Speculative Aesthetics: Time, Space, and the Black Subject in 20th and 21st Century

African American Literature

By

Regina Danielle Hamilton

A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in English

Written under the direction of

Michelle Stephens

And approved by

_____

_____

_____

_____

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Speculative Aesthetics: Time, Space, and the Black Subject in 20th and 21st Century

African American Literature

by

REGINA DANIELLE HAMILTON

Dissertation Director:

Michelle Stephens

In "Speculative Aesthetics: Time, Space, and the Black Subject in 20th and 21st Century African American Literature" I engage the speculative as an umbrella term for any literary device or trope that exists beyond the boundaries of realism, rather than as a lesser acknowledged sub-genre used by authors within the African American literary canon. Though seemingly marginal, speculative themes, characters, and settings are fairly common within the African American literary canon. Therefore, one crucial element of my argument is that the speculative should be thought of as an important component of black aesthetics employed by authors of African American literature to tackle issues that are central to the canon and to black life in America. One such issue is the possibility, or lack thereof, of untethering the American black subject from the afterlives of enslavement. Authors of African American literature have been using speculative devices to create breaks or gaps in the time and space of the American nation in order to disconnect the American black subject from the afterlives of enslavement since the 19th century. "Speculative Aesthetics" focuses on the speculative means by which authors of African American literature move the American black subject out of empty time and abstract space to the future.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Deborah Hamilton, who is everything, and who has saved me from myself and everyone else more times than I can count. To my father Albert Hamilton who didn't live to see the culmination of this dream so dear to both of us. To Dorian Townsend, whose love knows no bounds, and whose heart holds my heart (especially when I'm behind schedule). To Michelle Stephens, who has worked tirelessly with me and fought for me from the beginning. Michelle, you have had the greatest impact on shaping me as a scholar, and in my professional life I hope very much to make you proud. To Courtney Borack, Cheryl Robinson, and Angela Piggee— you are the true heart of the Rutgers English department. To Cheryl Wall and Brittany Cooper for contributing to my education as both my professors and committee members. Thank you both for serving on my dissertation committee. To Evie Shockley (and Cheryl Wall again) for serving double duty on both my comprehensive examination and dissertation committees. To Stephane Robolin for your continued support. To Olabode Ibironke for that one conversation that changed everything. To Lynn Festa for allowing me to be your TA, and for always seriously and thoughtfully engaging my work. And finally, to my cohort, I love you all, and my successes belong to all of us.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

"Speculative Aesthetics" investigates the use of speculative literary devices within African American literature from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. Authors of African American literature have always tried to seize some control over the narratives produced about black people and their experiences in America. To do this, African American authors created texts that looked beyond realism as the only literary tool that could expose and rework the discursive misrepresentations which supported the oppression of black Americans. Within the African American literary canon, which has persistently centered itself on the realities of the enslaved past of African Americans and the modern fallout of that history, the literature produced by African Americans often includes literary elements that fall outside of the boundaries of realism. Thus, in the African American literary canon, the speculative and realism are not at cross-purposes, but are both important components of the literary representation of African Americans. Speculative literary devices offer African American authors rhetorical and discursive freedom, which is particularly important in texts grounded in the realities of anti-blackness.

The African American story is not only the history of African American enslavement or who African Americans are in the present, but it is how African Americans see themselves in the future. Throughout the twentieth century, authors of African American literature have utilized speculative literary devices to move the American black subject through time and space in multiple directions. Often movements backward prioritize giving voice to the experiences of enslaved African Americans, and treating the stories of the enslaved with humanity and empathy. In African American

literary texts that move the American black subject to futuristic or parallel timelines,

authors seek to imagine futures in which black people have overcome (and in some cases

succumbed to) the anti-blackness so endemic to the American nation. In "Speculative

Aesthetics" I focus specifically on African American speculative texts in which the

American black subject is moved to alternative or futuristic timelines and spaces. I am

interested in the ways that authors construct the temporal and spatial schisms required to

break the American black subject out of national time and from the space of the

American nation. I also engage contemporary theoretical discussions on Afrofuturism,

Afropessimism, posthumanism, and postmodernism in order to investigate how African

American authors use the speculative and particular forms of futurity to respond to the

sociopolitical and cultural concerns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Authors of African American literature, particularly those who use the speculative

to move the American black subject to a future or alternative timeline, are also

responding to the perpetuation of what Saidiya Hartman calls the "afterlives of

enslavement" (Hartman 6). Hartman defines the afterlives of enslavement as the fact that

"black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic

that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances,

limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and

impoverishment" (Hartman 6). Having a life in some way affected by the afterlives of

enslavement is the reality for black people throughout the twentieth century, and it is this

reality that authors of African American speculative literature are sure to represent with

the utmost veracity in their texts. And as authors of African American speculative

literature respond to the realities of black life in America, they also try to answer the

question "when might [the afterlife of slavery] be eradicated?" (Hartman 45). In the texts I examine in "Speculative Aesthetics" the question of the duration of the afterlives of enslavement is based in reality, but the answer is always speculative. Whether that answer comes in the form of an alternative present or in futures near or far, moving the American black subject beyond the afterlives of enslavement requires the use of speculative literary devices. And it is the speculative movement beyond the afterlives of enslavement that creates new and different sociopolitical alternatives for the American black subject that cannot be accessed through realism.

The Speculative vs. Science Fiction

One of the issues with discussing the speculative from within the field of African American literature is that there are many different terms and traditions brought to bear on the same set of devices. The most popular—and I think ill-fitting— categorization for the use of most kinds of speculative devices or tropes within African American literature is science fiction. Science fiction by definition is a poor umbrella term for the myriad of speculative devices used within African American literature, which can run the gamut from spiritual practices to aliens— none of which would qualify as science fiction under its original definition. As Gregory Rutledge reminds us "Hard SF valorizes the central tenet that scientific plausibility must constitute the guiding framework for the story" (238). And in her essay "Becoming Animal in Black Women's Science Fiction," Madhu Dubey argues that in African American speculative literature "the critique of scientific rationality forms such a strong, impelling force in the fledgling field of black-authored science fiction as to almost warrant the term 'black anti-fiction.' In science fiction novels

by black men and women writers… scientific practice is relentlessly indicted for its predatory exploitation of black bodies" (Dubey 34). Obviously, there is a clear difference in the goals and the actualization of those goals between African American speculative literature and science fiction, even though there are texts and tropes that overlap.

Moreover, there is an element of characterizing authors of African American literature who use tropes or devices often associated with science fiction in their work as somehow "appropriating" those things from science fiction and forcing them into the field of African American literature. Gregory E. Rutledge in his discussion of "Futurist Fiction and Fantasy" or "FFF"—an umbrella term he constructs to discuss "hard science fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, and cyberpunk" argues that "[George] Schuyler is… the first black author to appropriate the tropes of FFF" (Rutledge 236, 243). For Schuyler, appropriation would mean not only using a trope that came from outside of the genre he understood himself to be writing, but that this same belonged to another genre that it is somehow inconceivable for an author of African American literature to access. Neither of these are the case. That assessment of African American literature as somehow lacking imagination or the capacity to use speculative devices to say something important about the experiences of black people in America is problematic and discriminatory. Also, Rutledge's timeline of FFF leaves out texts like *Blake* by Martin Delany, *The Conjure Woman and other Conjure Tales* by Charles Chesnutt, and *Of One Blood* by Pauline Hopkins, even though his definition of FFF makes space for speculative fiction and fantasy.

Not until Samuel Delany begins to publish in the 1960s is there an African American author connected to the science fiction genre. Both Samuel Delany and Octavia

Butler are credited with being the first authors of African American literature to write science fiction, and both are award-winning authors in that genre. Yet, some literary critics seek to create distinctions even within the science fiction genre because of the ways that Delany and Butler tackle race, sexuality, and futurity in their texts. Gregory Rutledge has one of the more extreme views of Butler and Delany and does not consider them science fiction authors, though he writes that both "have incorporated hard science into their speculative fiction" (Rutledge 236). The specifications of the science fiction genre —and even genres like fantasy— have necessitated the development of different and more inclusive ways of discussing textual components that are outside of realism, specifically it seems when race is one of the primary subject matters in a text. I conceptualize my project as one that continues this process of thinking about the use of speculative devices in more inclusive ways, and really considering speculative devices as being formed from within African American literature specifically for the purpose of representing black bodies, lives, and experiences in literature. Speculative devices used in concert with the goals of African American literature do particular kinds of work that will never fit neatly into genres that were never meant to accommodate them—like science fiction.

Science fiction cannot or, at least in the past, would not account for most forms of speculativity that exist in literature. Yet, in more recent years artists and critics have continued to try to make science fiction a kind of inclusive and unwieldy umbrella term in order to broaden the science fiction genre in ways that it just cannot accommodate. Often the broadening of science fiction is achieved through trying to bridge the disconnect between African American literature and science fiction, and through trying to

consider the ways that authors of African American literature have forced the science fiction genre to reckon with its discriminatory past. Marlene Barr in the preface of her book *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory* argues that "black science fiction writers alter genre conventions to change how we read and define science fiction itself" and that texts that include some speculative literature along with science fiction tropes are "part of science fiction's newest new wave" (Barr xv, xvii). Barr takes her argument even further when she quotes Walter Mosley from a conference panel where he says, "'Think about what exists. Black people can't have fiction without science fiction. Science fiction takes us away from the world which is so oppressive'" (Barr xiv). This is a similar point to the one Isiah Lavender makes when he argues, "The blunt thesis underlying Afrofuturism is that all black cultural production in the New World is sf" ("Ethnoscapes" 187). Scholars certainly need to challenge the science fiction genre and its practitioners to reckon with its gaps and blind spots as it relates to authors of African American literature and their texts. This is important work; however, making connections across genres is not the same as collapsing one genre (African American literature in this case) into another genre (like science fiction). As fascinating as the speculative components of African American literature are, it is dangerous to conceptualize the entire canon as speculative without parsing which particular devices and tropes are being situated as such. One of the reasons I try not to define the speculative as a genre or subgenre is due to the erasure of the realistic representations of the American black subject that are so foundational to a text being considered African American literature, even when a text is also speculative or has speculative elements.

It is a fairly contemporary exercise to categorize African American speculative texts as science fiction, and Isiah Lavender is a scholar that is intent upon making space in the science fiction genre for African American speculative literature and for discussions of race. In *Race in American Science Fiction*, he argues that "science fiction has an unwarranted reputation for being 'progressive' in matters of race and racism" (4). His solution to that problem is to "foreground issues of the color line in sf and possibly transcend them by deliberately remaining aware of how race is buried in the genre" (*Race in American Sci-Fi* 53). But this twisting and warping of science fiction to drag race to the forefront only leads back to a genre that thinks race can and should be sublimated by science and technology. Science fiction will always be based on the premise that hard science can move human beings beyond having to deal with race— and therefore also leaving those who are raced out of the story. Lavender does a masterful job of bringing blackness to science fiction and truly seeking to undo the ways that science fiction blurs its presence. And his work has been useful and enlightening as I seek to reconceptualize where the speculative and race and representation all meet.

The point remains, however, that no one genre owns the domain outside of realism, and to argue such is itself myopic and disingenuous. In *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, Andre M. Carrington argues that "we have refracted ideas of Blackness through the meaning-making conventions of the [science fiction] genre," and that his book both "examines those mediations of Blackness through the lens of genre, and it also interprets speculative fiction through the critical lens of blackness" (2). In "Speculative Aesthetics" I do not offer a reading of blackness through science fiction or fantasy. Instead, I focus on taking up what Carrington describes as the

second goal of his book— examining and reading the speculative (as a set of devices)

through the meaning-making conventions of race/racism in America. In each of the texts

I engage in this project, blackness is often read through the meaning-making conventions

of science fiction or fantasy or magical realism, all of which often can be blind to the

deep-seated nature of institutional racism in America. For this reason, it is important that

the speculative devices deployed by the authors of the texts I discuss are refracted

through the institutions that perpetuate both anti-blackness and the afterlives of

enslavement for black Americans. It is equally important that blackness is not subjugated

to one of many themes deployed in service to a particular genre. In actuality, it is the

speculative that is used in service to the exigencies of the black subject to move through

time and space without restriction.

Speculative Aesthetics

Other scholars have gravitated toward both the term speculative and the idea that

a speculative tradition could and should be created with black authors and stories

featuring black people in mind. In "Beyond the History We Know," De Witt Douglas

Kilgore eschews social realism as "the mode that best captures the texture and meaning

of the black experience" opting instead for the speculative as a genre that could be

"responsive to the long-neglected experience of the African diaspora" (119-120). It is

therefore extremely important, in Madhu Dubey's words, to "explain the generic and

epistemological discontinuities" between science fiction and the speculative ("Becoming

Animal" 34). Instead of centering rationality through science as science fiction does, the

speculative tends to reflect Nalo Hopkinson's idea of the "fabulist," which represents "a

different worldview" through portraying "the irrational, the inexplicable, and the mysterious side by side with the daily events of life" (Dubey, "Becoming Animal" 34). Dubey also connects this definition of the speculative to Toni Morrison's idea of a "black 'cosmology' marked by a seamless blending of the supernatural and the mundane" (Dubey, "Becoming Animal" 34-35). Morrison argues that the primary art form for black and often subjugated populations is a version of the novel that can "incorporate unorthodox novelistic characteristics," which are in her view connected to "Black art" and a "Black cosmology" that relies on an "acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other" (60-61).

Thus, in this project I define the speculative not as a specific subset of texts, or as a genre fiction, but rather, as an important constituent of black aesthetics. Evie Shockley defines black aesthetics as "a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing" (Shockley 9). The idea of black aesthetics as expansive enough to include various forms and strategies to represent the lives of black people in literature is an important foundation for my argument. I use the terms the speculative and speculative devices interchangeably to refer to any tropes or literary devices in this non-delimited complex of strategies that fall outside of the boundaries of realism used by authors of African American literature. The connection of black aesthetics to the speculative helps to drive home the point that the speculative is not something that comes

from outside of the African American literary canon, but something that exists and is engendered from within it.

Shockley also argues that the strategies within black aesthetics "might be 'recognizably black'… or might not seem particularly concerned with issues of race" (9). This is crucial for situating the speculative as a category of tools, devices, and strategies that can include both the most scientific or the most fantastical elements of texts, and still fit easily within the African American literary canon. The speculative as a set of devices more broadly are often not thought of as "recognizably black," but that has never stopped authors of African American literature from using these devices to achieve literary goals, such as giving the American black subject the freedom to move through time and space. And even within the category of speculative devices, some devices regarding myth and spiritual beliefs are often coded as black when speculative literary devices like time travel, aliens, and space ships are not. By considering the range of speculative devices within black aesthetics, hopefully certain devices will no longer be thought of as extraneous to African American literature.

In my application of Shockley's understanding of black aesthetics, there might seem to be a bit of a disconnect, as she "understand[s] black aesthetics to refer to types of engagement rather than specific styles" (9). Shockley implores readers and critics to look for proof "of the African American writer's wrangling with competing expectations or desires for whether and how race will function in their work" instead of "expecting black aesthetics to inhere in any *particular* strategies, tropes, devices, or theme" [emphasis in original] (9). Again, the speculative is a set of devices, and not a particular style of writing. And it is this extremely broad set of devices that allows authors of African

American literature to have particular engagements with the American black subject and time, even as authors of African American literature write in different styles throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Unlike other traditions of the speculative, I do not argue that any speculative device is intrinsically black because speculative devices do not have to be assigned an ethnicity to be a valuable part of the African American literary canon. In the same sense as realism, the utility of speculative devices for authors of African American literature depends on how an author chooses to deploy those devices to represent black lives and experiences in text.

My goal in "Speculative Aesthetics" is to acknowledge speculative elements within African American literature without creating a hierarchy of tropes and devices based on the rules of particular genres or claiming that specific devices belong in some sense to the African American literary canon. In a sense, I am trying not to make the same mistakes as authors and scholars of science fiction often make by locating particular devices and tropes as solely belonging to the science fiction genre. My argument centers on authors of African American literature and how they deploy speculative literary devices to represent the existence of the American black subject throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. My argument is that African Americans have been using speculative devices as tools for sociopolitical critique and to create sociopolitical alternatives for the American black subject throughout the whole of the African American literary canon, regardless of the way particular kinds of speculativity have been popularized by other genres in various periods. In the African American literary canon, the speculative has always been used by authors who tried to understand black life, the conditions that create it, and the possibilities or viability for black life in the future.

Also, since authors of African American literature define themselves in various ways, in "Speculative Aesthetics" I try not to proscribe the ethnicity or even nationality of the authors discussed. Thus, I use the rather clunky formation "author(s) of African American literature" frequently throughout this project, which replaces an assumption that every author of African American literature defines themselves as African American, or even American. Also, when I refer to African American literature, I am by no means arguing that either blackness or anti-blackness belongs solely to an African American frame of reference.[1] Particularly in discussions of the speculative, diasporic conceptions of blackness are popular, but this project focuses specifically on how the time and space of the American nation-state has particular effects on the black subject, which then necessitates particular responses from that subject. As a scholar of African American literature, I believe it is important that the African American experience is codified and represented. Yet, as a scholar of Africana studies I am careful not to mindlessly subsume all experiences of blackness into arguments I make with a Western focus. It is also important to note that though my argument is made with the African American literary canon in mind, that does not mean this particular body of texts is alone in the utility of the speculative to move the black subject through space and time.

American exceptionalism is not just a metaliterary issue. There is often an element of American chauvinism in the way authors of African American literature engage bodies that have a connection to American enslavement as the only ones that exist

---

[1] As we all know, African American literature should include the narratives of colonial subjects and near-citizens this country has created, which sometimes occur beyond the continental United States because the American influence over its surrounding region and various places around the world is rather extensive. However, it is important to include these texts without co-opting these stories as *only* American, when they might also belong to other canons. Great—this is a good use of a footnote, to make an extra comment or qualifier

into the future in African American speculative texts. It is important to note here that the future(s) African Americans see for themselves is not the only future of blackness; it is but one in a multiplicity of black futures. Within African American literature there is often the assumption that the future will bring the American black subject back into the fold of a global "blackness" without consuming an African American identity. That black people can and will be some kind of monolithic black population in the future, and that there is a way to coalescence various ethnicities into one black population without erasure, is a particularly African American goal.

Authors of African American speculative literature often assume that the "Afro" in Afrofuturism will (always) be enough to discuss all black subjects and all experiences related to being read as black, and there are some scholars and authors who reject that premise. Author and scholar Nnedi Okorafor recently coined the term Africanfuturist to highlight a different historical tradition of speculative writing than many of the speculative traditions which foreground authors of African American literature. On Twitter Okarafor often challenges her followers to trouble and rethink how they understand Afrofuturism. In one tweet she writes, "I am an Africanfuturist. BEFORE you start asking for or debating its meaning, please call me the name first" (Okarafor). Authors and scholars of Africanfuturism like Okorafor insist on the literary representation of futures— and therefore presents and pasts— that foreground the existence and experiences of the African black subject. Okorafor believes there needs to be an acknowledgement that different kinds of futures exist for an African black subject than the ones based on the African American expectation of an often monolithic, yet still African American focused, black future. Throughout "Speculative Aesthetics" I try to be

respectful of the use of the speculative by authors from other nationalities and ethnicities by stating very specifically the focus (and perhaps limits) of my research as it pertains to the narratives and authors of African American literature.

The Future in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century African American Literature

There are four chapters in "Speculative Aesthetics" and they are roughly based on the time period in which the authors and novels they focus on were written. The texts in this project are not intended as core, canonical items in an unbroken timeline of speculativity. What connects all of these texts — aside from their being speculative novels within the African American literary canon— is that in each of these texts speculative devices are used to create distance between the American black subject and the time and space of the American nation, thereby moving the black subject to the future. The movement of the American black subject is no small matter and it takes extreme events—like a long-lost king finding his hidden African city or the end of the world and humanity being held in captivity by aliens—to give the black subject the freedom and power necessary not only to move to the future, but also to have some part in determining the outcome of that movement.

Chapter one, "Utopian Visions of Africa and the Ideal American Black Subject in *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire,*" explores how early twentieth century authors of African American speculative literature used spatial movements not merely to place black subjects outside of the American nation—namely Africa—but also, to achieve their temporal movement outside of the time of the American nation, as well. This discussion of the black subject and time engages with and updates the original definitions of

Afrofuturism, so that Afrofuturism might accommodate the movements of the early twentieth century American black subject through time and space in ways that I liken to a version of time travel. Afrofuturism, as a term that could be used to describe all of the movements of black subjects forward in time, cannot continue to rely on the idea that it will be by technological means that the black subject will move or be moved to the future. The technological aspects of Afrofuturism are a holdover from its original connection with science fiction, and scholars have continued to redefine the term to make it more inclusive.

In both *Of One Blood (1903)* by Pauline Hopkins and *Black Empire (1936-1938)* by George Schuyler, characters, revolutions, and even whole societies are moved out of a discriminatory America to Africa. Both texts imagine the return of the American black subject to Africa as a move to a kind of utopia. An African American utopia located in Africa was an idea that still had some viability for African Americans in the earlier years of the twentieth century, and in chapter one I analyze the necessary elements of an early twentieth century African American utopia. For the American black subject, Africa not only represents an ancestral homeland, but also a place where cultural, social, economic, and political power awaits African American people who are used to having those things denied to them. Moreover, the spatial dislocation of the African American body from America, or more specifically the relocation of the African American body to Africa, is truly a reparative experience. One theme that persists throughout the literature explored in "Speculative Aesthetics" is the need for the black subject to move forward by somehow also revising the past. For early twentieth century texts like *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire*, each of the protagonists (and other characters as well) experience a

reversal of the middle passage, and by doing so recuperate some of the trauma and loss associated with the transatlantic slave trade.

The protagonists in *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire* do not go back to Africa as slaves, but as kings with the power to shape the futures of black people all over the world. Saidiya Hartman's idea of the afterlives of enslavement frames the notion of the existence of the American black subject as both stranger and slave. For Hartman, being a stranger did not stop when she travelled to Ghana. There were no sudden changes in her condition based on her movement to the space of West Africa. For the protagonists of *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire*, this is not the case. Thus, another component of the utopian nature of these texts is the power each protagonist gains through the recognition that they belong in Africa. Once these characters move to Africa, all problems associated with anti-blackness are solved. In Hartman's text the stranger and the slave are one. In Hopkins' and Schuyler's texts, once the protagonists of both texts move to Africa and are no longer strangers (due to various reasons), in a sense, they can no longer be slaves, either. For Reuel, the protagonist of *Of One Blood*, his royalty is literally tied to his kinship with the people he is descended from in Africa. In *Black Empire*, the protagonist Dr. Belsidus is recognized as the sovereign that can and will unite black people around the world and free them from white supremacy. He may not be technically related to any of the people he meets in Africa, but he is the proclaimed leader of black people around the globe and the entire continent of Africa, and therefore definitely no longer a stranger.

This first chapter also demonstrates the utility of the speculative for African American authors in the early twentieth century by beginning with a short discussion of the nineteenth century text *Blake (1859-1862)* by Martin Delany. *Blake* is an early

African American speculative text with an impossibly ideal African American subject as the protagonist. In *Blake*, Delany writes toward a future that could conceptualize his previously enslaved character as free enough and heroic enough to create a future without slavery. However, Delany does not complete this text and the story ends before the climax, and this future that is able to tear itself away from an enslaved and oppressed past is never realized. *Blake* represents in some senses the literary impossibilities of realizing a future that can truly break free from the history of enslavement in America. In both *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire* it is the looming nature of the not so distant past of enslavement that inspires authors of African American speculative texts to try to tap into African pasts that extend much farther back into history than transatlantic slavery. Hopkins and Schuyler use the speculative to recreate the grandeur of African civilizations in black utopias to recuperate blackness and move beyond enslavement as the defining feature of an African American future. Both Hopkins and Schuyler are able to conceptualize a freer version of African American life through both spatial and temporal dislocations that are only possible due to the speculative narrative elements they employ.

In chapters two and three, I engage texts from the latter half of the twentieth century by Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler, who both use speculative means to move the American black subject into the future and thereby move this subject farther away from slavery and its after-effects. As Delany and Butler extend the temporal and spatial movements of different American subjects within their narratives, they delve into the complexities and unresolved issues both of these kinds of movements produce. In fact, much of the social critique from Butler's and Delany's texts concern the kinds of ideas, politics, prejudices, and norms their characters bring with them as they are moved

through time and space. The futures created by Butler and Delany are not all-black utopias, like those of chapter one, and this fact has material effects for futuristic populations that are still very much American. Many of the dystopian elements of Butler's and Delany's texts center on the violences caused by anti-blackness, homophobia, and misogyny as they are dragged to the future—often futures in which other beings can no longer tolerate the existence of these kinds of prejudices.

In chapter two, "'Prism, Mirror, Lens': The Near Future of America in Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*," I focus on Samuel R. Delany's novel *Dhalgren*, which he wrote in 1975. *Dhalgren* is a fascinating and sprawling text, and it is the first novel in which Delany takes up the issue of race in a setting closer to both the time and space of America in the 1970s. Delany is often thought of as the first author of African American literature to imagine a future far beyond the present, beyond even the earth as we know it; one that catapults black lives and experiences beyond our modern understandings of blackness and out into the expanse of space; a space where black people could (perhaps) be something different, something new, even. However, in *Dhalgren*, instead of the fairly tightly structured space operas for which he had become known, Delany creates a space extremely adjacent to, but still disconnected from, America and sets his characters free against a backdrop of taxing and confusing liberation.

Also in chapter two, I discuss time as the structuring mechanism of both capitalism and the nation-state, and the importance of breaking the American black subject's connection to and perhaps subjugation by the homogenous, empty time that structures the American nation. In *Dhalgren*, Delany does not move his characters very far, opting for a setting in a middle-American city that is jarringly disconnected both

spatially and temporally from the contemporary version of America that surrounds it. Delany's *Dhalgren* offers wide-ranging critiques of post-civil rights America, within the framework of a city that is suddenly without the ideological, economic, governmental, and social structuring mechanisms that make America the country we know it to be. Much of *Dhalgren* is preoccupied with an analysis and exploration of capitalism as a structuring mechanism of both nationhood and anti-blackness, and the text explores the fact that suddenly dismantling capitalism in this American city might also demolish the idea of nationality, but the sudden obsolescence of capitalism does not eradicate anti-blackness. This is due in part because *Dhalgren* is a text that I categorize as a "near-future" speculative text.

I use the term "near-future" to describe a set of speculative texts that envision futures extremely adjacent to the period in which they are written— usually, no more than a generation or two away from when the text was published. One particularity of near-future texts is that the characters represent individuals and populations who have not had the opportunity to prepare for their movement to the future or to acclimate fully to their new temporal and spatial surroundings. For these characters, they remain mired in a past that no longer exists, and to which they hold even more ferociously. For white American subjects, in both *Dhalgren* and Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, equality is a difficult and dehumanizing enterprise that shatters their world view and self-perception. The Richards family in *Dhalgren* provides the occasion for a discussion of Delany's portrayal of the white subject's reaction to this near-future without capitalism. In the future of *Dhalgren*, the American black subject is represented by characters who remain flattened against the stereotypical perceptions of the racist city-dwellers in this very small

American-adjacent town. Delany creates moments in the text which show the black

characters as complex beings who use the disunion between the way they understand

themselves and the way others might see them— similar to Du Bois' idea of double

consciousness— to navigate the futures Delany has constructed. Yet, the future of

Dhalgren is not one in which black people have moved beyond the afterlives of

enslavement, but they are indeed moving in the right direction. The near-future Delany

creates in *Dhalgren* may be beyond the time and space of America, but it is too near for

the people inculcated with American power structures to ever truly give way.

Chapter three, "Xenogenesis: Giving Humans and Humanness a Different

Future," examines the novels of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series: *Dawn (1987)*,

Adulthood Rites (1988), and *Imago (1989)*. In this series, Butler stretches time to its

limits, using the speculative to move human beings from the 1980s forward two hundred

years into the future. This chapter argues that the main institution Butler tries to

dismantle in this series is the western ideal of the human—as modeled on the white

heterosexual male. The category of the Human is instrumental in perpetuating the

afterlives of slavery into the future, but in the *Xenogenesis* series, humans from the 1980s

are catapulted into a future in which this ideal Human can no longer exist. My argument

in chapter two regarding Delany's portrayal of who should be included in the body politic

is strongly connected with the debates Butler engages about who is thought of as human

(or not) in the universe of *Xenogenesis*. In fact, just as anti-black sentiment outlasts

capitalism and the American government as we know it in *Dhalgren*, in Butler's

Xenogenesis series anti-blackness also outlives most of humanity and even planet Earth.

In *Xenogenesis,* the human characters are forced to relinquish their belief that humanity is

the apex life form in the universe, and the persisting hierarchies within their understanding of "the Human" make this transition very difficult.

The chapter is split into various thematic sections, with each book having at least one section to itself. I discuss each book on its own terms under the overarching premise that each book tackles an element of posthumanity as a theme that is related to critical posthumanism. *Dawn* is the first book of the Xenogenesis series and unlike *Dhalgren*, in which human beings are moved to a space outside of the American nation by an unnamed disaster, in *Dawn* human beings are moved to the future by an alien species. This alien species, the Oankali, rescue (or perhaps capture) as many human beings as they can as the Earth is destroyed due to nuclear war. Butler's engagement with the politics of the 1980s was the impetus for this series—particularly in terms of *Dawn*. In this first novel of the series, Butler engages particularly American perspectives, including an American exceptionalism that many characters hold on to even though America, and the idea of the nation or nationality, have long been defunct. From the moment the protagonist Lilith is awakened and goes about her assignment of awaking others, American characters continue to create hierarchies that consider Americanness almost as important as whiteness, and as the human communities that refuse further contact with the Oankali grow and become more desperate, they also become more bigoted.

Whether the cause was their capture by aliens or an intense but largely ignored disaster, all humans in near-future speculative texts like *Dawn* have to face the conditions of a new future for which they are wholly unprepared. Though set at least two hundred years into the future, I consider *Dawn* to have many of the same elements as other near-future texts like *Dhalgren*. The human characters who have been rescued by the Oankali

are kept in suspended animation from the moment they are taken into the Oankali's custody, so they are just as confused and ill-prepared for the future they find themselves in as characters in literary futures most closer to the present. In fact, much of the tension in *Dawn* is built around the awakened humans' refusal to accept that the world around them is different than the world they remember. In this first book of the series, Lilith is the main protagonist and she makes an astute, if less than willing, captive. Lilith tries to define and conceptualize humanness to the Oankali in ways that would perhaps inspire them to cease treating humans like human beings treat animals. But as Lilith is trying to explain humanity to the Oankali, the human condition, human existence is in flux, and is even harder to define under the new conditions the Oankali have set forth.

In the second text of the *Xenogenesis* series, *Adulthood Rites*, the focus is on Lilith's first human and Oankali male child, Akin. This text focuses a fair amount on gender relations as the Oankali see human males as more dangerous and more likely to have the innate genetic contradiction they claim that all humans have—the mix of intelligence and hierarchical behavior. Akin, and the entire first generation of human-Oankali children, represent a shift in the process of moving beyond humanity in this series. No longer is posthumanity a theoretical or discursive debate but, in the creation of this new species, the human body is in a sense being torn to pieces, and those pieces are genetically (re)distributed into the new human-Oankali species. The only problem is that the Oankali are the only ones in control of the creation of these new children. Which parts of the human being, of the human bodily experience, will the Oankali discard? Are specific elements of the human genome necessary for this new species to be truly (even if only partly) human? Also, where is human subjectivity located if not in the human body?

These are the questions forced upon the remaining human beings in *Adulthood Rites*, as the remaining humans agree to procreate with the Oankali or not at all. And the Oankali do not wait to change or mold the humanness of Oankali-human offspring. They begin their machinations with the newly awakened human adults by changing the bodies, sexualities, and reproductive options of human beings in ways that inspire fear and distrust. Akin stands up for the humans that resist and shifts the relationship between the Oankali and human beings back to something closer to a partnership.

The subject of the last book of the *Xenogenesis* series is the evolution of the human-Oankali species into its final form with the creation of a human-Oankali child with the full, genetic shapeshifting powers of the Oankali's third sex— the ooloi. In *Imago*, this new human-Oankali species is able to reproduce within themselves without any oversight or help from the Oankali aboard the ship. Between the Oankali who control things from their ship orbiting the revitalized Earth and the Oankali, human-oankali, and humans who reside on Earth there is a power struggle. And similar to the way that his brother Akin fights for the rights of humans to have a society that does not partner with the Oankali, Jodahs—the protagonist of *Imago*— fights for the rights of this new human-Oankali species to exist without existential and reproductive restraints imposed by the Oankali. This text represents, as Jodahs' existence also represents, the final stage in the process of moving beyond twentieth century conceptions of humanity. To discuss the tensions created by trying to truly balance the power relations between humans and the Oankali, I use Monique Allewaert's idea of parahumanity as a theoretical framework for my argument. Parahumanity also helps to frame how the Oankali's reluctance to relinquish complete existential control over the futures of humanity and the future of the

new human-Oankali species speaks to more toxic power relations than the Oankali ever admit. There is also an eco-critical element to my argument, as Allewaert's definition of parahumanity understands humanity as beings that can be both constituted and deconstructed by the environment that surrounds them. This broadening of the idea of what humanness is also helps to explain how the relations between humanity and the Oankali are flattened over time in the new environment of the new Earth.

In the last chapter, "Beyond the Posts: Postmemory and Postmodernism in 21st century African American Speculative Texts," I consider what is next for African American speculative literature and for African American literature more broadly. I use Rivers Solomon's novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and Alexis Pauline Gumbs' experimental text *M Archive: After the End of the World* to discuss an even more extreme version of spatial and temporal dislocation; one which moves African Americans so far into the future that it severs their connection to an African American history of enslavement. The extreme temporal and spatial displacements in both Solomon's and Gumbs' texts are notable because the one thing that remains generally static across the texts I engage for this project is the realistic representation of African American lives at each point in the twentieth century. Regardless of the speculative machinations of the twentieth century texts, they are at the very least framed in a way that locates the African American characters in a realistic version of time and space in which these characters continue to be affected by the afterlives of slavery in America. Solomon's and Gumbs's 21st century texts prompt my consideration of whether there has been another shift in the futuristic representation of the black subject. I use my discussions of these two texts to investigate twenty-first century tensions with moving the black subject to the future.

In the first half of chapter four I expand on my idea of futuristic neo-slave narratives to challenge Isiah Lavender's idea of metaslavery, and to think about the viability of the neo-slave narrative form for future authors of African American literature. To do so, I engage *An Unkindness of Ghosts* as a contemporary, futuristic neo-slave narrative. The protagonist, Aster, lives aboard a space ship that left Earth almost four hundred years prior to the events of the book. Several elements of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* fit neatly within the neo-slave narrative genre, and there is a productive tension (but a tension nonetheless) between the futuristic elements of a texts such as this one or even the texts of Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, and the neo-slave narrative genre within African American literature. I use Arlene Keiser's application of postmemory to slavery studies to consider what happens when the American black subject can no longer remember the original trauma of American enslavement. Part of my argument is that in these twenty first century novels, the afterlives of enslavement do not end just because black people forget the event that set these institutions of subjugation into motion. Even the new form of enslavement that takes place aboard the spaceship in Solomon's novel occurs once again along racial or at the very least ethnic lines.

In the second half of chapter four I argue that African American literature has moved beyond the postmodern moment into the new era of the post-postmodern. To justify that point I try to update Madhu Dubey's argument about postmodern African American literature in *Signs and Cities.* Dubey uses the economic and sociopolitical conditions that African Americans face as the foundation for her argument about African American postmodern literature. For my argument about post-postmodernism, I do the same. I use Achille Mbembe's discussion of the most contemporary (and toxic) version

of capitalism and the various sociopolitical ills that Mbembe links to capitalism as the

economic and sociopolitical basis for the kinds of speculative patterns I see in post-

postmodern African American literature. In *M Archive* Alexis Gumbs, like Solomon,

envisions a future in which human beings destroy themselves and the Earth. But the

destruction of the Earth is no longer the focus of futures written in the 21century. The

focus is instead on the humans that are left, and the changes in self-perception they

experience (or not) once they are in some senses jettisoned from the safety of human

civilization, and sometimes even the planet.

The use of the speculative by African American authors is not (just) a twentieth

century phenomenon. The speculative has always been useful for African American

authors who intended to sever the temporal and spatial ties of the American black subject

to the American nation. Ultimately, confronting or subverting the afterlives of slavery

requires a movement out of space and out of time. Since American institutions often

perpetuate discrimination based on the American history of enslavement, a physical

movement as far away from America is important for the creation of sociopolitical

alternatives. And even though movements in space are always accompanied by a

movement in time, time is the ultimate system, the ultimate institution that African

American authors use the speculative to try to escape. The creative utility and aesthetic

freedom that African Americans find in the speculative will clearly continue into the 21st

century.

Moreover, I am curious about the continued utility and deployment of the neo-

slave narrative in twenty-first century texts, particularly ones that deal with futures

millennia away from the present. In a field that has staked itself on a history of

enslavement, what does it look like, and what do we lose when we try to move beyond a history of enslavement as constitutive of a black identity? In the first part of the twentieth century, if we look past that history we find African utopias, and a vision of full black subjectivity based in Africanity instead of in spite of it. In chapters two and three, which focus on speculative texts from the late twentieth century, we see that this has become a more complex issue. First, separating social death from blackness seems impossible. In other words, there is no way to separate the afterlives of enslavement from blackness in any time or space that we can conceive of, except through the certain death of the species as a whole.

Works Cited

Barr, Marlene S. *Afro-future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory*. The Ohio State University Press, 2008.

Carrington, André M. *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. U of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Dubey, Madhu. "Becoming Animal in Black Women's Science Fiction." *Afro-future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory*. The Ohio State University Press, 2008. 31-51.

- - -. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Macmillan, 2008.

Kilgore, De Witt Douglas. "Beyond the History We Know: Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, Nisi Shawl, and Jarla Tangh Rethink Science Fiction Tradition." *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory* (2008): 119-129.

Lavender III, Isiah. "Ethnoscapes: Environment and Language in Ishmael Reed's" Mumbo Jumbo", Colson Whitehead's" The Intuitionist", and Samuel R. Delany's" Babel-17". *Science Fiction Studies* (2007): 187-200.

- - -. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 2011.

Morrison, Toni. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation. 1984." *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Non-Fiction*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. 56-64.

Mosley, Walter. "Black to the Future." *Dark matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora,* 2000. 405-407.

Okorafor, Nnedi. (@Nnedi). "I am an Africanfuturist. BEFORE you start asking for or debating its meaning, please call me the name first." 9:10 am November 4, 2018.

Rutledge, Gregory E. "Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The Racial Establishment." *Callaloo* 24.1 (2001): 236-252.

Shockley, Evie. *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*. University of Iowa Press, 2011.

Utopian Visions of Africa and the Ideal American Black Subject in
Of One Blood and *Black Empire*

Throughout the entirety of the African American literary canon authors use speculative themes and devices to carry out elaborate sociopolitical critiques and to envision futures near and far for the black subject in America. This is particularly the case within the two texts that are the focus of this chapter, *Of One Blood (1902)* by Pauline Hopkins and *Black Empire (1936)* by George Schuyler. To discuss twentieth century African American literature and the use of the speculative, *Blake* (1859) by Martin Delany*,* though written in the 19th century, is an important place to start. In fact, *Blake* is the prototypical text for my argument, which traces how African American authors maneuver their characters within and outside of time and space in ways that belie a critical and conscientious engagement with the present and future of the black subject in an American context. *Blake* begins with a protagonist, Henry, who though previously enslaved, moves unmolested through the southern United States discussing his plans for a social, political, and economic revolution, while recruiting black people to take part in his resistance. The way he moves through the time and space of the American south in the middle of the 19th century is nothing if not speculative, allowing him to be in one state one day, and another the next.[2] Henry's blackness never precludes his admission to particular spaces, and even time itself seems to bend to his will.

Yet, beyond Henry's unrealistic movements through time and space, it is also notable that returning to Africa seems basically inevitable for this character in his quest to gather people and resources for his eventual uprising against American enslavement.

---

[2] Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* is a good contemporary example of using the speculative to give a character freedom of movement through the south.

Though his headquarters are actually in Cuba, Africa is the last stop he makes before he

plans to launch his revolution and the restoration of all African-descended people to their

former glory. The fact that each of the protagonists of *Blake*, *Of One Blood*, and *Black*

Empire make a speculative trip to Africa is as fascinating as it is telling. It is as though no

revolution in the African diaspora could be conceptualized without a visit to Africa—at

least until the 1950s. When Henry returns to Cuba, he achieves the kind of PanAfrican

coalition that African Americans continued to dream of throughout the twentieth century.

The novel also makes clear that for a true revolution to take place, the first group of

people who need to understand that the black subject can exist outside of the strictures of

enslavement is the enslaved themselves, which is a theme that echoes throughout

twentieth century African American fiction and non-fiction.

For Henry, enslavement is truly just a condition he tolerated to be close to his

wife and son, and one that he could throw off at any moment in order to regain his actual

condition— that of the resplendent and powerful, African-descended leader of a free

population of blacks. As the novel illustrates, however, throwing off the binds of

enslavement is not as easy for others of the enslaved as it is for Henry. One of the most

interesting and speculative components of *Blake* is Henry's power to be truly unaffected

mentally, emotionally, or physically by enslavement. His lack of fear as an escaped slave

gives him a gravitas that both inspires people to follow and fear him— or at least fear the

repercussions of working with him. Henry, as unaffected by enslavement (and its

eventual afterlives), is then representative of the ideal American black subject; one who

can throw off the bounds and strictures of enslavement and move about the world at will;

one who has an identity that is not synonymous with or inextricable from his condition as

previously enslaved. Henry, as representative of an American black subject wholly

unaffected by having been enslaved might be the most speculative element of *Blake*, and

it is speculative themes and devices that allow Martin Delany to create this particular

possibility of black subjectivity. Throughout the twentieth century, the speculative

continued to offer similar conceptual freedom to African American authors, as they

considered and engaged the black subject in an American context, and tried to determine

what the future of that subject might be—if there was one.

In recent years, both *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire* have been reclaimed by

Afrofuturists keen on trying to create a tradition of Afrofuturism throughout the African

American literary canon[3]. Though Afrofuturism often elides more complicated

engagements of time, particularly in these texts from the early twentieth (and 19th)

century, work done by critics who engage texts on the basis of Afrofuturism has much to

offer. Mark Dery was the first person to coin the term Afrofuturism in an interview with

contemporary science fiction writers of color. Dery argued that "Speculative fiction that

treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context

of the twentieth-century technoculture" in his essay (180). From that definition in 1994,

many different scholars and cultural critics have continued to redefine the term.

According to Isiah Lavender, "the blunt thesis underlying Afrofuturism is that *all* black

cultural production in the New World is *sf*. The forced transplantation of Africans to the

Americas for the sole purpose of slave labor capable of producing wealth has been

interpreted as the substance of sf for blacks" [emphasis in original] (Lavender,

"Ethnoscapes" 187). Ytasha Womack, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and*

---

[3] For recent texts linking Of One Blood and Black Empire to an Afrofuturism, see Yaszek 3-7; Womack 124; Davis 7-8.

Fantasy Culture, argues that as "Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magical 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). Much of what Womack lists in her definition of Afrofuturism can be subsumed under the definition of the speculative that is operative here. Moreover, all of these definitions note some version of the productive tension between the speculative as both an aesthetic form and as a set of tools useful for sociopolitical critiques of racism. And though it is not the case that all black cultural production is science fiction, it is true that the institution of chattel slavery skewed reality and fundamentally shifted what was possible for the black subject in an American context.

One essential component of Afrofuturism that is particularly useful for reading the speculative from an African American perspective is the idea that there is a connection between the continued existence of the black subject and time. Thus, what this chapter is about, and the project more broadly, is both the literary necessity and the ability of the speculative to allow for the mobilization of the black subject out of the time and space of America, in order to make sense of this subject existing now, and to imagine the possibility of the black subject continuing to exist into the future. In early twentieth century African American literature, the future is a more nebulous concept than it becomes after the space race and the idea of time-travel makes it into the zeitgeist of American culture in the middle to late 20th century. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the "future" is often engaged through a reorganization and/or reclamation of the past, which somehow then changes the present, and therefore the future. In both *Of One*

Blood and *Black Empire*, the future is represented not only by rewriting history and eschewing a western narrative of world history and global blackness, but also, these texts use movements to a kind of utopian African space as that which would propel the black subject into the future. In addition, rewriting history, or in some cases giving power to different actors/events as the motivating forces behind world events, has the effect of moving characters from the timelines that we understand to be extant and placing them in different spatial and temporal realities. I maintain that this is a form of "time travel," even if the black subject is only shifted to an alternate timeline. This movement from what we might call a "realistic" timeline is enough in this era to come face to face with futurity and sociopolitical alternatives that might not be possible for the black subject in existing timelines.

Furthermore, part of the stakes of Afrofuturism from its genesis was the declaration that the future of a self-determined blackness and of the American black subject is certain. Early twentieth century authors such as Pauline Hopkins and George Schuyler are also confident about the future of a black subject, but they are certain the black subject needs a particular kind of space outside of America for this future to take place. Both *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire* exemplify a kind of speculative fascination with who and what the black subject could become in an African utopia that allowed this particular subject to disrupt and eliminate the afterlives of enslavement.

African American Fantasies of African Utopias in Of One Blood and Black Empire

In two of the earliest speculative texts written by African American authors— *Of One Blood* by Pauline Hopkins and *Black Empire* by George Schuyler— an African

American male protagonist finds his way to Africa, and through his move to the motherland his world is changed forever. Though often a very personal journey for these characters, this removal to Africa has far-reaching consequences for the world at large, including the reconceptualization of race and the global history of blackness, along with a reclamation of global power and esteem for the African diaspora and specifically for African Americans. In these texts, Africa provides more than just the setting for a speculative and utopian diegesis. Utopian fantasies of Africa furnish a space fully equipped for a spatial and cultural return that requires a speculative movement outside of linear/chronological time, a move that shifts both time and space and therefore shifts institutions and power.

Much of the way that African American authors in the early twentieth century engage time is through space. This is one of the factors that makes Africa an auspicious choice for Pauline Hopkins as the only place that is able to hold both the past and the present/future in a kind of productive and restorative tension for a black subject from America. In this tension between what has taken place and what is yet to come lies the African American fascination with not only Africa itself, but with particular utopian visions of Africa that center renewed power and perspective for African Americans. In fact, one of the criticisms of Hopkins' portrayal of Africa in *Of One Blood* is that "the novel avoids confronting the situation in turn-of-the-century Africa," and instead "produce[s] an Ethiopianist fantasy for her black middle-class audience that restores to Africa its former greatness" (Gruesser 34). However, for Hopkins the fantasy is not an act of avoidance, it is the goal. This fantasy of a utopian African space is more useful for

imagining sociopolitical alternatives for a black American subject than a realistic depiction of colonized Africa would be at the turn of the twentieth century.

In *Of One Blood* Hopkins creates a "fantasy, utopian in stripe, of a fully self-sustaining black community existing in the ancient past, meant to prefigure the reincarnation of the same such community in present-day America" (xvi McDowell). Hopkins needed a version of Africa that could both ameliorate the violences of the past and act as a launching point for the future of an American black subject suddenly and irrevocably severed from the afterlives of enslavement. There is (still) no real place in Africa or America that could accomplish a goal such as this one, which necessitated Hopkins' use of the speculative and her creation of a utopian space like the fictional, hidden African city of Telassar. It is important to remember that Hopkins' African utopia, Telassar, was shaped by the sociopolitical realities and goals of the American black subject at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, in Telassar, Hopkins needed a place that was just disconnected enough from both Africa and America (more from America), but still able to be reached by people from both places; a place where an American black person born as a slave could be recognized as an African king; a place where white supremacy is not the de facto law of the land and blackness is not despised; a place that has gone untouched by colonialism, slavery, and the general pillaging of its precious resources. In the first decade of the twentieth century, these are the conditions of utopia for African Americans, and even for a fictional space, this is a tall order.

Saidiya Hartman argues that "the domain of the stranger is always an elusive *elsewhere*," [emphasis in original] and basically what Hopkins does in *Of One Blood* is to try to make this elusive elsewhere an actual place, and a viable space for the work of

destroying the stranger/slave as an operative condition or societal category (Hartman 4.

Deborah McDowell argues that "while clearly utopian in outline, Telassar is not, as M

Giulia Fabi has suggested, the 'traditional ou-topoi (nonplace) of traditional utopian

fiction'" (xviii). It could not be. Hopkins needed to make this "elusive elsewhere"

somewhere that could not only repair the irreparable and offer a home for the

slave/stranger, but also provide a space where there are infinite possibilities for the future

of the black subject. For Hopkins, and for many authors from this era, realistic versions

of Africa may not have been utopian, but the utopia still needed to be African, if for no

other reason than that Africa is the only place that could offer the black American subject

a future disconnected from the afterlives of enslavement.

In Schuyler's *Black Empire*, the entire continent of Africa becomes the elusive

elsewhere that Hartman speaks of. It is only through fighting a war with European

powers for black control of Africa that the stranger finally finds a home. Several scholars

have tried to determine whether *Black Empire* was meant to be read as satire or as

straight-forward fiction. Henry Louis Gates, and the scholars who wrote the afterward to

the 1991 edition of *Black Empire*, R. Kent Rasmussen and Robert A. Hill, argue that

Black Empire was meant to be read seriously, while Gruesser believes that Schuyler

intended this text to be more anti-utopian and satirical.[4] Regardless, Schuyler crafted a

fantasy of a utopian Africa that resonated with his African American readership, whether

or not he was being critical or even tongue-in-cheek about the means required to obtain

this utopia or the consequences of coalescing various populations of black people into

---

[4] Gates Jr, Henry Louis. "A Fragmented Man: George Schuyler and the Claims of Race." (1992); Hill, Robert A., and R. Kent Rasmussen. "Afterword to *Black Empire,* by George S. Schuyler." (1991): 259-310; Gruesser, John Cullen. Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa. University Press of Kentucky, 2015.

one empire. Even Gruesser, who argues that Schuyler considers Ethiopianism "to be a dangerous, anti-intellectual myth with an incredibly powerful hold over the African American imagination," has to admit that Schuyler "is not above using it in his own fiction to produce specific effects" (Gruesser 110). Thus, the fact remains that creating a true African home for the American black subject (and everyone else in the diaspora) possesses a kind of critical utility for Schuyler, regardless of which direction he deploys his various critiques.

Pavla Veselá's discussion of African American critical utopias is also helpful here, as scholars seem to argue that *Black Empire* is either utopian or anti-utopian when there may be more room in-between those two concepts for early twentieth century authors like Schuyler. Veselá argues that "Given the racism of the traditional utopia, it is no surprise that the few African-American utopias written to date engage critically with both the status quo and the utopian genre itself, and therefore can be regarded as the precursors of Tom Moylan's critical utopia" (Veselá 272). Veselá counts *Black Empire* in the number of African American critical utopias she mentions, and using Tom Moylan's idea of critical utopia she argues that African American utopias can both play out particular fantasies of black utopian worlds while also being highly critical of both the concept of utopia and the world it springs from. Moylan's term is important because he argues that, "A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream" (10). It is particularly the limitations of utopia that writing about both the realities of black life in America and the future of a black controlled Africa help African American authors like Schuyler overcome—with a little help from the speculative.

An important facet of early twentieth century African American utopian narratives, such as *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire,* is that they begin in a realistic version of early twentieth century America. Veselá argues that "critical utopias are incomplete because they dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society and admit imperfection to the utopian world" and that, "in contrast to the traditional utopia, which effaces the human subject and focuses on the description of the better society, the protagonist is depicted in action in the critical utopia" (272). Perhaps not incomplete per se, but I would agree with Veselá that due to the way African American critical utopias are required to contend with anti-blackness and the afterlives of enslavement, they are often forced into being more critical than idealistic. Both of the African American utopias that exist in *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire* are necessitated by the subjugation of black people all over the diaspora. These utopias come into being from an imperfect world, and as such are always in some way attached to that imperfect world due to the restrictions of space and time, particularly in the early twentieth century.

Since African American critical utopias often center the afterlives of enslavement and anti-blackness as the impetus for much of what happens in these texts, the fantastical African utopian spaces in both *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire* are not just utopian places but have utopian politics as well. As Frederic Jameson argues, "The fundamental dynamic of any Utopian politics (or of any political Utopianism) will therefore always lie in the dialectic of Identity and Difference, to the degree to which such a politics aims at imagining, and sometimes even at realizing, a system radically different from this one" (xii). For black people in America, identity and difference are intertwined and bound to a history of enslavement, and any idea of a utopian politics in African American literature

must rely on imagining a system (or set of systems) that center radical ideas of freedom and black political, economic, and cultural power. How each text imagines the location of that power, and the means it would to take to gain this level of power, is perhaps another place where imperfection or anti-utopian sentiments can seep into African American critical utopias as Veselá argues.

In terms of a politics concerning power and rule, both *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire* tend to favor the installation of an African American sovereign as the nexus of new/resurgent black power to rule and expand black empires. In *Of One Blood* it is the protagonist Reuel, who suddenly discovers he is the long-awaited monarch of Telassar, and who is suddenly charged with "begin[ning] the restoration of Ethiopia" (Hopkins 123). In *Black Empire* it is the sovereign-like leader of the Black Internationale movement, Dr. Belsidus, in whom the power of the new black empire is located. So much so that, even after he and his followers have killed or ousted all European powers from Africa, Dr. Belsidus decides he is going to retain his position because no one else is ready to do it. Belsidus says "I would fain give up my leadership…you need a strong, a ruthless, an intelligent leader. Negroes are not yet used to freedom, and so for a time we must have a dictatorship… So, I am not going to give up my leadership" (Schuyler 141). Dictatorship does not seem particularly utopian, but neither has the American democratic republic which has found innumerable ways to disenfranchise African Americans.

The creation of contemporary and powerful black monarchies, is intensely radical— even as it recalls governmental (and economic) structures that are familiar. As Jameson argues "On the social level… our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production (and perhaps whatever remnants of past ones it has preserved) … at best

Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment… and that therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (xii). African Americans have been engines of the capitalist mode of production and often disallowed from having any power or control related to capitalism. Therefore, African Americans have always had to create and imagine ontologies and teleologies that existed outside of that particular mode of production. Indeed, part of the goal of African American critical utopias is to make clear that, "The promise of another world, or of the end of this one, is given in the general critique of world. In the meantime, what remains to be inhabited is nothing itself in its fullness, which is, in the absence of intersubjective relationality, high fantastical" (Moten 752). In keeping with Fred Moten's argument about "studying nothing's real presence," it is important to investigate and analyze the purpose that Jameson has characterized as negative (Moten 752).

In one sense, I agree with Jameson that authors are indeed constricted by their understandings of how power is disseminated based on modes of production such as capitalism. However, for African American authors in the early twentieth century, this constriction is not wholly negative. It is important for African American authors such as Schuyler and Hopkins to understand anti-blackness and the discursive, economic, and material stakes of its continued existence. Like Veselá, Jameson would see African American critical utopias such as *Black Empire* and *Of One Blood*, as existing outside of the classical utopian framework due to the way these texts center particular identities and differences associated with black life in America. Anti-blackness and the imperfect

social, economic, and political systems used to maintain it insist on particular attachments to reality that will never be utopian.

Other political elements of the texts, like a reticence to empower the black masses and even American exceptionalism in terms of how African American characters deal with native Africans, also speak to Veselá's idea that African American critical utopias might never achieve the supposed utopian ideal, but that still does not make them incomplete. Again, African American utopias have different goals, which are not always to make a new perfect world, but to reset the balance of the world that exists. As Dr. Belsidus describes his goals for the Black Internationale to our faithful narrator of *Black Empire*, Carl Slater: "No, we who have been on the bottom so long must now come to the top. We who have created the wealth of the world must now enjoy it" (Schuyler 15). Similarly, in *Of One Blood* Reuel, as the king, is charged with "restor[ing] to the Ethiopian race its glory" (Hopkins 114). In both texts these characters, armed with new knowledge and new technologies, go back out into a world ravaged by the anti-blackness they hope to overcome in order to bring these utopian goals to fruition. Even in a text like *Black Empire* that is more specific about the political machinations of a black leader such as Dr. Belsidus, Belsidus and his lieutenants do not try to create a global landscape where racism does not exist. Instead, Dr. Belsidus and the black empire hope to gain enough power that anti-blackness does not affect them, and that those who continue to hold on to racist views no longer have any power over them.

Early Twentieth Century Time Travel and Utopian Africa as a Chronotope

One way that both Hopkins and Schuyler are able to tap into the more utopian and speculative elements of their texts is through moving their African American protagonists out of time and space in order for these characters to experience the sociopolitical alternatives a utopian future in Africa might offer them. Though the actual speculative devices or mechanisms African American authors use to move their characters through time and space vary widely, there are discernible patterns in terms of the kinds of movements authors make depending on the particular period of the twentieth century in which they are writing and the goals of the narrative. In early twentieth century African American critical utopias such as *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire,* Hopkins and Schuyler rely on more expansive spatial movements than temporal ones for their characters. Even though the spatial movements seem more extreme, they often shift world events, and therefore the characters, into what reads as an alternate timeline. This is a generative speculative device for African American authors of this period, and operates as a kind of time travel long before the speculative device of time travel is thought to be used by any author within the African American literary tradition[5].

It is the movement of African American characters to a utopian Africa that functions as time travel in both *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire*. The move to the space and time of utopian Africa is important for both protagonists, as utopian Africa acts a chronotope in both of these texts, giving it the power to catapult the characters in both novels out of a realistic timeline and into a different future than realism can offer.

---

[5] Time travel is a slippery concept. In the entire canon of English language literature, the dates for the earliest use of time travel depend on whether a time machine was used or not. If no time machine was used, the first mention of time travel in literature can go back to the early 18th century. In terms of the African American literary canon, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler is thought to be the first novel to use time travel.

Bakhtin uses the term "chronotope (literally, 'time space')" to explain "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). Utopian Africa is a space that can both recognize and ameliorate the African American history of enslavement, because that is not the *only* history of blackness that African Americans can tap into there, as is shown particularly by Reuel's experience in Telassar. There is a longer and deeper history of blackness, of Africanity even, that the institution of enslavement disconnected African Americans from in ways that seem irreparable, and indeed are irreparable in reality. However, part of the utopian thrust of both *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire*, and the utopian power of a fantastical African space, is a kind of historical resolution that sutures the gaps that separate the African American past from the African past. In this way, by attaching the black American subject to a past that is much greater than a history of enslavement, utopian Africa can also serve as the place where visions of the African American future beyond the afterlives of enslavement are now possible.

The power of African American versions of utopian Africa is that the actual space of utopian Africa is situated in the midst of a timeline that spreads out in two directions. One direction is into the past and time immemorial, and the other into a future that centers instead of subverts the history of blackness and empowers rather than subjugates the black subject. Moving the American black subject to a utopian vision of Africa allows authors to have narrative access to the unbroken timeline that extends from that space. As Paul Gilroy said of the chronotopic slave ships he mentions in *Black Atlantic*, "They were something more—a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production" (Gilroy 17). The same is true for African American visions of

utopian Africa. For African Americans in the early twentieth century, claiming an ancestral and future home in a utopian version of Africa is something more than fantastical conjecture. This movement to Africa, but also to a particular version of time and space, is another means by which to conduct political dissent. By moving to the space of a utopian Africa, African Americans believe they able to reject every institution, system, and western ideal predicated on the subjugation of black people. Moreover, moving the American black subject to utopian Africa does indeed lead to specific modes of cultural production that necessitate and encourage the use of speculative devices.

The entire African continent is the space of utopian African in *Black Empire,* and as Dr. Belsidus and his revolutionary movement arrives in this utopian version of Africa, time shifts in ways that are noticeable and useful for Schuyler. Bakhtin argues that "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to movements of time, plot and history" (84). In *Black Empire*, the moment Dr. Belsidus and his military forces land in Liberia, they rewrite the history and future of that space. In Monrovia, and the other spaces of Belisdus' black empire, utopian Africa becomes an effective time-space where all wrongs against the black subject can be undone, and all hopes for the future can be realized. Dr. Belsidus is very clear about his hopes for the future in *Black Empire*. He says "We had hope for peace, for time to build here on the bosom of Mother Africa a great united land—one people one soul, one destiny. We had hoped to build here a haven for all those wearing the burnished livery of the sun, who wearied of battling discrimination and segregation, disfranchisement and perpetual assault in alien lands and

yearned for a place of rest" (Schuyler 166). In *Black Empire* control over the entire continent of Africa is an indispensable component for the future of black people— a future that is based in achieving a black empire that is both invincible and superior to the rest of the world. Throughout Schuyler's text it becomes clear that the only true escape from white supremacy is accomplished by moving to another space and time in the liberated and black controlled Africa he creates in *Black Empire*.

The idea of time travel is not just theoretical in *Black Empire*. Schuyler uses the chronotope of a utopian Africa to create a world that is politically and economically beyond the Africa that is still occupied by western powers in a realistic timeline. One element of *Black Empire* that illustrates that the black characters are in a new time-space is the separation of black communities from Christianity all over the world and the establishment of a new religion for black people. Called the Temple of Love, "The whole plan of African life of the future will center around the temple. Here will not only the recreation of the community but the dining hall as well. This will relieve women from the drudgery of cookery and free them to take up other pursuits if they wish" (Schuyler 155). Through making this new black religion the center of black life in the new time-space of utopian Africa, Schuyler makes sure to note the economic ramifications of keeping black dollars in black communities. While visiting one new temple, Carl Slater "noted in succession a restaurant, a grocery store, a drug store, a hair parlor, a gymnasium with a swimming pool, a clothing store and a bank, all opening off an arcade" through which "the Black Internationale will virtually control the economic life of colored America" (Schuyler 58). Through the Temples of Love, the American black subject is moved beyond the temporality that structures capitalism as the (only/primary) mode of

production— something that would not necessarily be possible with a move to a realistic version of Africa.

Hopkins accomplishes time travel in *Of One Blood* through moving her protagonist, Reuel, to Telassar. Although Telassar, as a version of a utopian Africa, will be a launching point for the freed, ideal black subject, there is more of a focus on filling the gaps between the African American and African pasts. As a professor tells the entire caravan of treasure-hunters searching for Meroe, "Undoubtedly your Afro-Americans are a branch of the wonderful and mysterious Ethiopians who had a prehistoric existence of magnificence, the full record of which is lost in obscurity" (Hopkins 99). In the text Telassar functions as the only place in the world where the truth of African history can be discovered. It is the place where both the past and present can exist and be joined again, but this joining in itself shifts the American black subject out of one timeline and into another. Due to finding the true past of Africa in Telassar, the future of the black subject is now changed. Using Telassar as a chronotope from which new timelines expand in both directions is useful for Hopkins. The city's existence, and its literal connections to African (and global) antiquity, allows Hopkins to contend that black people and black culture are superior and play a fundamental role in world events.

Reuel Briggs Loses His Mother, but Finds the Future of the Black Subject in Telassar

Through her use of speculative devices in *Of One Blood*, Hopkins is able to move her African American protagonist Reuel Briggs to Telassar, and out of timelines and discourses that situate African Americans as broken, lost, irretrievable, and the products

of an irreparable rift with the past. As Saidiya Hartman writes, "The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger. Torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider. She is the perpetual outcast, the coerced migrant, the foreigner, the shamefaced child in the lineage" (5). In early twentieth century America, Reuel may not be enslaved, but as he experiences the afterlives of enslavement through Jim Crow and other forms of institutional racism, Reuel is for all intents and purposes treated as a stranger and an outcast. Reuel is representative of African Americans then and now "whose lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (6). Because of this "racial calculus" and other factors Reuel is among the African Americans who can and do eschew their familial and cultural ties and pass as white.

Reuel is a young black man who is a medical student at Harvard. As he moves through the world a generation after the emancipation of enslaved blacks in America, Reuel's blackness is something he keeps hidden in order to escape the limitations that would be imposed on him due to his race. Interestingly, none of Reuel's classmates can quite place his heritage. Hopkins writes, "None of the students… knew aught of his origin. It was rumored at first that he was of Italian birth, but then they 'guessed' he was a Japanese, but whatever land claimed him as a son, all voted him a genius in his scientific studies, and much was expected of him at graduation" (4). Yet, nowhere would his genius be enough to overcome the stain of his race if those same classmates knew the truth of his birth, especially since he uses the gifts of mysticism that he received from his

African lineage to gain renown as a scientist. As a white (white adjacent) man he is a genius; as a black man, he would still be relegated to the position of the outsider, exiled and dishonored.

That Reuel passes for white intensifies Hopkins' characterization of him as rather isolated, but only part of his isolation is self-imposed. As the son of an enslaved mother, Reuel's life is a microcosm of the disconnection that African Americans feel to the continent of Africa and to the global history of blackness. According to Orlando Patterson, one "constituent element of the slave relation" is "natal alienation" (5). The slave "as a socially dead person" is "[a]lienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order" (Patterson 5). As the son of an enslaved mother, this seems to have been Reuel's condition even before he began passing, as he had no knowledge of his siblings, Aubrey Livingston, who became his traitorous friend, and Dianthe Lusk, who became Reuel's wife. Because of the condition of his mother (and of course the illegitimacy brought about by the actions of his white father/uncle), Reuel is what Patterson calls a "genealogical isolate," which is partially defined as being "culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage" (5). In fact, Reuel has two pasts. In a masterful stroke by Hopkins, Reuel is at once the son of an enslaved mother in the most recent past, and he is also the long-awaited king of the hidden African kingdom of Telassar, which connects him to the global history of Africa in ways that a history of enslavement generally disallows.

In fact, both of those identities are connected because in the universe of this text, enslavement is not the only condition that Reuel's African American mother passes on to

her children, and this fact itself begins to undo the afterlives of enslavement. As Hopkins writes, "It was a tradition among those who had known him in childhood that he was descended from a race of African kings. He remembered his mother well. From her he had inherited his mysticism and his occult powers" (125-126). It is important that Reuel is not just the long-lost kin of the people who have remained in Telassar through generations, but the long-awaited king, because royalty is perhaps the only condition, the only identity, the only social and economic standing that could undo or overcome that of enslavement. As the king, Reuel is no longer alienated from those from which he came, but fully inserted and reinstated into his bloodline in a way that literally undoes his condition as once enslaved/stranger. In other words, Reuel experiences a kind of deep connection to both Africa and to Africans that other twentieth century African Americans can only dream about. Once Reuel makes it into Telassar and is received not as a stranger, but as the long-awaited monarch, he becomes reminiscent of the protagonist Henry from *Blake*. Reuel is now the resplendent and powerful leader of a nation of Africans who are not only free, but who have never been enslaved and made to hate their blackness. Reuel assumes a role closer to the ideal black subject from America, as enslavement becomes something he tries to put in the past.

Is Carl Slater or Dr. Belsidus the Ideal Black Subject of the Future?

In *Black Empire* the audience is not given just one paragon of ideal blackness through a singular protagonist. Along with Dr. Belsidus, the leader of the Black Internationale movement, Carl Slater is also moved to the future when he travels to the utopian Africa of the black empire. In this future of black-controlled Africa, there is

perhaps some tension between these characters as it seems we are given (at least) two different versions of the ideal black subject. Maria Holmgren Troy argues that, "[i]ntimately linked to history, the chronotope expresses a world-view, and 'determines to a significant degree the image of man [or woman] in literature as well'… characters constitute and are molded by the chronotope in having particular ideologically charged views of, and relations to, time and space" (20). The particular chronotope of the utopian African continent expresses the clear view that the future of black people is in Africa, and that the future that takes place in this space necessitates new black subjects with new world views. With the successful takeover of Africa by Belsidus and all of his followers, it becomes clear that the future is now. This new time-space of a free and forward-thinking Africa that has broken away from the power of the west makes both Dr. Belsidus and Carl Slater deeply consider who they are and who they want to be in this future that allows new and unique possibilities for the black subject.

Belsidus might think of himself as the ideal black subject due to his singular focus and force of will. It is after all his idea and his leadership that achieves black freedom from white supremacy. He says, "There are very few men like me… If I were not unique, I should have been unable to accomplish what I have" (Schuyler 135). It is clear from the prototype Henry from *Blake* that the ideal black subject does not just free himself, but also brings freedom to his people. Belsidus definitely does that, but his extreme lack of sentimentality is at times jarring. The doctor is ruthless to a fault. In his first scene in the text he kills a white woman in the street, and spends much of the book using other white women as sources of information, sex, and money. Kali Tal argues that for Belsidus, "His potency in the bedroom underlines his effectiveness as a leader" and that "because he has

mastered both white and black women with his superpotency and brilliance, Belsidus is shown to be more masculine and much stronger than white men, who cannot even hold on to their own women." (78). This character's willingness to use people, and to kill without compunction is perhaps necessary to be an effective leader of a revolutionary movement. However, as Hill and Rasmussen argue, the presence of Carl Slater as Belsidus' "double" is proof that Schuyler himself did not view Belsidus as the ideal (Hill and Rasmussen 280).

When Slater accuses Dr. Belsidus of being harsh about the subject of marriage, Belsidus replies, "Of course I am harsh. I am always harsh, always have been harsh, always will be harsh… I am harsh because I tell the truth and act the truth, and do not let scruple or sentimentality interfere with my desire and ambitions" (Schuyler 135). This lack of feeling has the same effect perhaps as Belsidus' lack of a background. Hill and Rasmussen argue that "by not providing Belsidus with the accoutrements of a personal history, Schuyler ensures that the doctor will remain a mythical figure" (286). However, the mythical has become the material, and Belsidus is not a god, but a revolutionary leader and a new head of state; one who is perhaps as devious and violent as other heads of state in the world black people supposedly left behind when they arrived in utopian Africa. Again, Veselá argues that African American utopias, in their role as critical utopias, bring imperfections to their utopian spaces. Part of that is due to her other critique that African American critical utopias tend to focus more on the subject than the space. *Black Empire* focuses very much on the Dr. Belsidus character. However, due to the lack of information about how this character formed his beliefs and began this project of taking back Africa for black people, the audience (along with the character Carl Slater)

are left questioning his motives and his tactics in ways that create some distance between Belsidus and the ideal black subject.

In contrast, due to Carl Slater's function as the narrator the reader becomes intimately connected to his point of view. The audience sees his horror at Belsidus' use of violence and chaos to help the Black Internationale. Slater is law-abiding decent. Slater is also the romantic lead of *Black Empire*, which is usually a function reserved for the idolized black leader/sovereign. The romantic relationships in both *Black Empire* and *Of One Blood* are about more than sentimentality. Often, these relationships serve as the basis for making sure that the space and culture of the African American utopia is perpetuated through children. In *Black Empire*, though Slater claims he "would not be complete without the woman [he] loves," his most important relationship in this text is the one he has with Belsidus (Schuyler 135). The same is true for Carl Slater's wife, Patricia Givens, as well.

As Belsidus' secretary Slater is privy to all of Belsidus' plans. Slater often resists the violence Belsidus finds to be necessary and justified in his efforts to bring a utopian Africa into being. Hill and Rasmussen argue that Slater, "even as his fascination with Belisdus' ruthlessness grows, he embodies a viewpoint of moral restraint" and that Slater represents a kind of "naive humanism" (287). Even though it would seem the position of moral center and caring sidekick would be a position of weakness, multiple scholars have noted how the plot hinges on Slater's acceptance of both Belsidus and his radical methods for empire-making. Kali Tal argues that regardless of the positions of the powerful female characters in the texts, "their influence and importance is undermined by the constant presence of the male narrator. It is to Carl Slater, rather than to either

woman, that Belsidus explains his plans, provides his rationalizations, and waxes elaborate about his beliefs and philosophies. It is Slater, in the end, whom Belsidus must convince in order to earn his legitimacy" (78-79). Veselá makes a similar point about Slater and Belsidus. Instead of focusing on the effect Slater has on Belsidus' character, she thinks through how Slater's evolving relationship with both Belsidus and the violence associated with the Black Internationale movement illustrates Slater's own growth. Veselá argues that "By the end of the novel, the transformation of the hero is complete. Slater is no longer critical of Belsidus's use of violence" (Veselá 279). Perhaps this move from judgmental outsider to powerful insider moves Slater closer to being the ideal subject of the future in utopian Africa. However, I doubt that becoming more like Belsidus is what Schuyler would categorize as ideal.

The ideal black subject is one that is free from the afterlives enslavement, and who can move through space and time at will. Schuyler's portrayal of Belsidus makes this character seem as though he has been fundamentally corrupted by his compulsive need to lead the revolution against the West. Even after the Black Empire is created, he refuses to abdicate his position of absolute power, and it is easy to imagine that Belsidus could continue to spend all of his time and energy fighting against various global powers and refusing to let anyone else lead the Black Internationale. Belsidus has no existence, except for his fight (with and against everyone) to drag black people everywhere beyond the afterlives of enslavement and the subjugation of black people within the West. Belsidus will never be free from the afterlives of enslavement if he is fighting in perpetuity against them. Slater, on the other hand, fell into this cause, and though he is committed to the Black Internationale, he is a complete person without this war. And

when the war is won, Slater will probably live a much freer life than Belsidus (and perhaps even Patricia) ever could. The fact that Slater will grasp the freedom to be whoever and whatever he can (within this new black empire) makes him the most ideal black subject in *Black Empire*. His characterization as the black subject of the future is compelling because he is not the hero of this text and that is okay.

Interestingly, in *Black Empire* there is one female character that is at least in the running to be the ideal black subject of the future. Patricia Givens is the head of Belsidus' air force and an ardent follower of Belsidus and the Black Internationale. Kali Tal writes that "Givens is, for her time, an extremely active and competent black female character. She plans and executes dangerous missions, has the strength to give orders and make them stick, and comes as close as anyone to being the intellectual equal of Belsidus" (78). She even goes as far as to rebuff Carl Slater's advances until they complete the mission of capturing Africa from European powers. This character is as smart as the radical leader, and caring, though less sentimental and indecisive than Slater. Even though she and Slater do wed at the beginning of the second half of the book (and male characters start congratulating him on his wife's brilliance), Givens remains a powerful and important cog in the machinery of the Black Internationale.

However, Givens is never given more power than that of any one of Belsidus' many lieutenants, and she is never shown to disagree in any real way with Belsidus. The ideal black subject has to be more than a supplicant to those in powerful positions, and though Givens is an expert in her field, her expertise is solely deployed in service to Belsidus. Though she is one of Belsidus' longest followers and one of his most skilled lieutenants, there is never any discussion of Givens taking over for Belsidus (if he were

ever to allow her to, of course). Givens is a character with revolutionary potential—all of which was squandered in Schuyler's focus on the male characters in this text. Patricia Givens, though one of the smartest and most powerful people in the Black Internationale, is summoned to be Slater's tour guide of the operations, shifted to being Slater's love interest, and eventually becomes Slater's wife. Givens is never shown in any scene without either Slater or Belsidus. She is completely and intentionally overshadowed by these male characters, and used primarily as a literary device to relay information to the reader and to humanize Slater.

The Limits of Near Futures

In the early twentieth century, authors of African American speculative literature moved the American black subject out of the temporality of the American nation through spatial movements to Africa. Moving the black subject to Africa was seen as powerful enough to disrupt the black subject's relationship to American timelines, freeing African Americans enough to have a future that was not determined by a history of enslavement. This spatial move to the chronotope of Africa allowed the American black subject to tap into African timelines that already existed, but that this particular black subject had become disconnected from. Moving out of the time and space of America is enough to change how a person (or even a group of people) conceptualizes the future of blackness. In both *Of One Blood* and *Black Empire* certain characters have been shown a pathway to a utopian black future, but moving beyond the afterlives of enslavement is not the only element of utopia. As the near-future texts by Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler that are the focus of chapters two and three make clear, human beings bring their prejudices, bad habits, and violent tendencies to the future with them. This is especially the case in near-

futuristic texts that operate as alternative presents or have only moved beyond the present very slightly.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 2010.

Davis, Jalondra A. "Utopia and the Gendered Past in Pauline Hopkins' Of One Blood; Or, The Hidden Self." *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction* 3.1 (2019).

Delany, Martin Robison. *Blake: or, The Huts of America, a Novel*. Vol. 363. Beacon Press, 1970.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Afro-futurism 1.0." *Afro-future females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory,* 2008. The Ohio State University Press, 2008 6-13.

Gates Jr, Henry Louis. "University Presses; A Fragmented Man: George Schuyler and the Claims of Race." *The New York Times*, 1992.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* Verso, 1993.

Gruesser, John Cullen. *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa*. University Press of Kentucky, 2015.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Macmillan, 2008.

Hill, Robert A., and R. Kent Rasmussen. "Afterword to *Black Empire*, by George S. Schuyler." UPNE, 1993. 259-310.

Hopkins, Pauline. *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self*: The Givens Collection. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005.

Tal, Kali. "That Just Kills Me: Black Militant Near-Future Fiction." *Social Text* 20.2 (2002): 65-91.

Lavender III, Isiah. "Ethnoscapes: Environment and Language in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, and Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*." *Science Fiction Studies,* 2007. 187-200.

McDowell, Deborah. "Introduction." *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self*: The Givens Collection. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

Moten, Fred. "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.4 (2013): 737-780.

Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. London: Methuen, 1986.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, With a New Preface. Harvard University Press, 2018.

Schuyler, George Samuel, and Robert A. Hill. *Black Empire*. UPNE, 1993.

Troy, Maria Holmgren. "Chronotopes in Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." *African American Review* 49.1 (2016): 19-34.

Veselá, Pavla. "Neither Black Nor White: The Critical Utopias of Sutton E. Griggs and George S. Schuyler." *Science Fiction Studies* 38.2 (2011): 270-287.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago Review Press, 2013.

Yaszek, Lisa. "Race in Science Fiction: The Case of Afrofuturism." Ed. Lars Schmeink. *A Virtual Introduction to Science Fiction,* 2013.

"Prism, Mirror, Lens:" The Near-Future of America in Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*

For early twentieth century authors Pauline Hopkins and George Schuyler, the speculative was less a solidified genre or sub-genre and more a set of devices that allowed these authors to move the American black subject to both a physical and discursive utopia. In this utopia, American black people could regain some connection to African history, while simultaneously retaking control over the future— a future in which it was possible to separate a black American identity from a history of enslavement. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of early twentieth century African American speculative fiction is that these authors still share a fundamental belief that there is a place (even if only imaginatively) where the afterlives of enslavement cannot follow. This utopian space could be neither realistically African nor American, but an unspoiled space that not only accommodated, but welcomed, American black people in a way that could repair the rift caused by the transatlantic slave trade. In the late twentieth century the belief in the existence and utility of a space of true freedom for the American black subject shifts. The utopian space that would allow the American black subject to separate his identity from the afterlives of enslavement is no longer even imaginatively possible— or, if possible, at least no longer a viable space for the kinds of sociopolitical critiques Samuel Delany uses the speculative to execute in his texts.

Similar to the early twentieth century novels that deploy the speculative to illustrate sociopolitical alternatives (usually positive ones) for the black subject, in *Dhalgren (1975)* Delany deploys the speculative in order to envision the city of Bellona—a city still surrounded by a familiar twentieth century America, but one that has

been cut off from the surrounding country due to an unnamed disaster. At first glance,

Bellona seems like a late twentieth century version of Telassar, the grand and dazzling

city that serves as the setting for parts of Hopkins' *Of One Blood*. Both cities are for all

intents and purposes hidden, and the journey to both places is arduous and strange.[6] The

information about both places exists only by word of mouth, and only the most intrepid

(or reckless) of travelers happen to find the way. Also, time and space do not operate

within these cities as they do outside of them. However, unlike Telassar, Bellona is not

concealed to hide its grandeur. It is sequestered and disguised to hide the cankerous sore

of a city that has been left behind by most American cultural, governmental, and

economic institutions.

Regardless of the similarities and differences between Bellona and Telassar, the

critical purchase of a hidden or disconnected city within a country or within even a

continent touched by imperialism and colonialism has changed. By the time Delany

writes *Dhalgren*, the twentieth century has seen two world wars, an industrial and

automotive revolution, multiple movements for equality and civil rights, and the rise of

global capitalism. Therefore, a city without electricity or industry or capital is evocative

in a different kind of way in 1975 than it would have been in 1902. To this point, the

focus on Telassar is often on what is present there, and adversely, in terms of Bellona, the

focus is often on what is missing. But even in the most dire of situations in *Dhalgren*,

---

[6] In *Of One Blood*, the protagonist Reuel is drugged and kidnapped as he tries to commit suicide by losing himself inside an African pyramid. When he wakes up he is in Telassar. In *Dhalgren*, the protagonist Kidd follows a woman who he eventually has sex with and then who turns into a tree on the edges of the city. It reads as though he is led to this city by powers beyond his control, though he is actively looking for Bellona.

much of what is missing from Bellona does create some opportunity for the characters that remain to imagine and create a new and different world.

Samuel Delany is known as an author who projects humanity (and even non-human life) as far into the future as he can imagine. In Delany's work, these futures can go beyond the existence of the Earth and even past the existence of human beings[7] as an apex life form. Yet, even Delany has at least one text in which he radically shrinks the timetable between the present and the future. I refer to futuristic texts that are extraordinarily adjacent to the present as offering visions of near-futures. African American speculative novels which focus on the near-future operate differently than those projecting black lives and bodies into futures so removed from the present that things like racism and sexism have shifted onto different bodies or beings, or have ceased to exist at all. These near-future settings are not simply made possible by the speculative; they are at the core of what the speculative attempts to offer as an imaginary counterpoint to more realist fiction.

Throughout *Dhalgren* Delany constructs a literary battleground on which to play out his hopes and fears of a near-future in a localized setting that is suddenly shifted beyond capitalism. It is important to remember that Bellona, though disconnected from the rest of the country, is still surrounded by America. So in a national (or even global) sense capitalism has not been defeated. Only in this one locality has capitalism been relegated to a near-past that continues to occasionally intrude on the near-future

---

[7] Delany projects his characters so far into the future that his analyses of psychology, sexuality, and various kinds of subjugation seem to be only peripherally or metaphorically related to the periods in which he is writing. Many of his novels, such as *Jewels of Aptor (1962), Babel-17 (1966), and Einstein Intersection (1967)* take place beyond the extinction of the Earth, and even beyond the destruction of mankind. Even in Delany's text *Nova (1968)* in which the Earth and human beings still exist, it is the year 3172, well into the future.

happening in Bellona and running alongside the present in the rest of the country. In Bellona they are literally beyond capitalism, but that is a complicated situation that cannot on its face fully encapsulate the condition (and the critical utility) of the characters that remain in this city and of the city itself. Afropessimism, another recent critical framework in African American studies, provides further insight into the choices faced by the people left behind. At its core, Afropessimism is "an analysis… of how anti-black fantasies attain objective value in the political and economic life of society and in the psychic life of culture as well" (Sexton, 14). Interestingly, anti-blackness resides in the American imaginary. Thus, my reading of *Dhalgren* seeks to understand and analyze the impetus and consequences of the Bellona residents transforming the political and economic imaginary of an entire American city. Including Afropessimist theory encourages an engagement with the realities of anti-blackness and the ways anti-blackness will continue to warp even shifting cultural, political, and economic American imaginaries in futures near and far.

In Bellona, capital has ceased to exist but an "anti-black solidarity continues," making clear that anti-blackness supersedes the limits of capitalism, and that the abolishment of that particular economic system is not the so-called edge of anti-blackness that we might believe it to be here in the present. Charles Linscott argues that "to understand Afropessimism properly is to realize that it is not only *white lives* that take precedence over black lives but property and capital, as well. The terrible truth offered by Afropessimism is that while black bodies *became capital* under slavery, those same black bodies are now subordinated to capital during slavery's afterlife" [emphasis in original] (109). In Delany's vision of a postcapitalist near-future, the same could still be true in

capitalism's immediate afterlife, as black bodies are subordinated to forms of capital that now have no value. Conceptualizing a world beyond capitalism, but not beyond anti-blackness, is a major component of *Dhalgren* and of Delany's ideological jeremiad[8] — his warning for a future that is only a generation away— that critiques the pervasive nature of racism in post-civil rights America.

As Afropessimism makes clear, black social death is infused into American institutions, and part of the point of using the speculative in African American literature is to move the black subject away from (and hopefully beyond) these same institutions that help to perpetuate the afterlives of enslavement. In *Dhalgren*, through his use of speculative devices, Delany is able to do just that by moving the American black subject to a place that is still reeling from the destruction of American economic and political institutions. Yet, it is clear throughout the text that the sudden absence of American institutions does not solve the societal problems caused by institutional racism, at least not immediately. Black social death is endemic to the American cultural, political, and economic imaginary. Changing that fact might be even more worthwhile for an egalitarian future than haphazardly destroying American institutions which, as *Dhalgren*

---

[8] In *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*, David Howard-Pitney argues that "As a pervasive idiom for expressing sharp social criticism within normative cultural bounds, the American jeremiad has been frequently adapted for the purposes of black protest and propaganda, starting with the abolitionist crusade against slavery in the antebellum North" (Howard-Pitney 10). Moreover, Howard-Pitney argues that "According to Wilson Moses, the jeremiad was the earliest expression of black nationalism and… Black jeremiad is Moses' term for 'the constant warnings issued by blacks to whites, concerning the judgement that was to come from the sin of slavery" (Howard-Pitney 10). This rather sharp element of critique of the present state of a racialized America is both formally and ideologically centered within texts that engage the near-future. Like both Howard-Pitney's and Wilson Moses's conceptualization of the Jeremiad, speculative near-futures also seem rather certain that judgement day—even if not in a messianic sense— is coming for an America that is structured and ordered by black suffering and black death.

shows, only leads to chaos and destruction. African Americans have outlived capitalism in *Dhalgren*, but they are not the only group that survives into the near-future of America. Thus, for true egalitarian change to occur all Americans have to be able to envision a better way forward. Until that moment, Black residents of Bellona are shown skewing, subverting, and in some cases completely destroying American cultural, political, and economic imaginaries that refuse to disrupt the afterlives of enslavement in the near-future.

Lens: Bellona and the Disruption of National, Empty Time

The near-future is always uncomfortably close to the present, and this postcapitalist period in Bellona is so close to the present as to operate as an adjacent reality in many instances. In *Dhalgren,* a futuristic Bellona operates within the shadow of the present-day America that surrounds it. Even though the city is out of step with the temporality of the nation, its location in America is one of the only (pseudo)stable connections Bellona has with time or space. Bellona is characterized as having a vague location somewhere in the middle of the country, and from the beginning of the text its very existence is called into question by the narrator. Delany writes,

> Very few suspect the existence of this city. It is as if not only the media but laws
>
> of perspective themselves have redesigned knowledge and perception to pass it
>
> by. Rumor says there is practically no power here. Neither television cameras nor
>
> on-the-spot broadcasts function: that such a catastrophe as this should be opaque,
>
> and therefore dull, to the electric nation! It is a city of discordances and retinal
>
> distortions. (14)

The absence of electricity, and of a national media presence, is unique and therefore

notable for a city located in the middle of contemporary America. Bellona has also

apparently experienced some unnamed city-wide disaster that is often blamed for the

disconnection between Bellona and the surrounding nation. Yet, from a twenty-first

century perspective, it is not difficult to imagine an America that would ignore a disaster

zone within its own borders. After seeing the dearth of national news coverage

concerning the citizens of New Orleans, Houston, or even Puerto Rico in the weeks and

months following major natural disasters in those places, the fact that most of the local

and national media outlets in America would or could ignore Bellona is not entirely

outlandish. The complete cessation of news in or out of this city is the first of many

disruptions of what Walter Benjamin describes as "homogenous, empty time" (24). The

way the media functions within Bellona is one major symptom of the sudden, but

seemingly absolute disconnection of Bellona from the imagined national community of

America.

Within Bellona, the main news organ is the city newspaper, the *Bellona Times*,

that is printed daily by Roger Calkins. Even something as supposedly consistent as the

daily newspaper, however, lends itself to dislocating Bellona from the same time as the

surrounding nation. As Sandra Govan notes, "Days and years are ironically designated by

the *Bellona Times*, the whimsical town newspaper; it might declare 1995 the year in one

issue and 1776 the year in the next" (Govan 48). The arbitrary nature with which Calkins

chooses the date of the paper seems like a harmless quirk, but it is not. Benedict

Anderson argues that "the date at the top of the paper, the single most important emblem

on it, provides the essential connection— the steady onward clocking of homogenous,

empty time" (33). Anderson describes homogenous or empty time as being dependent on

"simultaneity," which is "transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and

fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (24).

Thus, part of the foundation of the American national community is knowing that it is the

same day in each part of the country, and that time works on the same schedule based on

a national set of rules. In Bellona, no one even knows what day of the week it is until

Calkins informs the residents in the paper. In this way, things like months, weeks, and

years become almost meaningless in Bellona, which all serves to further separate the city

from the American nation. The *Bellona Times* serves as a daily reminder to the residents

that there is no longer any simultaneity between Bellona and the surrounding nation. This

lack of simultaneity has material effects for this particular city, including helping to

change the political, economic, and cultural imaginaries that are now possible in Bellona.

However, waiting for the paper to declare the day of the week is one situation that

most of the residents, both new and old, seem to acclimate to rather quickly. What people

seem to have more trouble getting used to is the absence of capitalism and most forms of

capital from the city, especially since this kind of economy has apparently existed in

Bellona before the protagonist finds his way there. Even though everything is now free,

characters still try to buy and sell things and hoard the few dollars that remain in the city.

There are several scenes in which the protagonist, Kidd, grasps his last dollar bill even

harder in his pocket, hoping that no one will require cash payment for whatever food,

drink, or service he has just acquired. Certain groups of residents in Bellona still try to

control other resources, such as space, spotty electricity, or even the power of discourse,

while many minority residents are relegated to the margins. The absence of capitalism is

a more complicated issue than just a cessation of businesses and the trading of commodities— like bodies and labor— for money. Capitalism is an extensive and multifaceted institution, and its disappearance from Bellona leaves widespread consequences in its wake. One major issue with the sudden cessation of capitalism within Bellona is that capitalism can no longer be used to structure both time and space in service to both the nation and class and racial hierarchies. In Bellona, time, as a function of capitalism is no longer the steady industrialized constant that the nation can depend on, and this changes how the remaining city inhabitants interact with one another and the space(s) they occupy.

Several residents, represented by the Richards family, believe that by rejecting the post-capitalist reality and disruptions of empty time in Bellona, their lives can be restored to their former glory. The Richardses clings to a kind of chrononormativity, defined by Elizabeth Freeman as the "process" by which "naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation" (3). Throughout the text, the Richardses (particularly the parents), seem to believe that by restarting the process of chrononormativity, they can restore the city (and their lives in particular) to homogenous, empty time. In Bellona, it is primarily the Richards family that clings to empty, homogenous time even though this version of time no longer fits their reality.

The Richardses are a white upper middle-class family who live in an expensive high-rise building in what used to be one of the nicer parts of Bellona. Despite the fact that there are no more businesses or industries in Bellona, this family's understanding of their upper-class identity persists through their devout continuation of their pre-disaster schedules. In her discussion of the process of chrononormativity, Freeman argues that

"Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time" (3). By the time the protagonist meets the Richardses, Mr. Richards still leaves for his job every day, and even refuses his wife's requests to take a day off, "because this just isn't the time for it. Not now" (Delany 131). Mr. Richards keeps up this farce of going to work every morning, because he cannot understand his place in the alternative temporality of Bellona with no schedules, no definite time of the day, and no real date. Moreover, through the temporal regularity of his work schedule, Mr. Richards can physically tap into the past, where he feels his true class and social position is located, in order to try and force that past into this near-future. He tries to model undying faith in the power of capitalism-based empty time, and he believes that keeping this time will continue to give his life meaning, allowing him to connect with the political and economic imaginaries of Bellona on his own terms. Regardless of the fact that Bellona has become a place that showcases "the failure of Western 'modernity' and the capitalist system that organizes it,"[9] The Richardses refuse to acknowledge this kind of failure as a possibility, and as the protagonist Kidd notes, "trying to stay sane under that sort of madness drives [them] nuts" (Delany 136).

When the Richardses hire Kidd, it is clear they still believe in the power and stature of capital in this city where capital/ism no longer exists, and Kidd, for whatever reason, plays along. At this point early in the text, he might be having as much trouble adjusting to the economic and political imaginary of Bellona as the Richardses are. The Richardses make an offer to pay Kidd five dollars an hour to move them upstairs, because

---

[9] Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time binds: Queer temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010.

they still conceptualize labor as something they can buy from particular kinds of bodies.
Yet, after Kidd confronts Mr. Richards about never being paid, even Mr. Richards has to
admit that he cannot pay the money Kidd is owed. Angrily, Mr. Richards says, "What
does a person like you need that kind of money for anyway? It doesn't cost anything to
live in this city—no food bills, no rent. Money doesn't mean anything here any more…
MSE hasn't had a payroll for months. There hasn't been anyone in the damn office!"
(Delany 276). Here, even in the afterlife of capital, Mr. Richards still believes his class
position—combined with his race— allows him a kind of economic power over Kidd and
his labor without having to compensate him. However, Kidd's confrontation of the
Richardses again makes them face how out of place they feel in this new economic
imaginary in Bellona. The few dollars Mr. Richards has in his pocket have no meaning,
and the bitterness and frustration the Richards feel about the lack of economic power now
at their disposal comes pouring out in this moment.

For them, and a few other families like them, the idea of being outside the
strictures of empty time, and therefore the nation, is not only confounding, but terrifying.
But the Richardses' idea of their station and how they pursue making their lives
meaningful is not only based in time, but in space, as well. Henri Lefebvre's term
"abstract space" is useful here to further explicate the Richards' fixation on the capitalist
near-past of Bellona[10]. Grace Hong describes abstract space as "an epistemological
concept that is the spatial equivalent to Walter Benjamin's 'empty, homogenous time'"
(Hong 70). Hong goes on to argue that "'Abstract space' as a concept refers more to a
way of imagining space than to any particular space or even kind of space" (Hong 70).

---

[10] Lefebvre, Henri, and Donald Nicholson-Smith. The Production of Space. Vol. 142. Blackwell: Oxford, 1991.

Yet, as we have seen, imaginaries have real, material power—particularly ones that have the weight of capitalism and the nation behind them. Throughout *Dhalgren* the Richardses are as rigid about trying to maintain the abstract space of their particular apartment as they are about trying to mimic empty time. They subscribe to a strict spatial separation from other races and classes, and the only way the protagonist, Kidd, is able to come in contact with them is through his role as hired help. The Richardses' spatial separation is often realized through their seclusion from most other residents of Bellona by cloistering themselves in "their" part of town, or after the disaster, on their floor of the apartment building; a building which they now share with people associated with the street gang-like group, the Scorpions.

Ultimately, the Richards are not able to sustain this spatial separation from the people they see as the undesirables of Bellona, which is one factor that necessitates their move from their original apartment on the seventeenth floor to an apartment on the nineteenth floor (with a balcony). As the Richardses see it, if there is going to be a shift of the political and economic imaginaries of the city, they want to move upward, not downward. Mrs. Richards tells Kidd, "To you, moving like this is just a gesture. But you don't understand how important a gesture can be. I cannot have a home where I hear the neighbors shrieking. *I* cannot. Because when the neighbors are shrieking, I cannot maintain the peace of mind necessary for *me* to *make* a home" [emphasis in original] (Delany 227). For the Richardses, once the original residents of their building fled, and the Scorpions (among others) start squatting in the lower floors, the space of their apartment building "lacked the coherence and stability of abstract space" (Hong 70). No longer was their building filled with space that was "homogenous, empty, and

interchangeable," instead now they read the space as "deviant or transgressive" (Hong 70). Therefore, the Richardses' move to a new floor is more than a literalization of their dreams for upward mobility; it is another element of their refusal of a world in which space and time function in ways that that they cannot understand, and which no longer place them in positions of power. This move up two floors is a realization of getting farther away from the other residents of the city and of their building who are perpetually moving closer and closer to them in ways that make it harder to sustain their temporal and spatial pretenses. Here, due to the isolation of Bellona, there can be no white flight out to the suburbs. The only place left to go is up, higher and higher in their building.

For the Richards family, empty time and abstract space are literally life and death, as we see with the death of Mr. and Mrs. Richards' youngest son, Bobby. During the move, Bobby is killed when his sister June pushes him down an eleven-story elevator shaft. At first, it is unclear whether June did this on purpose or not. June's family is unaware that she is the young white woman that is photographed having sex with George Harrison during the disaster, and Bobby had threatened to expose June's poster of George Harrison to their parents. Mrs. Richards biggest fear is that this move to the nineteenth floor might cause "a space, a gap, a crack in which some terrible thing might get in and destroy it, us, my home" (Delany 227). When the protagonist Kidd brings a poster of George to June that she tries to hide in her family's apartment, in effect, Kidd supplies the "terrible thing," the "dirt, filth or horrible rot" that begins the decay of this supposedly safe, cloistered domestic space Mrs. Richards has tried to create for her family (Delany 227). Thus, Bobby's threat to June is not just childish banter between siblings. June's poster of George Harrison has the power to disrupt the particular political

and cultural imaginary that structures the entirety of their lives together. Thus, June is willing to kill her own brother to keep her actions a secret. However, in the end, his death accomplishes the same things revealing her poster would have. His death sullies her family's space and shatters the Richardses' supposed distance from the violent and chaotic city. The Richardses' home, full of expensive accoutrements, can no longer disguise the realities of Bellona. Bobby's blood, which trails from the elevator to their old apartment, along with the "faint putrescence" of his body rotting two floors below, disallows their refusal of the truth of their existence (Delany 277).

The Richardses cling to empty, homogenous time and space to try and make sense of the world Bellona has become, but the kinds of imaginaries they want to preserve, based in empty time and abstract space, are not *just* an elitist fantasy of the wealthy as they try to consolidate more wealth and power for themselves. Abstract time and empty space, in concert with being stratifying structures of capitalism, are also tools used by governing bodies to regulate and control populations. In Bellona, capitalism and American governing policies can be blamed for the way the city was originally arranged, but in this near-future postcapitalist Bellona, anti-blackness is clearly one of the strongest forces perpetuating the segregation of the city, even once empty time and abstract space have fallen away. The Richardses focus so much on trying to go back to what they had before, that they do not even notice how their politics might be in line with the new political imaginary of the city.

Delany's Bellona is emblematic of an extreme version of an American ghetto that houses underserved and ignored populations who are far from the resources they need. Water and electricity are hard to come by, and are spotty at best. Also, somehow it is

easier to get drugs and alcohol in Bellona than it is to find food, and most people are still living on the refuse of what was left behind after most of the original residents of the city fled during/after the disaster. Industry within the city has fled, along with all well-paying jobs, and jobs in general, so everyone has turned to stealing and other kinds of crime to survive. In Bellona, housing is poor because there is no way to "own" property. In fact, most of the population of this city is homeless, and many of the residents, like the aimless street gang, the Scorpions, turn to squatting in abandoned buildings like the Richards' apartment building. Moreover, joining a street gang is a good option for a lot of the young men floating around the city because of the access the gang provides to resources like food and to other advantages such as power and a sense of purpose. Still, the Scorpions in particular, often crowd almost thirty people into one "nest" or house at a time, and engage in gun fights with some of the white residents over clothes and other resources that have been left behind in the shopping areas around the city.

Like many poor urban areas, Bellona, and the things that go on there, are of no concern to citizens or news outlets from outside of that area. Unless the local news outlets (primarily the *Bellona Times*) are trying to perpetuate racial stereotypes, as they do with George Harrison, there is no other real news. Artists and others might come to slum for a day or two, and then they leave. And everyone, all of the intermittent interlopers that come to Bellona for vacation or for new material for their art, come and go without any real care or understanding that there are people who live there, who will never have the resources to leave and who will always be at the mercy of the city. This and other remnants of the near-past continue to live on in the city, and it is clear that Bellona of the past, like many American cities, had economic, political, and cultural imaginaries based

on class and race. In *Dhalgren*, the material effects of the economic imaginary in Bellona suddenly and violently moving away from capitalism was that both time and space shifted within the city. Yet, apparently the way that Bellona was wrenched from empty time and abstract space was not an extreme enough rearrangement to propel the predominantly African American population from being segregated in the Jackson street area, a part of town that has even fewer resources than everywhere else in this deserted city. Again, regardless of the shifts in the economic imaginary, the shifts of the political and cultural imaginaries have not been extreme enough to encourage new egalitarian politics for every resident of the city. Many residents still fall back on politics from the past, which is a true failure of this new and untethered American cultural imaginary.

Yet, no matter what the residents of Bellona believe about race and class, time and space truly function differently within the city. The almost intentional ways that the city itself seems to move characters through space and time is one of the major speculative elements of *Dhalgren* that makes the city read as a stand-alone character with a level of power and sentience not usually allowed for places. In Bellona "alternative spaces…[with] alternative ways of knowing and imagining space are no longer violently suppressed," and does change how the city and its inhabitants relate to each other (Hong 70). At one point, after having been in Bellona for a couple of weeks Kidd asks his girlfriend Lanya, "Do you think a city can control the way people live inside it? I mean, just the geography, the way the streets are laid out, the way the buildings are placed?" (Delany 250). Lanya's answer to him is, "of course it does" (Delany 250). Kidd asks this question because like every other thing in Bellona, the layout of the city is unintelligible,

and as a person who has just come to this place, he can feel the difference between how space works within the city and how it works outside of the city.

The way the city moves its residents around is not just something that the protagonist and his girlfriend notice. In another instance, the character Bunny tells Kidd "Like everything else in this town, you just hear about it until it bumps into you. You have to put yourself at the mercy of the geography, and hope that down-hills and up-hills, working propitiously with how much you feel like fighting and how much you feel like accepting, manage to get you there. You'll find it eventually" (Delany 326). Throughout the text, Bunny's theory is proven true. Even though traversing Bellona seems impossible to Kidd, he always ends up where he needs to be, almost as if the city not only knows where he needs to be, but has a stake in him getting there at a particular moment in time. Delany's portrayal of a city that never lets the protagonist go the same way twice, that is truly unmappable, that holds a kind of power over its residents is really fascinating and powerful in a book where everyone is trying to find their way— both literally and figuratively. In Bellona, the power that the city has also represents a true disjunction between how time and space function in Bellona and the national standardized functions of time and space in America.

As much as the city itself might disrupt empty time, so does the protagonist's experience and perspective of time and space within the city, which makes Kidd an especially powerful and productive figure in *Dhalgren*. In terms of his connection with time, the protagonist has a form of amnesia that works to temporally dislocate him from time in unsettling ways. He cannot remember what year it is, and is reliant on an unreliable source like the city newspaper to keep any sense of time whatsoever. He also

cannot remember his age, which is helpful in particular relationships, like the one with

Tak who seems to have penchant for hooking up with youngish men who have just

arrived in town, or like the protagonist's relationship with the Scorpions street gang, of

which he becomes the leader and seemingly one of the elder members. The fact that this

character has an indeterminate age is also one reason why the moniker of "The Kid"

sticks to him in its various forms. The way time moves around Kidd continues to be

muddled, and this is exacerbated by the way Kid moves through time, as well.

Also, aside from being unable to remember and attach himself to time before the

period during which he resides in Bellona, the protagonist loses chunks of time that we

are not privy to because of the narration, which allows us to see primarily through his

perspective. The first time people around him, namely his girlfriend Lanya, realize that he

suffers from a kind of amnesia in the present, Kidd has been gone for five days. Lanya

tells Kidd, "The night before I saw you last, you lost three hours. Now you've lost five

days. Maybe you really are crazy" (Delany 367). Kidd's relationship with time makes

him different in a way that sets him apart, even in the strange setting of Bellona.

Timelessness is next to godliness in this text, and because the protagonist's identity, even

down to his name, race, and age, is malleable, he is able to slip in and out of time in ways

that cause the characters to literally deify him. In the text, "everybody thinks [he is] some

kind of hero or something" (Delany 367). No one really knows what to make of Kidd,

and their perception of him is as changeable as where the sun sets and rises or what day it

is.

Furthermore, the protagonist, unnamed and ethnically ambiguous, is not just able

to slip in and out of time, but in and out of space(s), as well. Kidd goes to places that

even the average resident of Bellona would never go, and he is allowed into these places

in ways most people would not be. Just as Telassar could be neither realistically African

nor American in *Of One Blood*, the protagonist of *Dhalgren* could be neither white nor

black in order to give the reader the fullest sense of how the city works. Kidd is our lens

and the pictures we get of the city are all a matter of perspective. His agelessness and

perceived racelessness allows us to have the most panoramic view possible.

Mirror: In the Wake and into the Future

In *Dhalgren*, the speculative event of the unnamed disaster serves the purpose of

breaking Bellona from the empty time and abstract space of the American nation. The

movement of Bellona into the future and beyond American institutions is the vehicle

through which the American black subject is moved into the future, as well. Though

Bellona is not the utopian space that can support and allow for the ideal black subject—

conceptualized as a black subject finally free from the afterlives of enslavement—

Bellona is still a space that is (at least partially) dislocated from the difficult realities the

black subject faces in America. This speculative movement, then, does offer the black

subject some sociopolitical alternatives in Bellona, but these slightly futuristic,

postcapitalist alternatives are not necessarily better than the ones available to the black

subject in the present. Delany, in true proto-Afropessimist fashion, is clear throughout the

text about the way anti-blackness still restricts the movements and possibilities for the

black subject in the near-future. Bellona and the characters who populate it represent the

hard truth that utopia is not imminent, and that dystopia is a far more likely outcome in

near-futuristic spaces like Bellona, where all of the cultural imaginaries are shifting, and the lone tether between Bellona and the American present is anti-blackness.

The black characters George Harrison, and Risa (a young woman affiliated with the Scorpion gang), do not have a royal lineage or an ancient city of powerful subjects ready to do their bidding like the protagonist of *Of One Blood*; they are not people with some kind of hidden power waiting to be wielded as soon as each of these characters finds out who they are. Yet, what these characters do have is a deep understanding of the machinations of anti-blackness in Bellona specifically, and an intense motivation to shift the political, economic, and cultural imaginaries of postcapitalist Bellona in a more free and liberated direction through whatever means necessary and available to them. For the Black characters in *Dhalgren* the focus is on their subjectivity and often on having and maintaining bodily control over themselves. Each of these characters make calculated decisions in order to skew or destroy any imaginary within Bellona that perpetuates the afterlives of enslavement. Though in Bellona anti-blackness continues in ways that are generally familiar, black characters in this text use the institutional absences of the American nation to carve out some space for resistance.

In *Dhalgren* it is particularly the character George Harrison who leans into the absurdity of a static anti-blackness in a city where literally everything else is changeable. George comes into the cultural consciousness of Bellona as the black brute who supposedly raped a young white woman during the disaster that caused most residents to flee and shifted the temporal and spatial location of the city. Later, the audience finds out the young white woman is June Richards and that the encounter was consensual. Yet, all everyone knows about the sexual contact between George and June is that they were

photographed while having sex as part of an article written by Roger Calkins describing all of the strange and violent events associated with the disaster. One character, Joaquim Faust, says of the newspaper article concerning George and June, "There's supposed to be one set of pictures; of this *big* buck, getting after this little white girl… a whole *lot* of stink about them pictures. 'Rape' is the nasty word they didn't use in the paper but rape is what it was" [emphasis in original] (Delany 71). This is his opinion of an article that he has not read himself, based on hearsay from others who also have not read the article. But Faust's opinions and those of many of the residents of Bellona are not based on what actually happened, but on the anti-blackness they refuse to leave behind. Many individuals within the city cannot see how the sexual act that took place between George and June could come to be in any way, except through violence by George.

This moment of sexual contact between a black man and a young white woman, is the main event besides the disaster that shapes the political and cultural imaginaries of the city, and for many residents (like Faust) these two events are tied together and thought of simultaneously. The widely publicized sexual contact between George and June, begins the process of setting the limits of what is possible and acceptable in Bellona, and the foundations of these limits are connected to the anti-blackness that remains inside the city. Sharon Holland's book *The Erotic Life of Racism* is really useful in the discussion of the affair between George and June. Through Delany is able to "mine the interstices between black and white through the moment of sexual contact," and because this event is widely publicized everyone in the city falls into this gap that refuses to shift even as time and space are shifted (Holland 9). Holland argues that she "place[s] the erotic—the personal and political dimensions of desire— at the threshold of ideas about quotidian

racist practice," and in Dhalgren, particularly in the relationship between George and June, Delany does the same (9). There is a lot of sex in *Dhalgren*, but the most discussed and described sex act in the book is the one that takes place between June and George. In a sense, this act no longer belongs to them, but becomes representative of the break (or lack thereof) between the surrounding nation and Bellona. Even the characters that know and like George in some capacity feel that there was something innately wrong about what took place between George and June, and this feeling of some kind of line being crossed sets particular political stakes in place and shapes the political imaginary in ways that are frighteningly close to the nation Bellona just broke away from.

For Delany, sex is an important part of the political imaginary that is in formation in Bellona. Though quotidian, sex is a powerful act that has great critical utility as he delves more deeply into the anti-blackness that is dragged to Bellona with the people who remain and those who find their way to the city. As Sharon Holland argues, "In returning to the black/white binary and asking what really happens or happened there[,] we might be able to consider, at least for a moment, what our 'pleasure' might look like; what being together, figuratively and literally, might yield— aside from, at time, the miscegenated being" (Holland 9). In the text, George is really vocal about what his pleasure looks like[11], and that is the part of this affair that bothers many people the most. Faust says of the interview George gives in the paper, "That nigger had the dirtiest mouth… I know the colored people got it hard. But if you want to help, you don't print… two pages of him saying how good it was, with every other word 'shit' and 'fuck' and 'Wooo-eeeee', how he's going to get him some more as soon as he can" (Delany 71).

---

[11] See *Dhalgren*, page 209.

Moreover, this is the same article in which George reacts with complete disregard when Calkins refers to what happened between George and June as rape. Thus, not only did George have sex with a white woman, but he also told everyone about it with no fear or shame, and that is what Faust and many other residents want. They want George to feel that there is shame connected to his actions and that he should be fearful of the consequences to follow. Yet, in lieu of any institutions to appeal to, there are no real repercussions that could be levied, even if anyone had the power to do so.

George understands very much the ways that anti-blackness affects him (and others) in the space of Bellona. So not only does he insist on his ability to live the fullness of his desires (with consenting women), but he also uses the only media source in the city to make sure his voice is heard, and as a byproduct of his resistance he becomes famous in the city.[12] His media-focused campaign, including not only the interview in the *Bellona Times*, but the various pornographic posters he poses for, refuses his characterization as a nameless faceless black body and insists on his subjectivity even as he leans into sexual-racial stereotypes from the past. As he tells Lanya, "she knows my name— it was in the paper. I gave it to them for free, too. I told them I ain't ashamed of nothing I done. I like it like that, and I'm gonna do it again, any time, any place" (Delany 210). George never lets the stereotype of a violent, excessive black male sexuality deter him from speaking and acting out his desires, and in this way really tries to break away from one aspect of the afterlives of enslavement. Again, he refuses to be cowed by the

---

[12] There's a really uncomfortable conversation he has with Lanya where he performs what he thinks she expects, and deflects this rape question by saying there are various definitions of rape. They end up landing at a place where he basically says that he likes it rough and with consenting women. He believes in consent, and has conversations with the women he has sexual contact with (generally) but there is enough in this moment to leave open what he will do when his desires are conflict with a sexual partner of his… This is not the virgin king who finds himself both widowed and then betrothed to virgin women.

shame and fear others feel and try to foist onto him, and throughout the text George uses the media of Bellona and his fame to shape the political and cultural imaginary of the city.

George becomes a kind of folk hero in Bellona, or according to Kidd "*becom[es] a god*" [emphasis in original] (Delany 362). And as a part of his campaign for power over his image, Reverend Amy mass produces posters depicting erotic images of George's nude form in order to publicize her services at her church. In response to Kidd's question of why she distributes nude, sexually explicit pictures of George, Rev. Amy says "The poor people in this city—and in Bellona that pretty well means the black people— have never had much. Now they have even less… We have to give them… something" (Delany 191). So, Reverend Amy (and by extension Roger Calkins) gives them George, a local hero who is as close to the ideal black subject as anyone in Bellona is going to get. This near deification of George is not completely unfounded, because even though "the black body is the quintessential sign for subjection, for a particular experience that it must inhabit and own *all by itself*"[13] [emphasis in original], George and his particular raced and sexualized body in some ways overcomes racial subjection through insisting on his subjectivity (Holland 4). In this one locality, and for this one person, his body is no longer (only) a sign of subjection, but the quintessential sign of power and sexual prowess in Bellona, which grants him a large amount of social cache. So much so, that when a second moon rises in Bellona the residents name that moon George because he is the one subject (besides the second moon) everyone is talking about and thinking about.

---

[13] Holland, Sharon Patricia. The erotic life of racism. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

Again, the forms of resistance favored by Black characters within *Dhalgren* are individual and often focused on the body and sexuality, which often makes these various forms of resistance seem onerous and clumsy. That is particularly the case with the scenes involving Risa, a young black woman associated with the Scorpions after Kidd becomes the leader of the gang. Risa is a character who, in the most graphic sex scene in the text, has sex with every male member of the Scorpions that is present in the scene. Originally, I wanted to link Risa's scene with Delany's interest in the critical utility of pornography, and perhaps even in the power of sexuality to bring the black female body into being, but these interpretations overstate the power that Risa is able to gain through the sexual contact she makes with the other members of the Scorpions in this text.

Based on the way Delany writes this particular scene Risa's ability to consent is in question, especially since there are references to her drinking and the men are clearly concerned only with their own pleasure and with performing various forms of sexual prowess for each other. Because of these factors, and the fact that another female member of the Scorpions seems upset, the next morning Kidd tries to make sure that Risa was a willing participant of their shared sex act and that she enjoyed herself. In response to Kidd's questioning Risa replies, "That was mine… That was all mine. You just can't have any part of that. That's all. It was… mine!" (Delany 684). She also goes on to tell Kidd, "You go find out yourself if you want it!" (Delany 685). Even though Kidd might think he is trying to do the right thing, by making sure she is ok and that she has no hard feelings, in a sense he is disallowing her power to consent due to his own guilt, no matter how unintentionally. Regardless of how Kidd, Lady of Spain (another more powerful female Scorpion), or even how we as readers might read the sexual experience Risa has

with the rest of the male members of the gang, she reads it as deeply personal and she wants to maintain ownership over that experience and over her own understanding of what happened.

From Risa's point of view, she is as much a willing participant of this sexual act as are the men that participate along with her, but Kidd does not go ask any of them if they are alright with what happened. He only seeks her out because he either feels or projects a difference in power between this young woman in his group and the men who participated in group sex with her. Much like George Harrison, she refuses the shame and fear that Kidd tries to foist onto her, and she takes full ownership of her sexual desires and the sexual acts that were the result of those desires. I do not want to repeat Kidd's mistake by perhaps (mis)reading this situation as one in which one of the few black female characters in the text is disallowed the power she seems to have taken for herself during this particular sexual act.

However, I must note the differences between how black female characters and white female characters are allowed to search for and engage in sexual acts that allow them to express their sexual freedom in this text. The white female characters in this text are allowed the space to clearly express in language what they sexually desire, and they are allowed to pursue those desires without having guilt or shame continually attached to their actions. Risa is not given either of these opportunities. Before Kidd approaches her about his fears of her feeling abused by the men of the Scorpions, Kidd wonders if she can even speak at all. Delany gives this character no true dialogue, and at least during the sexual act her intentions and desires are only expressed through gesticulations and non-

verbal sounds, which is partially responsible for leaving those involved, like Kidd, wondering if her desires have been misread.

Yet, in the one scene in which she does speak, and in the few words she says, perhaps the point can be made that Risa, in a very localized way, shifted the sexual and political economies within the Scorpions, which could indeed shift the political and cultural imaginaries of Bellona. If nothing else, Risa's conversation with Kidd made him consider his own sexuality and who exactly he was performing for when he participated in having sex with her along with the other members of the Scorpions. She also did seem to shift the way Kidd understood agency, his culpability in acts that might seem heinous, and his responsibility to this group of wayward young people. Risa may not have been given much of a voice, but she refused to let anyone else speak for her. Unlike George Harrison, Risa may not have been able to change what people think of her; she was not given the kind of platform George was in the text, but like George Harrison she insisted on a particular sexual economy that included her as a full and equal member.

Prism: Roger Calkins Builds a New Nation in Bellona

The absence of the governmental, economic, and cultural institutions that structured American life in Bellona before the disaster leaves a kind of vacuum that is filled mainly by the character Roger Calkins. At one point Reverend Amy describes Calkins as "A very polite man. And very concerned about what goes on in his city" (Delany 74). Bellona is understood to be Calkins' city, and he even refers to it as such, because he alone seems to be actively creating and supervising the institutions in post-disaster Bellona. From the creation of *The Bellona Times*, the daily newspaper that he

writes and publishes, to the local watering hole, Teddy's, it is only through Calkins'

direction (and his sole access to resources within and outside of the city) that many of the

characters are put to work maintaining the few fundamental city institutions that exist.

Calkins is the character that has a hand in "cultivating economic subjects with different

desires"[14] in postcapitalist Bellona (Gibson-Graham xxiv). Calkins may not have had

control over the disaster and the spatial and temporal disjuncture of Bellona from the rest

of America, but he seems fully committed to maintaining that division, so that he might

have as much control as he can over whatever comes next.

Though some residents might believe Calkins has sovereign power at his

fingertips, Calkins fashions himself as a politician more akin to a governor than as a king

or dictator. In a letter to the protagonist Kidd, Calkins writes, "My friend, I am fascinated

by the mechanics of power. Who in his right mind would want the problems and

responsibilities of the nation's president? Lord, I *would*" [emphasis in original] (Delany

658). However, Calkins believes that due to his Jewish heritage, only moderate wealth,

lack of an Ivy League degree, and his inability to pass the New York bar, the American

presidency is out of his reach (658-659). In this gap between his goals and his reality lies

Bellona, where suddenly he can experiment with the mechanics of power even to the

point of manipulating how the city's small population understands time and space.

Bellona, as this new space where literally anything is possible, allows Calkins the chance

to finally ascend to the heights of political power, but first he has to make this small

middle-American city a nation in the wake of a disaster that destroyed almost everything.

---

[14] Gibson-Graham, J K. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Print.

Calkins' first objective is to cultivate the necessary simultaneity it will take for Bellona to become a nation of its own. He begins this process when he takes over *The Bellona Times*, which is the first apparatus he uses to control simultaneity in Bellona. Again, he picks the date and day, and due to the postcapitalist nature of the city and its shifting political and economic imaginaries, the residents follow his lead. Except for Reverend Amy's need to have a Thursday every ten days or so for her church services, no one really needs a static calendrical schedule since Bellona is no longer attached to a capitalist economy. And of course, this new temporality continues to help separate Bellona from the surrounding American nation. For Calkins, the more he can substantiate the differences between Bellona and the surrounding nation, the more power he can have within the small nation he is building. He is perhaps the one character that does not see Bellona in terms of shifting imaginaries; instead he is fixated on how the political and cultural landscapes of the city can be shaped in material terms. Calkins is not open to any shifts in politics or culture that deviate from what he has determined to be the reality of Bellona, and because of that he never has true control over the politics or culture of the city, and he underestimates the things that do.

The imagined community of nations and of nationalism requires various forms of fixity[15] to exist, and while Bellona's very existence is essentially contrary to that, Calkins tries to bring a kind of fixity to Bellona. To do so, he taps into anti-blackness and class hierarchies as foundational elements of his new nation, like so many nations before. Calkins uses his first issue of *The Bellona Times* to showcase both an article and pictures depicting George and June having sex. To make sure that the disaster did not supplant the

---

[15] See Anderson. Fixity of Language; fixity of borders; simultaneity.

power of anti-blackness, Calkins fans the flames of one of the oldest sexual stereotypes

about black men: their supposed violent and uncontrollable sexual desire for white

women. As Charles Linscott argues the "foundation of Western institutionality [is] the

exclusion of black people from the category of human" (105). Calkins' article trafficked

in sensationalism, racist stereotypes, and racial fears, and the tawdry subject matter

almost guaranteed that this article would be read (or at least discussed) by everyone in the

city. This article affirmed anti-blackness as not only acceptable but foundational in the

political landscape of Bellona, when the moment after the disaster offered the city an

opportunity to imagine something different. In Bellona there are no institutions left with

which to structure institutional racism, but Calkins is committed to steadily building these

kinds of institutions. He is also committed to using the black body as a somatope[16] that he

can hang anti-blackness (through an animalistic, violent sexuality) upon, when no

institutions are available. Through this one article about George and June, and others that

followed, Calkins gave Bellona residents like Faust, the Richards, and many others

multiple reasons to fall back on their outdated prejudices, and out of weakness, fear, or

familiarity, they did.

For Calkins, in the imagined community of his new nation, hierarchies are

important, and it is important that he gives people ways to situate themselves into

particular classes in ways that do not include capital or wealth, since those are no longer

extant in Bellona. Calkins' interest in the mechanics of power leads him in many

directions, and as we come to know this character, it is clear that he is always in the

process of developing or buttressing particular components of what could be called the

---

[16] Hamilton, Regina. "The Somatopic Black Female Body within Archipelagic Space and Time in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*."

culture of Bellona. In a conversation with Kidd, Calkins says "My interest… is politics.
I'm only out to examine that tiny place where it and art are flush" (Delany 741). In art,
Calkins sees an opportunity for particular kinds of discourses to reach everyone in
Bellona. However, instead of trying to find the actual places where art and politics come
in contact with each other, Calkins uses all of the power at his disposal to try and create
artificial—state approved— intersections between the two. Calkins states in a letter to
Kidd, "I have always felt every society must have its art; and for that art to have ultimate
use, it must be free of intimidation from the centers of power" (Delany 658). Yet, he only
believes this freedom to be necessary during the moment of creation. After the art has
been produced, Calkins believes he should be able to politicize and deploy that art in
whatever way he wants. At one point late in the text, Kidd says that he will not write
anymore or he might refuse to send his second book to Calkins, and Calkins responds by
saying "If I must arrange to have it hijacked, ink still moist, from beneath the very
shadow of your dark quill, I suppose that's what I'll have to do" (Delany 744). Like any
other head of state he believes anything created in his empire belongs to him, and that
includes both the artist and whatever art they produce.

Furthermore, if one of Calkins' goals is a kind of city cohesion, another of his
goals is to create a high culture that is clearly differentiated from everything else moving
discursively or otherwise through the city. Calkins thinks of art in its cultured iterations,
and as something which can prove the lives lived in Bellona have meaning and purpose.
Moreover, Calkins is set on proving that in its current condition, Bellona is a place where
high culture still exists in a way that favors rich, white people and their refined tastes.
Yet, because he tries to create something akin to a high culture, there continue to be

important movements, discourses and artistic expressions that take place in the city which are outside of his purview. Calkins underestimates the importance of anything he did not create (or at least sanction), and some of the things he did help to create. Yet, in the spaces that he eschews as inconsequential is where the real cultural zeitgeist of Bellona takes place, and through the art of the people is where real opportunities for resistance is located. Calkins may believe that the citizens Bellona are pawns in his movement toward wherever the intersection of art and politics take him, and that he can choose for them what their aptitudes and appetites should be, but that will never be the case.

Even in terms of religion, Calkins attempts to set up a "state religion," headed by a character named the Father who we never meet, and who has no connection to the people in Bellona and the lives they lead (Delany 745). No one even seems to know this religion exists, and it is not even mentioned until the very end of the text. Kidd and Calkins have their very last conversation at the monastery which houses the state religion no one practices, and Kidd confronts Calkins about this fact, contrasting the state religion with what the people hold dear:

"What do you think of the religion of the people?" I asked.

"How do you mean?"

"You know. Reverend Amy's church; George; June; that whole business."

"Does anyone take that seriously?"

"For a governor," I said, "you're pretty out of touch with what the people are into, aren't you? You've seen the things that have shown up in the sky. There're posters of him all over town. You published the interview, and the pictures that made them gods."

"I've seen some of it, of course. But I'm afraid all that black mysticism and

homoeroticism is just not something I personally find very attractive. And it

certainly doesn't strike me as a particularly savory basis for worship…" (Delany

745)

But for many of the people who actually reside in Bellona, all of these things are a basis

for something akin to worship, or at the very least a kind of local folklore. Calkins seems

willfully ignorant of the fact that most of the people in "his" city are predominantly

occupied with a sexual politics that he did not introduce or control. Thus, regardless of

what Calkins plans to center as the mythology of the city, he inadvertently creates the

true religion of the people when he tries to fan the flames of anti-blackness and publishes

his interview with George Harrison.

Delany uses Calkins' fixation with creating a perpetually segregated city culture

to make some of his more incisive critiques of post-civil rights America. Calkins'

insistence on delineating high culture from everything else is one way he is directly

responsible for perpetuating racism as one of the major components of Bellona's culture.

He creates smut through the paper, and even is the one that prints Rev Amy's

pornographic posters of George, but claims a higher and loftier cultural and political goal

for (his) new imaginary Calkins cannot even imagine anything produced by the black

residents of Bellona to be connected to his concept of the city culture. It is telling that for

whatever reason Calkins does not attend the book party he throws for Kidd at his

mansion. Kidd's book party is perhaps the one place in *Dhalgren* (besides the bar), where

high and low, black and white come together on an even playing field.

Calkins is proof that no one can completely control the political, economic,

cultural imaginaries of the postcapitalist near-future in Bellona. He and his machinations around the city are also representative of the less positive alternatives everyone could face in a near-future if one person tries to grab power for themselves. As the person who has the resources and motivation to shape Bellona into whatever he wants, Calkins is implicated in being the main force that keeps Jackson street in slum-like conditions and the black residents at the margins of society in the city. He does, at the very least, turn a blind eye to the issues affecting the most vulnerable populations left in Bellona— which include the poor and black residents of "his" city. This oversight or willful omission on Calkins' part is one of Delany's most incisive critiques of the future of unchecked governmental power. As shown by the supposed freedom of Bellona, just because the governmental and economic power in America is redistributed does not mean this power will be allocated equally in the future.

Afrofuturism often envisions the moment at, or beyond which, black people are no longer forced to the margins. However, what a speculative novel such as *Dhalgren* demonstrates is that just because the black subject has been moved to a futuristic time and space, this does not mean that as a matter of course the problems of the present have been corrected. In *Dhalgren,* Delany creates a kind of near-future that is so close to the current moment of the text that for the characters it operates as a kind of alternative present. Often this makes *Dhalgren* intensely and terrifyingly familiar—again, a familiarity which is often based in racism, sexism, and homophobia. The hope of this text lies in the fact that African Americans can, and in this text do, outlast capitalism and its attendant institutions. Yet, part of the critique of this text is based in the idea that it is extremely possible that the anti-blackness extant in the present could persist into the near-

future in ways that no one could predict. The end of normalcy or complacency is always much closer to the present than expected, and this is part of the sociopolitical critique Delany levies through the near-future of *Dhalgren*.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books, 2006.

Benjamin, Walter. "On the concept of history." 2009. http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/books/ Concept_History_Benjamin.pdf

Delany, Samuel R. *Dhalgren*. 1974. New York, NY: Vintage, 2001.

Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Gibson-Graham, J K. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Govan, Sandra Y. "Homage to tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel." *MELUS* 13.1/2 (1986): 79-96.

Hamilton, Regina. "The Somatopic Black Female Body within Archipelagic Space and Time in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*."

Holland, Sharon Patricia. *The Erotic Life of Racism*. Durham, NC: Duke University, 2012.

Hong, Grace Kyungwon. *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*. U of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Howard-Pitney, David. *African American Jeremiad: Appeals For Justice In America*. Temple University Press, 2002.

Lefebvre, Henri, and Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Production of Space*. Vol. 142. Blackwell: Oxford, 1991.

Linscott, Charles "Chip" P. "All Lives (Don't) Matter: The Internet Meets Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *Black Camera* 8.2 (2017): 104-119.

Sexton, Jared. "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word." *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 29, 2016.

Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago Review Press, 2013.

Xenogenesis: Giving both Humans and Humanness a Different Future

I have argued throughout this project that authors of African American literature use the speculative to move the American black subject through space and time, often for the purpose of exploring the sociopolitical alternatives available to the black subject outside of what is afforded them in twentieth century America. In the Xenogenesis series, which is the focus of this chapter, like in *Dhalgren*, it is clear those sociopolitical alternatives are not necessarily positive or that they require a level of change that is above and beyond what human beings expect. In *Dhalgren,* the space and time of the near-future was too close to the present to move beyond black social death or the afterlives of enslavement. In the Xenogenesis series, human beings do indeed progress beyond the afterlives of African American enslavement, but at great cost to the planet and the human species.

The Xenogenesis series by Octavia Butler, which includes the novels *Dawn (1987)*, *Adulthood Rites (1988),* and *Imago (1989)*, represents yet another example of the utility of speculative fiction for twentieth century African American writers. In these texts, like the other texts in this project, an American black subject is moved through time and space and faces a new set of sociopolitical realities. In one interview with Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin in 1988, Butler says that the characters and plot of Xenogenesis were written partly as a response to "Ronald Reagan's first term" (23). Butler recounts that Reagan's "people were talking about a 'winnable' nuclear war, a 'limited' nuclear war, the idea that more and more nuclear 'weapons' would make us safer" (23). For Butler in this moment, the future could have literally meant the destruction of the species and the planet. Her use of speculative themes and literary

devices allows her to create a world where that possibility has become the reality. In Xenogenesis, following nuclear attacks which destroy the planet, the remaining human characters come into contact with a powerful alien species that does not have to capitulate to human will and control. Through these speculative elements of the Xenogenesis series, Butler is able to offer an intense and fascinating critique of the ideal human figure of Man and the conditions it would take to destroy this figure and the institutions that perpetuate its power and existence.

In the Xenogenesis series, Octavia E. Butler explores the difficulties human beings experience in a posthuman future that decidedly and rather forcefully displaces the human subject from the center. In these three novels, the human characters and their children grapple with trying to define humanity to aliens, the Oankali, who now control the future of the human species. At the same time, the human characters also struggle to define humanity for themselves as they are forced into a future that requires fundamental changes to the human species. In all three of these novels the struggle for human definition is especially pressing due to the genetic trade the Oankali intend to make with the remaining humans in order to create a new species from both human and Oankali parents. Though both time and space have shifted greatly in the 250 years since the late twentieth century in which the humans of Butler's series destroyed themselves and the Earth, humanity's understanding of themselves and the Other has not. Thus, even after the remaining humans are shown the truth of their current reality by Lilith and the Oankali, many of the humans continue to put their hope and faith in a supposedly ideal— though antiquated and spurious—figure of humanity that can no longer exist.

The conflicts and tensions between the humans that remain after a global apocalypse and the aliens that intend to give these humans something of a second chance at life center on how each group answers certain questions about the viability of humanity in new a setting and under great amounts of stress. The Oankali have serious concerns about humanity's ability to survive both the dangers of their new world and the very real danger human beings pose to themselves and others. The Oankali are sure it is "the pair of mismatched genetic characteristics" of intelligence and a hierarchical understanding of the world that makes humanity both uniquely attractive and dangerous "trade" partners (Butler, *Dawn* 36-37). Furthermore, the Oankali are technologically advanced enough to make sure particular traits such as hierarchical thinking, and whatever other human traits they wish, are not passed on to the next generation through their manipulation of both human and Oankali genetics. Human beings have no real recourse when it comes to the changes the Oankali make to their bodies or to the construction of their eventual offspring. Thus, the human beings in this series find themselves fighting for the future of humanity in ways both great and small as the category of the Human is exploded to make space for something new.

In this new world, the remaining humans have to face what many who have been excluded from the category of the Human have always known, which is that definitions or delimitations of who (or what) is "human" are more than a philosophical riddle. The category of "the Human" has always been more than discursive; it is also biological, teleological, and ontological. Given that fact, the determination of who is human and who is not literally decides who is allowed to live and who is classified as disposable at best, or killed at worst. However, the Oankali have different biological, teleological, and

ontological goals for humanity, the most primary of which is to serve as one of the parent species along with the Oankali for a new species. Here, the title of the series becomes important, as the definition of Xenogenesis is "the supposed generation of offspring completely and permanently different from the parent."[17] The Oankali's goals and their general perspective on human beings (individually and as a species) as attractive, yet flawed, serve to flatten the various hierarchies of humanity that these late twentieth century humans hold dear. However, these human beings who last remember being alive in the 1980s are not prepared for the demolition of the race, gender, and species hierarchies that structured their entire lives, and many of them react violently to the change.

Butler's use of the speculative gives her the freedom to move human beings two hundred and fifty years into the future to a point at which humans finally have to confront the inadequate and intensely discriminatory nature of the ideal human figure, Man, that structures Western ideas about who is human (enough). Alexander Weheliye describes Man as "the modern, secular, and western version of the human [that] differentiates full humans from not-quite humans and nonhumans on the basis of biology and economics" (8). Weheliye's definition is based on Sylvia Wynter's definition of Man, which Wynter also then breaks down into figures from two different eras, Man1 and Man2. Man1 was "tethered to the theological order of knowledge of pre-Renaissance Latin-Christian medieval Europe" and "opened up a slot for Man2" (McKittrick 10). Wynter describes Man2 as "a figure based on the Western bourgeoisie's model of being human" that has been in operation "since the latter half of the nineteenth century" (10). In the late 20th

---

[17] https://www.dictionary.com/browse/xenogenesis

century western and modern understandings of humanness are still based on the figure of Man2. Thus, the humans that are awakened by Lilith and the Oankali still define themselves in relation to Man (Man2, in particular), and they reject the idea that humanity will be moving drastically and suddenly away from this ideal in ways they cannot control.

Throughout the series, the human characters are forced to confront their general misunderstanding of both the connections and gaps between themselves and the figure of Man. In this new reality structured by the Oankali many of the human beings refuse to accept that a certain understanding of "ideal" humanity is no longer viable for them, even going as far as to ignore that many of the human survivors had rather tenuous connections to Man before the Oankali became involved in human redefinition. Still, many of these human characters cling to what Sylvia Wynter describes as the mythology of Man2— "the powerful origin stories and knowledge systems that explain who and what we are"[18]— as the last vestiges of a true humanity (McKittrick 2). Throughout the series, certain characters rail against anyone and anything that would force them to relinquish the idea of an authentic humanity (and the hierarchies that come along with it), and relegate it to a bygone and toxic past. However, it is also true that in the series no human being familiar with Man is ever truly able to overcome all of its influence, regardless of how much time and space is put between them and this figure. This human ideal continues to maintain its power unless truly contextualized, interrogated, and undone from all sides, which is exactly what the Oankali do by breaking down human

---

[18] Wynter went on to say that "These systems produce the lived and radicalized categories as asymmetrical naturalized racial-sexual groupings that are specific to time, place, and personhood" (McKittrick 2)

existence to its most fundamental components, and then warping these components beyond recognition.

In the Xenogenesis series, Butler builds a futuristic universe that is in line with critical posthumanism, which acknowledges "the advantages of technology, even while questioning the gender and ecological implications of a society that celebrates the subjectivation of the natural world" (Flieger 360). Critical posthumanism is a popular branch of Posthumanism, and where many scholars such as Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles tend to situate themselves. Haraway, one of the most popular Posthumanists of the late twentieth century is known for her cyborg figure, which she uses to critique late twentieth century patriarchal capitalism and the societal byproducts of that system. However, the goal of this project is not simply to map Haraway's cyborg figure over the Oankali or even over the children created from Oankali and human parentage. Instead, Haraway's essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" provides an interesting framework for understanding some of the ecocritical stakes of late twentieth century human beings' obsession with an ideal humanity that is the zenith of existence, and therefore power, on the Earth.

Haraway argues that there are "three crucial boundary breakdowns that make [her] analysis possible," and which her cyborg figure transgresses as part of the progressive "political work" that she and others should undertake" (Haraway 10-13). The first is the "boundary between human and animal," the second is "the leaky distinction between animal-human (organism) and machine," and the last is "a subset of the second: the boundary between the physical and non-physical" (Haraway 10-11). In Butler's Xenogenesis series, merely the existence of the Oankali challenges the first boundary

between animal and human. If the Oankali are now the apex life form in the world, many humans feel as though that would relegate them to animal status, and they reject this by holding tighter to Man and the mythology of its primacy over all beings. This shuffling of power relations is also complicated due to the fact that the Oankali do not make clear distinctions between human and animal, and also often treat humans as lesser beings (i.e. animals) despite the core values of their society. In terms of the second boundary, the Oankali do not have any machinery and use their bodies and various kinds of secretions to serve the functions many of the machines created by humans used to perform. The Oankali have the power to manipulate their own bodies like machines, and they often manipulate human bodies in the same way, as well. Taking control over another being's bodily functions without their consent is usually a power reserved for the most powerful beings that exist, and throughout this series, human beings wrestle with the fact that they have been displaced from that position.

These boundaries that Haraway describes are so fundamental to humanity's understanding of itself, that the perpetual transgression of these three boundaries is what situates Butler's series as posthumanist. In this series, it is not just the death of millions of human beings that moves the setting of the series beyond the human. Instead, it is the inability of human beings to perpetuate the mythology of Man due to the machinations of another more powerful species. The Oankali accomplish what Haraway imagines a cyborg world would achieve, which is "social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 13). The Oankali only accomplish this through "the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet" (13). The Oankali

fundamentally and irrevocably change what it means to be human, while skewing how this new humanity relates to a new planet and new species who do not fit neatly into hierarchies from the past. And as many of the characters argue, these changes to humanity are as drastic and final as extermination would have been.

Butler's Xenogenesis, though an origin story of a new species, is also the story of how and why the death of Man was necessary for this new species to come into being. As Butler delves into what it means to be or cease to be human, she, like Wynter "provides a meaningful pathway to dwell on … how we might give humanness a different future" (McKittrick 9). Like Haraway, Butler is able to view humanness as something other than a concrete whole, and there is some degree of hope in that, regardless of the dystopian settings and themes of the series. Indeed, for many of the human characters within these texts the partiality of human existence offered by the Oankali means a kind of life instead of certain death and some semblance of hope they did not think possible.

Aside from analyzing the machinations of Man outside of a time and space built to accommodate it, this chapter also seeks to analyze Butler's portrayal of partial humanity and other complex biopolitical realities over multiple generations. Contemporary scholarship in Black Studies, particularly the work done by scholars such as Sylvia Wynter, Alexander Weheliye, and Katherine McKittrick, offers important theoretical frameworks for an analysis of the complex assemblages of humanness, race, and gender that constitute the field and its subjects. Butler's work in Xenogenesis intentionally highlights the humanity of people outside, or inhabiting the underside, of the category of the Human— which in these texts still seem to be people of color first, even as the underside of humanity evolves to include those with Oankali parentage as well.

Alienness does not replace race or gender or ethnicity as things which separate people from full humanity; instead it is just added to the list, particularly in the first few generations of Oankali-human co-existence. Thus, if Weheliye asks, "what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?" (Weheliye 8)—Butler both asks and answers this same question (and others) through the lives and experiences of her main character Lilith and through Lilith's children, Akin and Jodahs, in each novel of the Xenogenesis series.

The generative nature of dislodging Man from the center of the three narratives in Xenogenesis allows Butler to engage the limits and the underside of humanity through Lilith's (and her children's) clear position outside of it. Even more radically, Butler uses the speculative to interrogate the processes, challenges, and consequences of not only dislodging Man from the center of the human narrative, but she does so specifically by dislocating the human from the human body. By both centering a black woman and bringing her (and others) into intimate contact with an alien species who intend to irrevocably change humanity, Butler ultimately pushes all of us to imagine the complicated and terrifying possibilities for a future that is only able, finally, to halt the afterlives of enslavement from following the black subject into the future, by imagining an alternative future that includes the enslavement and eventual eradication of the entire human species.

Dawn: Lilith, Race, and the Stickiness of Man

Dawn, the first book of the Xenogenesis series, takes place after humans have destroyed themselves and the Earth through nuclear warfare. The few human beings left in existence are rescued from the dying Earth by a nomadic alien species, the Oankali, who survive and evolve through integrating other living species into their own. Butler describes the Oankali as "xenophilic," which is defined as having a deep love of difference and a way of being that Butler intends to be in opposition with the xenophobia of human beings. In *Dawn,* the first few large groups of humans are awakened by the Oankali and promptly given a set of choices (choice being rather loosely defined in this series). The first option is to either mate and intermix with the Oankali to create a new species, and thereby take advantage of the technological, health, and other advancements that would allow these humans and a select group of Oankali to return to a newly revitalized Earth. The second option is to be forced to remain on the Oankali's ship in outer space for the rest of their lives, either awake or back in the state of "suspended animation" they were awakened from.[19]

When Lilith first meets the Oankali they have been studying human beings and their various cultures for two hundred and fifty years, and they know enough about humans to know they need a human to present this terrible choice to those who are newly awakened. They are seemingly unaware, however, of the power of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in determining how individuals and groups of human beings react to each other, and so they choose Lilith, an African American woman, to be the first awakened

---

[19] "Suspended animation" was a term that the protagonist, Lilith, used to refer to the deep sleep in which the Oankali stored human beings. Human beings in this sleep do not age, and can be kept there indefinitely. See page 127 in Dawn.

human being who presents to the other humans what amounts to a choice between two different forms of death. In all that the Oankali have read and been taught about humanity over two and a half centuries, it is interesting that the operations of Man as a racialized structure of power with fundamental internal hierarchies, seems to have been omitted from their education. Here, it seems that the Oankali themselves fall prey to the "governing conception of humanity as synonymous with western Man" (Weheliye 5). Indeed, one of the most insidious aspects of Man is its naturalized ubiquity; as a figure that purports to stand in for the universal human being, race, gender, class, and other fundamental socially constructed forms of difference seem (almost) invisible if viewed from above, even as they are always already affecting all of the relationships human beings have to and with each other.

Thus, when the Oankali awaken Butler's black female protagonist Lilith and charge her with awakening the first group of humans and smoothing their transition into this new world, they do not take the complicated nature of race and gender into consideration. When the Oankali individual, Jdahya, informs Lilith of her new "work," after most of her questions are answered Lilith says that she is "willing to learn what [the Oankali] have to teach her," but that she does not "think [she is] the right teacher for the others" (Butler, *Dawn* 36-37). Lilith blames her original refusal on the presence of more knowledgeable individuals, but there is something more here at the edges of this conversation. Lilith knows that race, gender, and sexuality are inordinately imbricated with the humanity these newly awakened humans will feel slipping away, especially as these categories are being collapsed, and destroyed, in this new future that feels much nearer to the 1980s than it is. Lilith also knows that her own humanity will be called into

question and her life threatened due to her position as liaison between the Oankali and the humans, but the danger she faces is also due to the fact that she is a black woman in a position of power. As the other humans are awakened by Lilith, they become aware of the fact that only Lilith can open the cabinets for food; only Lilith can make new rooms; only Lilith can open a particular wall and encourage the plants behind it to spit out the human of her choice. For the newly awakened humans Lilith's abilities situate her body as the only body they are sure has been altered and perhaps co-opted by the Oankali.

Lilith is always very clearly concerned about the fact that she is female, and that certain men might try to hurt her and reject her authority. In fact, she is beaten and nearly raped by a man named Paul Titus before her work awakening the first group of humans begins. As Lilith is being introduced to Oankali society aboard their ship, she eventually asks to see another English-speaking human being and the Oankali take her to a young black man, Paul Titus. Later, Lilith finds out that his Oankali family had hoped she would "share sex with him at least once" (Butler, *Dawn* 96). Yet, when Lilith refuses to have sex with Paul he attempts to rape Lilith, and when she appeals to his humanity, while stumbling across his fears of impregnating one of his family members, he loses control in a violent rage. At this point in the novel, Nikanj, one of Lilith's one eventual Oankali mates, is still a sub-adult and is overruled when she objects to the meeting between Paul and Lilith. Before this meeting, Nikanj had spent days looking for an English-speaking human that would be a good match for Lilith to meet. However, Nikanj's parent Kahguyaht, who thinks of humans as simplistic beings who must be coerced into doing everything, grew impatient and picked Paul only because he was near Lilith's age and they shared the same racial markers. Even in this instance, though the Oankali seem not

to understand how race functions in human society, race was one of the determining factors for deciding which humans were put together and why, particularly when dealing with Oankali like Kahguyaht, who think less of the human beings they are dealing with.

Regardless of how the Oankali view race, throughout Xenogenesis and *Dawn* in particular, racial politics are still clearly at play in how the remaining humans understand Lilith and each other. After Lilith's encounter with Paul Titus, Nikanj makes Lilith stronger and able to heal more quickly from injury to prevent Lilith from falling prey to other men. Therefore, when the humans moving against her decide that she might be too strong to take on, they shift their attention to her human partner, Joseph. Speaking about Joseph, Nikanj tells Lilith "… there are already two human males speaking against him, trying to turn others against him. One has decided he's something called a faggot and the other dislikes the shape of his eyes" (Butler, *Dawn*159). There is a lot of homophobia and racism wrapped up in this one line of text, but clearly certain characters agree that Joseph is not worthy of his position, or any position really, partially due to the fact that he is Asian. Similar to the way Lilith's rivals deploy Joseph's Asianness against him, Lilith's blackness still carries all the meanings and discourses attached to it in the late twentieth century these humans were rescued from. Though Lilith's blackness is never specifically stated as a reason for much of the antipathy she faces, it is clear that racism, along with misogyny and homophobia, are being used as props against Lilith and her supporters. And as one of the things being used to mount a rebellion against Lilith, racism is in part responsible for the violence she faces (along with her supporters) from the other human beings. Yet, even as each of the humans decides to work with and against the Oankali in

various ways, the intraspecies differentiations and hierarchies humans have dragged with them to the future come to the fore causing violence and destruction for everyone.

Moreover, since everyone knows Joseph and Lilith have a sexual relationship the homophobic slur certain characters use against him has a further implication, which implies what some characters say outright: that Lilith is a man because no woman could possibly be as strong and powerful as she is. This criticism of Lilith, leveled by men and women in the group of humans, has its own deep history. Black women have had their womanhood called into question since European nations began coming into contact with African nations, particularly in a colonial context. As Hortense Spillers argues, under the conditions of the New World diaspora African Americans "lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific" (Spillers 67). In other words, the gendered humanity attributed to womanhood or manhood is disallowed to raced individuals in a Western context. Also, as Weheliye argues, "black people appear as nonhuman or magically hyperhuman within the universe of Man…However regardless of the deficit or surplus, what remains significant is that the histories of racial slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, the prison, and the like… have constitutively incapacitated black subjects' ability to conform to hegemonic gender and sexuality norms" (Weheliye 42). In this text Lilith is no different, and due to her literal body being used for both the cultural and political maneuvering of the Oankali, the unreadable and alien nature of Lilith's body and therefore humanity is intensified. Throughout *Dawn* Lilith's opponents deploy coded racist and sexist language by questioning both her gender and humanity, not only in order to communicate a deeper message about Lilith's position outside of the category of the

Human, but also to use her outside position to collapse Lilith and the Oankali into the same crudely constructed enemy.

The Death of Capitalism and Human Control

The figure of Man relies on the economic and sexual control of all other bodies it comes into contact with, and the newly awakened humans, particularly the (white) men, feel that economic and sexual control over themselves and others is being forcibly stripped from them, first by Lilith and then by the Oankali, and generally, they are right. The Oankali orchestrate a complete breakdown of these western humans' relations to each other and to the world around them through overlaying various Oankali social and cultural relationships over human and capitalistic ones. Similar to the way Delany uses disjunctures of time and space to break down institutions (that bolster racism & social death) in *Dhalgren*, Butler does the same on a larger scale, through the machinations of a more powerful species. The confrontations between these two species and their cultures is not only ideological, but physical and sexual, and there is a sharp escalation in violence as the Oankali culture continues to encroach on the power over themselves and others that humans believe to be foundational to human existence. As the Oankali begin to reshape human society into one humans and the Oankali can share, there are multiple expectations of human primacy that have to be shifted or destroyed.

For example, the Oankali do not believe in killing animals for food, and refuse to supply meat to the newly awakened humans. In response to this, one of the humans attacks Lilith due to her forced vegetarianism. Butler writes, "A large, angry, not particularly bright woman named Jean Pelerin demanded an end to the meatless diet. She

wanted meat, she wanted it *now*, and Lilith had better produce if she knew what was good for her" (Butler, *Dawn* 146). In this instance food is a stand-in for human dominance over other species. One of the most fundamental parts of being human in the late twentieth century is being able to kill and eat any other species of animal desired. The inability to eat meat may seem trivial, but this belays a clear and uncomfortable leveling out of power between the humans and other species. The violent reaction to a very real loss of human power in this new society proves just how untenable some of the human beings find this change to be. When Jean does not get the meat she wants, she physically attacks Lilith. This confrontation over food is the first time Lilith is forced to defend herself physically among the newly awakened humans, but she realizes it definitely will not be the last.

The Oankali view the first few confrontations between Lilith and the other humans as par for the course in terms of teaching the humans how to survive in their new world, and they also feel that the humans should "spend a little time… understanding that they're helpless without [Lilith]" (Butler, *Dawn* 152). Lilith disagrees. She says "They're just as helpless with me… You've made them dependent on me. They may not be able to forgive me for that" (Butler, *Dawn* 152). In the training room where Lilith awakens and houses this first group of humans, Lilith is the only person who can control the space by partitioning off rooms for each person. Only she has control over the receptacles that produce food and the suspended animation plants that basically spit out humans at her behest. From the perspective of the newly awakened humans, and only until the Oankali show themselves, there is no real limit to Lilith's power, which basically situates her as a kind of sovereign instead of another human pressed into a particular kind of labor. For the

humans, Lilith's pseudo-sovereignty over commodities such as space, food, and even somewhat over who is picked to join their little community is tenuous, but generally tolerable because she oversees a sexual and commodity-based economy they can understand.

In the small human community aboard the Oankali ship, it becomes customary over several weeks for newly awakened people to choose a sexual partner fairly quickly. However, the violence related to human dominance and control escalates again when one young woman, Allison, refuses to pair off with any of the men after being awakened. Two men, Gregory and Peter, grow tired of her reticence and try to force Allison into having sex with one of them or their followers. After meeting some resistance from Lilith's supporters, these men refuse to let Allison go and physically assault her. At this point, Lilith finally uses all of her heightened strength to swiftly and decisively put down this particular insurgence. After seriously injuring Gregory and Peter, Lilith declares, "There'll be no rape here… Nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anybody else's body. There'll be no back-to-the Stone-Age, caveman bullshit! … We stay human. We treat each other like people, and we get through this like people" (Butler, *Dawn* 178). Yet, Lilith's appeal to a humanity centered on an egalitarian ethics of respecting each others' bodies and personal decisions falls on deaf ears, because the people who feel their power and privilege slipping away do not really care about equality. This attempted rape, and control over who has sex with who more generally, is another pressure point of human control. These newly awakened human beings might not have dominance over animals, but some still believe it is solely the right of certain humans to have control over the other humans. Also, it is no longer just one lone person willing to

deploy physical violence against Lilith and her supporters, now it is a group of men who are willing to attack Lilith as a means of instituting a kind of patriarchal power over their fellow humans that is no longer acceptable or feasible.

The final breakdown of human dominance takes place when the Oankali introduce a new sexual dynamic to the existing human sexual relationships, which destroys human ideas of their dominance over the world or even over the universe. The moment the Oankali drug the human beings and begin the process of "imprinting" on them, the human beings realize that this "trade" between species is not just economic or genetic— imagined as occurring in a lab far away from the literal, physical bodies of the human beings. No, this trade involves a drastic reimagining of human family structures and human sexual relationships. Human couples are expected to mate for life with a non-gendered Oankali called an ooloi, eventually becoming part of a family group that includes a male and female Oankali, as well. The ooloi and its human and Oankali mates never engage in physical intercourse; instead the ooloi connects all of its mates through their central nervous systems, and projects to them a kind of sensory loop in which it manipulates and melds the group's sexual sensations and experiences, while also having unprecedented access to each body. This alone would be enough of an adjustment, but on top of having to sublimate human understandings of gender, the physicality of sexuality, and the sanctity of the human body, this trade also involves never physically touching other human beings, including never having sexual intercourse with another human being, again.

This trade is relational and experiential, but also a very physical and sexual exchange, and it is more intimate than many human beings can accept. Many of the

human characters, particularly those grasping at the figure of Man as it slips through their fingers, have a very difficult time accepting these new sexual relationships that are forced upon them by the Oankali. One of Lilith's followers, Gabriel, says of Lilith's fiercest opponent Curt: "Look at things from Curt's point of view… He's not even in control of what his own body does and feels. He's taken like a woman… He knows the ooloi aren't male. He knows all the sex that goes on is in his head. It doesn't matter. It doesn't fucking matter! Someone else is pushing his buttons. He can't let them get away with that" (Butler, *Dawn* 203). One of the foundational intentions or objectives of the figure of Man is control, control over oneself and control over others, particularly through economics and through sex, and neither of these is possible anymore for humans within the confines of this new Oankali society. As each human being is made to submit to sex with an Oankali, the human belief that no matter what happens to the outside world, they would always retain ultimate control over themselves— their bodies, and their minds— is irrevocably destroyed.

Another adversary of Lilith's, Peter, after being drugged and eventually imprinted by Kahguyaht, "decided he had been humiliated and enslaved," that he had been "turn[ed] against himself… causing him to demean himself in alien perversions. His humanity was profaned. His manhood was taken away" (Butler, *Dawn* 193). Here it is important to speak more explicitly to the gendering of Man, and that masculinity, or a certain notion of it is what is being stripped from the men on the training floor. As Echo Savage argues, the ooloi "confuse notions of discrete gender identities and destabilize conceptions of biologically encoded sexualities" eventually "becoming the expressly sexualized Other" (54). The men on the training floor feel that having a sexual

relationship with an ooloi is not just an alien perversion, but they feel these kinds of

relationships are an affront against the heterosexist figure of Man they desperately cling

to.

Peter's reaction to having a sexual experience with an Oankali serves as a very

interesting reversal of his attacks on Lilith's womanhood and humanity, both of which he

invalidated almost from the moment he met her. Though the Oankali blame the human

fear of difference on evolutionary behavior, that is not the only reason Peter is so afraid

and agitated by the extreme differences the Oankali are making to him and his way of

life. For Peter and many other humans, the figure of Man has categorized difference as

inhuman, and Peter cannot except that there could ever be a change as great as this one to

his sexuality without also ejecting him from the category of human as well. Perhaps, one

way in which Man will become a category with no meaning is by evacuating all human

beings from that category. Yet, as we see in the series, even as Man becomes a category

that is unattainable, it still exists for quite a long time as a kind of discursive ideal and a

kind of teleological purpose for the resisters, the group of humans that refuse to capitulate

to Oankali demands.

For the newly awakened humans, these sexual relationships with the Oankali are

not only inhuman and aberrant in and of themselves, but they make Peter, Curt, and even

Gabe feel an inhumanness that they have never felt before. These white men are not used

to their bodies being vulnerable and permeable, but for the Oankali there is no such thing

as an impermeable human body, even if the aliens penetrate human flesh in different

ways and on different terms than expected. The penetration may take place on different

terms, but it is still an extant and important part of the sexual relationships between the

humans and Oankali. And for a white, cis-gender, heterosexual male like Peter, being at all penetrated and thereby subjected to a literal alienation from his identity creates a schism that is insurmountable for him. As Peter's drugs wear off, he attacks the Oankali who had imprinted on him, and the surprised and wounded Oankali lethally stings him. Within these new familial and sexual relationships, the control that usually lies with Man now lies with the Oankali. And men like Curt and Peter, who refuse to relinquish control over themselves become willing to fight to the death to keep from being controlled. These men often fight like their lives depend on it, because in some sense they do. This change in human sexual relationships, and in these humans' powers over themselves, sets the stage for the most intense confrontation between the Oankali and the awakened humans.

After Lilith awakens forty-three people, the Oankali drug the humans, imprint on them, and move them to a bigger training room that resembles an island on Earth. There, the humans are basically allowed to fend for themselves. Most are still reeling from the effects of being drugged and imprinted, but the one thing they all agree on (except for Lilith), is the need to get as far away from the Oankali as possible. Again, sex and a kind of intimacy with the Oankali is a major facet of this trade between species that the humans did not expect, but a major underthread of these sexual relations is more emotional and complicated than both species expected. Nikanj says at one point that "It might be better for both our peoples if we were not so strongly drawn to you" (Butler, *Dawn* 202). The Oankali are so attracted to human beings that they often make bad decisions based on that attraction, and the humans delude themselves by ignoring or repressing any attraction or emotions they might have. Finally, after some time away

from the Oankali and splintering into various groups, Curt finds Lilith's group, attacks her, and kills Joseph. Lilith and the Oankali track him down, and the first thing he says is "No closer! …This is a human place! It's off limits to you and your animals" (Butler, *Dawn* 227). For Curt, his shattered dominance over animals, over other humans, over the world around him, and even over himself could all be restored by taking a territory for himself and killing the Oankali. Only through the eradication of the Oankali could he restore his connections to the figure of Man, so Curt starts the largest and most violent skirmish between this group of humans and the Oankali.

In this fight, most of the humans are subdued pretty easily, but Nikanj has one of its sensory arms almost amputated by one of the axe-wielding humans. As the human in this group who has been with her ooloi the longest, Lilith still has very complicated feelings toward the Oankali, but Nikanj's injury forces her to be more open and honest about her relationship with Nikanj than she was perhaps prepared for. It is necessary for Lilith to strip naked so that Nikanj can link into her body to heal itself. After Nikanj is healed and Lilith returns to the human settlement Gabe confronts her about siding with the enemy. He asks, "But why should you want to help it? … Why didn't you just let it die?" (Butler, *Dawn* 239). Lilith replies, "I've known it since it was a child. Why should I let it die, then be stuck with some stranger? How would that help me or you or anyone here?" (Butler, *Dawn* 239). Lilith knows that she will be placed with an ooloi whether it is Nikanj or not. She goes on to say that, "Hell, the Oankali set me up to be the focus of blame and distrust, but I don't hate Nikanj. Maybe I can't. We're all a bit co-opted, at least as far as our individual ooloi are concerned" (Butler, *Dawn* 240). Of course, this is what the Oankali want: human beings that have true bonds with them and who consider

them family. What the Oankali seem less prepared for is the way that human bonding

with the Oankali will splinter certain human relationships needed to build a new society

and new kinds of families. The Oankali are not able to break down or break apart the

sexual and emotional relationships between humans before laying their own over it, and

this creates difficult situations for both species and their offspring.

Butler and the Parahumanity of the Posthuman: Constructs and the Disaggregated Body

From the beginning, the idea of "trade" as the Oankali understood it was more in

line with Monique Allewaert's idea of relation than with the idea of a simple or even

capitalistic exchange. "Far from being a synonym for exchange," Allewaert defines

relation between entities as "a process through which bodies and parts punctuate

themselves against larger fields that they also decompose. Relation, then, describes an

enmeshment that is not a merging and that forecloses the possibility of exchange"

(Allewaert 8). The idea of relation is interesting when juxtaposed with Oankali value

systems and with this particular project of creating a new species because relation

forestalls capitalistic (and generally human) ideas of value. The only value particular

attributes have for the Oankali is how they affect the viability of this new species to grow

in their human or Oankali mothers' bodies, to survive their eventual metamorphosis, and

to propagate the species. In the process of combining both parent species into the bodies

of their offspring, each of the body parts and traits specific to both species will be

separated and divided from their original species before they can be put together anew, or

cast to the genetic wasteland of the past. Therefore, these parts of each species are also in

some sense responsible for the decomposition of the (whole) bodies of each of their

parent species. And this new larger field, through and against which these parts and bodies are divided, is composed of more than the bodies of the parent species. True viability for the individuals of this new species will necessitate a complex entanglement with not just humans and Oankali, but a true enmeshment with the other beings and overall environment of this new planet; an enmeshment that mirrors the almost symbiotic relationship that the Oankali have with the sentient and non-sentient creatures and environments on their ships and on New Earth.

In the time between *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites*, Lilith and her Oankali family have returned to Earth with many of the other humans and Oankali to set up the community of Lo. The human and Oankali populations are set down in the Amazon basin, and this geography is in many ways similar to the colonial tropics, in that this new earth "produce[s] [a] different materialist tradition in which the body is invaded, rendered in parts and otherwise deranged" (Allewaert 3). As Monique Allewaert argues "this disaggregation… in which the body is invaded, rendered in parts… was almost always experienced as catastrophic by human beings" (3). Again, what the Oankali propose is basically a derangement of the human body, in which the human body ceases to exist as a qualitative whole. The word derangement is fitting here, because not only do the Oankali plan to dis-arrange or pull apart the human body, this process also requirements a disarrangement of the human mind and human thought; so much so that for many humans, the ideas of their construct children seem strange enough for these new construct beings to seem insane. And as much as the Oankali believe they are producing the derangement of the human body in the most humane way and for the most noble of

reasons, all of the humans experience this pulling apart of themselves to make something new as catastrophic.

The fundamental reason many of the newly awakened humans resist the Oankali throughout the series is the Oankali's intent to fundamentally change the nature of the human body and, by extension, the relationship between subjectivity and the body. The humans in this future-present are still firmly planted in a materialist tradition that cannot understand how humanness or personhood could continue to exist in the pieces of humanity that will remain after the amalgamation of human and Oankali. For them, humanness is either whole or non-existent. Therefore throughout *Adulthood Rites* there are growing numbers of human beings who set up their own little communities, known as resister colonies, and these human beings refuse any help or trade—even of only goods and knowledge— from the Oankali. All of these humans are willing to die from ailments that could be healed, starvation, and exposure, in this fight against the Oankali. They see any intrusion into human affairs by the Oankali as an assault on their humanity. Now that they know the human body is permeable in ways that make them uncomfortable and vulnerable, they refuse to allow their bodies to be invaded or infiltrated even if it means certain death.

Aside from being willing to die from curable ailments, the resisters also are rendered infertile by the Oankali, which is one of their strongest objections to how the Oankali treat them. The resisters want to be able to have sexual relationships and produce fully human children without any interference from the Oankali, though they have been told repeatedly that procreation without the Oankali is no longer an option for them. For the human beings in resister colonies, there is something inalienable about human

reproduction, and even outside of procreation they believe that human sexuality is foundational to humanness. Humans are often reduced to the set of sexual organs they were born with. As Michelle Stephens argues, human beings "emerge into consciousness, social being, and languages as sexually differentiated beings" (17). Thus, human sexual organs, and thereby sexual relationships, become representative of the whole human body. By introducing an Oankali intermediary into human sexual relationships, human personhood is detached from human copulation and human sexuality in ways that rattle the human beings, and really start to break down the figure of Man. Moreover, construct children also have another stage of development, which includes a metamorphosis in the twenties in which they finally develop into true adults. For the Oankali and the construct children true gender is not known until this moment. Through not only introducing new sexual relations, but changing the development of children born of human and Oankali parents to include a metamorphosis, the Oankali detach and re-arrange the relationship of humans to the bodies they understand to be housing their humanity in some unbreachable way. Thus, resister humans are not just resisting Oankali rule, they fiercely protest the Oankali's removal of what they see as the most defining feature of their humanity and of their human subjectivity—their sexuality.

Yet, some humans, like Lilith and the others who decide to work and live with the Oankali, instead of resisting a kind of relational economy, put their faith in the viability of humanness in whatever parts or pieces of human bodies (and psyches) that their construct children retain. Therefore, it is more than vanity or narcissism that draws Lilith to her son Akin— the protagonist of the second book in the series, *Adulthood Rites*. As Allewaert goes on to argue, "this rendering of the body in parts did not signal the end of

personhood but the origin of a minoritarian and anti colonial mode of personhood that was largely developed by Afro-Americans" (2). Akin, and his almost entirely human façade, is the best proof that Lilith's minoritarian concept of the human body is viable; that the humans who work with the Oankali should feel validated in their hope of true humanness existing in the fragments of humanity that they are allowed to pass on to their construct offspring. In other words, Akin and the other construct children are proof that all is not lost with this new generation of constructs, who represent the best creolized version of this new human-Oankali species.

Here, in terms of the construct children born of both human and Oankali parentage, I am linking "alienation" to creolization processes instead of to hybridity. Robert Young argues that "hybridity is a making one of two distinct things" but that those two separate entities still exist within the one, and due to neglect or other issues those entities "will revert to their original state" (158). Young also argues that "In the nineteenth century we have seen that a common analogous argument was made that the descendants of mixed-raced unions would eventually relapse to one of the original races thus characterizing miscegenation as temporary in its effects as well as unnatural in it's very nature" (158). Perhaps a futuristic version of this idea is one reason why the humans in resister colonies who refuse to work with the Oankali continue to kidnap the most human looking children to raise as their own. Even though resister humans hold human purity as paramount, important enough for them to give up their own chances to have children, still "they sometimes stole construct children, the most Human-looking construct children they could find" (Butler, *AR* 19). However, the melding and the bringing together of the Oankali and human species is more than a simple cross-

pollination of species so similar that they can reproduce. Moreover, similar to my

reticence concerning the term cyborg, I am equally unwilling to haphazardly cast

construct children as products of miscegenation due to the specific racial and sexual

economies associated with this term.

Linking the experiences of construct children to the process of creolization is my

attempt to take into consideration the complex and at times violent clash between the

human species and the Oankali which produced not only construct children but a new

world and new ways of being in that world. I agree with Monique Allewaert that "we

might understand creolization not simply as a cultural phenomenon but also as a material

and even ontological phenomenon that described how the substances and agencies that

interacted in and thus composed a given place, as well as the economic conditions

particular to this place, produced bodies and forms of personhood in which

diversification became primary" (6). The construct children born from Oankali and

Human parents are the living embodiment of this idea, and there are ontological and

material stakes to their existence. Both of Lilith's children who are the protagonists of the

Adulthood Rights and *Imago*, are the first constructs of their kind. Akin is the first

construct male born to a human mother and Jodahs is the first construct ooloi born to a

human mother. For both, they bear the burden of not only having to chart a path between

two often diametrically opposed species, but for each, the decisions they make determine

whether there will be more beings like them born at all. Through these two characters we

become privy to the uncomfortable and uncertain nature of the process of creolization as

it occurs in these texts, and since many humans see construct children as replacements for

them and for the Human, this creolization process is often contentious, and even violent.

The second text of the Xenogenesis series, *Adulthood Rites*, focuses on Lilith's son Akin, the first human-born male of this new human/Oankali species. Akin is the first human-born male because, as Nikanj explains to Lilith, the Oankali believe that "A male who's Human enough to be born to a Human female could be a danger to us all. We must try though. We'll learn from Akin" (Butler, *AR* 10). Their true fear is not of male biology, but that the hierarchies set up by Man could literally infect this new generation of beings and the new egalitarian society the Oankali are building. This fear of human born males is another moment in which the Oankali conflate men with the figure of Man. Again, for an alien species, this distinction might be hard to make because men often benefit the most from propping up toxic structures like patriarchy, misogyny, and a fixation on domination to keep the figure of Man operative.

Interestingly, while the Oankali are worried about Akin being too human, Lilith is worried about him not being human enough, and experiencing violence and hatred due to his differences. Lilith says to Nikanj, "Will Akin survive the Human males that will hate him?… He isn't Human. Un-Human women are offensive to them, but they don't usually try to hurt them, and they do sleep with them—like a racist sleeping with racially different women. But Akin… They'll see him as a threat. Hell, he *is* a threat. He's one of their replacements" (Butler, *AR* 10). Lilith's fear of Akin's un-humanness is not a fear of the difference itself, but of how other human beings will react to his difference. Lilith's fears are definitely founded as Akin grows into a young man prone to wandering into resister villages filled with humans who refuse to have any contact with the Oankali. Yet, it is often not Akin's alienness that incites humans to attack him, it is his race. As a young man, Akin is "driven out of, of all things, an English-speaking village because he was

browner than the villagers were" (Butler, *AR* 190). It is clear that there is still racism in resister villages, and therefore there is still some human beings considered less human than others. The only update to this model is that now ideas of being less human include being partially alien along with race, ethnicity, and gender. Even after the complete destruction of human society, and given the opportunity to begin again, many of the human beings that live in resister villages still utilize the figure of Man to seize whatever power they can through violence.

As he ages, both species wrangle for Akin's allegiance, and his parents from both species struggle to understand who he is, while trying to make sure he has a fundamental understanding of the beings and cultures that created him. Akin is truly a being with two origin stories, and with true bonds and complicated relationships with members of both species. Allewaert argues that "These invocations of multiplying geneses, including geneses forged through relations with nonhuman species, require a theorization of personhood that traces the multiple events through which personhood accrues and, sometimes, dissolves" (17). For Akin, "personhood" or even a kind of subjectivity is complicated because each of his parent species have large blindspots or misunderstandings of how subjectivity is constructed for the other group. Though he is raised by both human and Oankali parents in the new Oankali-human community of Lo, Akin has an interesting childhood punctuated by a year-long separation from his family due to the fact that he is kidnapped by raiders who trade human looking babies for other commodities. Here, it is important to note the damage still being caused by a human economy that assigns particular value to commodities instead of accepting and living based on a more relational and communal model established by the Oankali.

During the year Akin is away from his family, he lives in a human resister village and is cared for primarily by two of the people his mother awakened in the first group of humans, Tate and Gabriel Rinaldi. From the moment he is taken until the moment his family finally is able to rescue him, *Adulthood Rites* operates as a kind of posthuman passing narrative; one where Akin is often much safer when he passes for human, and where human beings come to love him in spite of his alienness. This year among resister humans becomes one of the most formative experiences of his young life, and changes him in ways that reverberate out from him as an individual to affect both of his parent species in fundamental ways. Due to the in-depth knowledge Akin gains while among the resisters, he refuses to alienate them and fights for humanity to be given a second chance to live without Oankali interference, which is a complicated position for him to take. When Akin's male Oankali parent Dichaan sends him to the Oankali mother ship to learn more about the Oankali, Akin advocates on behalf of the resister humans and urges for them to be given the planet Mars to start anew.

Though the Oankali offer several reasons why human beings should not be given a second chance to survive on their own, the real reason is that allowing humanity to succeed or fail on their own represents a true evening out of the hierarchies that have developed between human beings and the Oankali. Allewaert uses the term parahumanity to "challenge the hierarchical organization of life-forms" and "put animals, parahumans, and humans in horizontal relation without conflating them" (86). This is similar to the relationship that Butler strives for as she discusses humans, aliens, and constructs. Neither can be conflated with the others, and in the texts, it is important to at least strive toward a leveling out of the power between all three groups. However, that is not without

some tension from all sides. Though the Oankali often say there is no real distinction

between categories of beings, that is not really true when it comes to their relations with

humanity, and it is not true in terms of how they relate to the constructs, either. For the

original human beings there might always be a problematic distinction between human

and animal, and the Oankali's position in that binary might differ based on the opinions

of individual human beings. However, one of the outcomes of producing construct

children is making the humans understand that there can no longer be a hierarchy of

beings if this new species is to survive. But what both Akin's and his brother Jodahs'

stories also illustrate is that the Oankali have to relinquish some control, stop making

decisions out of fear, and deal with human beings in more egalitarian ways, as well. The

idea of parahumanity and an evening out of human relationships with other species is not

just a human problem in Xenogenesis, and the survival of this new species eventually

requires the Oankali to do the same flattening of their own hierarchies to achieve a truly

egalitarian society.

In the third book of the Xenogenesis series *Imago*, Jodahs the first human born

ooloi, continues to flatten human-Oankali relations, by advocating for the rights of

constructs through its refusal to be controlled by the Oankali aboard their spaceship.

Jodahs becoming an ooloi is an accident. It is the final combination of human and

Oankali that neither species is ready for and neither species can control. Parahumanity,

more than just describing a set of relationships between humans and other beings that are

equitable, also can be used to describe those beings who stand in the gap between human

and animal— or for my uses here, the gap between human and alien. Allewaert says of

the parahuman that this being is "distinguishable from other bodies produced in emerging

biopolitical regimes because her body was broken into parts" (85). In *Imago*, Jodahs finds itself in a new, dangerous, and distinguishable body in a community and on a planet where its literal existence has not yet been sanctioned. Its body has recombined parts of both parent species in ways that neither species can fully understand. Thus, even within the existence of construct children on the revitalized Earth, the biopolitics surrounding Jodahs' body and power are fraught.

Jodahs is eventually exiled for having the most powerful (and dangerous) components of both the human and Oankali genome within him, and for being able to change the genes of any other being at will. On an individual level, Jodahs "would be the most extreme version of a construct—not just a mix of Human and Oankali characteristics, but able to use [his] body in ways that neither Human nor Oankali could. Synergy" (Butler, *Imago* 28). Furthermore, Jodahs' existence "represented the premature adulthood of a new species. [Jodahs and other construct ooloi] represented true independence—reproductive independence— for that species, and this frightened both Oankali and constructs" (Butler, *Imago* 217). It is the reproductive independence of this new species of constructs that finally diminishes the power the Oankali wield over constructs to something nearing equality. At the end of *Imago*, Jodahs and its paired ooloi sibling Aaor had not only "built modes of self and politics that were not simply critiques of the category of the human but suspended it so as to prohibit any simple return to it" (Allewart 87). What the Oankali did not expect was that it would be necessary for Jodahs to undertake the same process with the category of the Oankali, as well.

Futuristic Neo-slave Narratives and the Afterlives of Slavery

Even after the improvements Lilith, Akin, and Jodahs achieve in terms of human-Oankali relations, what the Oankali never seem to reckon with is their role as futuristic slaveholders. In fact, even as Jodahs fights for the rights for constructs of all genders to exist, he lies to the humans he wants to mate with and basically binds them to him forever without their consent. In this situation, he takes it upon himself to make life-altering and life-long decisions for the human beings he supposedly loves without their consent. Throughout the series, Oankali do similar things. And Lilith, even after decades of living and working among the Oankali can never quite make peace with the control the Oankali have over her life, and over her children's lives as well.

Themes of human enslavement and sexual coercion are central to each of the three texts in the Xenogenesis series. Yet, when scholars discuss neo-slave narratives in relation to Butler's work, Xenogenesis is not mentioned as often as other texts in Butler's oeuvre, such as *Kindred* or *Wild Seed*. The presence of extraterrestrials and what seems like the impending doom of the entire human species (instead of a particular subset) seems often to elide the inclusion of this series in many conversations about neo-slave narratives. Jeffery Tucker argues that "there are real limits to reading Xenogenesis as a neo-slave narrative, however…although there is an anti colonialist approach to the human side of Butler's contact narratives, the author's aliens… are not necessarily figures for white slave owners and overseers" (Tucker 173). Tucker cites the "biological compulsion" of the Oankali to "breed" as somehow more noble than lust or greed, when it is related to both. Yet, even Tucker has to admit that "despite the limitations of the slavery hypothesis, race still matters in Xenogenesis" (Tucker 174).

On the other side of the issue, Madhu Dubey argues that "Neo-slave narratives are impelled by the conviction that the racial legacy of slavery has not yet become a matter of history. Butler obviously shares this conviction; extended realist references to this history appear throughout her fiction, revealing the afterlife of the construct of race instituted by US chattel slavery"[20] (Dubey 346). Lisa Dowdall argues that "it is important to recognise that the symbiotic relationship between Lilith and the Oankali is not only a form of oppression, but also the only means of resistance available to humans within the racialized structures of a reimagined colonial system, historically epitomized by slavery" (510). Moreover, "Lilith maintains a form of oppositional consciousness that recalls the severely limited options of slaves and other colonial subjects" (510).

Isiah Lavendar expands the idea of neo-slave narratives to include his idea of meta-slavery narratives. Meta-slavery narratives are a science fiction version of the neo-slave narrative where "science fiction writers work out complicated feelings toward 'the peculiar' institution by creating representations of the historical events of slavery, charging their retellings of the past with their own rationality and truth, making them vivid and unflinching accounts of evil in their attempt to come to some kind of closure with fabulist impulses" (Lavendar 15). Lavender argues that "issues of meta-slavery occur in Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy…Butler uses meta-slavery to explicitly reawaken the unbearable memory of slavery" (70). Lavendar goes on to argue that "As the epitome of racism, then, slavery is the inevitable starting point of any exploration of race in science fiction" (55). And for the field of science fiction, this might be true, but from within African American literature, this is not the case. However, it is true that the neo-

---

[20] Dubey, Madhu. "Octavia Butler's novels of enslavement." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 46. No. 3. Duke University Press, 2013.

slave narrative form does offer something useful and specific to authors of African American literature, like Butler and like Rivers Solomon—who is the author of *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, the text that is the focus of the next chapter.

And while neo-slave narratives share particular similarities, as Lavender notes along with Bernard Bell and Angelyn Mitchell, I think there are two types of neo-slave narratives: those that move the black subject to the past, and those that move the black American subject to the future. Speculative devices are important and useful for both kinds of texts, but are particularly useful for futuristic neo-slave narratives. They do not move us backward but into the future, and they serve a particular purpose for authors of African American literature that only the speculative can help create. This is very important as we move into 21st century literature, and continue to move the afterlives of enslavement into the future, and different bodies with different histories become involved, as is the case in Xenogenesis. It is clear from this text that the afterlives of enslavement will not cease just because we come in contact with a force supposedly, and perhaps eventually, more powerful.

Works Cited

Allewaert, Monique. *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*. U of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Aline Flieger, Jerry. "Is there a Doctor in the House? Psychoanalysis and the Discourse of the Posthuman." *Paragraph* 33.3 (2010): 354-375.

Butler, Octavia. *Adulthood Rites*. 1988. New York: Warner, 1997.

- - -. *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Consuela Francis, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010.

- - -. *Dawn*. 1987. New York: Warner, 1997.

- - -. *Imago*. 1989. New York: Warner, 1997.

Dow, Suzanne, and Colin Wright. "Introduction: Towards a Psychoanalytic Reading of the Posthuman." *Paragraph* 33.3 (2010): 299-317.

Dowdall, Lisa. "Treasured Strangers: Race, Biopolitics, and the Human in Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy." *Science Fiction Studies* 44.3 (2017): 506-525.

Dubey, Madhu. "Octavia Butler's novels of enslavement." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 46. No. 3. Duke University Press, 2013.

Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Harvard University Press, 2000.

- - -. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso, 1993.

Haraway, Donna J. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." *The Haraway Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Lavender, Isiah III. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 2011.

Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Women in Culture: An Intersectional Anthology for Gender and Women's Studies* (1980): 16-23.

McKittrick, Katherine, ed. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Duke University Press, 2014.

Mitchell, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Savage, Echo E. "'We Pair Off! One Man, One Woman': The Heterosexual Imperative in Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy." *The Sex Is Out of This World: Essays on the Carnal Side of Science Fiction* (2012): 50-61.

Smith, Rachel Greenwald. "Ecology Beyond Ecology: Life After the Accident in Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55 no. 3 (2009): 545-565.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 65-81.

Stephens, Michelle Ann. *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer.* Duke University Press, 2014.

Tucker, Jeffrey A. "'The Human Contradiction': Identity and/as Essence in Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis' Trilogy." *The Yearbook of English Studies* (2007): 164-181.

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human.* Duke University Press, 2014.

Young, Robert. "The Cultural Politics of Hybridity." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader.* London: Routledge, 2006. 158-162.

Beyond the Posts: Postmemory and Postmodernism in 21st Century African American

Speculative Texts

Throughout the twentieth century, speculative themes and devices have allowed

authors to move the American black subject out of realistic chronological trajectories in

which the afterlives of enslavement continue unabated into the future of the American

nation. In the twentieth-century texts that have been my focus, the American black

subject was clearly defined— with the institution of enslavement as its clearly defined

genesis. As I argued in chapter three, American versions of anti-blackness connected to

the history of African American enslavement were still very much operative in late

twentieth century texts like Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*. Even after the destruction of

the planet and most of the human beings on it, in this particular future created by Butler,

anti-blackness remained responsible for much of the violence perpetuated by human

beings. What Butler's texts and others illustrate is that in twentieth century African

American speculative literature the focus was always on how the black subject could be

moved beyond the afterlives of enslavement. In the twenty-first century, the focus is no

longer on getting beyond the afterlives of enslavement, but rather, on what will be left of

blackness, of humanity, and of the planet when human beings do.

In the twenty-first century, authors of African American speculative literature

envision a future blackness that survives the end of the world, but like everything else, it

is changed. Two African American speculative texts exemplify this 21st century

fascination with the kinds of beings and information that will survive whichever

apocalypse happens to annihilate the Earth first. Both *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) by

Rivers Solomon and *M Archive: After the End of the World* (2018) by Alexis Pauline

Gumbs, deploy some of the same tropes that flow through African American literature throughout the twentieth century. They also offer twenty-first century perspectives on the future of identity for a black subject that has no memory— or even postmemory— of enslavement or of the sociopolitical reverberations caused by that institution.

In *An Unkindness of Ghosts* human beings sought refuge away from the dying Earth in space— or more specifically, in a spaceship the size of a small planet named the *Matilda*. In *M Archive*, those who could escaped the surface of the Earth and fled to underground caves and shelters to survive; we meet them as they venture to the surface again. Both texts delve into the interplay between artifacts left behind haphazardly by a decimated human species and the specifically curated knowledge left for future generations by black women. Each of these texts has a different vision of what intergenerational memory looks like for black women (and for the entire species) in the future. In the futures Solomon and Gumbs create, many of the successes and failures of new generations rely on finely-tuned and highly sophisticated reading and understanding practices being taught to or somehow acquired by the generation(s) that follow.

In her discussion of the salience of specific forms of reading practices as an important trope within African American literature, Madhu Dubey, in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, argues that "since the 1970s—the period widely referred to as postmodern—African American fiction has teemed with tropes of the book-within-the-book, and with scenes of reading and writing" (2). Explaining the complicated relationship between African American literature and postmodern thought, Dubey goes on to say that, "Tropes of the book serve as perfect vehicles for [imagining racial community], forcing to the forefront issues of class antagonism, technological mediation,

and time space distanciation" (6). This complicated relationship between African American literature and postmodern thought has particular dimensions that Dubey analyzes in *Signs and Cities*, but African American literature has also had a complicated relationship with modernism. In the modernist period, African American authors also turned to tropes of the book, reading, and writing, to force to the forefront discussions about class, technology, and the future of black people. The same is true for the current period, which postdates postmodern thought. In this moment that has yet to be named, but that for want of a name one might call the post-postmodern, tropes of the book and of reading and writing practices remain utilitarian though complex elements of African American literature, and of African American speculative literature more specifically.

As it relates to *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and to *M Archive*, both Solomon and Gumbs provide their characters with some connection to the past, especially in futures that seem to be devoid of most electronic and digital devices, through texts that exist within larger texts. These written works serve as records of particular languages and dialects and help to create community, especially after such community-making projects as the nation are destroyed or at least reshaped. In the futures of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *M Archive*, the human beings that remain are beyond being able to connect to each other and to the past through the postmemory of the American institution of enslavement. Arlene Keizer describes African American postmemory as "a haunted condition, in which images from the past hover over the present or erupt into it" (1650). Keizer borrows the term postmemory from Holocaust studies scholar Marianne Hirsch, who used the term to "describe the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the stories and

images with which they grow up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (8). In the twenty-first century futures of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *M Archive*, there are no more family members who are only a couple of generations removed from enslavement. There are no more stories being passed down from the era of American enslavement to fill the gaps between generations. That particular history has been lost along with the planet and the rest of human history.

Keizer is very clear that the forms of postmemory present in literary texts and in the visual work of artists such as Kara Walker from the postmodern era are used "as a placeholder for a less stark, more complex set of relations of domination for which we do not yet have a literary or visual language" (1650). And in addition to trying to fashion a new language, literary and artistic forms of postmemory are central for "developing formal strategies for representing the [late twentieth century] black female subject's relationship with her enslaved ancestor/counterpart/alter ego" (Keizer 1662). In this post-postmodern era, however, there seems to be some tension concerning the temporal (and sometimes spatial) disconnect between the twenty-first century black female subject and her enslaved ancestor, and each of these texts uses a version of what might be called post-postmemory to fashion formal strategies for discussing the increasingly attenuated relationship between black subjects from the past and black subjects in the twenty-first century.

In both *An Unkindness of Ghosts* and *M Archive*, the enslaved ancestor is no longer temporally close enough to be considered a counterpart or alter ego, and the protagonist of each novel only receives bits and pieces of information about how their lives might be connected to this person from the distant past. For example, in an

Unkindness of Ghosts, the protagonist Aster is searching for information about her mother, and has no information about the Earth or how she might be connected to anyone who lived on the planet. And yet, there is something more opaque and less clear, but still operative and important, about the connections between a past none of the characters can remember and the futures created by each twenty-first century author. Both an *Unkindness of Ghosts* and *M Archive* develop formal strategies for representing simultaneous iterations of the ancestral and futuristic black subject. Speculative devices are crucial elements of these formal strategies that aim to represent the complex relations between an enslaved ancestor and a futuristic counterpart that knows nothing of enslavement.

Ghosts in the Machine: Futuristic Neo-slave Narratives and Memory in *An Unkindness of Ghosts*

In *An Unkindness of Ghosts* the protagonist, 25 year old Aster, may not know much, if anything, about the history of humans before the spaceship named the *Matilda* and its inhabitants fled from Earth, and she is definitely unclear about how that history is connected to her personally. Aster is still searching for information about her own personal past, and it is her relationship with the texts her mother left behind that help Aster solve the mystery of her mother's death. The people aboard the *Matilda* have been on the spaceship for almost four hundred years, flying at light-speed toward a "promised land" that does not exist. The knowledge that there is no habitable planet, no specific safe port that they are heading toward, is just one of many pieces of knowledge that Aster's mother, Lune, leaves encoded in the maps and cryptic journals she leaves behind. The

idea that the *Matilda* is just careening aimlessly into space with no real bearing is radical enough to inspire Lune to act. The only idea more radical is Lune's plan to change that course by using a black hole to turn the giant ship back toward Earth, or "the Great Lighthouse," as Matildans call it.[21] It is Lune's one act of resistance—setting the ship toward the known point from which it came— that costs Lune her life and also reveals the guiding principle of the text: that sometimes humans need to go back to move forward.[22] Lune dies shortly after giving birth to Aster, and Aster is haunted both by Lune's presence and her absence as she goes about her life aboard the *Matilda*.

In chapter 3, arguing for Butler's *Xenogenesis* series to be considered a futuristic neo-slave narrative I also posited that there are two kinds of neo-slave narratives: those that move characters to the past and those that move characters and enslavement to the future. Isiah Lavender draws a similar distinction when he separates neo-slave narratives from his idea of metaslavery narratives. For Lavender, metaslavery narratives attempt to "situate slavery beyond its historical conventions," while relying on "the resources that sf can bring to bear on black experiences"[23] (60, 64). According to Lavender, one of the resources that sf brings to the table is that "We break away from the 'actual' historical continuum when we read sf, going forward and back in time, experiencing alternative realities and an unfamiliar humanity, leaving us free to change our history, our society,

---

[21] There is a lot more to parse here in the name of given to the Earth by Matildans. Lighthouses are beacons of safety, they are also warnings of dangerous conditions, and can be used by sailors to get their bearings. In the future, perhaps this is what the memory of the Earth has been reduced to.

[22] It is too soon to know, but perhaps this will be one of the guiding principles of the post-postmodern period, as well. Perhaps instead of the haphazard eschewal of all things predating its own era like the most stereotypical versions of postmodernism, the post-postmodern can be more intentional about which things are brought forward into the future and which things are relegated to the past.

[23] sf is a shorthand for science fiction.

and ourselves in our examination of its process" (59). As my study has demonstrated, science fiction is not the only genre that allows the movement of characters and cultures through time and space,[24] and the one thing that remains static in African American literature is the history of African American enslavement and its afterlives. Lavender argues that science fiction foregrounds undefined temporality and unfamiliar humanity, which makes his assertion that all African American literature is sf even more untenable. When sf uses unfamiliar and undefined humanity to engage "the living history of slavery" it is always the black body that is left in the wake, as sf authors often choose to eschew that body and use robots, aliens, and technologically-changed beings as proxies for the enslaved (Lavender 63). From an African American literary perspective, it is crucial that the connection between black bodies and the history of African American enslavement is never diminished in ways that obfuscate the realities of black life in America then and now.

One of the through lines in African American literature then, between slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, and futuristic neo-slave narratives, is engagement with the black body as it relates to the condition of being enslaved in various versions of the past and future. In *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, Aster and the other characters aboard the *Matilda* are so far removed from notions of America, the institution of American enslavement, and even from the Earth itself that they are completely unconscious of how anti-blackness and the sociopolitical realities of American slavery (and its afterlives)

---

[24] Lavender tries to expand the definition of science fiction in much of the same way as I have tried to make the speculative an umbrella term for most everything that is outside of the boundaries of realism within African American literature. However, I think to use the genre and even the term science fiction in this way forces into the shadows science fiction's history. Science fiction was never meant to be an umbrella term, and that remains true in ways that the now more mainstream iteration of the genre can never overcome.

might continue to affect the societal structure aboard the *Matilda*. That is to say, Aster and the Matildans do not have to remember American enslavement from a millennia before for that institution still to be organizing the world around them in ways they cannot quite comprehend. Therefore, as much as Aster is haunted personally by what is left behind of her mother's existence, the true ghost haunting this text is African American enslavement, and its tenacious and long-lasting afterlives. Even in this future so far removed from even the contemporary moment of the early twenty-first century, anti-blackness is the ghost in the sociopolitical machine of the *Matilda* as it hurtles away from the Earth as fast as it can (as far as anyone knows) and away from a painful and problematic human past.

There are quite a few indisputable thematic elements in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* that place it within the neo-slave narrative tradition. For example, like so many black communities in the antebellum south the various decks aboard the ship are isolated from each other; one would assume the reason for segregating large groups of people and cultures for hundreds of years would be to stave off insurrection and to perpetuate ideas of otherness. Aster, as the assistant to the *Matilda*'s Surgeon General, Theo, is allowed a level of mobility that very few Matildans ever enjoy. As she travels to various decks serving as a physician to those in need, Aster notes the differences between decks, including knowledge of various technologies and languages. According to Aster, "It was Matilda's geography, she supposed. What people had known for two generations on R deck had yet to be discovered on V, and so on. Twenty thousand lowdeckers and almost half as many different ways of life. That was the nature of a ship divided by metal, language, and armed guards. Even in decks as linked as the Tarlands, information had a

way of staying put" (Solomon 16). Aboard the *Matilda* there are no nations recognized

by the leader known as the Sovereign, but "Tarlanders were the inhabitants of P, Q, R, S,

and T decks, and it was close to a nation as anything on *Matilda*" (Solomon 11). Each

deck is separated from the other, but the "lowerdeckers"—which includes the

Tarlanders— are separated from the "upperdeckers" by both race and gender.

All of the Tarlanders are dark-skinned people charged with picking the crops that

are used to feed the inhabitants of the *Matilda*. These people who reside in the lower

decks have been described as sharecroppers, which is an incorrect description considering

they are under the control of an overseer who is authorized to do them bodily harm if

they do not make curfew or work too slowly. Sharecroppers technically own what they

produce, even if they have to use most of that produce to pay various debts. The

individuals aboard the lower decks of the *Matilda* own nothing except their very few

personal effects, and they are doled out provisions by the guard, who can change and

decrease them at any time. They are housed in bunks and verbally and physically abused

by the guards posted at each entrance and exit. Aboard the *Matilda*, race is not only

operative in the areas designated for people of color, but also serves to structure life for

white and/or more affluent citizens in the upperdecks. Theo, the Surgeon General and

Aster's boss and friend,

> didn't have white skin—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. An upper deck father, a low deck mother. Such
>
> children belonged, as Aster had heard a C deck woman once say, downstairs.
>
> Light tan darkened into true brown when the Surgeon spent more than an hour in

the Field Decks, and his jet-black hair had a definite wave. His nose and lips were

wider than Aster's. (Solomon 37)

In other words, the surgeon is a character that passes, and who is afforded a life in the

upper decks because he can do so. Like Reuel, the protagonist from *Of One Blood* by

Pauline Hopkins, Theo would not have been able to pursue a medical career unless he

passed as white. Even being the accepted and recognized son of the Sovereign could have

taken him only so far if he was not able to blend seamlessly into the society of the upper

decks.

The Sovereign and the militarized guard that keep order aboard the ship treat

people from the lower decks as lesser beings and enact laws and policies that codify

lowerdeckers as being less than human. The Lieutenant—who is second in command to

the Sovereign and also Theo's uncle— says of the lowerdeckers, "none of them are

harmless… They are animals, and if it weren't for us bending them into some kind of

shape, they'd live in complete chaos and sin" (Solomon 101). For the guard and the other

governmental leaders, bending people from the lower decks into shape includes

systematically disallowing these individuals any bodily or sexual autonomy. In addition

to being routinely raped and beaten by the guards, low deck individuals—thought

generally to be women, even though they might be born with any combination of sex

organs due to what the Surgeon names "hereditary suprarenal dysregula"— are entered

into a "forced breeding program" (Solomon 20, 44).

For Aster specifically, "Doctors examined [her] genitals and reproductive tract

and determined she was one of the few females of this 'poorly racial stock' capable of

carrying offspring. Next to her name in Matilda's manifest was a stamp that read, *Fit to*

Breed" [emphasis in original] (Solomon 43). Like so many enslaved women before her (and around her), Aster's body is seen as a tool of domination, and regardless of what she wants for herself, according to the Sovereign and that stamp in the manifest her only value is what she produces through her productive and reproductive labor.[25] If it were not for Theo's intervention, "remov[ing] Aster's uterus" and "chemically castrat[ing] all the upperdeck men listed in the records of the ship's reproduction programs" until the program was banned, Aster's sexuality and fertility would have been usurped by the state, perhaps in perpetuity.

Notwithstanding the components of neo-slave narratives discussed above, perhaps the element of *An Unkindness of Ghosts* that is most connected to both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives is the Matildans' disconnection from their history. By the time we meet Aster, the *Matilda* has been flying away from the Earth for 325 years and there seems to have been some important fissures between the various histories that led to this point. Earth is the stuff of fables to all of the people who are still alive on the *Matilda*. In one scene, Solomon explains how T-deck people wore charcoal around their eyes to imitate the appearance of raccoons. They fashioned themselves "after the scavenging animal; for they descended from a scavenging people. So they said. So they told themselves. So their stories went. This far from the past, no one could truly know their history" (24). Similar to the way in which the transatlantic slave trade created a historical gulf from which there was no real return for those that were displaced or their descendants,[26] so too the residents of the *Matilda* share a similar sense of historical

---

[25] See Jennifer L. Morgan's book *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*
[26] See Lose Your Mother by Saidiya Hartman

rupture in their separation from Earth, especially since no one aboard the spaceship in the novel's present is passing along stories about how and why the *Matilda* was forced to leave the home planet.

Perhaps it is because so much knowledge about humanity and the greater world that existed has been lost to history, that Aster and other characters like her Aint Melusine seem fixated on passing down what memories they still have to the next generation. Aster remembers Aint Melusine saying "*You got to document. That's what our work is, as womenfolk, memorating anyway we can. Do you count yourself among us?... That's what I thought... You never know when a memory's gonna save your life*" [emphasis in original] (Solomon 69). It is in some sense necessary for Aster's survival aboard the *Matilda* for her to write herself into being by keeping a journal like her mother, especially once the Lieutenant intensifies his campaign of terror against her. In her review of Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs argues that, "What we know is only the means through which we ourselves (are) produce(d)… history is not the only way to know. Our privileged site of knowledge is what 'is written,' which shows what has been preserved, and how, what story has been told and when, and in the case of slavery, what and who has been obliterated through prices in a logbook, histories erased" ("Slavery" 175-176). Indeed, in lieu of history the Matildans have created myriad ways to know themselves and to pass that knowledge along. People from the lower decks do not usually own any books, and most do not have access to the *Matilda*'s Archive located in the upper decks, so they rely on myth and fable to pass on memories and information.

Therefore, all of the texts that Lune leaves behind operate as privileged sites from which Aster tries to bring both Lune and herself into being. Before Aster even began her search for her mother, or even knew there was a search to be had, just the act of creating a tradition, of writing in her own journal and reading her mother's papers, helped Aster to connect to the world inside the *Matilda* and create her own place within it. Aster still could never quite connect with Lune, however, until her friend (and sometimes foil) Giselle informs her that Lune's journals were written in code (Solomon 47). Because Aster is an astute researcher, and as a person who is fluent in at least three (and likely more) languages and dialects spoken aboard the *Matilda*, it is curious that Giselle has to inform Aster that Lune's papers were coded. Aster never read her mother's papers deeply because, like the rest of world and worlds immemorial, she thought "what a black woman produces has been written 'death,' has been written 'slave,' has been written 'dysfunctional,' has been written void" in any language that matters (Gumbs, "Slavery" 176). The possibility that her mother's papers could reinscribe and somehow verify the most damaging discourses that surround Aster made her less curious and probing of her mother's work. But, as Aster tells the character Seamus later in the text, "It is foolish to ignore the dead" (Solomon 271). By deciphering the code in Lune's journal Aster is not only able to fill in the gaps of her past, but also, she is also able to get some direction about her own future and the future of everyone aboard the *Matilda*.

The prominence and significance of these texts that exist between generations underscores the utility of tropes of the book for authors of African American literature. Again, as Dubey argues, "books serve as the perfect vehicles" for creating imagined communities by "forcing to the forefront issues of class antagonism, technological

mediation, and time-space distinction" (6). Through the texts shared between Lune and

Aster, they are able to create a powerful imagined community that extends to Aster's best

friend Giselle, Theo, Aint Melusine, the girls Giselle and Aster live with, and several

others. It is this small community who initially follow Aster's plan to resist, ultimately

leading to an uprising aboard the *Matilda*. The texts Lune leaves behind also set in

motion Aster's literal time travel back to Earth. Even though the *Matilda* has been gone

from the Earth for 325 years, due to the speed at which it was traveling, Lune calculated

that these 325 years were equivalent to 1,000 years on Earth. In returning to Earth, Aster

also literally moves to the future by following the directions her mother left her. And it is

the community of friends and other oppressed lowdeckers who allow Aster the time to

get away from the ship. Aster's escape might be more high tech than that of her enslaved

ancestors who followed the north star, but in a similar fashion her mother's papers point

her back to the most fabled object in the universe and perhaps the one place where she

can find true freedom: the newly revitalized Earth.

In the end, the narrative arc of a futuristic neo-slave narrative must follow an arc

similar to its forebears, tracing the movement of an enslaved individual out of bondage

and into some modicum of freedom through an escape, manumission, or death. In *An*

Unkindness of Ghosts, Aster's friend and fellow decoder of Lune's journals chooses

death. Giselle, out of boredom or spite or her uncontrollable need to destroy things, burns

down Aster's secret botanarium. Aster is devastated because "Everything she'd ever held

dear had been housed in this botanarium. There'd be no forgiveness this time. It was one

thing to destroy a person, but to destroy their work was a sacrilege… All that was left of

a person's life was recorded on paper, in annals, in almanacs, in the physical items they

produced. To end that was to end their history, their present, their future" (Solomon 327). Even worse, the fire is the perfect excuse for the Lieutenant— who has now become the Sovereign— to hold a public execution of Giselle in hopes of ridding himself of her and finally breaking Aster in a way she would find difficult to recover from.

In spite of Aster's immediate reaction to Giselle destroying her most sacred space aboard the *Matilda*, she organizes a plan to help Giselle escape. After Giselle is dragged out to the gallows to be hung, Aster throws a knife to her hoping that it might help Giselle fight off the guards. Solomon writes, "Aster knew the world which Giselle slew every one of these men, Lieutenant included, did not exist, that one half-crazed woman could only do so much" (334). But what Aster did not expect was for Giselle to take "the blade and stab it into her own stomach… Giselle, forever defiant. She'd not let them take her, not when she could so easily take herself" (Solomon 334). Giselle, like Aster, "understood that kings don't die. Even when they do, they have sons, and those sons have sons, and so on," and in the words of the Lieutenant, "*The Sovereignty is forever*" [emphasis in original] (Solomon 303). Giselle decided, that for her, death is the only way forward. The Lieutenant (now Sovereign), not to be outdone, "lifted his foot and set the bottom of his boot on the tip of the knife handle, pressing down. He shifted left and right, driving the metal jaggedly through her," thus denying her even the bodily autonomy of taking her own life (Solomon 335). Achille Mbembe defines sovereignty as "the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die," and that "to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality" ("Necropolitics" 10-11). As the personification of all governance and the various institutions aboard, the Lieutenant sees Giselle publicly taking her own life before he could kill her as an affront to his supposed

absolute power. He cannot accept Giselle having even a modicum of power over when and how she dies.

After Giselle dies, Aster becomes the focus of the guard, and the guard nearest her begins to beat her as she lays near Giselle's dead body. Theo then kills that guard and his uncle with a dart gun, which sets off a violent battle between the guard and the inhabitants of the lower decks. Aster chooses to escape, even though the uprising might prove powerful enough to overcome the guard and provide her ally, Theo, with a chance to claim the Sovereignty. Even though, like her corollaries from both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, she has no idea what she will find at the end of her journey, in her decision to escape Aster chooses herself and her mother. She makes her way toward the Great Lighthouse using a flight plan her mother uploaded into one of the transporter ships before she died. Also like slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, escape and its supposed outcome, freedom, are both complicated. What is freedom for Aster on the wild and untamed planet that Earth has become in the thousand years since humans have lived there? Aster has been freed from subjugation aboard the *Matilda*, but the freedom she finds is dangerous, arduous, and isolating.

In one of the last scenes of the novel, after Aster arrives on Earth she buries the bodies of both her mother and Giselle. Solomon writes, "The ground was soft and damp, the dirt pliable… She moved maniacally, scooping earth into her hands and throwing it to her sides…She placed her mother in first and covered her with the blanket. It was harder, much harder, to lay Giselle to join her" (349). In this moment, Aster literally and figuratively lays the past to rest. *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, along with other twenty-first century African American speculative texts, "effectively shift[s] the question away from

how these, our dead, can be resurrected through triumphal historical reunion narrative

and ask[s]… what desire it is that leads us to tell the story we are telling in the way that

we are telling it" (Gumbs, "Slavery" 178). In twenty-first century texts, the goal is no

longer to resurrect the dead but to make sure that we lay them to rest without completely

forgetting they existed as a means of preparing for whatever is next.

In the future, as blackness becomes more fungible, it is even more possible that

the black body and its connection to particular histories—that of enslavement and

subjugation in America and the West more broadly— will be lost as "blackness" will be

used to characterize any number of bodies and populations rejected (or even ejected)

from the category of the human.[27] In terms of the literary representation of blackness and

the black body, metaslavery, as a literary form, offers no resistance to this discursive

broadening of blackness and the distance this creates between blackness and the black

body. Thus, in twenty-first century African American speculative literature, the various

components of the neo-slave narrative are no longer just "placeholders for a less stark,

more complex set of relations of domination for which we do not yet have a literary or

visual language" (Keizer 1650). Instead, the point of bringing together literary

representations of futuristic black subjects and the neo-slave narrative literary form is to

interrupt formally specific evolutions of blackness that strive to forget the bodily

experience of black people in the West. Moreover, the productive tension between the

form of the neo-slave narrative and the futuristic black subject in *An Unkindness of Ghost*

is representative of African American literature's investment in representations of the

---

[27] See *A Critique of Black Reason* by Achille Mbembe

black body as more than just an ahistorical platform or blank space on which random experiences and stories can be projected.

"After the End of The World": *M Archive*, the Post-Postmodern, and the future of African American Literature

M Archive: After the End of the World is an experimental twenty-first century text by Alexis Pauline Gumbs. There is no named protagonist, but in a note at the beginning of the text Gumbs explains that it is a "speculative documentary. written from and with the perspective of a researcher, a post-scientist sorting artifacts at the end of world" (Gumbs, *M Archive* xi). In the form of a documentary, the text weaves its way through smaller, quasi-poetic vignettes that together constitute an overarching narrative. Taken together, the various scenes within *M Archive* provide an account of how human beings brought themselves to the brink of destruction, and what human beings do after the world they know is destroyed. Though the text is beyond "a multitude of small and large present apocalypses," the future in *M Archive* is much closer to the twenty-first century present than the future in a text like *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (Gumbs, *M Archive* xi). And like all near-future texts[28] in African American literature, the closeness between the present and future in *M Archive* makes the connections between present and future societal ills more apparent, while also making the difficulties of the future more stark against an all too familiar background of anti-blackness and out of control consumption.

For these reasons and others, *M Archive* is the perfect text to use to update the conversation between African American literature and the postmodern, now that we are

---

[28] See my discussion of *Dhalgren* by Samuel Delany in Chapter 2.

beyond the postmodern moment. Madhu Dubey argues that one of the "impetus[es] behind [her book] *Signs and Cities* is to dispute prevailing claims of thoroughgoing rupture between the categories of the modern and the postmodern in a number of fields" (Dubey 17). Dubey even "refrain[s] [from] using the term *postmodernity* because the implication of an "epochal shift, a supercession of the modern era" [emphasis in original] is not what she is trying to convey (18). Based on the economics of the postmodern period, Dubey "treats socioeconomic developments since the 1970s as novel in significant respects yet part of an intense round of modernization" (18). Thus, Dubey uses terms like "the postmodern period… as shorthand references to the ensemble of political, economic, technological, social, and cultural transformations that have occurred in the United States since the 1970s…In the realms of art, culture, and intellectual discourse, she employs the term postmodern to describe a moment of perceived crisis within the modern" (18). Dubey's distinction between postmodernity and the postmodern is useful for analyzing the preliminary boundaries of the intersection between the post-postmodern and African American literature in *M Archive*.

From the perspective of the present, it is impossible to know if the post-postmodern is yet another re-modernization of the modern period or a complete epochal shift. In time, it could serve to be either. Regardless, it is clear that the changes in the economic and sociopolitical landscapes that have taken place since the early aughts of the twenty-first century have created a corresponding cultural crisis in the postmodern or a break from the modern entirely. Dubey reminds us that "one of the most vexed issues in debates on postmodernism is the precise relation between socioeconomic and cultural levels of change" (18). She argues that "the racial crises associated with postmodernism

are so emphatically understood in cultural terms that culture not only operates as a pressure point but also begins to feed back into political and economic policy decisions" (18-19). For Dubey, the foundation of her argument and of the "racial crises" associated with postmodernism are the economic changes that have had material effects on the lives of African Americans in the late twentieth century. Thus, for any analysis of the next wave of cultural and sociopolitical changes one might attribute to post-postmodernism, it is important to start where she did, and that is with economic developments, specifically the ascendancy of finance capitalism in the twenty-first century.

Dubey argues that "In most theories of postmodernism, the modern period is identified with industrial capitalism, although its successor is variably characterized as postindustrial society or a new stage of 'multinational' or 'disorganized' capitalism" (Dubey 17). Since the postmodern moment there has been yet another shift. In "The Age of Humanism is Ending," Achille Mbembe explains that, "Abetted by technological and military might, finance capital has achieved its hegemony over the world." Mbembe goes on to say that, "The world as we knew it since the end of World War II… has ended…Another long and deadlier game has started. The main clash of the first half of the 21st century will not oppose religions or civilizations. It will oppose liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism, the rule of finance and the rule of the people, humanism and nihilism" (Mbembe, "Age of Humanism"). For Mbembe, this new moment is not just a simple (re)modernizing of the modern period, but a new epoch altogether. Mbembe argues that "Inequalities will keep growing worldwide. But far from fueling a renewed cycle of class struggles, social conflicts will increasingly take the form of racism, ultra-nationalism, sexism, ethnic and religious rivalries, xenophobia,

homophobia and other deadly passions" due to "structural shifts, which will become ever more apparent as the new century unfolds" (Mbembe, "Age of Humanism"). Mbembe's vision of the post-postmodern era is grim and untenable. In post-postmodern African American speculative texts, the outcome of this economic and sociopolitical moment is the destruction of the Earth and most of humanity.

Yet, in neither of the texts this chapter engages is the actual destruction of the planet the focal point of the story. Solomon focuses primarily on a future centuries beyond the destruction of the Earth, and Gumbs focuses on the periods immediately before and after human beings experience planetary destruction. In both texts, what comes after the end of the world is not perfect, but it gives the people left behind another chance to try again. *M Archive* and other post-postmodern African American speculative texts illustrate that dreams of a utopian future, particularly one that does not perpetuate the afterlives of enslavement (or actual enslavement), died in the early twentieth century. In the late twentieth century, there was a focus on dystopian futures in which the afterlives of enslavement and anti-blackness were dragged to the future with the black subject. But in the futures launched from the twenty-first century, dystopia has come and gone, and come back again. Therefore, twenty-first century speculative futures are not seeking perfection, or even viewing the end of the world as particularly dystopian. The dystopia is *now*, in our present—the moment these novels are looking back on from a near or far future. It is in this present economic and sociopolitical moment that human beings are putting in place the institutions and structures that will cause the demise of the species. The future end of the world is just the logical conclusion of the processes of the present.

In Gumbs' note at the beginning of *M Archive* she argues that the text, "depicts a species at the edge of its integrity, on the verge or in practice of transforming into something beyond the luxuries and limitations of what some call 'the human'" (Gumbs, *M Archive* xi). The human survivors of the destruction of the planet, and their imperative to be something different or more than human in *M Archive*, is a response to the effects of finance capitalism on twenty-first century ideas of humanness. Mbembe writes that "Already in the making, a new kind of human will triumph. This will not be the liberal individual who, not so long ago, we believed could be the subject of democracy. The new human being will be constituted through and within digital technologies and computational media" (Mbembe, Age of Humanism). In *M Archive*, Gumbs imagines the exact opposite of the post-postmodern human that is basically a symptom of finance capitalism, and because of the world ending in this text, there is more room for futuristic human beings to be more than a symptom of an economy run amok.

Indeed, part of where the goals of African American literature overlap with the post-postmodern is in the former's desire to trouble twentieth century ideas about who is considered human. African American post-postmodern texts like *M Archive* strive to devise better ways of defining or conceptualizing the existence and experiences of human beings that are not purposefully and intrinsically discriminatory. From the beginning of *M Archive* Gumbs takes issue with the exclusionary nature of the category of the human, partly due to her very clearly expressed goal of "attending to Black bodies in a way that doesn't seek to prove that Black people are human but instead calls preexisting definitions of the human into question" (Gumbs, *M Archive* xi). Again, the post-

postmodern trope that allows her to destabilize how we understand humanity is the end of the world. In one scene, seemingly just before human beings succumb, Gumbs writes,

> at some point pretending we weren't going to die, that our children weren't going to die, that our deaths and lives weren't going to be forgotten, became unsustainable. it was hard enough just to breathe and metabolize. to find something to metabolize. to find people to metabolize near. now some people call it the true end of whiteness, when the world could finally operate based on something other than the fear of blackness, of being, of death… at some point. all the dead being here anyway and all of us here being obviously doomed, we let go of that little game. and started breathing. and saw our hands. we let go. i felt like i could fly. (76)

Here, as both human beings and the Earth struggle to survive, Gumbs breaks down the human experience into its most fundamental components. It is the impending death of these characters along with the communal necessity of these most basic human needs that allow them to overcome anti-blackness. In this scene, there is no capital. There is nothing to trade, and no power differential, and no need for hierarchy. All that is absent serves to makes racism meaningless, and to make these humans consider that there might be other ways to be human than those based on the models of the past.

Community and communality are important themes in *M Archive*. The (near)futuristic destruction of the planet is an experience that Gumbs describes as particularly isolating, at least in the moments after it happens. In a scene that takes place soon after the destruction of the planet Gumbs writes, "so different people did different things. but, for a time at least, they all thought they were the only people left

alive…which is not to say the remaining survivors were ignorant or proud or separatist or that they *wanted* to be the only people, but a major part of their sense of the situation depended on their understanding that everyone else was dead" [emphasis in original] (*M Archive* 1). In other words, one of the consequences of surviving a global cataclysm is that the kind of simultaneity that supports nations and global economies no longer exists. Simultaneity is a concept used by Benedict Anderson to explain how members of imagined communities—like the nation— assume the simultaneous existence of members of their imagined community that they do not meet, and how people understand time as a forward-moving, evenly segmented quantity in a way that makes one second equivalent to and exchangeable with another.[29] Anderson describes simultaneity as "transverse, cross-time, marked not by pre-figuring and fulfilment [sic], but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (24). In *M Archive*, after the planet is destroyed, simultaneity (the way Anderson defines it) is no longer an assumed constant, not only because the people who survive have to seriously consider that they might be the only ones to do so, but also because time is no longer the homogenous, empty time that it was before the world ended.

In *M Archive*, global destruction throws everything humans understand about the world into flux, and time does not escape the temporal and ontological shifts experienced by human beings in the face of utter annihilation. Gumbs writes,

> no one invented time. it's just that the sun and moon did what they did and we felt
> it. so no one had to abolish time either. it was just that we couldn't see the sky
> anymore and we didn't feel ourselves breathing. so whenever it was, we had no

---

[29] See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* by Benedict Anderson.

choice but to be present. some people believed that time was moving backward, which would have been nice, if it meant we could undo what we had done…it was definitive, but like everything else (except for love) it was not always. so i do have to talk about it in the past tense. (141).

In this scene, human beings are no longer even sure whether time is moving backward or forward because in the future beyond a worldwide cataclysm there are no more institutions seeking to standardize time for the sake of productivity. Instead, Gumbs gestures to an understanding of time that allows for a simultaneity that works differently than Anderson's version. It is the unbounded nature of time after the world ends that allows for this new version of simultaneity to work transversely, but across greater quantities of time going both backward and forward. In the afterword to *Signs and Cities* Dubey argues that "Very many postmodern African-American novelists are stirred by a 'polemical passion' against the present that is 'forward looking, not nostalgic'" (238). In the post-postmodern moment of Gumbs' writing, authors do not feel as though they have to choose; they utilize literary tropes and forms that allow connections to both the past and future.

For Gumbs, a broadening of simultaneity within *M Archive* also allows for a reconceptualization of humanness and a creation of imagined communities that can operate across generations. Here again, the post-postmodern and African American literature have overlapping representational goals. Gumbs writes, "the problematic core construct was that in order to be sane, which is to live in one body, which is to live one lifetime at one time, which is to disconnect from the black simultaneity of the universe, you could and must deny black femininity. and somehow breathe" (Gumbs, *M Archive*

7). Gumbs' idea of a black simultaneity is perhaps a theoretical cognate to the afterlives of enslavement. Anti-blackness has been used to create imagined communities and connect particular kinds of bodies across time and space, and black simultaneity operates in a similar way across similar spans of time, even if for very different purposes. The difference for Gumbs seems to be choice. She writes, "they remembered the selves they had sent across generations and realized it wasn't time that would make the difference, nor the specific mass of land, it was the act of choosing. of choosing each other. again" (Gumbs, *M Archive* 102). Black simultaneity is chosen across generations by black people in ways that anti-blackness could and would never be. And in the post-postmodern era, it is the speculative portrayal of the end of the world that gives black people, and the rest of the human beings that survive, a chance to truly choose each other without the power of the nation, capitalism, and anti-blackness impacting that choice.

Literary representations of black people, outside of the boundaries of anti-blackness and across time and space, have always pushed African American literature to a new set of extremes in each cultural moment. The post-postmodern moment is no different. Another symptom of the economic and sociopolitical shifts of the twenty-first century is that "Language has been dislocated. The content is in the form and the form is beyond, or in excess of, the content" (Mbembe, "Age of Humanism"). In Gumbs' speculative documentary, the content is in the form in different ways. The speculative devices Gumbs uses in *M Archive* allow the black subject to be moved through time and space, as they do in all of the texts discussed in this study. This movement of the black subject that the speculative effectuates is also represented in the narrative arc. Though there is some loose narrative progression, *M Archive* has no real beginning and no end,

and the narrative moves back and forth through time and space at will. The speculative also allows the black subject, and others, to create and be a part of imagined communities that are not limited by time. The content of *M Archive* mirrors these connections between different generations of black people by including sections on Phillis Wheatley and dropping other individuals, like Saartjie Baartman, into this post-apocalyptic text at various intervals.

It is also true that *M Archive* is in excess of its speculative and fictional content, and that excess is primarily made up of the literary analysis that finds its way into the text. Often literary analysis is based on bringing external theoretical approaches to bear on literary texts, but in *M Archive* the theory and the narrative are one. And though that makes the narrative a bit more obtuse and the theory more intuitive, the inseparability of various kinds of knowledge production about black life in the past and in the future is an evolution that looks backwards. Through *M Archive*, Gumbs engages the work of M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. For each of the poetic small narratives in *M Archive*, Gumbs lists a corresponding section and page of Alexander's book. Aside from these very specific connections, Gumbs also creates thematic and theoretical links to Alexander's argument that "the middle passage [is] an act of violence that continues to impact the entire planet" (Gumbs, *M Archive* x). In this way tropes of the book find their way into Gumbs' text. Each new section of *M Archive* is accompanied by a periodic table of elements and, "At the end of the book a list of texts other than *Pedagogies of Crossing* that have had a chemical impact on this work are included" (Gumbs, *M Archive* x). Through this thematic and theoretical element of the text, readers are encouraged to tap

into Gumbs' imagined community of black feminist theorists who have worked together across time and space. In this post-postmodern moment books and print literature remains one of the mediums specifically suited for this task, even if the way this task is accomplished has to evolve.

Conclusion

The speculative has always been a necessary component of African American literature, and African American authors have always used the speculative to consider how current events and laws and mores would affect the futures of black people in America. The speculative has been necessary to the production of alternative imaginary times and spaces outside of the American nation, where the futures created by black Americans could be used to make scathing critiques of the sociopolitical and economic realities of the present for black people in America. Throughout this project I have been trying to bring the "blackground"[30] to the forefront by tracing the use of the speculative from within the African American literary canon, instead of through other genres such as science fiction and/or fantasy. Isaiah Lavender writes that "Science fiction often talks about race by not talking about race, makes real aliens, has hidden race dialogues. Even though it is a literature that talks a lot about underclasses or oppressed classes, it does so from a privileged if somewhat generic white space" (7). This tendency of science fiction to dislocate race from the black body is problematic and creates a disconnect between the particularities of anti-blackness in an American context and various other forms of subjection. Moreover, science fiction does not control or oversee all forms of literature

---

[30] Isiah Lavender defines his term the "blackground" as "the embedded perceptions of race and racism— intended or not—in Western sf writing and criticism" (Lavender 6).

and all literary devices that fall outside of the boundaries of realist fiction. Within African American literature it has always been important to discuss race along with its imbrications with time, space, and capitalism, and speculative devices have often been necessary for telling that particular story.

The thematic core of this project is freedom. The speculative as I define it— as a set of devices that allows the black subject to be moved in and out of time and space—is an expression of formal and generic freedom. As authors faithfully try to convey black life in their texts, the speculative allows them the freedom to imagine, while staying grounded in the realities of black life in America throughout the twentieth century. Chapter 1 concerns early twentieth century texts that try to conceptualize what true freedom after the abolition of slavery, and in concert with back to Africa movements, might look like. Where is the true spiritual and physical home of African Americans? In the early twenty century that was a more viable question than it has ever been since, and both Hopkins and Schuyler use the freedom of speculative texts to parse the stakes of both going back to Africa and staying in America. Chapters 2 and 3 attend to authors who tried to conceptualize how African Americans might be freed from the afterlives of enslavement. Both Delany and Butler consider the kinds of social, political, and economic extremes that could accomplish a flattening of racial hierarchies, and what kinds of sacrifices have to be made in order for this to take place.

Finally, this fourth chapter considers what freedom might look like for a futuristic black subject launched from the present of the 21st century. Throughout this project, as the present moves forward into the future, so does each iteration of the "future." In the speculative African American texts of the 21st century, instead of focusing on getting

away from or beyond race and the other violences human beings commit on each other and on the planet, these texts focus on return and recovery. Perhaps the lesson of the 20th century is that it is as futile to try and get beyond race as it is to get beyond humanity itself. In these texts there is a recognition that eventually we have to return to the place where we were bound, in order to truly be free. In the twenty first century this return is no longer to Africa but to the planet earth itself, or at least to its surface.

Works Cited

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, 2005.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso books, 2006.

Dubey, Madhu. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *M Archive: After the End of the World*. Duke University Press: Durham, NC. 2018.

- - -. "Slavery is a Language." *Obsidian*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2007, pp. 175-185. ProQuest, https://search.proquest.com/docview/206795375?accountid=13626.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Macmillan, 2008.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012.

Keizer, Arlene R. "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory." *PMLA* 123.5 (2008): 1649-1672.

Kilgore, De Witt. *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Lavender, Isiah III. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 2011.

Mbembé, Achille, and Libby Meintjes. "Necropolitics." Public culture 15.1 (2003): 11-40.

- - -. "The Age of Humanism is Ending". *Mail & Guardian*. https://mg.co.za/article/ 2016-12-22-00-the-age-of-humanism-is-ending

- - -. *Critique of Black Reason*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Morgan, Jennifer L. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Solomon, Rivers. *An Unkindness of Ghosts*. Akashic Books: New York, NY. 2017.