for how to integrate with new species and pitfalls to consider when constructing new children. For humans in *Lilith’s Brood* to thrive in a new reality shaped by the Oankali ethos, they must learn to adopt this alien approach to engaging useful memories.

All humans in *Lilith’s Brood* struggle with their memory of Earth as it used to be. Central to the heartache of their cultural and individual rememory is that Earth as they knew it is gone, damaged by a nuclear war between the United States and Russia and further altered by the Oankali alien invasion. The Oankali have studied, learned from, and tried to heal humanity on their alien mothership Chkahichdahk for at least two hundred fifty years. As the mothership orbited Earth during this time, the aliens also reconstructed the flora and fauna of the planet with the intentions of returning to Earth with the humans to begin gene trading. These changes are so vast and unfamiliar that the Oankali must train a human, the protagonist Lilith, to teach other humans who want to return to Earth how to recognize the new plant and animal species and navigate the Oankali social and familial structures. Lilith must also explain to the humans she trains that an important part of the Oankali resettlement plan includes encouraging humans to process memory, and by extension cultural trauma, as accepted facts and not sites of pain. The humans in *Dawn* who willingly return to a different Earth are the ones who believe they can accept their traumatic past, their very unfamiliar alien present, and their uncharted, alien future.

However, once they arrive at a seemingly familiar Earth, some of these humans choose to leave the Oankali-human family structures on Earth and form human resistor communities. The trauma these humans experienced from a nuclear war and a subsequent alien invasion proves to be overwhelming. Many

people feel they have lost so much already that they want to retain a version of humanity not influenced by the Oankali. The human resisters hold onto their view of humanity even though it means no access to healthcare if someone gets sick, strictures on deviant behaviors such as assault, and no means to propagate their version of humanity. Their trauma, pain, fear, and resentment act as a fixative. Many would rather expire in this fixed state, clouded by rememory, than explore alien opportunities to heal and flourish.

The question the humans in *Lilith's Brood* must ultimately ask themselves is whether they want to thrive in a new reality or languish in an old one that no longer exists. Acceptance is the key to this reorientation of memories. Indeed, when Lilith considers the mechanism that undergirds her ability to remain sound during one of her awakenings on the Oankali ship, she credits acceptance as the primary reason. Lilith muses that she, "had learned to keep her sanity by accepting things as she found them, adapting herself to new circumstances by putting aside the old ones whose memories might overwhelm her" (131). While this perception is a step towards moving through rememory, Lilith must reconsider the mechanisms she employs to process memory.

Lilith begins her new journey towards her future with the Oankali through requests to document her memories in familiar, human ways such as writing. She soon learns from Nikanj that the Oankali have no alternative modes of recording their histories or daily activities besides their memories (61-62). Readers only witness the Oankali creating print and photograph-like images when they give Lilith a group of dossiers on selected humans so that she may begin waking them from stasis. Lilith describes the pictures as "paintings, impressions of the inner person as well as the outer physical reality. . . . Oankali interrogators had painted these pictures with (Oankali) sensory tentacles or sensory arms using deliberately produced body fluids" (124). A new way to remember and a new role for memories that expands to a different intention and modality of recording data offer new pathways towards becoming unfixed from emotional trauma.

Lilith is not the only human to crave physical artifacts and tools as a mode of remembering the past. Readers witness the contrast of this human penchant with the Oankali approach to remembering in *Adulthood Rites*. Human resisters from the Phoenix community kidnap the male human-Oankali construct Akin when he is a toddler. The humans eventually realize that he is Lilith's son. They also discover that Akin, unlike a human toddler, can speak in full sentences and possesses a mouth full of teeth as well as a grey, tentacle-like tongue. As much as they despise these characteristics of Akin, they are so desperate to have children in their midst, that they care for him anyway. As he matures, he eventually returns to his human-Oankali family.

As Akin lives with the human resisters in the Phoenix community, he learns about salvage sites where humans travel to search for raw materials. At these sites they often find artifacts such as, “glass, plastic, ceramic, and metal” (367-68). At one point, Gabe, while holding Akin, shows the toddler a coin and says, “Phoenix money. . . . That’s a phoenix rising from its own ashes. A phoenix was a mythical bird. You understand?” (368). Akin replies “thoughtlessly” with the phrase, “A lie” (368). When Gabe moves to put Akin down, Akin apologizes for his careless response to which Gabe replies, “You said my dream, the dream of everyone here, was a lie” (369). An important mechanism for retaining a sense of the past is language and artifacts (Eyerman 9). Gabe’s reaction to Akin’s characterization of the Phoenix community’s source of belief systems underscores why the Oankali insist that humans divorce themselves from practices that encourage an attachment to the memories and beliefs connected to the past. Mitigating how humans remember is one strategy towards this effect; managing their ability to participate in communal remembering broadens the impact of this strategy.

Accepting the Oankali approach to memory is an important component of humans beginning to adopt the Oankali identity from inside the group through verbal communication and stories. Eyerman’s perspective supports this view. He writes, “Collective memory is conceived as the outcome of interaction, a conversational process within which individuals locate themselves. This dialogic process is one of negotiation for both individuals and the collective itself. It is never arbitrary” (7). Intentional reifications of the collective memory are evident in the stories the Oankali tell Lilith about themselves, as well as the evolutionary nature of these stories about how the Oankali species and ecosystem continue to develop. Until she learns Oankali histories as memories and adopts related communication perspectives and practices, Lilith is constantly reminded that she is an outsider, not part of the community.

Lilith realizes the intricacies of the interdependent Oankali ecosystem through a grave error. In *Dawn* Lilith wanders too far away from the kinship group who informally adopted her and, consequently, their area of the ship. She eats an orange and buries the peelings in this foreign portion of the ship, which results in poisoning this section of the ship (67-69). Once Lilith understands the harm she has caused, she “focused on the fact that it was alive and she had probably caused the ship pain. She had not merely caused an interesting effect, she had caused harm” (68). Had the ooloi Kahguyah’t not stepped in to stop the spread of the poison and heal the affected area, the effects could have potentially spread to the entire ship. If burying an orange peel in the wrong part of the Oankali ship could cause this level of suffering, circulating painful, traumatic memories from innumerable species could devastate the Oankali community.

While humans must rely on the oral traditions of storytelling to share memory data, the collective memory of the Oankali resides in their yashi. They often share information, including memories, through the nonverbal communication method of touching their tentacles (106). Information travels back and forth between them similarly to how data moves in broadband cables. Eyerman quotes Mannheim, who highlights the value of this practice: “The function of generational memory for Mannheim consists in offering ‘fresh-contact’ ‘with the social and cultural heritage’ of a social order, which ‘facilitates re-evaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won’” (Eyerman 11). Eyerman’s use of Mannheim underlines the Oankali approach to futurity. The communitarian parameters the Oankali construct around selecting and transmitting memories and present experiences ensure that the practice of deemphasizing pain when preserving memories continues.

If there is one pitfall of the Oankali practice of shuffling off memories and biodata that are not useful to the community, it is an inability to accept unanticipated innovation. As a naturally curious species, the alien race enthusiastically covets new information, new experiences, and new species for gene trading. However, they are only able to excel in these practices when they can control and design a recognizable outcome. In other words, they invite newness, but only newness they view as obviously beneficial to the sustainability of the Oankali. They illustrate their aversion to unknown developments that will affect the community when the ooloi collectively delay the construction of male human-Oankali children and ooloi human-Oankali children. They view both types of constructs as unstable and therefore detrimental to the Oankali community.

However, as no scientific process is foolproof, one must anticipate unexpected outcomes and value how these surprises can enhance future processes. In *Lilith's Brood* the types of constructs that the Oankali feared most were able to reflect upon on their Oankali-human community with original perspectives that ultimately advanced the species and Oankali-human relations. The new outlook of Akin and Jodahs contributes to an expanded consideration of genetic bioengineering and the importance of respecting other species’ need to define their own brand of freedom from the Oankali. Lilith’s son Akin offers an especially poignant example of such influence on Oankali-human relations.

Akin’s lived experiences enable him to teach the Oankali-human families—by his mere presence—how to raise and nurture a male human-Oankali construct. And, because of the time he spent with the humans as a toddler, Akin learns about human culture outside of the Oankali narrative. Akin also becomes the bridge between remembering and forgetting for the traumatized humans. While with them he experiences the complexities of the human condition that the Oankali

renounce as the human contradiction of humanity of intelligence and need for hierarchy. Akin also unintentionally experiences his metamorphosis in the human community and witnesses kindness and nurturing from a perspective other than that of the Oankali. As a member of a new generation of human-Oankali constructs, Akin learns what the Oankali and humans were not able to learn from one another. Their human contradiction was never an issue to be conquered; rather, it was a reality to be accepted and shaped.

Additionally, he concludes that humans who were part of the resistor camps strive to be free, not new humans forced to adapt to the Oankali ethos and their practices. Akin's lived experiences among the humans allow him to view their past and current traumas as complex and surmountable. As the conduit between resistor humans and the Oankali, he crafts a solution to the humans' rememory of the nuclear war that destroyed Earth, and the alien invasion that remade the planet and robbed them of their ability to procreate. Akin, one of the unlikely manifestations of an Oankali future, advocates for any human who desires relative autonomy from the Oankali to settle on Mars. In the second book, *Adulthood Rites*, Akin negotiates with the Oankali to give humans Mars, and to restore their reproductive rights once they arrive on the red planet. There is no doubt that humans born on Mars will be different from those born on Earth. Human responses and methods for negotiating the Martian environment alone will shape Martian-born humans' lived experiences. But in terms of being trapped in their rememories and unable to shape their future, a new environment and distance from the Oankali will relieve the tension of remembering and forgetting.

The new generation is not the only part of the Oankali community that requires unique solutions for the sometimes difficult, interstitial moments between accessing memories and shaping the future. The acceptance that resolves rememory and prepares one to create a sustainable future is not idyllic. Lilith's acceptance of her present was an integral part of her moving towards a new future. Although she has escaped the tension of rememory, she still engages her memories and reviews her decisions during occasional walks by herself. Another interpretation of these brief solo respites is a version of walking meditations where she often reconnects with who she is becoming as informed by her memories (63, 467). Akin says of his mother, "Sometimes she stretched the bonds between herself and the family. She wandered. She still wandered. But she always came home" (466). In this manner, Lilith—similarly to the humans who elect to settle Mars—does not become a new self; she becomes a free self in that she is not fixed in a tension between forgetting the past and remembering the past. She is, in the Oankali manner, intentional about remembering the past in ways that she controls and that remind her of her humanity.

Viewing Lilith's need to walk in the woods as a method of reclaiming herself invites a comparison to Baby Suggs's healing ceremonies in the woods in Morrison's *Beloved*. Her practice illustrates a method of remembering which invites a new way of recovering. Eke points to the scene in *Beloved* where Baby Suggs shepherds members of her community into a woodland clearing and helps them "reconcile their bodies with themselves. She guides their healing process, returning them to parts of their bodies which had been commodified or dismembered under slavery" (10). An important component of this healing process is for this group of "people, whose bodies, psyches, and spirits have been traumatized" (10) to not only remember and accept, but also design a new reality around how these memories informed who they would be in the future. While the mechanics of Lilith's walks differ from Baby Suggs's ceremonies, the intentions that inform each woman's activities share many similarities to the Oankali method of remembering.

In both instances Lilith and Baby Suggs employ methods to reclaim themselves that do not center on the pain of emotional trauma. Their approaches to reconnecting with themselves require acceptance and reframing of the past as they determine which traumatic memories are useful and identify the memories that should expire. Because humans do not interact with ooloi who could moderate emotional trauma, Lilith's and Baby Suggs's approaches also emphasizes the necessity of a mechanism that enables selected memories to expire naturally.

Levy writes that in *Beloved* "the scar [of slavery] intrudes on the story . . . if history hurts too much—then self-understanding and self-definition are damaged products" (qtd. in Powell 107). In other words, if individuals are unable to process history, then their understanding of themselves as well as their future becomes bound and incomplete. Viewing memory as an asset rather than as a site of pain provides opportunities to redefine the past as a resource rather than confinement. With this new perspective one gains new insight into how to engage the lessons from cultural trauma and transfer them to a freer version of oneself and of one's community.

Perhaps if early in the text Sethe had been able to create a version of Baby Suggs's healing ceremony that allowed her to mitigate the emotional pain of her trauma, she could have shared her story with Denver as material from a Sankofa-like data stream. With this new frame of reference for her past, maybe her advice to Denver about the site of Sweet Home, the site of her mother's—and so many other enslaved people's—traumas would look towards the future. Her advice to Denver would be that should she ever be able to travel to the Sweet Home plantation safely, she should plant flowers and trees in an act of remembrance, renewal, and reclamation.

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Tangible Black Joy and Beyond: An Interview with Isiah Lavender III

Shelby Crosby and Terrence Tucker

We are excited to interview Dr. Isiah Lavender III for this special issue of *CLAJ*. Dr. Lavender is one of the most prolific scholars of Afrofuturism of the last decade. His interest in race and science fiction, shown in 2014's *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction* and 2017's *DisOrienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science Fiction*, has evolved into a significant interest in Afrofuturism, particularly in literature. His interest in Afrofuturism's literary history and present contrasts Afrofuturism's expansion into film, art, and music. Along with *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement and Literary Afrofuturism in Twenty-First Century* (co-edited), his upcoming book *Conversations with Nalo Hopkinson* signals his interest in capturing and preserving the voices and experiences of some of the field's most influential yet underappreciated voices.

How do we define ourselves? How do others define us? These are the central questions that Isiah Lavender III answers in texts like *Afrofuturism Rising and Literary Afrofuturism*. Thinking about slave narratives as “laying bare a science-fictional American existence. Each of these black freedom fighters engenders the afrofuturist vista from antebellum America to the twenty-first century by creating a legacy of resistance.” It is this legacy of resistance, rooted in the “science-fictional American existence” that allows readers to understand the hope that lies within these narratives. Readers can also reimagine and redefine the notion of resistance in new terms, new words, and, perhaps, new worlds—new worlds that fugitive slaves had yet to imagine. As artists and scholars recover the voices and experiences that many have tried to erase, Lavender challenges us to consider that “Racism refuses to die even when the dead rise.” For him, the importance of Afrofuturism is not in happy endings or in easy solutions, but in the joy and possibility that lies in telling our own stories and continuing the search for the notions of freedom the fugitive slaves relentlessly pursued.

1. How far back can we trace the presence of Afrofuturism or Black Speculative Fiction in African American literature?

Certainly, I think the presence of Afrofuturism can be seen in the spirituals and folktales prevalent in the black vernacular tradition of early America because songs and stories transported tired black bodies and black minds of the enslaved to more

hopeful places such as heaven. How could they not? For example, the spiritual “I Know Moon-Rise” engages outer space in evoking the moon and the stars, a physical actual heaven that Octavia E. Butler will extrapolate upon more than 200 years later in her great novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), where the destiny of her imaginary religion, Earthseed, is to take root among the stars. Looking to the past to move into the future is surely Afrofuturist and absolutely related to the Akan concept of Sankofa first derived in Ghana. I do not think this concept occurred to the originator of the term Mark Dery when he invented the word in 1993 to frame a set of interviews with Samuel R. Delany Jr., Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Dery did nominally have an African American future, technoculture, and prosthetic enhancement firmly in mind when he defined Afrofuturism, though that’s debatable since he used William Gibson’s orbital Rastas as an example. Delany brilliantly clapped back to this political error or cultural misstep on Dery’s part with his skillful, even beautiful riff:

You’ll forgive me if, as a black reader, I didn’t leap up to proclaim this passing presentation of a powerless and wholly nonoppositional set of black dropouts, by a Virginia-born white writer, as the coming of the black millennium in science fiction; but maybe that’s just a black thang.... (195)

In short, Afrofuturism predates the founding of the United States from a skewed viewpoint even with the paradox of its being defined in the late twentieth century. I think the race of Dery himself has caused a bit of anxiety for black Afrofuturists because they did not in fact coin the term themselves and there is power in defining things. As I understand it, this power is why the Nigerian American writer Nnedi Okorafor invents her own term Africanfuturism to explain her own writing and refuses the label of Afrofuturist. But that’s definitely not what you asked! But I see this difficulty in your question of framing in terms of Afrofuturism versus Black Speculative Fiction. These literary expressions feel like different things to me.

2. What is the greatest misconception about Afrofuturism?

I think the greatest misconception about Afrofuturism is that all associated stories, no matter how loosely connected, are hopeful. I mean where is the hope in *Zone One*? The unnamed black protagonist earns the nickname of “Mark Spitz,” the great American Olympic swimmer—Michael Phelps before Michael Phelps—because he cannot swim and refuses to jump off a bridge twenty-feet down into the water below with the other wreckers to avoid a zombie horde. Instead, he expends all of his ammo killing the undead while hopping from car wreck to car wreck in the process. His friend Richie thought it funny to name him Mark Spitz because the unnamed black protagonist can’t swim. It’s not that he can’t swim, he knows a few

strokes according to the text, so it's probably a fear of heights. Anyway, Whitehead subversively engages the stereotype of blacks not being able to swim and provides a clue to the race of his main character past the halfway point of the novel for casual readers. But a more diligent reader will recognize the racial epiphany on page 26 when Whitehead foreshadows telling his audience how the unnamed black protagonist gets the nickname and will know that the nameless main character codes as black. Anyway, New York City gets overrun by skels at the end. What a brilliant word for zombie by the way. Racism refuses to die even when the dead rise. My point *is* that Afrofuturism allows for dark and pessimistic endings as well except black authors and creatives get to tell their own stories and therein lies the misapprehension.

3. How important is the Black Arts Movement to the rise of the themes found in Afrofuturism and the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM)? How influential were artists like Sun Ra, Samuel Delany, and Octavia Butler to 21st century notions of Afrofuturism/BSAM?

Listen, I appreciate the significance of BAM and what it meant and still means with its art, activism, and promotion of black pride. How could I not? I'm an Afrofuturist. I dig the past to move the future for myself, for my family, for my people after all. Amiri Baraka is one of my favorite poets and certainly Nikki Giovanni. Talk about giants! I think Samuel Delany deserves inclusion here too. His science fiction from this period is absolutely political and utterly magnificent. His early work is always associated with the New Wave in science fiction because of his experimentation, social politics, and artistry irrespective of the scientific accuracy of his story-telling. We're talking, race, sexuality, class, the importance of language and memory in his writing among other things. But it could and should also be associated with BAM. Just read *The Ballad of Beta-2* (1965) or *Nova* (1968) and you'll know he belongs. How could he not? He absorbs everything racist the country had to offer African Americans in the mid-twentieth century and his politics are clearly visible in the writing. He chooses to express and refract his view of reality in fantastic, if not futuristic, settings. The same goes for Octavia Butler. If anything, she has eclipsed Chip in importance. These two *are* simply legendary and have influenced anyone daring to call themselves a black speculative fiction writer in the twenty-first century.

I confess: I prefer literature to music. Nonetheless, you'd have to be living under a rock not to appreciate the genius of Sun Ra and the gravity of his influence on black cultures. His otherness makes possible an André 3000 or Janelle Monáe.

Of course, the BSAM deeply roots itself in this tradition of political art and activism. I wholly admire what Reynaldo Anderson and his crew have done to create

a living network of black creatives, intellectuals, academics, and activists who, in turn, present African diasporic worldviews for consideration with respect to black futurity through the lenses of black struggles and black cultures. Technology, art, history, design, literature, music, religion, film, politics, philosophy—all of it. I've learned so much from their efforts and look forward to what's coming. They represent. They hold it down. Total respect.

4. How does Afrofuturism/BSAM challenge or revise traditional notions of identity of gender and sexuality in the black community?

Without hesitation, I'd say read Delany (*Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*) and Butler (*Fledgling*) first; proceed to Nalo Hopkinson (*The Chaos*), Nisi Shawl (*Everfair*), Bill Campbell (*Koontown Killing Kaper*), and N.K. Jemisin (*The Fifth Season*); and round it off with Nicky Drayden (*The Prey of Gods*), Rivers Solomon (*An Unkindness of Ghosts*), and Marlon James (*Black Leopard, Red Wolf*). Add a dash of Janelle Monáe for good measure (*The Memory Librarian*). This partial and incomplete list should provide you with a sense of how Afrofuturism/BSAM challenges and remixes traditional notions of gender and sexuality and of identity in the black community.

5. Where does Afrofuturism/BSAM fit in contemporary black literary, political, and creative movements? (#BlackLivesMatter, Afro-Pessimism, postblack art)

I think a short story like Violet Allen's "The Venus Effect" perfectly demonstrates what #BlackLivesMatter can mean for Afrofuturism/BSAM. Allen uses metafiction to tell a speculative tale of how a police officer murders the titular black hero Apollo Allen at the end of each vignette. The story is comprised of 9 vignettes and 9 metacommentaries. Apollo changes in each story and each story changes and takes a further into an alien takeover subplot. The opening vignette begins with a Chicago rooftop party. In the second story Apollo is a local basketball star, who makes the winning shot in the championship. In the third, he's a teenager sitting on a stoop who decides to walk the new girl home. He's Black Justice in the fourth entry, a member of a super team like the Power Rangers. Allen changes up with the fifth entry by switching Apollo's gender to a black woman, who happens to be walking through a poorly lit parking deck to her car after getting off work. The sixth vignette is a love story in an apartment with Apollo resting his head in his girlfriend's lap deep in intimate conversation when the cops break in with a no-knock warrant. In fact, Apollo doesn't even appear in the seventh vignette at the end of time with only the alien Lord Tklox waiting to let loose the Omega Question killing every-

body. Irony of ironies, there are no black people in the far-flung future because science fiction said so as Allen riffs in the accompanying metacommentary. With the eighth vignette, Apollo is a plainclothes detective. And the brilliant ninth entry subverts everything by putting us into the mind of a white police officer. Allen, in the second-person present voice, forces the reader to become a “You” during a stop and frisk of a black man minding his own business walking on the sidewalk who fits the description of a mugger. As the black man reaches for something bulging in his pocket, the Omega question triggers in that moment—who matters? That’s the last line of the story. This question matters. I’d say that’s powerful and provocative writing that engages a sense of the Black Lives Matter movement and the black social death we face in contemporary times à la Frank B. Wilderson III.

Honestly, I never put much stock in postblack notions. Not a day goes by where the white world lets me forget my skin color since my first moment of “epiphanal blackness,” to borrow a phrase from my friend Piper Kendrix Williams. From that moment, it has entirely enveloped me even when strangers are unsure of my racial background, not trusting their eyeballs, until they ask “What are you?” And they do ask! This is what Chip Delany calls the “total surround” in his magisterial essay “Racism and Science Fiction.” To me, the creators of race define it, won’t let it go, will kill for it out of a misguided notion of being replaced. I’m still reeling from the Buffalo attack as a native of the area.

6. What has the impact of *Black Panther*’s enormous popularity had on the mainstream’s interest to Afrofuturism?

Now that a few years have passed, I’d say the impact of *Black Panther* has been magnificent to behold. All of academia has now heard of Afrofuturism. That’s one of the worlds in which I exist and I immediately inhabit. I will never forget an elevator ride at some conference I shared with a professor at Macalester by the name of Daylanne English back in the early 2000s where we were talking about Afrofuturism and she remarked that it may just be the next Harlem Renaissance. Daggone it! I believe she was right!

Black Panther to the black world was the moment ushering in this proclamation. *Black Panther* represents a cultural zeitgeist, where the entire world has seen black people and black cultures written into the future. It’s our *Star Wars*. I mean young black girls will desire to become scientists because of Shuri. On another note, I fondly recall black people pausing and posing to take selfies in front of the 10-foot-high movie poster like they were up in the club. It was enjoyable to witness a tangible black joy! Guilty as charged right here!

7. Who are the leading Afrofuturist/Black Speculative artists?

Right now?! That's easy: Nalo, Nnedi, Nisi, and Nora; then Sheree Renée Thomas, Bill Campbell, John Jennings, Stacey Robinson, Tade Thompson, Jordan Peele, Janelle Monáe, P. Djeli Clark, Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki...

Modify the question to academics and you have Alondra Nelson, Ruha Benjamin, Adilifu Nama, Reynaldo Anderson, andré carrington, Kinitra Brooks. Oh, some of them might not identify themselves as Afrofuturists, but I find their scholarship rewarding in terms of my own thinking. More science fictionally-oriented folks like Lisa Yaszek and Mark Bould, serious allies and serious thinkers.

And lastly, and most importantly, always Delany.

8. Where are we in the Black Speculative Arts Movement and the push towards Afrofuturism/Black Futurity? Afrofuturism 3.0? Does something like African Futurism contest the diasporic impulse many claim in Afrofuturism?

Well, I think artists like Nnedi Okorafor have the right to define their own work as Africanfuturism. I respect this choice and support it with my own purchasing power. She's such a talented writer. Everyone should be reading her work. I think other parts of the African Diaspora will seek to define their own creations too and they should be free to do so unencumbered by what academics might say. There's plenty of room for conversation and I am humbled to be a part of it. I'm happy to see where these latest iterations take us as the next generation pushes to the fore.

Dear Mothership,

Marcus Wicker

Whereas we spit your cyclical ubiquitous goodness
at the dawn of each break on December 25th Americans belt carols
for their creator's kin call it Christmas Wherein their creator's
surrogates trekked 65kHz [to Bethlehem] to see about a tax man
you'd figure they'd put it on wax: *Peep the Ponzi scheme The IRS issues our
refund checks w/ Etsy gift card revenue & guess whose chin fleece resembles St. Nick's?*
[A: Uncle Sam's] Glimpse the artifice? The Last Poets said *the white man's
got a God Complex* A Tribe Called Quest said *God lives thru* Whereas mine resides
across the corridor Night before low Fro haloed by dying snow Mary
rolled three rusted kid bikes up five flights & no sooner than a thrown
switch heralded one sickly tree crinkled newsprint & spray cans
rustling a plastic bag [in that instant] i adopted their traditions Sneak-gifted
her white wall tires & some frankincense Macaroons
from Morocco Pumice stones Shea butter for the soles of her feet

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R. Nicole Smith earned her BA in English from Spelman College and her PhD in Contemporary American Literature at Georgia State University. Her secondary area of study is Rhetoric and Composition. She is currently a Senior Lecturer at Spelman College where she teaches courses in composition, grammar, Black speculative fiction, and the African diaspora. Nicole's research centers on the ways in which a womanist reading of speculative fiction, written by Black women authors, highlights these authors' texts as unique approaches to engaging intersectional oppression. A component of these inquires includes translating Black feminist theories and speculative stances, such as Afrofuturism, into new media pedagogies in the literature and composition classrooms.

Ousseynou B. Traore was born in Senegal and holds an MA and a PhD from the Department of African Languages and Literature (now renamed African Cultural Studies), University of Wisconsin-Madison. Traore taught graduate and undergraduate English, African and African American literature courses at several universities in the US, including designing a special course on Toni Morrison's oeuvre while researching and writing conference papers on them over a long teaching career. Traore is now working on a book on *Song of Solomon*.

Terrence T. Tucker is an associate professor of African American literature in the Department of English at the University of Memphis. He is the author of *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock* (University Press of Florida, 2018). He has also published essays on topics ranging from race and pedagogy to Ernest Gaines to African American superheroes and in journals like *Pedagogy*, *Southern Literary Journal*, and *College Language Association Journal*. He is finishing work on his second book project, "The Rise of the Afristocracy: Portraits of the Black Elite in Contemporary African American Literature" contracted with University Press of Florida. This book traces the representation of the black elite in African American literature from the lives of free blacks during slavery to rising black middle and upper classes in the twenty-first century.

Brandy E. Underwood, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of African American Literature and Culture in the Department of English at California State University, Northridge. Underwood received her Ph.D. in English at UCLA. She is currently at work on her first book manuscript, *Feeling the Crowd: Affective Responses to Collective Violence in African American Literature*, which explores the nexus between leadership and racial uplift in literature. She also writes poetry, and her work will be published in an upcoming issue of *The Journal*.

Dr. Christopher Allen Varlack, the #BLKLitProfessor, is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Arcadia University where he teaches courses in African diasporic literature and world literature at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Editor of *Critical Insights: Harlem Renaissance* (2015) and *Critical Insights: Civil Rights Literature, Past & Present* (2017), he is currently editing two major projects—a special double issue of *The Langston Hughes Review* on the life and legacy of Sterling A. Brown and a forty-essay volume titled Zora Neale Hurston in Context for Cambridge University Press. His work on race, gender, and cultural politics in African American literature has appeared in *CLAJ*, *Third Stone Journal*, and *the South Atlantic Review* in addition to a number of edited volumes. He is currently in his second term as the president of the Langston Hughes Society. For more on his work, visit his website at www.christopherallenvarlack.com.

Jasmine Wade is a doctoral candidate in Cultural Studies at the University of California, Davis with designated emphases in Feminist Theory and Research and Native American Studies. Her dissertation, "Healing/Encountering: Black and Indigenous Radical Aesthetic Practices" is an interdisciplinary project that looks at Black and Indigenous speculative aesthetics, including the manifestos of Black Lives Matter and Idle No More, in relation. Her work engages Black Studies, Native American and Indigenous Studies, Black and Native feminisms, queer studies, and speculative futures studies. In addition to her work as a Lecturer at Sacramento State University, Jasmine is also a freelance curriculum writer. In this capacity, she writes inclusive, critical teaching guides for educators and reviews educational materials with a culturally responsive education lens. Jasmine is also a speculative fiction writer whose work has appeared in *Drunken Boat*, *Trouble the Waters: Tales of the Deep Blue*, *Lunch Ticket*, and more.

Marcus Wicker is the author of *Silencer* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)—winner of the Society of Midland Authors Award—and *Maybe the Saddest Thing* (Harper Perennial, 2012), selected by D.A. Powell for the National Poetry Series. He is the recipient of a 2021 National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, 2011 Ruth Lilly Fellowship, as well as fellowships from The Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and Cave Canem. Wicker's poems have appeared in *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic*, *Oxford American*, and *Poetry Magazine*. He is Poetry Editor of *Southern Indiana Review*, and an Associate Professor at the University of Memphis where he teaches in the MFA program.

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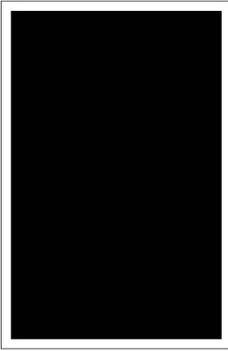
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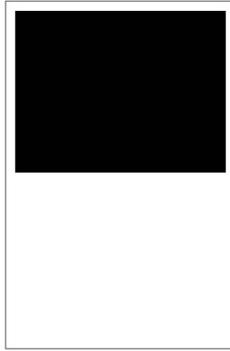
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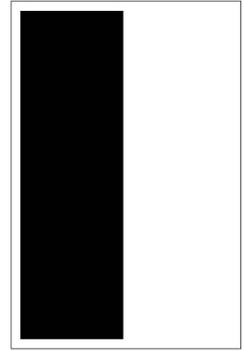
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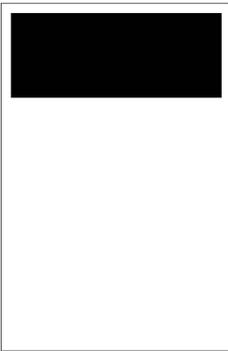
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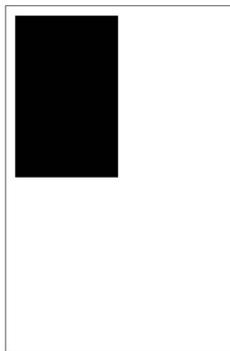
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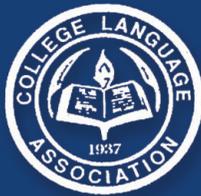
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