English Honors Papers   English Department

2022

Genre Fluidity in Black Speculative Fiction as an Exploration of Blackness

Jake Upton

Genre Fluidity in Black Speculative fiction as an Exploration of Blackness

By

Jake Upton

A Thesis

Acknowledgements

I owe thanks to a great many people, without who's help this project would not have been possible. I would like first to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Wilder, for her patient guidance, her faith in me, and our many delightful conversations.

I would like to thank my thesis readers, Dr. Martin and professor and poet Kate Rushin for their assistance, comments and inspiration.

I would be remiss if I did not also extend my gratitude to Dr. Cook, my major advisor for most of my college career. Without the inspiration and knowledge I gained from your classes and conversations I doubt this thesis would exist at all.

Last but not least I would like to thank my family and friends for their steadfast support throughout this entire project. I dedicate this thesis to my mother, who pushed me to become the writer I am today and always believed in me.

Table Of Contents

Chapter I: Kindred and Cross Temporal Dialogue

Why write speculative fiction? Why write science fiction, or fantasy, or a work that blends these genres? This question carries an unfair weight for Black writers of speculative fiction. These writers have wrestled with "expectations that African American literature ought to contribute demonstrably to some social end or to the belief that novels, poems, or plays constituted proxies for the status or the nature of the race as a whole."[1] This has placed strong pressure on Black writers to write realist fiction addressing these issues and to ignore the more fanciful realm of speculative fiction. Compounding this problem is the historic exclusion of Blackness from speculative fiction in favor of futures and idealised pasts without the uncomfortable problems of the color line.[2] Yet, despite these pressures, Black writers have embraced these genres. Asking why this is risks essentializing the motives of Black writers. Furthermore, even if this was my aim, Black authors possesses many different motivations that defy easy categorization. Some writers such as W.E.B du Bois affirm the value of science fiction and fantasy as a political tool, while other writers such as N.K. Jemison reject the expectation that their work be read as purely political. Both writers, despite opposing motivations, embraced the genre. Thus a better question with regard to Black writers is: what are the opportunities presented by science fiction and fantasy which could outweigh the pressures against writing it?

---

[1] Warren, Kenneth, What Was African American Literature? Pg 13

[2] For more on this topic see Mark Bould. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF." Science Fiction Studies, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp. 177–86
For a discussion of the racism experienced by earlier sci fi writers see, Delany, R. Samuel, "Racism and Science Fiction" *NYRSF* Issue 120.

Such a question allows for an exploration of why science fiction and fantasy is attractive to Black writers while recognizing the diversity of their artistic motives. This project deals with more specific questions, yet this larger question should be kept in mind. I examine how the blending of science fiction and fantasy, and the subsequent blending of the past present and future associated with these genres can be a generative space for the exploration of Blackness in the works of Black speculative fiction writers. This is a very specific exploration of certain opportunities science fiction and fantasy present to Black authors. As will become clear, however, this narrow focus actually aims at a broader examination of this larger question.

Science fiction and fantasy carry historical associations baked into their respective tropes and conventions that are useful tools for exploring Blackness. Speculative fiction is written as a departure from what was, from what is, from what will be or from all three. Science fiction traditionally focuses on visions of the future, or at least the idea of the forward progress of science is assumed; fantasy evokes the past, even when set in the present or the future. Thus, blending these genres can connect the past, present, and future together. This blending of the past with the future is particularly relevant when we consider the relationality of Blackness to the experiences of modernity. Gilroy expresses the urgency of recognizing how we conceive of modernity in relationship to Blackness, "It can be argued that much of the supposed novelty of the postmodern evaporates when it is viewed in the unforgiving historical light of the brutal encounters between Europeans and those they conquered, slaughtered, and enslaved. The periodisation of the modern and the postmodern is thus of the most profound importance for the history of blacks in the West and for chronicling the shifting relations of domination and

subordination between Europeans and the rest of the world."[3] Essentially, he argues that the

failures of enlightenment rationality with regards to Black people suggests a reorientation of our

periodisation of modernity. Depending on ones racial perspective this periodisation shifts

drastically, creating a range of relationalities to modernity. Du Bois explored this relationality

through the model of "double consciousness"[4] which Gilroy then built upon. We see Gilroy

explores this relationality as a dialogue wherein Blackness shaped modernity and modernity

shaped Blackness through the rhizomatic network of the Black Atlantic. Black responses to

injustice challenged modernity and shaped [5] The concept of The Black Atlantic: Modernity and

Double Consciousness has been a crucial source of inspiration for Black speculative fiction in

exploring the alienation of modernity that Gilroy describes through a science fiction lens. Eshun

describes the aim of such fiction as "reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic

towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective."[6] This tradition of blending the past and the

future challenges western concepts of progress and modernity, and orients Blackness in relation

to them.

This thesis examines how blending genres intersects with explorations of Blackness

through the blending of the past and the future. How does blending genres empower an author's

attempts to explore Blackness in their stories? The blending of the past and future is a common

characteristic of Black speculative fiction and scholarship surrounding this topic is extensive.[7] It

---

[3] Gilroy, Paul, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, 44
[4] See Du Bois, W.E.B, The Souls of Black Folk, chapter 1 and 3 in particular.
[5] Gilroy, Paul, The Black Atlantic.
　　　For more on the relationality of postcolonial Blackness to modernism and postmodernism see, Appiah, Anthony, Kwame, "In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture"
　　　For an exploration of the relationality of Blackness towards the institution of colonialism, see Day, Ikyo, "Being or Nothingness" Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique.
[6] Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." 289
[7]　　　For a discussion of the relation between the blending of the predictive and the retrospective see, Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism."

is recognized that this blending of the past and future often results in a blending of genre. I have chosen to focus specifically on the role genre plays in this blending and how genre specifically allows for an exploration of Blackness through it. Drawing from this scholarship I contend that the blending of the past, present, and future performed in genre-fluid speculative fiction allows for an anachronistic dialogue to take place across history that is a genrerative space for explorations of Blackness. Different ways of thinking from radically different time periods can come into dialogue in ways organic to the story's genre. These ways of thinking allow for an author to contextualize Blackness through a myriad of historical and prospective lenses. This relationship between genre fluidity, history, and presentations of Blackness is one of the signature opportunities of speculative fiction. Octavia Butler, as a canonical figure in Black speculative fiction is an ideal starting point to explore the generative potential of genre fluidity. I have chosen her novel *Kindred*: a work where genre is consciously blended and subverted, and where cross temporal dialogue takes place through time travel. This novel demonstrates the complexities of genre, and the ways in which their interplay can enhance explorations of Blackness.

For a discussion of how the erasure of Black history influences the imagining of Black futures see, Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose". Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture

For more on the mixing of the past, particularly folklore, with the futuristic see Samatar, Sofia, "Towards a Planatery History of Afrofuturism

For a discussion of African history and mythology in Afrofuturism see Womack, Ytasha, *Afrofuturism,* particularly chapter 5

For more on the use of the past to explore the future see, Mark Bould. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF."

For a discussion of the aims of Afrofuturism in relation to history see Anderson, Reynaldo. "AFROFUTURISM 2.0 & THE BLACK SPECULATIVE ARTS MOVEMENT: Notes on a Manifesto." *Obsidian*, vol. 42

For a discussion of how Black speculative fiction works the precolonial past into postcolonial narratives see Burnett, Joshua Yu. "The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 46, no. 4,

Kindred, by Octavia Butler, is a novel that defies easy categorization. It is written in the first person and is not epistolary in nature.The novel follows Dana, a Black woman from 1976 Los Angeles who is involuntarily transported through time and space repeatedly to antebellum Maryland. There she becomes entangled in the lives of her ancestors, in particular the life of her young white ancestor Rufus Weylin. She learns that his self-destructive behavior summons her through time and space to protect him and the unborn generations that would lead to her own birth. To ensure her own birth in the future, however, she realizes Rufus will have to have a child, likely by rape, with her ancestor Alice Greenwood. Her white husband, Kevin, also becomes entangled in her involuntary time travel, and the vast differences between their experiences in the past become a point of contention and reflection. Despite Dana's best efforts, Rufus cannot escape the racial ideology of his time.Dana struggles to survive the horrors of the Weylin plantation and to navigate the moral quandaries of ensuring the survival of her unborn ancestors. Ultimately, Dana escapes back to the future after her bloodline is secured, losing an arm in the process.

The question of *Kindred's* genre must begin with Butler herself. She was quite insistent that *Kindred* was fantasy. She repeatedly pushed back against its categorization as sci-fi, saying in an interview that it "was obviously not science fiction. There's no science in it at all." Butler promotes a rigid interpretation of the genre classifications of science fiction and fantasy. If there is science, then it's sci-fi, if there's no science, then it's fantasy. By science Butler means a speculative treatment of our scientific knowledge, "Science fiction uses science, extrapolates from science as we know it to science as it might be to technology as it might be."[8] By this

---

[8] Butler, Octavia quoted in Kenan " Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: BLACK WOMEN AND THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE" 14

definition Kindred certainly is not science fiction. Dana was not sent back in time by a time machine (to the reader's knowledge), nor did any other sort of new technology show itself. Even if we stretch our conception of technology, such as Butler does in her novel *Wildseed* to include genetic mutations as scientific technology they are never explicitly or definitively explored in any length in *Kindred* aside from the idea that the time travel is powered somehow by consanguinity. Now, scientific thinking is extremely common throughout *Kindred;* for example, Dana speculates upon the identities of various diseases and tries to treat them with a modern scientific medical approach. According to Butler, however, this science does not count because it does not speculate beyond current medical knowledge. If this division were so clear cut and obvious, as Butler thinks it is, then why is there such confusion surrounding the genre of *Kindred*? Butler concedes that her classification of *Kindred* as fantasy may seem odd as, "It was the kind of fantasy that no one had really thought of as fantasy because after all, it doesn't fall into the sword and sorcery or pseudo-medieval and fantasy that everyone expects."[9] What we have, according to Butler, is a book that has no sword and sorcery but is nonetheless still fantasy by virtue of its lack of science. However, while *Kindred* may not have any speculative science in it, nonetheless it is easy to see how it could be confused for science fiction. This genre confusion arises from Butler's use of science fiction tropes in *Kinded*.

The presence of science fiction tropes in *Kindred* is decidedly overt, yet insufficient to qualify the novel as science fiction according to Butler. Dana is quite aware of the sci-fi nature of her experiences, "Time travel was science fiction in nineteen seventy-six."This is the framework through which she and Kevin attempt to understand the seemingly impossible things that have

---

[9] Butler, Octavia, quoted in Beal, Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: BLACK WOMEN AND THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE 14

happened to her. Indeed they try as best they can to follow the conventions of that genre, trying tofind a logical and scientific explanation to the time travel. If she and Kevin could find some sort of scientific principle to explain her journey this would certainly qualify as a speculative exploration of science and thus as science fiction according to Butler. The acknowledged existence of such an explanation is the most important defining feature of science fiction. A seemingly impossible phenomenon such as time travel w. This leads the reader to expect, at the outset, that the novel's plot will be resolved through the tropes of science fiction. Yet such an explanation never materializes. The best Dana can do is draw a correlation between time travel and genetic ancestry.

> There had to be some kind of reason for the link he and I seemed to have. Not that I really thought a blood relationship could explain the way I had twice been drawn to him. It wouldn't. But then, neither would anything else. What we had was something new, something that didn't have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from us being related[10]

This hypothesis is never proven or disproven. It is accepted as a sort of matter of fact, like gravity before Newton. Now, the correlation between the genetic relation and Dana's time travel is irrefutable by the end of the narrative. However, whether the genetic relation actually causes the time travel or not is unknown, and to think otherwise would be a cum hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy. Now, the mechanism of the time travel is refined a bit, but this too is a realization made early in the narrative. Dana concludes that, "Rufus's fear of death calls me to him, and my own fear of death sends me home."[11] This understanding is established early in the narrative and does not change at all over the course of the novel. In a science fiction novel, we typically expect some deepening of the reader's understanding of the science presented over the course of the novel.

---

[10] Butler, Octavia, Kindred pg 29
[11] Butler, Octavia, *Kindred* pg 50

Dana, however, quickly meets a dead-end in her attempts to understand the time travel taking place. Instead, the novel focuses on a deepening understanding of how time travel affects Dana and the other characters. The mechanism of the time travel could well have been scientific but without any sort of scientific progress towards understanding that question *Kindred* fits more closely into the tropes of fantasy rather than science fiction.

Kindred is a fantasy that flirts with science fiction. The novel refuses the traditional tropes of fantasy while embracing the genre's most basic essence, yet is informed by the tropes of science fiction while failing to embody the essence of the genre. The promise of a plot based around scientific inquiry is harshly rejected at the end of the prologue, "Then they wanted me to tell them how such a thing could happen. I said I don't know...kept telling them I didn't know. And heaven help me, Dana, I don't know." "Neither do I," I whispered. "Neither do I."[12] This statement performs some curious work. On the one hand it establishes that this is not the sort of story which will deliver a scientific explanation for its strange happenings. On the other hand, however, it primes the reader to desire such an explanation, just as these two characters so desperately desire one. As we saw, this explanation will not materialize, and the narrative will retain its fantastical character. However, *Kindred* continues to tease the reader with the tropes of the science fiction tale. The most basic of these tropes is that of time travel. The modern conception of time travel is dominated by H.G Wells's *Time Machine,* which is part of the founding canon of science fiction. Time travel exists in fantasy as well, such as in "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" Or "A Christmas Carol." However, time travel is far more closely associated with science fiction. This is because, while fantasy may include science fiction, science fiction stories are more invested in how time travel works. This has led to

---

[12] Butler, Octavia *Kindred* pg 11

science fiction dominating the discourse surrounding time travel. Dana engages with this science-fiction discourse when she considers the "grandfather paradox," coined by early science fiction writers,

> "Again, what would have happened if the boy had drowned? Would he have drowned without me? Or would his mother have saved him somehow? Would his father have arrived in time to save him? It must be that one of them would have saved him somehow. His life could not depend on the actions of his unconceived descendant. No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist."[13]

This mention of the grandfather paradox evokes the discourse of science fiction time travel stories. Indeed the plot of Kindred does mirror the plots of many of these stories. The protagonist has to act carefully in order to preserve their own existence, or the proper course of history through making sure certain events occur, (or don't occur). Such stories were common in 20th century science fiction onward and most certainly would be evoked by mention of the grandfather paradox. *Kindred's* use of this archetypical science fiction plot does not help it distance itself from the genre. Butler appears to quite deliberately deal with the tropes of science fiction but to what end?

Butler's use of science fiction tropes in a work of fantasy allows for an interrogation of these tropes. The grandfather paradox is closely related to the science fiction trope of the "butterfly effect." Simply put, this time travel trope posits that even the smallest action on the part of the time traveler could drastically alter the course of history. Implicit in this trope is the idea that individual actions matter greatly. Yet in Kindred Dana struggles just to affect the history of her own ancestors and safeguard her own birth. This history, moreover, leaves hardly any trace, "an old newspaper article —a notice that Mr.Rufus Weylin had been killed when his house caught fire and was partially destroyed. And in later papers, notice of the sale of the slaves from

---

[13] Butler, Octavia, *Kindred* pg 29

Mr. Rufus Weylin's estate"[14]It is not uncommon, in science fiction stories of time travel, for

nothing to be altered about the past when the protagonist returns to their present. Usually, this is

the result of a hard fought victory on the part of our protagonist. Such narratives assume a correct

course of history that must be preserved at all costs. Yet, Dana's involvement in the past is far

more individual and fraught,

> "He could have left a will," Kevin told me outside one of our haunts, the Maryland
> Historical society. "He could have freed those people at least when he had no more use
> for them.
> "But there was his mother to consider,"I said. "And he was only twenty-five. He probably
> thought he had a lot of time to make a will."
> "Stop defending him," muttered Kevin
> I hesitated, then shook my head, "I wasn't. I guess in a way, I was defending myself. You
> see, I know why he wouldn't make that kind of a will. I asked him and he told me."
> "Why?'
> "Because of me. He was afraid I'd kill him afterwards."[15]

Dana makes history play out so as to safeguard her own birth. In this way, for her, history has

undeniably unfolded in its proper fashion. Yet in ensuring her survival Dana also kept alive a

slave owner who keeps her ancestors enslaved. If history is seen as the march of progress

Dana's actions are against history. Here is a critique of the inevitability of progress that SF

assumes. Future generations are supposed to be more enlightened than those of the past, they

are not supposed to perpetuate the mistakes of the past. *Kindred* demonstrates that the future is

not immune to the systems of power of the past. Nor is the past so easily changed by the

presence of future peoples and their ideas. Essentially, Butler critiques the idea that the ideals

of modernity are sufficient to bring about "liberty and justice for all." Assuming the past is

easily changed invalidates the struggles of past generations which brought about the progress

future generations take for granted.

---

[14] Butler, Octavia, Kindred 262
[15] Butler, Octavia, Kindred 263

Butler also critique's science fiction's origin's in stories of colonial-era exploration. Foreign lands are replaced by far-off planets, and the "savage" natives are replaced by aliens. The influence of colonial thought still pervades the genre,

> "Genres such as science fiction and fantasy, Hopkinson acknowledges, have long and deeply problematic histories of depicting conquest and colonialism as glorious enterprises, and they also often engage in the othering of indigenous people to the point where the latter become nonhuman: that is to say, they appear only as aliens. Even when speculative fiction attempts to critique colonialism, it has often simultaneously reified the problematic assumptions underlying the colonial project.[16]

This problem was particularly rampant when Butler wrote *Kindred*. In many ways *Kindred* rejects the colonial paradigm of science fiction. The first novel to inspire this sort of science fiction (indeed the first English novel ever written) was *Robinson Crusoe*. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that this novel is the story that Dana read to Rufus,

> "The Book was Robinson Crusoe. I had to read it when I was little, and I could remember not really liking it, but not quite being able to put it down. Crusoe had, after all, been on a slave-trading voyage when he was shipwrecked. I opened the book with some apprehension...And I began to get into *Robinson Crusoe*. As a kind of castaway myself, I was happy to escape into the fictional world of someone else's trouble."[17]

The inclusion of this novel is no accident. *Robinson Crusoe* possesses incredible similarities and drastic differences to the plot of *Kindred*. As Dana mentions, both protagonists are castaways, one at sea, the other in time. Both experience a culture shock dealing with the locals and are shocked by their "savagery." Both impart literacy and knowledge from their own time and place: Dana teaches Nigel how to read, while Crusoe teaches man Friday how to speak English. The differences between these narratives are as drastic as their similarities. Crusoe actively enslaves people throughout the novel, while Dana is enslaved, Crusoe regularly resorts to violence without hesitation, while Dana is torn by the moral quandaries of violence, Crusoe ends the

---

[16] Torontoett, Joshua "The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction' 134

[17] Butler, Octavia, Kindred 87

novel as an owner of a massive plantation, while Dana destroys the Weylin home in a fire, Crusoe imposes his will on the wilderness, while Dana has the will of others imposed upon her. In making these similarities explicit Butler links *Kindred to the* early science fiction tradition that was inspired by *Robinson Crusoe.* All of the similarities highlighted would develop into many of the tropes of adventure sci-fi, particularly the tropes of "lost-race" fiction which according to Reider are, "fantasies of appropriation."[18] In science fiction we can see the "Surprising reach of Defoe's story in anything from bleak science fiction reamaginings to young adult pastiches."[19] The text of *Robinson Crusoe* is thus quite representative of the continued influence of colonial ideology on science fiction, making it an excellent target for Butler. She attacks the colonial inspirations of the science fiction novel by highlighting Crusoe's involvement in slavery and the violence of colonial exploration and domination. Ultimately, Butler's inclusion of *Robinson Crusoe* demonstrates Butler's rejection of the genre label of science fiction while subverting its colonial tropes.

Kindred's status as fantasy is complicated by the realism of the novel. Despite the fantastic elements of time travel in the novel *Kindred* presents a realistic portrait of life on a plantation. This realism is enhanced through Butler's use of slave memoirs, which she relied heavily upon in her preliminary research. In many ways the novel reads as a historical memoir, employing, "narrative strategies of the classic memoirs of former slaves and occasional deliberate verbal and situational echoes of these texts. In doing so she establishes a degree of authenticity and seriousness rarely attained by contemporary writers miming the conventions of the Wellsian time-travel story."[20] This sort of authenticity, the sense that the story is an actual

[18] Rieder, John. Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction, 40
[19] Lipski, Jakub. "Rewriting Crusoe: The Robinsonade Across Languages, Cultures, and Media." 8
[20] , Crossley, Robert, "Critical Essay", 278

first hand account, is the hallmark of realist fiction. Realism and fantasy seem like antithetical

genres, yet Butler manages to blend them together. This realism is in fact an extension of the

conventions of the science fiction genre. This is the argument of Bagwell, who claims that,

"Science fiction is the imposition of the code of realism on the fantastic…fantasy is the code of

unreality on the fantastic"[21] Bagwell equates realism with the idea that science fiction requires an

explanation grounded in our own world. Fantasy, on the other hand, is explicitly unreal things

made real and thus requires no such realistic explanation. In *Kindred*, however, the fantastic

elements are treated as the unreal made real, while the day to day life of the plantation and

Dana's modern day life is given a realist treatment. What Butler wrote could be called a realist

fantasy. It is not magical realism, however, where the fantastic is given no explanation yet treated

as entirely normal and "is studiously ignored."[22] Dana's time travel is certainly not treated as

normal, yet all the other elements of the story are so grounded in historical reality that they can

only be defined as realist. Thus, we are left with the label of realist fantasy.

Butler uses the realism of *Kindred* to subvert mainstream fantasy tropes. Fantasy as a

genre tends to take place in a eurocentric pseudomedieval world. The motivations for this choice

are myriad but a few stand out,

> "I believe that the medieval past dominates fantasy for a number of reasons. One obvious
> reason is that it presents a world in which magic fits comfortably, a world in which
> science had not yet made magic fantastic. A second reason is that fantasy has powerful
> generic links with both fairy tales and medieval romances. A third reason is ethical.
> Fantasy, until very recently, has always offered us a Manichean world, in which values
> are polarized by absolutes of good and evil, a world especially compatible with the
> mixture of pagan and Christian beliefs prevalent in Europe in the middle ages. Fictions
> grounded in such a matrix regularly present ultimate good and ultimate evil embodied in
> the fictional characters of the text"[23]

---

[21] Bagwell, Timothy, "Science Fiction and the Semiotics of Realism 41
[22] Bagwell, Timothy, "Science Fiction and the Semiotics of Realism 41
[23] Scholes, Robert, *Intersections: Fantasy and Science Fiction* pg

This third reason appears to be the most relevant with regard to the sort of fantasy trope subversion *Kindred* performs. Setting a work of fantasy in the American south troubles the Manichean absolutes of good and evil. Instead, the reader is confronted with the "banality of evil." There are no dark lords or orcs, only human beings that, in another time, could be your next-door neighbor. The world of *Kindred* is not the idealized pseudo-European past where the good are purely good and the evil are purely evil. *Kindred* represents a realist African American past, a past that does not allow for this sort of idealization. Of course, fantasies of the American South do exist. There is the "lost cause of the Confederacy" which presents the south as a benevolent upholder of chivalry, honor, and tradition. There is also the far more historical, although idealized vision of the South as some kind of American Mordor. Both idealizations are reactions towards slavery, with the Lost Cause fantasy seeking to minimize and justify it, while the "American Mordor" fantasy seeks to condemn and distance the actions of white Southerners from the rest of America. Butler seeks to attack this sort of moral absolutism by stripping the fantasies of American slavery bare. She replaces fantasy morality with a morality grounded in realism. Butler attacks, in particular, fantasies about opposition to the oppression of slavery,

> I wrote this book because I grew up during the sixties - that was the period of my adolescence - and I was involved with the black consciousness-raising that was taking place at the time. And I was involved with some people who had gone off the deep end with the generation gap. They would say things like, "I would like to get rid of that older generation that betrayed us. I'm not going to do anything because to start, I would have to kill my parents. My attitude was what the older genera- tions, not just my mother who had gone through enough for heaven's sake, but my grandmother on back had suffered a lot from oppression. They endured experiences that would kill me and would probably kill that guy. He didn't know what he was talking about and there were a great many people who sounded the way he did.[24]

Butler addresses here the disconnect between modern expectations of resistance and the lived

---

[24] Butler, Octavia, quoted in Beal "Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: BLACK WOMEN AND THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE" pg 15

reality of previous oppressed generations.This is the reality she hammers home through evoking the realism of historical slave narratives. The heroic fantasies of resistance this man held would, according to Butler, probably have got him killed. Such resistance to evil, however, is one of the defining tropes of fantasy. The resistance of Kindred is of a less cinematic kind than the traditional epic struggles of fantasy; resistance is teaching Nigel to read, or plotting a failed escape, or trying to change Rufus's ways. Butler seeks to deliver a realist portrait of the heroism in the everyday life of the enslaved, rather than give in to the template of traditional fantasy.

Butler preserves this realist portrayal of slavery by severely limiting the trope of magical gifts and aid. In the usual fantasy hero's journey our hero gains some sort of magical aid, either from the assistance of allies, from magical gifts, or their own innate magical powers. Authors perform a delicate balancing act between the powers they grant their protagonists and the difficulty of the obstacles these characters face. The tension present in the plot's conflict evaporates if our heroes can solve every problem with a magical snap of their fingers, and the narrative threatens to come to an abrupt end if their powers are insufficient. Kindred is grounded in the historical realities of enslavement in order to show the heroism of the enslaved in everyday life. The struggles of this sort of heroism are undercut by magical aid. Indeed, a sort of antagonistic magic is required to return Dana to the past and keep the narrative moving. Magic returns Dana from harm to the present, but only after bringing her into the past and into harm's way in the first place. If Dana possessed any great magical abilities or assistance, Kindred would not be a narrative of enslavement and escape, not unless, perhaps, the enslavers possessed magic of their own. Either case would disrupt the realist character of the novel. Moreover, it would prevent Dana from truly learning and experiencing the struggles that her ancestors faced.

The intersection of science fiction and fantasy allows for a realist portrayal of contact and communication between the past and the future. In realist fiction cross historical communication can only take place from the past to the future. Devices such as the discovery of journal's or letters, for example, can allow those in the past to communicate with those in the future. The reverse —communication from the future to the past —is entirely impossible in realist fiction. Now, it is of course easy to perform this sort of communication between the past present and future in any direction in a work that is purely science fiction or fantasy. However, the realism of such a work would be greatly sacrificed. Science fiction could present such a story with a greater degree of realism, yet the scientific explanation of the fantastic would still bring the reader out of the realm of realism. They would have to realize that whatever technology or physical phenomena causes the time travel has not yet been invented or discovered, a point that Bagwell illustrates using the example of Benford's novel *Timescape*, "if the novel explained how to communicate through time using tachyons (theoretically hypothesized particles that have the speed of light as their lower limit), he would have gone for a patent instead of a copyright"[25] *Kindred's* precise layering of science fiction tropes atop a spare fantasy foundation serves to minimize the fantastical elements which make *Kindred* not a work of speculative rather than realist fiction. By making time travel an unexplained fantastical phenomenon Butler eliminates the need for a distracting scientific explanation. Instead of the usual fantasy tropes, however, such as magical gifts, or absolute morality, more realist science fiction tropes prevail. Essentially, the generic mode that detracts the least from the realism of the novel can be swapped in by Butler when convenient. Science fiction is the least distracting genre to view the plot through, save for the moments when fantastical phenomena take center

[25] Bagwell, Timothy J. "Science Fiction and the Semiotics of Realism," 40.

stage. Consider the long passages in the beginning of the novel where Dana tries to understand

what is happening to her from a scientific perspective. These passages are necessary to establish

the story's rules, yet they are also the parts that feel the least grounded in the conventions of

realism. Here characters remark upon the unbelievability of their experiences, such as when

Dana admits to Kevin that, " If you told me a story like this, I probably wouldn't believe it

either, but like you said, this mud came from somewhere"[26] Only as Dana accepts the futility of

a scientific explanation does the novel really enter its realist phase.

  Preserving realism allows for Dana's experiences in the past to feel authentic. This

seems like a truism; realist fiction is supposed to feel realistic, that's it's whole deal. Butler,

however, complicates this simplistic understanding of genre. To understand what Butler has

done we must consider a simple question, why does Dana have to be from the future? Relative

to the people of Antebellum Maryland all of *Kindred*'s readers are from the future too. Why not

read about a Dana who is contemporaneous with that time, without any time travel nonsense,

and experience her struggles alongside her? This certainly would present a more realistic

portrayal of the past, or would it? Butler answers this question herself as Dana and Kevin

struggle to reconcile their ideas of the past with their own experiences of it,

> And I began to realize why Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren't
> really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around
> us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us
> by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our
> roles. We never forgot that we were acting.[27]

This is the problem with realist fiction, that the audience, like Dana and Kevin, are always the

outsider looking in. Dana and Kevin still view the past as a narrative, even while they are in it,

because that is their only exposure to the past besides the impersonal facts of history. Dana

---

[26] Butler, Octavia *Kindred,* 16.
[27] Butler, Octavia Kindred, 98.

spends much of the novel struggling to bridge that gap until the past becomes all too real. She, however, had the misfortune of actually living the experience, while audiences of realist fiction experience events indirectly. Realist novels can have outsider figures, but they can only be so different from the other characters before the credulity of the audience is exhausted. Furthermore, readers of realist fiction can certainly try and place themselves in the shoes of the characters they read of but this is quite deliberately an act. Butler, however, manages to shortcut the issue of narrative distance. Instead of exclusively trying to make a future audience feel what it was like to live in the past, Butler tells us how a person from the future feels living in the past. The realism of the novel is important, all of the research into the dynamics of the plantation helps to immerse the reader; however, Dana's reactions, as a person from the future, shows the discrepancy between our own perceptions of the past and the reality of living through it in ways a traditional realist novel cannot easily do. Much of the insight of the novel comes from the juxtaposition of the facts of plantation life and Dana's reactions to them. *Kindred* manages to show the modern reader their ignorance, they understand that like Dana, despite all of her reading and research, they cannot really understand the struggles of her ancestors without that first hand experience; except that, through Dana the reader comes away with a plausible feeling example of just such an experience. Her experiences feel plausible because of the realism the blending of science fiction and fantasy allows.

The realism of Dana's experience adds meaning to her moral judgments. If Dana journeyed into the past armed with modern technology or powerful magic the morality of her choices hardly apply to anyone. They would not be representative of the sorts of choices that were available to her ancestors. However, by using the synthesis of science fiction and fantasy

Butler grants Dana's experiences realism, and meaning. It is here that the allegorical side of fantasy comes into play in *Kindred.* Dana's decisions become decisions representative of her idealistic generation. Her ideals clash with the unforgiving challenges her ancestors faced and she comes to understand their struggles firsthand. The internal struggles of Dana, and the conflict between the ideals of the future and the past becomes an allegory for intergenerational trauma, conflict, and misunderstanding. At the end of the novel, Dana is finally free of Rufus and is back in the future, yet she is not quite free of the past. Her freedom comes at the cost of killing Rufus, and the resulting sale of all the slaves he did not free. In the intergenerational allegory of *Kindred* the cost of her freedom represents the cost paid by older Black generations to ensure the survival of their children and to fight for them to have a better world.

Through using the conflict between science fiction and fantasy, Butler advances the allegory of *Kindred.* This conflict allows Butler to critique the tropes of these genres which go against the allegory of the novel. The tropes which Butler most heavily critiqued were touched upon earlier, the butterfly effect, the moral absolutism and heroic resistance of fantasy, magical aid, as well as the critique of the colonial tropes of science fiction. All of these tropes are antithetical to the allegory of *Kindred.* The butterfly effect undermines the difficulty with which older black generations survived and brought about social change; the moral absolutism of fantasy, and the heroic resistance that it requires sets a (in every sense of the word) unrealistic standard of behavior for past generations. The sorts of resistance possible in mainstream fantasy and in our modern times was suicidal in the past that *Kindred* presents. This struggle between the expectations of the future and the harsh realities of the past is also expressed in the conflict between science fiction and fantasy. As Dana wrestles for an explanation for her situation she

also is fighting for control. That is the narrative mode of science fiction, where the forces of nature are controlled through a scientific understanding of natural laws. Yet, science fiction fails Dana, leaving her only the meager magical gift/curse of time travel and her wits to survive. She is left to live in a past she has little power to change. She is left in a fantasy world, but the fantasy is not her own. In *Kindred* genre is itself allegorical, with science fiction representing the future, where Dana has control, and fantasy representing the past where she lacks almost all control. In order to survive Dana has to learn to survive in both worlds and adapt to the ways of thinking of the past.

The presence of both science fiction and fantasy in *Kindred* allows for the synergizing of portrayals of past and future modes of Blackness. By collapsing the boundaries between the past and the future Butler creates an experience of Blackness that doesn't exist. Dana ends the novel as a Black woman caught between two times. She carries the scars of whippings while visiting the site of her enslavement in modern day Maryland. The loss of her arm was brought about by her travel between times, a lasting symbol of her divided self and the way the past changed her. While Dana embodies an experience of Blackness that doesn't exist, her experience carries deep allegorical weight. The realism that Butler produces through science fiction and fantasy allows Dana to have had as authentic of a journey and life in the past as it is possible to portray in a work of speculative fiction. As a result Dana holds within herself an experience of Blackness that transcends eras of history. Her experiences represent the trauma of Black history; she is a survivor of that history both by having lived it, and because of the suffering her ancestors endured in order that she might survive. In this way Butler collapses the divide between Black generations into a single character. Dana is both the student who, "felt so strongly ashamed of

what the older generation had to do"[28] and the older generations who, according to Butler, "endured experiences that would kill me and would probably kill that [student]."[29]Butler brings these generations into dialogue as Dana is torn between feelings of shame and the exigencies of her survival. This dialogue between the past and the present within Dana culminates in her taking the courage to kill Rufus, while Alice wishes that she "had the nerve to just kill him!"[30] Yet this is not a simple triumph of the ideals of the future over those of the past. Dana, like Alice, felt just how hard it was to keep resisting, "I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this."[31] By the end of the novel Dana truly becomes a part of both generations, feeling painfully at home in the past just as much as the future. She felt acutely the struggles of the past without entirely losing the ideals of the future, "I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover." [32] In this line Butler perfectly encapsulates the division within the character of Dana. She becomes capable of viewing Rufus with a paradoxical mix of ideas informed by the past and by the future. She rejects the systems of power of the past, yet accepts how those same systems made him her ancestor and allowed her to exist. Her existence is one of double consciousness, "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivngs; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[33] Butler's ability to combine the experiences of these generations into a single character, to bring them into dialogue and come to an understanding, is a direct result of her blending of the science fiction and fantasy genres.

---

[28] Butler, Octavia quoted in Kenan " Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: BLACK WOMEN AND THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE" 15
[29] Butler, Octavia quoted in Rowell ``An Interview with Octavia E. Butler" 51
[30] Butler, Octavia Kindred, 168.
[31] Butler, Octavia Kindred, 259
[32] Butler, Octavia Kindred, 260
[33] Du Bois, W. E. B, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 2

Through cross historical dialogue Butler explores the relationship between Blackness and modernity. Dana, through the magic of time travel, existed within two historical eras. Through the blending of genres Butler creates a highly realistic portrait of this double historical consciousness. She has experienced what to her felt like a brutal premodern oppression, and a modern existence where the promises of enlightenment rationality seem to be being fulfilled, if imperfectly. She experiences guilt in her inability to live up to her modern values in this premodern period, feeling that she is complicit in her own and others oppression. Yet, the fact that she holds these values at all is a result of her ancestors past oppression; if they had not survived, had they not worked within the confines of their situation, she would never have been born. It is important to note that, while Dana's experiences seemed premodern, the ideals of modernity existed during the time of her enslavement. Yet these ideals of the faith of rationality in human progress are rendered hypocritical by, "the obvious complicity which both plantation slavery and colonial regimes revealed between rationality and the practice of racial terror."[34] We can see this rationality in the ways adventure sci-fi stories draw inspiration from *Robinson Crusoe*. Modern futurity is not the bulwark against oppression that it may seem. Thus, Dana's dual existence in both the past and the future is actuall allegorical for the ways in which the Black experience is split between the promise of the future of modernity, and the reality of oppression that feels like the backwards past. This reality informs the ways in which conceptions of Blackness relate to modernity across generations of Black people. When history is viewed as an inevitable march towards progress, those who do not seem to resist their oppression seem to be on the wrong side of history, to be servile relics of a past illiberal era. Yet such a view is overly simplistic, as knowing is not "half the battle." Black people did not remain

---

[34] Gilroy, Paul, "The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness," 39.

enslaved and oppressed solely due to some lack of class consciousness. Slavery did not exist because the world was not modern, but precisely because modernity was applied unequally and perpetuated oppression through its rationality. By experiencing both the past and future Dana realized the absurdity of expecting adherence to modern ideals from those enslaved by people who who use those very ideals to justify the institution of slavery. The fact that Dana nonetheless struggles to uphold modern ideals at great personal cost demonstrates that Butler has not abandoned the idea of the pursuit of progress through enlightenment rationality. Rather, through Dana she demonstrates how these ideals in themselves will not bring about freedom from oppression.

Ultimately, Butler uses the intersection between science fiction and fantasy to tell a story that is impossible to tell any other way. Butler explicitly set out to explore a character, sent "back in time to some of the things that our ancestors had to go through, and see if that character survived so very well with the knowledge of the present in her head."[35]This is a story that is frankly impossible to tell within the bounds of strictly realist fiction, yet within the confines of only the genres of fantasy or science fiction is not realistic enough for Dana to authentically experience the past. Together, however, they serve to create a realist portrait of the past that retains its integrity despite the addition of the fantastic element of time travel. There is nothing inevitable, however, about this interaction of these genres. The way Butler uses the two genres to critique and modify each other to produce a realist setting is a deliberate effort. Furthermore, the genres blend together and come into conflict in ways that reflect the themes of *Kindred*. Through the interplay of genres Butler produces a vivid portrait of double consciousness and

_____

[35] Butler, Octavia quoted in Rowell ``An Interview with Octavia E. Butler" 51

intergenerational conflict, which produces a cross historical dialogue of various conceptions of Blackness. What makes this blending particularly unique is the high degree of realism it produces. Had Butler blended these genres in different ways the effect would have been drastically different. Moving on to the other works in this thesis it shall become clear that the realist effect Butler creates is hardly the only way to handle the blending of science fiction and fantasy. Through handling the tropes of science fiction and fantasy differently Butler could have told the story of another sort of cross historical dialogue. Perhaps Dana possessed incredible magical and technological powers and used them to fight systems of oppression that plague a whole nation, or perhaps even the world. We are thrust into the story of just such a character in the world of Nneddi Okorofor's *The Shadowspeaker*.

Chapter II The Shadow Speaker: Postcolonialism and the Fluidity of History

The Shadow Speaker is the coming of age story of Ejii, a fourteen year old Shadow

Speaker. It is a postapocalyptic novel, set in Niger, in the aftermath of an event called "The Great

Change," which brought magic back to the world. The Great Change gave "metahuman" powers

to people like Eijii. As a Shadow Speaker she possesses the ability to speak with animals, see for

long distances and in the dark, and to speak with shadows, who give her advice about the future.

Also, like all other shadow speakers she has strange catlike eyes, which mark her as somewhat of

an outsider. While the setting is post apocalyptic, society has not lost all its technological

progress, as advanced science fiction technology still exists and mingles with magic.

A device called The E-legba perfectly sums up the relationship between science fiction

and fantasy in *The Shadow Speaker*. The device appears to be a highly durable and advanced

version of the modern Ipad. It is capable of doing most tasks of a modern smartphone, as well as

possessing advanced navigation and solar charging capabilities. The name of the device at first

glance appears to be a play on the Ipad, using "E" instead of the signature I. This "E"is

commonly used in American English to show that something is digital or online, such as in such

terms as "E-sports, E-commerce, or e-book. Such usage is consistent with the characterization of

the e-legba as an Ipad type product. However, the word "Elegba" in Yoroba is a actually one of

the names of the God Eshu a trickster god of the crossroads and a messenger between worlds.[36]

This god in fact makes an appearance as "The Desert Magician" who is responsible for guarding

the pathway between Earth and Ginen.[37] Our main character Ejii, we shall see, soon becomes

---

[36] Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Eshu". Encyclopedia Britannica
[37] Jackson, Sandra, and Julie Moody Freeman, eds. *The Black Imagination, Science Fiction and the Speculative, 155.*

caught up in the relationships between worlds, making the dualities of the E-legba representative of the plot of the novel as a whole.

Ejii becomes entangled in a brewing conflict between our world and the legendary world of Ginen. She has to leave her hometown of Kwamfà and embark on a dangerous journey of self discovery across the Sahara to Ginen. There she must choose whether to embrace the way of Surinaya Jaa, the warrior queen who killed the corrupt chief Ugabe, Ejii's father, or to forge her own path. *The Shadow Speaker* blends the worlds of science fiction and fantasy in ways that allow for an exploration of a truly postcolonial Africa, and all of the complications that entails. This novel represents a radical shift in geography from the U.S to Niger, as well as to another world.

Unlike the time travel of *Kindred* the magical abilities of Ejii and other metahumans have an explanation. The Great Change was not a random unexplained event; it was directly caused by human intervention. Ejii recounts the history of the Great Change as it is known to the people of Kwamfà:

> What people called the Great Change happened decades ago, a result of nuclei and Peace Bombs being dropped all over the earh. The Peace Bomb was the tool of an enviro militant group called the Grand bois, headed by a a Haitian man named Dieuri. The Grand Bois systematically blew up oil refineries, disabled and destroyed equipment used to cut down trees in the rainforest, and set loose chickens, turkeys, ostriches, pigs, and cows at slaughterhouses. Dieuri, himself, was responsible for crossing science and magic and creating the Peace Bomb, a weapon consisting of airborne biological agents meant to counteract the effects of nuclear misiles…
> Dieuri acted immediately after hearing that nuclear bombs had been launched. He called his Grand Bois International Underground Army, and the Peace Bombs were launched to hit all the earth's contintents. The Earth was changed forever, of course, The Great Change.
> This detailed historical explanation also contains a scientific explanation for the "peace

bombs" that caused "The Great Change." They are "airborne biological agents," combined with

some sort of magic. We don't know the actual science behind how these agents work; however, the terms used to describe these agents are scientific rather than fantastical. Fantasy deals with plagues and miasmas, not bioweapons, yet the peace bomb uses the language of both genres: it is both a miasma and a bioweapon. Describing the weapon as an "airborne biological agent" demonstrates that the agent is scientifically identifiable as such by the experts of the world of *The Shadow Speaker.* The narrative mode for describing the "Peace Bombs" would appear to be grounded in the genre conventions of science fiction.Yes, magic is involved, but the weapon is scientifically identifiable as a biological agent. They are a weapon that, while outside of our current understanding of science, are able to be understood in scientific terms. However, scientific explanations work in degrees. Consider a dragon. A scientist would be able to classify it as a living organism and more specifically a flying reptile. This is about the level of scientific explanation given to us for the Peace Bombs —we have an airborne biological agent, and a flying replilian organism. Science, however, would be at a loss to describe how our dragon violates the laws of aerodynamics when it flies, or how it manages to produce fire without burning itself. Still, by describing a dragon, or a biological agent in scientific terms, the reader is primed to seek such a scientific explanation. This explanation was not delivered at all in *Kindred; The Shadow Speaker* by contrast delivers a partial explanation.Through her explanation of the Peace Bomb Okorafor establishes the limits of the science fiction at work in *The Shadow Speaker.*

Okorafor's worldbuilding in her explanation of the peace bomb serves as a treaty between the warring factions of fantasy and science fiction. She allows science fiction some territory for its own, but lets fantasy colonize (or perhaps decolonize) a whole lot of ground. Okorafor spells out the terms of the balance of power between science fiction and fantasy when she describes the

aftermath of the Peace Bombs: "Things changed. But not in the way Dieuri expected. No science or magic is so easily controlled by a mere human being. No longer did many rules of the earth apply." (The Shadow Speaker 56). The scientific understanding of Dieuri failed to predict the results of the Peace Bomb. In a world where science cannot yet predict events, magical thinking is the only way to make sense of things. Both in and out of universe the narrative mode of fantasy dominates *The Shadow Speaker.* Yet while fantasy was the dominant mode of *Kindred* in a very particular sense, the situation is different in *The Shadow Speaker*. Science fiction plays a much more overt role in the setting of the novel despite the dominance of fantasy. Rather than just channeling some of the tropes of science fiction but never delivering on them *The Shadow Speaker* makes use of science fiction elements in a way that is integral to understanding the setting and the plot. What does Okorafor accomplish by allowing these two genres to share narrative territory?

The resurgence of magic in *The Shadow Speaker* leads to a world free from neocolonial domination. Destroying the motives for conflict was the goal of Dieuri when he created the Peace Bombs, "the Peace Bombs would create where the nucleur bombs destroyed and cause so many 'glorious' mutatiions amongst humans (he called these potential people, metahumans) that no one would want to fight each other. There would be too much variety. Fights meant that sides had to be taken first. With so many differences, there would be too many sides taken for any kind of fight"[38]. While his goal of eliminating conflict entirely evidently did not come to pass, Dieuri did succeeed in breaking the old neocolonial order through the magical apocalypse of the peace bombs. While *The Shadow Speaker* focuses mainly on the situation in Niger and Ginen, it is clear

---

[38] Okorafor, Nneddi, The Shadow Speaker 55.

that the old order is shattered, as a throwaway line about the United Nations demonstrates,

"What's the United Nations? Dikéogu asked, yawning. 'It was a group with representatives from

all over the world that helped in keeping peace and maintaining relationships between countries,'

Eijii said."[39] The United Nations are refered to here in the past tense, and thus it seems no longer

exist, nor, given Dikéogu's ignorance of them, have they been replaced by a new form of

international organization. Indeed the very idea of an international organization seems foreign to

Dikéogu, despite his upbringing in a family of respected journalists. The Great Change did not

just disrupt the neocolonial order but gave struggling countries like Niger an opportunity to

prosper,

> "Instead of making small fortunes exporting uranium, the government decided to make use of its own resource for once. This turned out to be a great decision, for after the Great Change, nuclear weapons and nucleur power plants were no longer being made becase the science that had made them no longer worked. This was another result of the Great Change. Capture stations, however, worked and sold well, not only in Niger, but also all over the world where clean normal water had become scarce"[40]

While the capture stations were invented before the Great Change, and were an incredible

invention even then, it took a magical apocalypse for them to bring real prosperity to their nation

of origin. Without the destruction of the neocolonial order the capture station could not have

greatly changed the situation of an impoverished nation of the global south relative to the rest of

the world. Now, however, with the whole world devastated, Niger is free to become a prosperous

nation.

Creating a truly postcolonial society is challenging both in reality and in fiction. It may

seem easy, within the boundless possibilities of the worlds of speculative fiction to imagine a

postcolonial society. With the aid of some sufficiently powerful magical or technological

---

[39] Okorafor, Nneddi, The Shadow Speaker, 214
[40] Okorafor, Nnedi, The Shadow Speaker, 116.

intervention the formerly colonized can easily throw off the yoke of colonial oppession. Yet there are pitfalls that such a project can fall prey to. First, we must consider the word "postcolonial." Burnett addresses how fraught it is to use this term to describe present day postcolonial nations, "To simplistically call our world "postcolonial" is to ignore the ongoing hegemonic power of the colonizers on the ex-colonies. However, if we abandon any notion of "postcolonial" we lose the ability to imagine what a truly postcolonial world might look like and how such a world can achieve meaningful postcolonialism.``[41] To describe the world as it currently is as postcolonial is inaccurate. Our world has not made nearly enough progress in ending the legacies of colonialism that still perpetuate it in all but name. The question, then, is whether speculative fiction, through speculating new worlds removed from this reality, can imagine a postcolonial future. Burnett goes on to argue that, "Both recent history and lived experience show us that "postcolonial" is best understood as an aspirational notion rather than as something already achieved (or, perhaps, that is even achievable." [42] An imagined postcolonial world that is entirely rid of any vestige of neocolonialism (such as in works set in the distant future like Star Trek) does not really tell a postcolonial story in a particularly useful way. The observations of Bould help to clarify this dilemma when he notes how such stories can do a disservice to the representation of people of colour"

> " From the 1950s onwards, sf in the US magazine and paperback tradition postulated and presumed a color-blind future, generally depicting humankind "as one race, which has emerged from an unhappy past of racial misunderstandings and conflicts" (James 47; see also Kilgore). This shared assumption accounts for the relative absence of people of color from such sf: if race was going to prove unimportant, why even bother thinking about it, when energies could instead be devoted to more pressing matters, such as how to colonize the solar system or build a better robot"

[41]Torontoett Yu Joshua "*The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction 138*
[42] Ibid

What Bould says about race in Sci-fi also holds true for the issues of colonialism. In an effort to portray a more enlightened future the pasts of the formerly colonized are erased. Often there is little more than the name and skin color of a character to hint that they are from a formerly colonized culture. Such as story is postcolonial, but it is not **about** postcolonialism in any meaningful way. Star Trek, for example, while presenting a much needed vision of a more enlightened future, presents a future so removed from Earth's history of colonialism that it is not really a story of our world's postcoloniality. With the project of decolonization so complete, there really isn't a postcolonial conflict to drive such a story. The colonialism of the past in Star Trek is about as removed as the colonialism of the Roman Empire is from the modern day. However, on the other end of the spectrum, a story that is heavily grounded in the realities of neocolonialism isn't exactly postcolonial either, as the nation has yet fully escaped colonial oppression. That is not to say, again, that such a story is not worth telling, however it does not provide speculative vision for a postcolonial future. A postcolonial story must not be too far removed from the legacies of colonization, yet cannot be so caught up in them as to negate the postcoloniality of the story.

The Shadow Speaker manages to tell a truly postcolonial story. Niger is free from neocolonial oppression and yet the legacies of past colonization and neocolonial oppression are still fresh. Nor is this postcolonialism achieved at the complete destruction of civilization. The world of *The Shadow Speaker* is post apocalyptic, yes, but this apocalypse caused things to grow and change just as much as it destroyed. How does Okorafor manage to strike the ideal balance of remoteness and immediacy of postcoloniality? The apocalypse of the Great Change is of course instrumental; an apocalypse allows for fresh starts and for society to begin anew. However, if the

culture of a colonized nation is also destroyed in the apocalypse then is it really possible to tell a story about that society anymore? The brilliance of the Great Change is that it destroys neocolonial systems of oppression while bringing about new growth and change. The societies of Niger were forever altered by the Great Change, but they are still the same the same societies, peoples and cultures changing and evolving to this new world. What makes the Great Change work as an apocalypse is its combination of magic and technology. Magic undermines the rules of the neocolonial order, "No longer did many rules of the earth still apply."[43] These rules of the earth are physical laws, but also the laws of the old world order. Just as magic asserts its power over the world of science, so to does the colonized world reassert itself once again. Magic also asserts its power over the narrative, breaking down the expected tropes of the postapocalyptic genre. In the aftermath of an apocalypse such as a nuclear war sciece fiction stories tended to have "described the irreversible total extinction of the human race in the aftermath of a nuclear war, such as Nevil Shute's On the Beach (1957), or focused on the possibilities for rebirth and revelation in a much more distant future, as in Walter M. Miller Jr's A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959)."[44] The magic of the Peace Bombs reroutes the story from these well worn sci fi tropes. *The Shadow Speaker* neither focuses on the destruction of the apocalypse, nor upon some distant future far after the apocalypse. Such distant stories, as we know, lose focus on the postcoloniality of the story, while the extinction of humanity defeats the purpose of imagining postcolonial futures in the first place. *The Shadow Speaker*, however, concerns a society that has recently adjusted to the new reality of the Great Change in a stable (though imperfect) fashion. This society does not fall into the conventional realm of science fiction postapocalyptic tropes that are

---

[43] The Shadow Speaker 56
[44] Mousoutzanis, Aris. 46. Apocalyptic SF (Part IV Subgenres).

antithetical to the telling of a postcolonial story. The apocalypse is generally seen in science fiction as negative, as it disrupts a satisfactory status quo. Yet, for nations suffering under neocolonial oppression, the apocalypse can be a magical opportunity to begin anew. Such a notion flies in the face of science fictions tales of linear progress and innovation. Okorafor challenges traditionals measures of progress in science fiction, although not in a way that is at all anti-technology or regressive. Like the data thief of *The last Angel of History*,[45] Okorafor, "a refusal to accept the dominant narrative of History as a march from primitive savagery to enlightened civilization in which the black peoples of theworld have been left behind."[46] Instead, Okorafor acts as a bricoleur, drawing from visions of fantasy and science fiction to create a postcolonial future.

Allowing the genres of fantasy and science fiction to coexist allows the presentation of a postcolonial future. A return to a world of magic would seem to signal a return to a precolonial era. The African mythologies which Okorafor draws upon to create the magical world of The Shadow Speaker have their origin in the precolonial era. The Shadow Speaker, however, is not set in this past but in the future, around roughly the year 2060, with many great technological advancements such as the E-legba. The result is a blend of genres which signify the past and the future. As with the Ooni, the people of Niger are presented in a state of flux. They are variously postcolonial, precolonial and colonial. It is this state of flux that is essential to telling a postcolonial story. This state of temporal flux is present throughout the novel, with flying carpets sold alongside E-legbas. As established previously a speculative postcolonial story must not be too far removed from or too close to the colonial/neocolonial period. The logistics of the "Great

---

[45] Akomfrah, John, director. *The Last Angel of History*..

[46] Samatar, Sofia, "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism" 176

Change" place the events of the story in an ideal time in a literal sense. However, the confluence of fantasy and science fiction makes the temporality of The Shadow Speaker feel far more fluid. Indeed, when asked if she felt like she was a part of history Eiji said, "No." Her history assignment afterwards is to "write yourself into history because no matter what history books say, even you are a part of it. Tell me about some historical event and how you figure into it" Where Eiji fits into the progress of history is the defining question of the novel. Will she repeat the past, or forge a new future? The presence of the past and future is all around in magic and fantasy tropes as well as in advanced science and science fiction tropes.

The Ooni are an example of how Okorafor plays with assumptions of political, historical and technological progress. Okorafor wrote that she intentionally made the Ooni as a clever subversion of stereotypes: "Ginen is a series of African stereotypes that I turned on their heads. The people of Ooni truly are closer to the land. They do live in trees. And they are the first people. But they aren't primitive, dirty, or ignorant." [47] The Ooni decenter notions of progress in science fiction. Theirs is by far the most technologically advanced society in the world of *The Shadow Speaker*, yet they do not conform to the usual conventions of a futuristic society in science fiction. Their technology is organic and magic based, including cars made out of hemp magical living tree computers and animal pheromone weapons, far removed from the sterile polished chrome of science fiction. In terms of political progrogress the Ooni are complex. On the one hand their society presents a vision of an Africa untouched by colonization. However, after the technologically advanced Ooni begin to consider invading Earth, they are cast in the role of the colonizers. Yet Jaa's attempted coup d'etat is reminiscent of colonial intervention in

---

[47] Okorafor, Nnedi , The Black Imagination, Science Fiction and the Speculative 155

conflicts between African tribes and nations and of neocolonial regime change. It may seem tempting, given that this novel is a postcolonial story, to ascribe to one side or another the role of colonizer. Okorafor, however, avoids such a simplistic conflict. The conflict between Earth and Ginen is postcolonial but also potentially precolonial, as the conflict threatens a return to a new age of colonial conquest. The central conflict of the novel is a struggle between the violence of colonialism and peaceful trust and compromise. This is also the character arc of Eijii, who has to choose between her warrior nature and her nature as a peacemaker. By making the Ooni a nontraditional technologically advanced civilization Okorafor is able to cast them as potential colonizers and the potential colonized. The intersection of fantasy and science fiction is critical to this state of colonial, postcolonial and precolonial flux that the Ooni exist in. This state of flux also extends to the peoples of Niger in *The Shadow Speaker*.

The dualities of science fiction and fantasy help to explore what it means to shape a postcolonial future. In Kwamfa we see a society struggling to decide how to adapt to the opportunities of the Great Change. With the neocolonial order destroyed the people of Niger are free to create a postcolonial future. However, with this freedom comes the great responsibility of choosing what this future will look like. The postcolonial experience is ultimately about defining how the past, colonial and precolonial, will shape the postcolonial future. What parts of the past should be held onto and what should be let go? What legacies of colonization can be shaped into something positive and what should be rejected? Some, like chief Ugabe, look to the traditions of the past, while others, like Jaa, seem to break with tradition to bring about their vision of the future. The novel refuses such a basic dichotomy by blending the past and the future together through science fiction and fantasy. Old traditions are brought into dialogue with the progressive

ideas and technology of 2060. Jaa does not simply reject the past and indeed is quite well versed

in history as her knowledge of Fanon demonstrates. The anachronisms of flying carpets alongside

digital technologies mirrors the ways in which a postcolonial future is constructed from a blend

of indigenous and colonial ideas and values.

Science fiction and fantasy, as two seemingly incompatible genres,

Jaa and the Aejej present two radicall dualities for relating to the past. The Aejej is an ancient

magical being born of trauma that hates everyone and everything that reminds it of how it was

wronged in the past. Jaa, however, is a modern woman who is constantly looking towards the

future

A return to the way things were can feel like a return to the future as well as a return to

the past. When Niger became free from neocolonial influence after the Great Change it returned,

in certain respects, to the way things were hundreds of years ago. Yet, such a momentous change

can also be seen as a sign of great social progress, as a sign that Niger has moved into the future.

Colonialism and neocolonialism in many ways are, to use the common expression, on the wrong

side of history. The idea of people standing in the way of history and progress is a theme of *The

Shadow Speaker,* perhaps best embodied by chief Ugabe. Jaa describes him as "A weed in my

garden; a weed's nature never changes." [48] Not only does Ugabe stand in the way of her plan but

he is unchanging, and "History is change."[49] By never changing Ugabe places himself on the

wrong side of history. Ugabe represents the ugly side of the postcolonial experience, that

returning to the way things were can mean a return to the worst elements of the past. Okorafor

invokes the fantasy trope of the evil magician to characterize him, "He was like one of those

---

[48] The Shadow Speaker 21
[49] The Shadow Speaker 10

crazy magicians in the storyteller's stories. Talented, arrogant, and always wanting to eat power."[50] Casting him as a magician places him in the ancient time period in which such stories of magic take place, cementing his characterization as evil, from the past, and and on the wrong side of history. Ugabe tries a similar rhetorical tactic when he calls Jaa a "witch." Yet this characterization merely reinforces to the reader that Jaa is on the right side of history, just as persecuted and progressive women who were called witches were. Jaa, in contrast to Ugabe, is a modern woman. Her reforms in Kwamfa show the futurity of a return to the way things were. It is difficult to imagine a "desert Queen" in the neocolonial world, against the vested interests of the neocolonial powers, uniting many African nations into an "empire."[51] She is undeniably on a crusade of future progres making sure that, "everyone learned how to shoot a gun, ride a camel, take apart and rebuild a computer. Girls and women with meta-abilities were allowed to hone their skills and learn from their elders."[52] Her reforms, while future oriented and progresssive, are not radical by the standards of most of the global north. Yet to the people of Kwamfa these are radical changes, changes that to them represent a promising or terrifying future, as seen by how controversial her rule is in Kwamfa. To readers from the global north such changes do not seem radically futuristic; yet by crafting a world where old magic and futuristic technology coexist Okorafor is able to draw out the futurity felt by the people of Kwamfa when they return to the precolonial past.

The use of magic in *The Shadow Speaker* speaks to the ways the precolonial past can be used as a source of progress. Just as the cultural practices of people in the global south are often viewed as backwards, magic is often viewed as antithetical to progress. Magic is sometimes

---

[50] The Shadow Speaker 15
[51] The Shadow Speaker 37
[52] The Shadow Speaker 13

characterized this way in The Shadow Speaker, as in the case of Ugabe, yet it should be noted that, while he is characterized as a magician, he does not in fact possess any so called metahuman abilities. Magic instead is a potential catalyst for creating a more peaceful and just society, although it can be misused. Eijii's magical abilities allow her to see into the future as well as into the minds of others. This ability allows her to see the world from many different perspectives and to bring them into dialogue with one another. The central conflict of The Shadow Speaker is solved by the signing of a magical Nsibidi pact in which it is impossible to lie.[53] The Nsibidi writing system is an actual ancient Nigerian writing system which, "slaves from Nigerian-Cameroon border-land area carried the Nsibidi tradition to Cuba via trans-Atlantic slave trade"[54] It has historically been a source of anti-colonial resistance and in the world of *The Shadow Speaker*, is an example of how ancient traditions can lead to a more peaceful and understanding society. Only by the use of magic, however, could this ancient tradition have such a drastic impact on the world.

By exploring a postcolonial story through science fiction and fantasy Okorafor creates a cross historical exploration of Blackness. Up until now I have discussed postcoloniality rather than Blackness because explicit references to race are rare in *The Shadow Speaker*. There are a few references to skin color, such as "her normally dark-brown skin looked black as beetle wings."[55] Skin color for the most part, however, is as insignificant as any other feature. Besides such passing remarks the Black identity of most of the characters can be infered from the cultures and geography of the setting. There is one notable exception to this rule, however: the Ooni. Buji, one of Saurinaya Jaa's husbands and an Ooni native, when discussing the people's of the world of

---

[53] The Shadow Speaker 324
[54] Sunday, Lekan Ogar. "The Cultural Value of Nsibidi in the Contemporary Era." pg 3
[55] Okorafor, Nnedi 127

Ginen, specifies what race they look like, "Now you'll notice when we get there, that the people look like us: dark skinned, thick lips, and wide noses; they look like black Africans and their cultures are similar too."[56] This description of the Ooni would be equally apt for most of the people's of precolonial subsaharan Africa before the modern construction of race, or indeed from any point in African history. Indeed, as mentioned previously, the Ooni were intended as a subversion of the stereotypes associated primarily with precolonial Africa. However, the Ooni also function as a technologically advanced Other whose leader is bent on a project of vengeful conquest and colonization. They can be seen as being like white colonizers and as the original Black Africans. The Ooni exist in a state of precolonial and post colonial flux, yet also in a state of racial flux. They trouble the intersections of the binaries of race, colonizer and colonized. By bringing the Ooni into conflict with the people of Earth Okorafor creates a cross historical heteroglossia concerning Blackness. There is the precolonial preracial perspective, the postcolonial and many shades between. For the Ooni, Blackness is an identity that is in no way informed by their own history, yet for visitors from Earth it is the most natural way to identify them. Yet on the other hand the growing division between the Ooni and the people of Earth threatens to replay the dynamics of othering which lead to the construction of race in our world, "Look at what they've done to themselves,' Ette continued. 'They're the reason for all this in the first place! I don't want their kind here!"[57] Chief Ette others the people of Earth, referring to them as "their kind" despite the common humanity of the people of Earth and the Ooni. This othering is particularly egregious given that the Ooni associate with many sapient nonhuman species yet

---

[56] Okorafor Nnedi The Shadow Speaker 215
[57] Okorafor, Nnedi, *The Shadow Speaker* 302.

treat their fellow humans as subhuman. So, within this dialogue between competing perspectives on Blackness what sort of consensus emerges?

Through the blending of genres Okorafor breaks down the binaries of race just as she breaks the binaries of technology and magic. Throughout *The Shadow Speaker* Eiji reads from a book called, "My Cyborg Manifesto." This book provides all sorts of information on the world of *The Shadow Speaker,* and is also an allusion to the seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." This essay takes the cyborg, a chimera of human and machine, as embodying the confusion of boundaries. Hanaway, as a feminist theorist, focuses primarily upon the boundaries between genders arguing "for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction."[58] However, the implications of the cyborg analogy extend to other sorts of boundaries as well, as is argued by Cox, "Instead, she [Hanway] privileges the notion of 'woman of color' to consider the ways that the cyborg may disrupt gender, and race, and class, and ethnicity."[59] The theme of the confusion of boundaries is central to *The Shadow Speaker,* and map quite well onto the confusion between the bounds of fantasy and science fiction, "The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation."[60] Imagination and material reality respectively are the genres of science fiction and fantasy, and historical transformation? Well, *The Shadow Speaker* is the story of perhaps one of the greatest historical transformations: the Great Change. Within *The Shadow Speaker,* binaries are confused and explored. No singular definition of any one identity such as "Blackness" is ever really stable. Like a cyborg, Blackness in *The Shadow Speaker* is a

---

[58] Hannaway, Donna, A Cyborg Manifesto, 7
[59] Cox, Lara Decolonial Queer Feminism in Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985)
[60] Hannaway Donna, "A Cyborg Manifesto, 7

chimeric construction, in this case of precolonial and postcolonial perspectives, none of which are privileged over one another nor mutually exclusive.

Conceptions of race in *The Shadow Speaker* are shaped by the historical contexts that blended genres bring into dialogue. The breakdown of racial boundaries in *The Shadow Speaker* is not just analogous to the fluidity of history but dependent upon it. Race is a historical construct, informed by the pasts of individuals and by the identities forced upon, embraced, or created by them. Conceptions of race evolve and change over time, as *Kindred* vividly illustrates. The people of *The Shadow Speaker* may not literally be from different times but the blending of genres creates this perception for the reader. For example the Ooni at times feel like they are from the past, just as sometimes they feel as if they are from a strange alternate future. For the reader this evokes different historical conceptions of race, we do not imagine an Ooni individual as holding a racial identity informed by the historical oppression of their ancestors for example. This is why the blending of genres and the ability to use these genres to evoke histories is essential to bringing conceptions of Blackness into dialogue. This blending is generative of a whole range of conceptions of Blackness that are just as fluid as the genres that bring them into dialogue.

Blending genres allows for an exploration of how postcoloniality informs conceptions of Blackness. Since, as mentioned previously, achieving postcoloniality is in many a return to the past, this leads to a return to previous conceptions of Blackness. These conceptions of Blackness may not actually be historical, but may be perceived as such. Examples of this could include various Pan Africanism movements, which seek a sort of African racial unity that never actually existed in precolonial time. The influence of postcoloniality upon conceptions of Blackness

becomes most apparent when we consider where conceptions of Blackness arose from in the first place. Blackness is originally a white invention, created to justify and perpetuate the institution of slavery, and other forms of systemic oppression. Throwing off colonial white oppression and its legacies is to remove the influence of the other half of the white/black binary, to remove the influence of those who created this binary in the first place. While Blackness may have had its origin in the colonial era, its meaning has and will continue to evolve. Here the metaphor of the cyborg helps to clarify the relation between the creators of Blackness and its future, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate ofspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate ofspring are ofen exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, afer all, are inessential."[61] Colonialism, as an extension of capitalism, functions in a similar way in engendering binaries. Yet, despite the absence of colonialism or neocolonialism Blackness lives on in *The Shadow Speaker*, yet its boundaries are fluid and changing. It is the prerogative of the formerly colonized to decide their relationship to the legacies of colonialism, as Eiji calls upon the Aejej to do, "I am not saying to forget that man has harmed you' she said. 'But have forgotten what exactly he did. Maybe it is time for you to *calm down.* Make your own peace. Create it yourself."[62] Eiji calls here for the deliberate crafting of one's relationship with the legacies of the past. These legacies include the cyborg of race, whose boundaries may be redesigned like a machine, yet are as fluid and changeable as organic matter. Postcolonialism represents greater freedom in this endeavour, a freedom that is derived the ways postcolonialism brings different eras of history into dialogue.

---

[61] Hallaway, Donna, A Cyborg Manifesto, 9-10.
[62] Okorafor, Nnedi, The Shadow Speaker 104

This dialogue, as established earlier, is enhanced and evoked for the reader by the blending of genres.

Consider again Buji's description of the Ooni, "Now you'll notice when we get there, that the people look like us: dark skinned, thick lips, and wide noses; they look like black Africans and their cultures are similar too."[63] Buji uses the word Black as a way to describe the physical appearance of the Ooni and also to highlight shared cultural similarities. Highlighting these cultural similarities also highlights a shared history as, "Africans resemble Ooni people because, according to Ginen history, long ago may people migrated from Ginen to Earth through openings that lead to parts of Africa."[64] Blackness here functions as a marker of shared history; yet it is of a shared history spanning such a vastness of time and space as to make constraining the meaning of Blackness impossible. History is change[65], and so too is Blackness in The Shadow Speaker. Combining genres allows Okorafor to define Blackness in this way, to set up the fantastical yet science fiction world of the Ooni, and to set in motion the magical yet technological emancipation from neocoloniality of the peace bomb. Conceptions of Blackness merge from every era in the confluence of genres that is *The Shadow Speaker.*

---

[63] Okorafor, Nnedi, The Shadow Speaker 215
[64] Okorafor, Nnedi, The Shadow Speaker 216
[65] Okorafor, Nnedi, The Shadow Speaker, 10

Chapter III Brown Girl In the Ring: The Soucouyants of Modernity

Brown Girl in the Ring is set in a postapocalyptic Toronto. Unlike The Shadow Speaker this apocalypse is not magical in origin, but is actually an economic collapse caused by reparations paid to first nations tribes by the Canadian government. Economic conditions led to riots which caused Toronto to turn into a violent and lawless slum, abandoned entirely by the government. The gangster boss and evil voodoo sorcerer Rudy rules the city from the heights of the once famous CN Tower.

The setting of the novel is distinctly futuristic, with hidden underurrents of magic. Pig organ transplants are common place, there is advanced body armor and weapons, medical technology and the new and terrifying street drug known as buff. Voodoo also plays a major role in the events of the novel, yet, unlike in *The Shadow Speaker*, it is secret from the rest of the world at large. The worlds of magic and technology come into contact within the novel, but ultimately they remain separated within the worldbuilding of the novel. The role of technology is also unique in that it is mainly the purview of the privileged upper class and their agents. The people of the inner city of Toronto exist in a state of poverty that precludes access to much technology. There are no ubiquitous E-Legba's or other such devices for the masses. Geographically, the novel is quite different from *The Shadow Speaker,* following the diasporic experiences of its characters in North America. Black identity in Okorafor's work is explored in

the context of the sudden removal of western neocolonial influence. Blackness in her work is the purview of a majority culture that is ultimately free from any current majority oppression. *Brown Girl in the Ring* explores Blackness from a minority diasporic perspective. The stability of Black identity are fluid in both texts, but this fluidity in Hopkinson's work is in response to a very immediate spectre of assimilation. Unlike *Kindred*, which explores a resistance to assimilation into the past, *Brown Girl in the Ring* explores the resistance of past traditions to assimilation into a dominant culture. This dominant culture, as we shall see, is indexed to the technologies of science fiction, while magic represents the power of Black tradition. While the conflict between these two genres is fierce, there is a fluidity and syncretism that is generative of conceptions of Blackness that are not rooted solely in opposition to modernity.

Technology in *Brown Girl in The Ring* is associated with systemic oppression. For the people of Toronto most encounters with technology are acts of state violence or other forms of systemic oppression. For example, the way out of Toronto is blocked by guarrds wielding "Synapse cordons" and dazers,"[66] weapons that are highly advanced versions of tazers. These weapons, in the tazer, share a geneology with a weapon that in the present day is a tool of police brutality against the Black community. Medical technology is quite advanced in the future, yet access to this advanced care is extremely exploitative and predatory for the people of Toronto, "The price for established medical care was so high that only the desperately ill would call for help. If you saw a Vultuure making a house call, it meant someone was near death,"[67] The "Vultures" are workers for the "Angel of Mercy" hospital, who are so called because of their advanced bulletproof armor equipped with a "clear Shattertite beak" over their faces that gives

[66] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring 116.
[67] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring 8

them the appearance of vultures. Both the practices and the appearance of these medical professionals are predatory, and it is their advanced technology and science that gives them this power. Indeed, the plot of the novel is set in motion by this very sort of medical exploitation, when Rudy and his thugs are tasked with procurring a heart for Mayor Uttley.[68] The advanced medical technology presented in the novel never benifits the people of the Toronto and bleeds them dry, sometimes literally in the case of Gros-Jean's stolen heart.

The novel makes clear that the technological divide falls upon racial lines. In the opening chapter of the novel we see a deliberate contrast between the hospital procurrement officer Baines and Rudy. Baines, "had obviously never ventured into Rudy's neighborhood before. The pudgy man had shown up in a cheap, off-the-rack bulletproof" while Rudy, "picked at a nonexistent bit of fluff on the sleeve of his own tailor-fitted wool suit. His ostentatious lack of protection against attack carried its own message."[69] Baines uses modern technology to protect himself with advanced bulletproof armor. The first chapter keeps things vague, but Rudy protects himself with the magic of his "duppy pot." Here a clear dichotomy has been set between those with technology, and those who rely on other options. This technological divide is further illustrated by Baines, "fiddling nervously with the case of his palmbook", which is implied to be some sort of tablet device.[70] The races of Baines and Rudy are not explicitly stated, however this information is nonetheless imparted by Hopkinson's use of dialect, "Yes, well, of course the Porcine Organ Harvest Program has revolutionized human transplant technology….' *Eh-heh. He talking all official. The way he using all them ten-dollar words, this*

---

[68] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring 1
[69] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring 1
[70] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring 2

one go be big.''[71] Baine's use of official language and 'ten-dollar words' sets him apart from Baines as a person of privilege and a member of the white world outside Toronto. While his atual race cannot be definitively proven by the text, it is clear that at least he is meant to rbe representative of the privileged whites outside Toronto. On the other hand, Rudy's use of caribbean dialect marks him as an immigrant and as Black. Thus technology is associated with white priviledge and the "other" means of power of Rudy are associated with Blackness.

Magic in *Brown Girl in the Ring* is indexed to race and culture. All of the magic in the novel is drawn from Caribbean religion and folklore. There is no suggestion that magic from outside of this tradition is real, and it certainly does not have any presence in the novel at any rate. All of the practitioners of magic, Gros Jean, Mi Jean, Ti Jean and Rudy, are Caribbean immigrants. Thus knowledge even of the existance of magic is tied to their race and culture. Other parts of the Afrodiasporic tradition are suggested to have access to this magic, "you will hear people from Haiti and Cuba and Brazil and so call them [the spirits] different names"[72] Now, it would seem that this magic would be a natural foil to technological oppression. It is a magic that is associated with a historically oppressed group, so in that sense would seem to stand in total opposition to technological oppression. However, in the hands of Rudy, magic is an incredibly powerful destructive and oppressive force. Why, then, does the magic of Rudy seemingly fail to preserve the dual dichotomies of oppressor and oppressed and technology and magic? As a villain who oppresses the people of the Toronto, it would seem to make thematic sense for him to use technology rather than magic. The only thing that fundamentally differentiates Rudy from the other enforcers of oppression is his culture and race. His racial and

---

[71] Ibid, 2
[72] Ibid 126

cultural identity privileges him with ancient magical secrets that he uses to opress the people of the Toronto. What is the effect of having Rudy oppress the people of Toronto not with technology, but with the cultural secrets of the very people he oppresses?

Magic in Brown Girl in the Ring works through two different ways of interacting with spirits. The way Gros Jean and Ti-Jeanne interact with the spirits is through petitioning them for aid, as Gross-Jeanne explains, "Them is the ones who does carry we prayers to God Father, for he too busy to listen to every single one of we on earth talking at he all the time. Each of we have a special one who is we father or mother, and no matter what we call it, whether Shango or Santería or Vodoun or what, we all doing the same thing. Serving the spirits."[73] The relationship between spirit and human in this case is defined by supplication and service. It is a reciprocal do ut des relationship; sacrifices are offered, proper behaviour and reverence is maintained, and supernatural aid is received in return. Gros-Jeanne characterizes this relationship as a familial one, "Legbara is your guardian. He will watch out for you, if you is a good daughter."[74]There is some ambiguity here over who Ti-Jeanne is meant to be a good daughter too, and indeed that is part of the point. The spirits are the "oldest ancestors,"[75] making them literally part of Ti-Jeanne's family. Serving the the ancestors and being a good daughter are thus one and the same. Worship and service of the spirits is essentially an extension of the dynamics of familial relationships among the living. Rudy, however, has perverted this familial relationship both in regards to his living and his spiritual familly, as the Jab-Jab makes Ti-Jeanne see,

> "Yes, Gros-Jeanne was a hard woman. Now Rudy, he does try and make the spirits serve *he.* And the visions flashed around her, *through* her, invading sight, smell, sound touch: *A blow to the side of her face jolted her, sent her flying bck into a cheap aluminum*

---

[73] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 126.
[74] Ibid, 127
[75] Hopkinson, Nalo, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, 126

folding chair. She was Gros-Jeanne as a younger woman, and Rudy had just backhanded her. He stood over her, fist pulled back for a second blow. He Roared, "You think say is money me make from? Eh? Through tears and the blood in her eyes she could see her young daughter, Mi-Jeanne, watching, fist jammed into her frightened mout, from the bedroom doorway of the run-down apartment. Hunger. It filled her, burned her up. She would die of it, kill for it. She was Mi-Jeanne's duppy, looking up at Rudy from the little world of the Calabash. From that angle, shadows limned the underplanes of his face, made him look otherworldly. He tipped a cup into the calabash, and blood poured over her, intoxicating in its heat and smell. She drank eagerly, but the cupful was not enough. 'You could have more,' he told her, 'when you kill Dunston for me. Kill he and trap he soul in there with you, and you could have all he blood.' She railed silently at him, but the hunger was too much. It made her a thing without a will of her own, obedient only to Rudy's commands. She knew that she would murder her stepfather."[76]

Rudy attempts to subvert the reciprocal familial relationship with the spirits to force them to do his bidding. The breakdown of his relationship with the spirits is mirrored by his exploitation and abuse of his living familly. He abuses his wife, Gros-Jeanne, and turns Mi-Jeanne into a duppy in order to kill Dunston, Gros-Jeanne's new husband. He controls Mi-Jeanne with blood in a perverse version of the do et des relationship between the spirits and their servants. The relationship between them has become that of master and slave, with no true reciprocity as is present in the relationship between Papa Legba and Ti-Jeanne. While Rudy draws his power from the spirits, he does not do so in the same way. This ultimately leads to his downfall, when his attempts to pervert the reciprocity of the spirits fails, "No, master,' said Legbara, 'You aint going nowhere. You try to give me all these deaths in exchange for you own, but I refuse the deal. I give them all back to you."[77] Rudy's magic is ultimately a form of oppression, both of the spirits, of his family, and of the people of Toronto. Hopkinson thus clearly divides the sort of magic Rudy performs from the magic of Gros-Jean and Ti-Jeanne.

Rudy represents those Black people who are complicit in the perpetuation of Black

---

[76] Hopkinson, Nalo, *Brown Girl in the Ring* 219-220.
[77] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 226

oppression. This is evident in his deal with the Angel of Mercy Hospital to procurr a heart, as

well as in his other criminal activities such as selling buff, which keeps the people of Toronto in

poverty. His use of magic also helps to reinforce his complicity in Black oppression, as

Romdhani argues,

> "the use of the African zombie problematizes the white oppressor/African
> oppressed dichotomy, and, by making this being a hybrid, Hopkinson appears to draw
> attention to the role that some black people themselves have played and continue to play
> in black oppression. In the novel, Rudy captures Mi-Jeanne's soul in a calabash bowl
> and forces it to do his bidding. Mi-Jeanne is described as a fireball who drinks the blood
> of Rudy's victims, she is a duppy-soucouyant with an insatiable thirst for blood. The
> soucouyant's insatiable thirst for blood also mirrors Rudy's insatiable hunger for power
> and wealth, calling to mind Karl Marx's use of the vampire….Rudy and those he trades
> with, through his soucouyant-zombie, literally suck the blood of the people in the Burn.
> His trade in drugs and human organs is run by capitalist commerce with the suburbs and
> fed by people from the Burn.[78]

The magic of Rudy, like the predatory medical practices of the Angel of Mercy Hospital, is

vampiric. His magic allows him to dominate and feed off of the oppressed in the same way that

technology allows white oppressors to prey on Toronto. Ramdhani links Rudy's soucouyant

vampirism to the vampirism of capitalism. Essentially, Rudy has taken Black magical

knowledge and used it just as technology is used to further oppression.

Hopkinson highlights Rudy's complicity in Black oppression by characterizing Rudy's

magic as more medical/technological in nature. He begins the process of turning Ti-Jeanne into

a duppy by delivering a dose of Buff powder, "He held a calibrated phial of buff powder…He

asked Crack and Barry, 'How much I should give she? How much oonuh think she weight?"[79]

Turning Ti-Jeanne into a duppy is a hybrid operation of medical technology and magic. The

previouse exchange could have just as easily been between an anesthesiologist and a med

---

[78] Romdhani, Rebecca. "Zombies Go to Toronto: Zombifying Shame in Nalo Hopkinson's Brown Girl in the Ring, 81-82
[79] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 208

student, testing them on the correct dosage to give to a patient. Hopkinson puts great emphasis on the fact that the Buff powder is calibrated, and delivered with precautions similar to those of an actually medical operation. Rudy could have just as easily delivered some mysterious concoction with no conversation about dosage, and the reader would still have believed the magic at play. Instead, through this exchange, Hopkinson is able to strengthen the parallels between technological oppression and Rudy's brand of magic. This connection is drawn out even further by the parallellism between the scene of Utley's heart transplant and the scene of Rudy's attempt to transform Ti-Jeanne into a duppy. Utley recalls to herself what to her felt like a dream of her experience receiving the transplant, "She realised that she was being invaded in some way, taken over…Uttley began to feel a numbness spreading out from her chest with each beat of the heart: down her arms, through her trunk and legs. Bit by bit, she was losing the ability to control her own body. The heart was taking it over."[80] Utley's experience of this medical procedure is of a spreading numbness and a lack of control of her body. Ti-Jeanne experiences the exact same thing at the hands of Rudy, "

Hopkinson also describes advanced medical technology in ways that highlight its connection to Rudy's oppressive magic. The "Angel of Mercy Hospital" workers are called vultures, as mentioned earlier, which helps to establish them as predatory and vampiric. However, the parallel runs deeper than this. Tony, as Rudy's henchman, functions similarly to the Soucouyant Mi-Jeanne, in that he has to obey him, and is tasked with committing murders he ultimately does not wish to commit against people he knows well, such as Gros-Jeanne. This is hinted at right before her own murder when she says, "Boy, is what do you? Like Duppy

---

[80] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 236-237

rifing you, or what?" [81] The "Duppy" is another name for the Soucouyant, which Tony is acting like by murdering her just a second later at Tony's command. When he ultimately kills her and harvests her heart, his use of medical technology is described similarly to the the way the Soucouyant is described, "Tony's funny square knapsack lay beside her, open. A machine of some sort hummed inside it, fat red tubes extended like claws into Mami's neck, arms, chest, thigh." [82] The Cp-Bypass machine is an existing piece of technology, but not something that presently can fit into a small knapsack, making this an example of advanced Sci-fi technology. The tubes of the machine are described as being "like claws" an unusual way to describe something that does not particularly look like a claw. When the Soucouyant attacks Tony, we see those claws again, "Mi-Jeanne fell like a sack of bones. A red mist rose from her crumpled body. Ravening jaws, mad eyes, and clawng hands swirled in it…But the claws were already scrabbling at Tony's whimpering throat."[83] The red mist and claws are parallels to the claws/"fat red/tubes" of the CP-bypass machine.Through drawing this parallel Hopkinson illustrates that this system of oppression that use technology to exploit and enforce is in many ways akin to the evil magic of Rudy.

The magic of Grosse Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne is associated with non western ways of knowledge. In direct contrast with the western medicine of the Angel of Mercy hospital, their magic is associated with traditional plant lore and healing. While she does have training as a nurse, Grosse Jeanne uses, "Bush doctor remedies,"[84] using primarily herbs rather than western medicine to heal. Her remedies, like her magic, is drawn from traditional knowledge and she

---

[81] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 150
[82] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 152
[83] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 163-4
[84] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 36

doesn't see a sharp division between them, "But allyou have to stop calling the thing 'obeah.' I don't work the dead, I serve the spirits and I heal the living."[85] Grosse-Jeanne sees her work as a service to the spirits and to living people. Whether she is helping people through magic, or her herbs, she is helping the living. The magic of Rudy, by contrast, uses the dead, like zombies, as servants, and sustains himself off of the deaths of others. Grosse-Jeanne's magic is associated with serving others, while Rudy's magic is a means of domination.

Ti-Jeanne's struggle to fully accept her heritage is reflected in her attitudes towards magic and traditional knowledge. She is initially skeptical of traditional practices and terrified of the supernatural. She dismisses traditional medicine, "not putting too much stock in Mami's bush doctor remedies."[86] She also sees the supernatural as a source of danger, particularly afraid of what she sees as her growing madness, "Tony hadn't seen what she had! Fear was like ice in her chest. Lately the visions had been growing stronger, more vivid. This was the worst one yet."[87] She sees her visions as a supernatural curse, which will drive her insane in the same way they did her mother. She is terrified of them, yet nonetheless does not trust her mother's knowledge of the supernatural to help her, "Maybe if she ignored the second sight it would go away. She dared not tell her grandmother. Lord knew how Mami would react. Ti-Jeanne's own mother had had a vision one day, back when the Riots were just starting . She'd told Mami about it, and they had quarrelled. Ti-Jeanne's mother had seemed to go mad in the days after that, complaining that she was hearing voices in her head. Maybe it was hereditary?"[88] Her mother's magic, which at this point she calls Obeah, is a source of uncertainty and fear. She

---

[85] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 59
[86] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 36
[87] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 19
[88] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 20

fears her grandmother's reaction, and the world of magic which lead to her mother's insanity. Indeed it seems that she may even have feared that her grandmother was responsible for her mother's madness, a fear which Rudy attempts to exploit, "Mi-Jeanne come running to me for help. Your grandmother did putting visions in she head, trying to control she. Trying to make Mi-Jeanne stay with she. Making she see things to frighten she."[89] Ti-Jeanne seriously considers this possibility, that, "Mami was at the root of all their problems."[90] For her to so readily accept this fear it seems likely that it was something that had crossed her mind, and certainly fits with her fear of her mother's reaction. Her Grandmother's world of magic is inextricably linked to her Grandmother's and her own cultural heritage. Essentially, the trauma of her mother's insanity drove a wedge between Ti-Jeanne and her own heritage, leaving her distrusful of the supernatural world which she chooses not to know about. This is reflected in her refusal to attend any of her grandmother's ceremonies, or even to learn about them, "Ti-Jeanne had joned them that one time, but after being frightened away, she'd refused to join them for any more ceremonies. Mami had tried to explain what went on in the chapel, but Ti-Jeanne had become so agitated that Mami soon stopped talking about her work there altogether."[91] As Ti-Jeanne comes to trust her grandmother more and embrace her heritage the audience is able to conveniently learn more about the magic alongside her. Her ignorance of the magic, however, is not just a convenient way to communicate worldbuilding to the reader, but a reflection of her past trauma and her initial rejection of her heritage. As the novel progresses, however, she comes to appreciate her heritage and the supernatural powers that come with it.

---

[89] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 214
[90] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 214
[91] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 78

Ti-Jeanne's acceptance of her heritage and of magic is mirrored in the resolution of her intergenerational conflict. There are six distinct intergenerational conflicts within the novel between Gros-Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne, Gros-Jeanne and Mi-Jeanne, Mi-Jeanne and Rudy, Mi-Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne and Rudy and Ti-Jeanne and her baby. Familial conflict is a prevelant, central theme of the novel and is also deeply entwined with magic. For now I shall focus on the conflicts between Ti-Jeanne and Rudy and Grosse Jeanne respectively.

Magic, as explained previously, is essentially a relationship with the spirit ancestors. This relationship can either be healthy and familial, or dominating and exploitative. By mending her relationships Ti-Jeanne both practices magic and resolves intergenerational confict. In order to learn magic she has to come to trust her grandmother more, learn not to fear the supernatural and to respect her heritage. This is a continual process throughout the novel, however it can be most clearly seen in Ti-Jeanne's climactic defeat of Rudy. The Jab-Jab (who is actually her spirit father Legbara) reveals to her that her fears about her grandmother are unfounded, and helps her to forgive her, "Rudy had lied to her. And she had wanted to believe it. Her grandmother had abused her offspring and had suffered for it, in her own heart's pain as she watched her daughter and her granddaughter reject her. *Love couldn't leave she*. Rudy cared nothing for love or loss. What would she be if she became his creature? Hesitantly she said to the Jab-Jab, "I can't keep giving my will into other people's hands no more, ain't? I have to decide what I want to do for myself."[92] Through the Jab-Jab Ti-Jeanne is able to realise her grandmother loved and grieved for her and is able also to forgive her. She also, however, realizes that she has to stand up for herself, against her grandmother, but also, more importantly, Rudy. She is able to reject his toxic

---

[92] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 220

influence, unlike her mother and definitively end two intergenerational conflicts in two very different ways. She forgives her grandmother, and with the help of her ancestral knowledge, is able to permanently end Rudy. Having just accepted her grandmother for all her flaws she remembers,

> "her grandmothers words: the centre pole is the bridge between the worlds. Why had those words come to her right then? Ti-Jeanne thought of the centre pole of the palais, reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. She thought of the building she was in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest centre pole in the world. Her duppy body almost laughed a silent *kya-kya*, a jokey Jab-Jab laugh. For like the spirit tree that the centre pole symbolized, the CN Tower dug rots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into this world. A Jab-Jab type of joke, oui. She was halfway into Guinea Land herself. She could call the spirits to help her. She wouldn't have to call very loudly."[93]

That this knowledge comes to her at this time is no coincidence. Having forgiven her grandmother she is essentially a better member of the extended family that includes the spirit ancestors and is thus open to their wisdom. In addition, having forgiven her grandmother allows her to be more appreciative of her grandmother's wisdom, and more willing to consider it. After all, just a moment ago she thought her grandmother might have intentionally driven her and her mother insane. By accepting fully her grandmother's heritage and magic she finally has the tools to call upon the spirits to defeat her Grandfather. When she calls upon them she uses "the names Mami had told her."[94] The final act of human magic in the novel is thus the use of a piece of cultural heritage passed down from Grandmother to daughter, and fully appreciated only after the intergenerational rift between them has healed. It is also, however, an example of the adaptation of cultural tradition to the new conditions of modernity. Ti-Jeanne works the modern element of the CN Tower, a symbol of the promise of modernity in Toronto that has been so

---

[93] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 221
[94] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 221

long deferred. While she accepts her heritage as a source of power, she does not embrace tradition uncritically, and instead adapts it towards the needs of the present moment.

Ti-Jeanne's struggle to accept and master magic is a representation of the struggles to maintain one's cultural identity in the face of the forces of assimilation. The decision to embrace or reject her cultural heritage as a grandaughter to a first generation minority immigrant, is fundamentally concerned with assimilation. This struggle stands at the crossroads between the two main intergenerational conflicts for Ti-Jean, which are against her Grandmother, and against Rudy. Gros-Jeanne on the one hand wants her to fully embrace her caribbean heritage, Rudy, on the other hand, wants to "assimilate" her into his system of oppression, stripping her of her free will through magic that embodies the parasitic nature of the technology which oppresses the people of Toronto. In the climax of the novel Ti-Jeanne essentially has to make a choice between which sort of magic to embrace. Gros-Jeanne's magic is deeply informed by her cultural heritage and is an essential part of her community through her healing practices. By becoming a Soucouyant for Rudy, she would embrace his entirely individualistic and predatory worldview, "You nah see the power I did give Mi-Jeanne? Knife couldn't cut she, blows couldn't lick she, love couldn't leave she, heart couldn't hurt she. She coulda go wherever she want, nobody to stop she."[95] The powers Tony promises are unfettered individualism, with no concern for community in any way. It is the last part, the ability to go anywhere, that most intrigues Ti-Jeanne, "Suppose she could have chosen her own way, instead of trying to tear herself in three to satisfy Tony, and Baby, and Mami."[96] The demands of her familly and her heritage are for much of the novel a burden for Ti-Jeanne. She is tempted by Tony's offer to

---

[95] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 215
[96] Ibid

escape with him to the Burb's, to abandon her community and start a new life. Rudy essentially offers the same thing, the ability to go wherever she wants and start anew. This offer is the offer of assimilation, to be able to go wherever she wants without being stopped by descrimination or systemic oppression. As a grandaughter to a first generation immigrant her ties to her heritage are not as strong, and this offer is alluring. This power for Rudy, though, comes at the price of reinforcing those very systems of oppression. By rejecting his offer Ti-Jeanne choses her own heritage as a source of power and resistance against systems of exploitation.

Ultimately, Hopkinson's blend of science fiction and fantasy serves as a tool to explore the confluence of intergenerational conflict, conflicts of assimilation: systemic oppression and complicity in it. Hopkinson believes that what sets speculative fiction apart from realist fiction is its ability to "directly manipulate the metaphorical structure of the story" which allows her to, "blatantly show what values the characters in the story are trying to live out by making them actual, by exaggerating them into the realm of the fantastical, so that the consequences conversely become so real that they are tangible."[97] Magic and science fiction technology function in precisely this way in Brown Girl in the Ring; those who use advanced technology or are characterized as scientific are aligned with systems of oppression and capitalist individualism, while those who use magic unaligned with technology are associated with resistance, selflessness and empathy, community, and Black culture. Science fiction and fantasy genre markers in magic and advanced technology thus serve as markers of a character's worldviews and values. As different generations come into conflict so too do the worlds of science fiction and fantasy. The resolution of these conflicts, ultimately, ends in a triumph of

---

[97] Hopkinson, Nalo and Alondra Nelson. "Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson." Social Text, vol. 20 no. 2, 2002, p.101.

fantasy over science fiction. This is seen in the defeat of Rudy, who serves those whose power is

enforced by the technological. The triumph of magic over technology also represents a triumph

of Black resistance to systemic oppression. This is seen in Gros-Jeanne ultimately taking control

of Mayor Utley. Reid sees this as ultimately a sort of symbiotic victory,

> "Uttley's admission that she "would no longer be herself indicates a fundamental
> alteration, not a fortification. The fact that her brain cells were "given up one by one"
> implies a submission and takeover. Her loss of consciousness into total "blackness"
> suggests a revolutionary act of resistance by GrosJeanne's heart, perhaps making the
> word "blackness" racially-charged. When Uttley notices that her blood moves through
> her body to the controlling beat of the new heart, it suggests the transplant was an act of
> possession. She is possessed by Gros-Jeanne's spirit, which dominates the way in which
> her body and brain unite into a sense of self. Yet, the "intertwined" streams of blood
> indicate a more equal partnership based on a hybrid combination"[98]

By wresting control of this scientific operation of a heart transplant through magical possession

Gros-Jeanne is able to assert her Blackness through the powers gained through her cultural

heritage in an "act of resistance." The act of transplantation can be read as an act of forced

assimilation, which Gros-Jeanne resisted despite the extreme violence visited upon her. Yet,

ultimately, violence still occured, and Utley, although her personality is changed, is alive

because of technologically enabled medical exploitation. Romdhani argues that this ultimately

undercuts the victory of magic here as, "even though Uttley experiences positive changes by

being colonized/infected by Gros-Jeanne's heart, Gros-Jeanne is also eaten by Uttley: she is

killed and her heart is stolen and consumed. The inclusion of the themes

of cultural cannibalization, colonial conquest, and zombification problematizes

reading this particular narrative in a way that could offer positive, yet difficult,

---

[98] Reid, Michelle. "Crossing the Boundaries of the "Burn": Canadian Multiculturalism and Caribbean
Hybridity in Nalo Hopkinson's Brown Girl in the Ring.".314

solutions for all Canadians"[99] I would argue that this cultural cannibalism is inherently

problematic, yet the consumption of Black culture is something that Gros-Jeanne is able to

sabatoge and co-opt for her own purposes of resistance. Fundamentally, conflicts of values and

worldviews in this novel are all alligned with the sides between the conflicting worlds of

science fiction and fantasy within the novel. Utley's cultural cannibalism, while initiallly an act

of pure exploitation, was co-opted into a forced dialogue that brought about Utley's ideological

changes. The exploitative tools of science are in a way stolen and used for magical purposes,

just as the tools of magic were used exploititively by Rudy.

The conflict between science fiction and fantasy in *Brown Girl in the Ring* can be read

as an exploration of the relationship between Blackness and modernity. Science fiction

technology, particularly medical technology which modernity promises will improve lives, is a

tool of systemic oppression in the Black communities of *Brown Girl in the Ring*. As we see in

the example of Utley's possession by Gross-Jeanne, however, the forces of modernity can be

turned to good. She rejects the use of big bussiness to rejuvenate Toronto, recognizing that these

businesses were exploitative instead she plans to offer, "interest-free loans to small enterprises

that are already there, give them perks if they fix up the real estate they're squatting on."[100]

Utley's plan demonstrates that the logic of modernity can be co-opted to bring about change.

She even explicitly invokes this logic to justify her actions to an incredulous constantine: "It's

called 'enlightened self-interest,' right? Solves the Virus Epsilon problem, and makes me look

good, too."[101] The Virus Epsilon problem was a zoogenic virus in the pig population that was

---

[99] Romdhani, Rebecca. "Zombies Go to Toronto: Zombifying Shame in Nalo Hopkinson's <em>Brown Girl in the Ring</Em>." Research in African Literatures, vol. 46, no. 4, 2015, pp. 87

[100] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 240

[101] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 239

being spread by porcine organ donations. Utley's response to this Virus, by refusing a pig heart

both as a response to the fear of the virus, and to pander to animal rights sympathizers, is part of

the central irony of modernity that the novel critiques. The promises of the enlightenment

project are extended to pigs, but not to humans. Utley says that she wants to stop, "preying on

helpless creatures"[102] while treating Black bodies as animals to be harvested. However, through

Gros-Jeanne's intervention, the same logic of enlightened self interest that lead to the treatment

of Black people as animals can be used to finally fulfill the promises of modernity. Technology

and enlightenment rationality are not inherently exploitative, nor is modernity a failed project.

Its tools can be possessed and used to create a freer and more equitable future for all. Hopkinson

does not present to us an Afrocentrist rejection of the project of modernity. She does not fall

back upon the crutch of ethnonationalism, and instead is, "prepared to renounce the easy claims

of African-American exceptionalism in favour of a global, coalitional politics in which

anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not to fuse.[103] For Hopkinson,

Blackness is not defined as a premodern antithesis to modernity, or founded upon any sort of

essentialism or exceptionalism. Blackness is defined in relation to experiences of modernity, but

it adapts and syncretizes just as much as it critiques and resists. In an interview with Alondra

Nelson, Hopkinson speaks of the Caribean tradition of syncretism:

> fusion fits verywell; that's how we survived. We can't worship Shango on pain of death?
> Well, whaddya know; he just became conflated with a Catholic saint. Got at least four
> languages operating on this one tiny island? Well, we'll just combine the four and call it
> Papiamento. Can't grow apples in the tropics for that apple pie? There's this vegetable
> called chocho, and it's approximately the right color and texture and pretty tasteless; add
> enough cinnamon, brown sugar, and nutmeg, and no one will know the difference.[104]

---

[102] Hopkinson, Nalo, Brown Girl in the Ring, 3
[103] Gilroy, Paul, "The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness," 4
[104] Hopkinson, Nalo and Alondra Nelson. "Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson," 99.

Just as Ti-Jeanne uses the modern center pole of the CN-Tower, so to is Blackness a hybrid construction of resistance and adaptation, of the premodern and the modern brought into dialogue. Indeed, Hopkinson suggests that Blackness has always been this way ever since it came into existence through contact with colonialism. This syncretism is a tool of survival, yes, but as this novel demonstrates, this fusion is not just a concession but a source of power and progress and a way to define identity. The tools of oppression can be reoriented, and Blackness need not define itself as separate from enlightenment rationality.

Blackness in *Brown Girl in the Ring* is ultimately explored through the conflict between science fiction and fantasy. Character's values and worldviews are indexed to their alignment towards the world of science fiction or the world of fantasy. When these values and worldviews come into dialogue, as occurs in intergenerational conflict in particular, various perspectives on Blackness come into dialogue. This dialogue is distinctly cross historical, with ancient wisdom intersecting with modern values and institutions. Should Black tradition be embraced as a source of identity? To what exent and how should it change? What is the relationship between Blackness and modernity? Should Blackness be defined as a premodern antithesis of modernity? What duties are owed to ones community, familly, spirituality? What is the role of assimilation and individualism? How can the knowledge and values of the majority culture be used and adopted without harming minority communities? These are all questions that the conflict between science fiction and fantasy helps to draw out, among many others. This dialogue between the genres is truly generative of the various modes of defining Blackness drawn from a variety of historical understandings and consciousnesses. The resolutions to the conflicts between science fiction and fantasy, suggest answers, as the various sides of debate on these

questions within the novel are variously aligned with magic or science fiction. For Hopkinson, Blackness rests at the fluid intersection of tradition and magic and the promises, and failures of enlightenment rationality and science fiction. It is an identity that is an ever changing syncretism, reflective of the realities of the present, the legacies of the past, and the promises of the future.

Chapter IV: The Fifth Season: Worldbuilding Race and the Tectonics of Modernity

N.K Jemisin's novel "The Fifth Season" in many ways represents a significant departure from the other novels I have discussed so far. All of these other novels are based squarely upon real world Earth history and geography. In the case of *The Shadow Speaker* and *Brown Girl in the Ring* there are certainly speculative offshoots, however they are nonetheless explicitly rooted in our own real history. The chronotopes of their settings is a major influence upon the ways in which the interplay of genres within these texts bring historical conceptions of Blackness into dialogue. This works quite differently for Jemisin. Her work at first glance appears to fit best into the genre subcategory of "high fantasy," which is fantasy that is set in a world that is pretty much entirely removed from our own. It is sometimes the case that these worlds are in some way connected to our own, for example, the conceit of the Lord of the Rings trilogy is that is is a book called the "Red Book of Westmarch" which was translated by Tolkein, and is actually a history of our own world in the very distant mythic past. Nonetheless, however, the text of these works is written with a completeness of worldbuilding that, barring any revelations from the author to the contrary, the work carries the suspension of disbelief that it portrays events that took place in another world and not our own at any point in the narrative. The history or future history of the world of *The Fifth Season* is particularly important when we consider the historical construction of Blackness. That the history of this world is entirely divorced from our own would on the surface of things seem to preclude any discussion of Blackness within the text. Strictly speaking, there are no Black individuals within the novel. There are characters who, if they existed in our world we might call Black. But just as, say, someone might call Australian Aboriginals Black such terminology is fundamentally wrong in its conventional label of racial identity. Save for the

existence of humans and various earth animals (which are exceptions that are standard to the fantasy genre) there is no commonality between our planet and the planet upon which the novel takes place. However, the planet upon which the novel takes place is post-apocalyptic, and could conceivably be a future earth, making the novel science fiction. This indeed is almost hinted at in the opening of the novel. The continent upon which the story takes place is called "The Stillness." Jemisin writes that, "The Stillness has had other names. It was once several other lands. It's one vast, unbroken continent at present, but at some point in the future it will be more than one again."[105] If these "several other lands" were what were once the Earth's current continents, well then this would be our post-apocalyptic future, and the genre of the novel would flip to science fiction. This is the sort of genre ambiguity that is par for the course throughout the novel. Yet, the Stillness in this case would be so far in the future that our current racial categories no longer exist. Thus, *The Fifth Season* is definitively devoid of Blackness rooted in our own history.

So, why talk about this novel? While the novel does not have Black characters it follows characters that would appear Black. This is similar in some ways to how Okorafor explores the nonracial society of Ginen. However, while race as derived from our own history does not exist per se in the world of *The Fifth Season,* nonetheless prejudice and racism of a sort have had a sort of convergent evolution there. This novel thus explores the process of constructing race, as well as the genesis of prejudice and systems of oppression. As will become clear, while the novel is not a speculative timeline of our own history, it is nonetheless inspired by our own world's history. This is in some ways inevitable, as after all it is incredibly difficult to worldbuild a

---

[105] Jemisin, N. K. The Fifth Season, 2

society and history out of whole cloth. Yet the historical allusions of Jemisin are quite deliberate, drawing from real world examples of Black oppression, as well as the oppression of other groups from Earth history. These allusions are not just tangential but fundementally baked into the plot and worldbuilding in ways that make this novel a true exploration of Blackness despite an apparent lack of Blackness from the content of the novel. These allusions are sustained in large part due to the confluence of science fiction and fantasy within the novel.

Of all the novels explored so far it is perhaps the one that most intimately links science fiction and fantasy. Magic in the world of the Fifth Season is called Orogeny, which is a term derived from geological science to describe the process of mountain range formation. At the most fundamental linguistic level magic in this novel is science. The word orogeny is not just used in a loose sense to describe that the magic has to do with the earth. One could imagine, for example, an elemental earth magic system such as earthbending in *Avatar the Last Airbender* being called Orogeny. No, Orogenes, those who use the magic of Orogeny, are able to control geologic processes such as earthquakes and volcanoes. They do so through a vary scientifically grounded process of manipulating the energy within the earth to shift layers of rock about to produce geologic activity. The processes that they trigger are entirely scientific, the way they trigger them, however, is purely magical. Thus Jemisin achieves the pure wedding of magic and science.

Race emerges from the setting of the novel, not from our own history. As mentioned, the world of "The Stillness" holds no link to our own history. Thus concepts of race are born from the logic of Jemisin's worldbuilding. Every element of her worldbuilding leads inexorably towards the creation of race, of which I shall provide a short summary. The story takes place on the continent called "The Stillness." The planet upon which our characters live lost its moon

millenia ago, and ever since experiences frequent tectonic disturbances that lead to cataclysmic disasters known as "Fifth Seasons" hence the title of the novel. These disasters routinely devastate society to a postapocalyptic level. Ruins of past civilizations, many quite advanced but nonetheless doomed by the inevitable Fifth Seasons, litter the landscape, and even the sky in the form of massive crystal futuristic obelisk satellites. Society rebuilds by passing down "stone lore" knowledge and wisdom recorded on the most enduring medium possible, stone. Each comm, or community, prepares constantly for the event of a season, with society organized around "use castes" that are careers deemed essential in the event of an inevitable apocalypse. One of these use castes, breeders, are tasked with maintaining healthy bloodlines full of traits desirable for survival in the extreme conditions of a season. Over the years, aesthetic and survival concerns have made certain "racial" groups more desirable breeding stock, thus recreating something resembling our world's concept of race. Race arise organically in this way from the setting but is most fully realised in the person of the Orogene, despite the fact that they can be of any "race."

Race is presented allegorically in the treatment of Orogenes. In this world the geologic magic of the Orogenes allows society to deal with tectonic disasters, yet Orogenes are also feared and reviled. They are seen as unstable, power hungry, and inhuman, due to the great power they wield and how difficult it can be to control. An Orogene could accidentally destroy a whole city, and untrained Orogene children are seen as ticking time bombs, often killed out of fear even by their own famillies. This perception is not exactly the whole truth, but for fearful people, just as in our own world, it is more than enough to perpetuate prejudice. They are called Roggas by many, a slur akin to the modern "N" word, or other racial or homophobic slurs. The current

government, the Yumescene empire,, trains and polices the Orogenes through an institute called the "Fulcrum," which Jemisin once described in an interview as an "evil hogwarts."[106] There they are indoctrinated by the "Gurardians," an order of warriors with their own set of mysterious magical powers that act as overseers. They are taught to repress their feelings, lest they trigger their powers, and to obey the orders of the Fulcrum. If they disobey, or show any lack of control they are killed, or worse. They are tools, treated like animals as they are breed to produce new bloodlines of Orogenes. While they do possess dangerous abilities the prejudice and exploitation they face is profoundly irrational and unjust. Indeed, by the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the danger Orogenes pose is mostly just a convenient myth to perpetuate their exploitation. They are not a perfect allegory for Black people, particularly in the fact that they occur randomly in the population. In this way they are more like LGBTQIA individuals with regards to their experience. Orogene characters are in fact an intersection of quite a few historically oppressed groups, however I shall focus primarily upon Blackness. Indeed, the ways in which they are systemically persecuted and exploited for their labor, best fit as an allegory for the Black experience.

Jemisin establishes Orogenes as an allegory for the Black experience primarily through allusions to present and historical black experience. Most ubiquitous throughout the novel is the slur, "Rogga." As mentioned previously this is an allusion to real world slurs, particularly the N word. It's use pretty much maps onto how that slur is used, "You've heard all the uglier terms for what you are. He has, too, but he would never say them. Neither would Jija, whenever someone tossed off a careless *rogga* around him. *I don't want the children to hear that kind of language, he*

---

[106] Hurley, Jessica, Jemisin, N. K. "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N. K. Jemisin" ASAP/Journal, Volume 3, Number 3, September 2018, pp.471

always said —"[107] Here we can see that the term is used as a slur, and also more carelleslly, as

has been, and unfortunately continues to be the case for the Black community. We also see the

use of the word rogga as a sort of reclaimed slur, as has often been a practice for marginalized

groups,"Now she understands that his use of the slur is deliberate. A dehumanizing word for

someone who has been made into a thing. It helps."[108] These uses of the word roughly track onto

the use of the "N" word. It is also one of many tools of dehumanization used to justify

oppression. The dehumanization of Orogenes is perhaps the most notable parallel, particularly

with regards to how it is used to justify a system of forced labor. This process of dehumanization

maps onto the sorts of dehumanization used against Black people to justify slavery. For example,

there is the belief that Orogenes do not feel cold, "And you've heard that orogenes don't feel cold

the way others do," says the man, with a weary sigh. "That''s a myth."[109] This myth is an

inversion of the idea that Black people were naturally suited for the heat of plantation work, or

like medical myths about Black people like them having a higher pain tolerance, or thicker skin.

The scientific racism Black people have historically experienced is alluded to by the way the

intellectual authorities classify Orogenes as nonhuman, "I don't give a shit what the

something-somethinggth council of big important farts decreed, or how the geomests classify

things, or any of that. That we're not human is just the lie they tell themselves so they don't have

to feel bad about how they treat us."[110] Alabaster here explains the dehumanization of Orogenes

as a tool to justify oppression and exploitation. Essentially he is describing a marxist view of the

origin of race as"an ideology that emerged with chattel slavery and other forms of class

---

[107] Jemisin, N.K, The Fifth Season, 22
[108] Jemisin, N.K, The Fifth Season, 140
[109] Jemisin, N. K, The Fifth Season 31.
[110] Jemisin, N. K, The Fifth Season, 354

oppression to justify the exploitation of people of color and survives as a residue of the past."[111]

This is fairly mainstream view of the origin of race, which tends to follow either the marxist

view, or the view that racism cames from irrational prejudice which then lead to exploitation,

instead of the other way around. This marxist view of the origins of race is thus quite

recognizable to the reader in what Alabaster sees as the origin of the lie of the inhumanity of

Orogenes.

By linking the past with the future through blending genres, Jemisin creates a cross

historical dialogue which explores the relationality of Blackness and the project of modernism

The world of The Stillness is a combination of old and new; flint knives exist alongside futuristic

crystal satellites. The ways in which this world is both old and new speaks to a common tendency

of distancing inconvenient parts of the white past. This is done by portraying this past as a

"different time" when people didn't know better, when, essentially, they were not yet really

modern, for example by viewing, "plantation slavery as a premodern residue that disappears once

it is revealed to be fundamentally incompatible with enlightened rationality and capitalist

industrial production."[112] Of course slavery occured during the time periods classically associated

with modernity, a modernity that is intrinsically linked to Black oppression. By presenting her

world as possessing both futuristic and old elements Jemisin demonstrates how slavery was both

a phenomenon of modernity, and something fundamentally opposed to the enlightenment ideals

of modernity. Hers is a a historical argument of the relationship between modernity and

Blackness quite similar to that of Gilroy, who sets forth that,

> the history of blacks in the new world, particularly the experiences of the slave trade and
> the plantation, were a legitimate part of the moral history of the West as a whole. They

---

[111] Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation.".467.

[112] Gilroy, Paul, "The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness," 49

were not unique events —discrete episodes in the history of a minority —that could be grasped through their exclusive impact on blacks themselves, nor were they aberrations from the spirit of modern culture that were likely to be overcome by inexorable progress towards a secular, rational utopia. The continuing existence of racism belied both these verdicts, and it requires us to look more deeply into the relationship of racial terror and subordination to the inner character of modernity

Her world contains the backwardness of the past we would expect from fantasy, yet she grounds that same fantasy in a science fiction reality we would expect to progress past such backwards racial discrimination. This world has the scientific rationality that one would expect to lead to "inexorable progress." Yet instead racism remains embeded in this society, not some purely irrational or aberrant phenomenon, but as something ingrained in the very moral and systemic fabric of modernity. Scientific rationality does not necessarily lead to inevitable progress but instead has historically been an instrument and justification of racial oppression. This is most brutally demonstrated when Alabaster and Syenite find the node maintainer, "The body in the node maintainers's chair is small, and naked. Thin, it;s limbs atrophied. Hairless. There are things —tubes and pipes and *things,* she has no words for them —going into the stick-arms, down the google-throat, across the narrow crotch."[113] This technology that allows for an Orogene to be kept alive while lobotimized and sedated is not strictly futuristic per se. Yet it fits with science fiction's usage of such technologies. The life support harness of this Orogene node maintainer is reminiscent of the pods humans are kept enslaved within in "The Matrix." This science fiction allusion works particularly well considering readings of "The Matrix" as an allegory for racial exploitation, "this representation of entombed and unconscious humans suggests, one way that hegemony operates is in its ability to deny humans real knowledge of how their bodies are located within social and historical hierarchies. If oppressed people gain true knowledge of how

---

[113] Jemisin, N.K, *The Fifth Season, 139*

their bodies are situated in the world, then they might be more likely to take action to change their situation."[114] This sort of futuristic exploitation is the logical end of the modern instrumental rationality, taking an exploited class of people and reducing their humanity and agency as much as possible in the pursuit of "progress." Syenite notes with disgust the logic of this objectification and total alienation, "Drug away the infection and so forth, keep the victim alive enough to function, and you've got the one thing even the Fulcrum can't provide: a reliable, harmless, completely beneficial source of orogeny."[115]

The Fifth Season stands as a bleak indictment of humanity's failure to live up to modernist ideals for Black people, with a glimmer of hope. In an interview with Jessica Hurley Jemisin lays out the stance of this novel towards the project of modernity, "I think constantly about how much more amazing a country America could be—or any of these countries that are industrially well developed—how much more amazing any of these countries could be if they weren't spending so much energy trying to oppress a massive chunk of their own population.How much further along could we be? Could we have flying cars? That's the science-fiction conceit: why don't we have flying cars? Well, it's because of fucking oppression. That's the kind of thing that I wanted people to come away with."[116] By presenting a world that was once futuristic, as demonstrated by "deadciv" remnants like the obelisks, that nonetheless keeps being dragged back into the past Jemisin argues that the project of modernity, and the promise of science fiction is not being fulfilled. She places this blame squarely upon systemic oppression, which at the very beginning of the novel is the catalyst for Alabaster triggering a fifth season, "his fellow slaves. He cannot

[114] Allen, Ricky Lee. "WAKE UP, NEO: WHITE IDENTITY, HEGEMONY, AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN 'THE MATRIX.'" 76
[115] Jemisin, N.K, The Fifth Season, 142
[116] Hurley, Jessica and N. K. Jemisin. "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N. K. Jemisin." ASAP/Journal, vol. 3 no. 3, 2018, p. 467-477. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/asa.2018.0035.

free them, not in the practical sense. He's tried before and failed. He can, however, make their suffering serve a cause greater than one city's hubris and one empire's fear."[117] In this act Jemisin presents both the irrational oppression that leads to such desperate acts, as well as a hope that perhaps this "greater cause," is a solution for the failure of modernity. This greater cause is suggested in an allegorical sense at the end of the novel when Alabaster asks, "have you ever heard of something called a *moon*?"[118] Fixing the absence of the moons would solve the problems of the fifth seasons, which stand as an allegory for the ways in which oppression continually sets back the project of modernity. We also see hints that such a society might one day come about in the community of Meov.

Jemisin uses the blending of science fiction and fantasy to present natural disasters as an allegory for the societal consequences of oppression. In Meov, we see a community untouched by disaster, or oppression. This stems from and is demonstrated by, their attitude towards orogeny, "Roggas.'" He looks at her and grins, and she realizes he's been waiting to tell her this. 'That's how they've survived all this time. They don't kill their roggas, here. They put them *in charge*. And they're really, really glad to see us."[119] The community of Meov stands as a promise of a more tolerant truly modern society. They do not discriminate against Orogens, and are not homophobic and are open to polyamory.[120] While they are not perfect, they are a pirate community after all, they nonetheless stand as a promise of modernity. Through their tolerant attitudes they have survived longer than either the intolerant Yumenes or Sanzed empires.[121] As stated in the previously mentioned interview, Jemisin sees oppression as something that routinely

---

[117] Jemisin, N.K, The Fifth Season, 6-7
[118] Jemisin, N.K, The Fifth Season, 449
[119] Jemisin, N.K, The Fifth Season, 296
[120] Jemisin, N.K, *The Fifth Season*, 356
[121] Jemisin, N.K, The Fifth Season, 295

holds humanity back, much like the seasons. She demonstrates this relationship allegorically, treating the fifth seasons and other disasters as a sort of karmic retribution or "mandate of heaven" that punishes those who fail the project of modernity. The magic of Orogeny, a force of magic which can both bring in premodern apocalyptic conditions, or aid in building a modern society, such as is evidenced by the clearly futuristic orogenic obelisks. This magic provides the mechanism for the allegory as well as assists in demonstrating the premodern modern duality of modern oppression. The tolerant and progressive people of Meov and their safety from natural disasters function as the oppisite end of Jemisins allegory. Thus, Meov proves that Jemisin has not lost hope in modernism, although she is quite pessimistic about how it is continually undermined.

Ultimately, Jemisin's ability to critique the shortcomings of modernity are built upon her blending of genres. The futuristic science fiction elements of The Stillness are contrasted with the fantasy elements of the world in order to demonstrate the ways the project of moderniity has historically failed Black people. The consequences of this failure are demonstrated allegorically through the cycles of societal regression and limiting of progress brought on by the fifth seasons. Without fantasy there would not be a convenient magical method to support the mechanism of this allegory. Advanced technology could perhaps work but magic as a force of vengeance carries deeper narrative force. Furthermore, magic works as a way to evoke a premodern time, associated with witch hunts and other persecutions related to the supernatural. Fantasy and magic set this society firmly in the past despite its scientific advancement. On the other hand, science fiction is essential as a way to highlight the potential for modernity of this world. Fantasy worlds tend to be seen as static, or even decaying from a golden age as magic fades from the world and

the age of heroes ends. With science fiction elements the promise of modern technological and its associated social progress is held out. Together, Jemisin brings the promise of modernity and the reality of the Black modern experience into a dialogue that is generative of the full range of associations between Blackness and modernity. The reader is able to read in this text postracial utopian ideas alongside extreme afro pessimism, with the latter of course the dominant reading given the extremely dark tone of the novel. Simultaneously, Jemisin critiques the failures in the promise of modernity that led to Black oppression through the juxtaposition of the past and future. Overall, Jemisin's work makes full use of the allegorical potential of the blending of science fiction and fantasy, creating a world that, while darker than our own, presents a terrifying portrait of the ways racism has historically evolved and continues to sabotage the project of modernity.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Butler, Okorafor, Hopkinson, Jemisin. These four women brought their incredible artistic

talents to bear on Blackness through the medium of speculative fiction. Despite all writing with a

blend of fantasy and science fiction none of them used these genres in the same way. Butler used

these two genres to enhance the realism of the fantastical reality of a woman trapped between two

times. She explored how this double consciousness of Black experience, and the dynamics of

intergenerational conflict that bring dueling conceptions of Blackness into conflict. At the

mention of intergenerational conflict we might think that Hopkinson uses genre in a similar way.

Perhaps we can think of opposites as being similar, for Hopkinson uses the genres of science

fiction and fantasy in precisely the opposite way. Yes, she did explore the same topic of

intergenerational conflict, and the idea of double consciousness. However, while Butler used the

fantastical to make a realist experience of two very different realities accessible, Hopkinson

turned the very real experiences of intergenerational conflict, assimilation, and systemic

oppression and made them exaggerated and expressed their conflicts on on an allegorical level

through the conflict of science fiction and fantasy. Through this allegory she explores the ways

Blackness relates to modernity, and suggests a conception of Blackness that is syncretic in nature.

Okorafor blends science fiction and fantasy in order to explore the ways in which conceptions of

Blackness and postcoloniality are linked. She also uses it as a critique of conceptions of modernity and progress in relation to Blackness, with the people of Ginen presented as a variously precolonial and futuristic Africa. Through the metaphor of the cyborg she explores the fluidity of Black identity, in some ways mirroring Hopkinson, but diverges in her geographically particular exploration of postcoloniality. Jemisin draws upon allusions to Black history and uses them to explore the relationship between Blackness and modernity. The blending of fantasy and science demonstrotes the failure of the modernist project to live up to its ideals in relation to Black people. Her allegorical use of the fifth season disasters provides the stark contrast of practically medieval fantasy towns against futuristic technology. We see what the world could have been, and could have even surpassed, if it were not for racial prejudice.

The common thread between these authors is that, in each case, their cross historical dialogue is enhanced by their blending of genres. In the case of *Kindred* this blending of genres facilitated dialogue in a structural sense, allowing the realist elements of the novel to have full effect. By enhancing these realist elements Butler was able to have literal cross historical dialogue take place between characters from different times. In the case of Hopkinson this cross historical dialogue takes place through a magic that is linked to Black culture and tradition, and the use of science in survice of exploitation and oppression. The intergenerational conflict of this novel is driven by the values associated with magic and science. This conflict in turn brings these worldviews into conflict, ultimately resolving this conflict in a way that embraces traditional knowledge while adapting to changing conditions. In *The Shadow Speaker*, genre is essential as a marker of the dual past and futurity of postcolonial society. We see a society that rejects the elements of modernity which lead to their oppression, creating a society that is "premodern." Yet

such a drive is also paradoxically representative of the modernist drive towrds a sort of utopian societal improvement, making the achievement of postcolonialism simultaneously futuristic. Jemisin builds her critique of modernity upon historical allusions contextualized by the use of a blending of genres. Without the use of fantasy to demonstrate how science fiction oppression like in the Matrix, usually relagated to theoretical dystopias, was in many ways the lived reality for Black people in a time period the West likes to pick and choose as modern or premodern. Blending genres was not the only option available to these authors it has in each case added something to each text far beyond the mere aesthetics of another genre. Genre is inextricably linked to the ways these authors tell these particular stories, it is not just a convenient tool to move along the plot. There are stories which do not materially change much when transposed between genres, these stories are not cut from such simple cloth.

The story of the Black experience is inextricably linked to experiences of modernity. Genres which are respectively associated with the modern and the premodern can together provide a rich exploration of the relationality between modernity and Blackness. Furthermore, given how conceptions of Blackness have historically shifted, primarily in relationship to the various partial fulfillments of the promises of modernity, fantasy and science fiction can help to evoke the racial wordlviews associated with different eras and bring them into dialogue. Since Blackness is not a static identity or concept, to fully explore it the historical context fantasy evokes must be provided, and the promises of modernity evoked by science fiction that have and continue to influnce Blackness must likewise be provided. A fluid relationship between these two genres is an extremely organic way to accomplish these goals, while providing the exciting aesthetics associated with them.

Speculative fiction is a risky business. Earlier I mentioned how Hopkinson described speculative fiction as an exercise in exaggeration. Portrayals of Blackness within speculative fiction likewise experience this process of exaggeration. Black people become allegories for a vast range of experiences, dualities and dialogues. There is a danger, within this exaggeration, for readers to come away with a conception of Blackness that is likewise exaggerated. In explaining my work with these authors to various people I have noticed a tendency to read subversions of Black stereotypes as representations of these very stereotypes. For example, when desribing the conflict between fantasy and science fiction in *Brown Girl in the Ring,* my interlocutor felt that it was wrong of Hopkinson to present Black people as being opposed to technology. Sure, the technology was being used in an evil way, they said, but doesn't having Black people in opposition to technology in general send the wrong message? I of course argued against that position, but this reading, and others like it, seemed to me to strike at the heart of why the blending of fantasy and science fiction is so important. While they were, I felt, wrong about the specifi work, their point was well taken. Modernity is presented as variously the savior of, or the antithesis of, Blackness. Uncritical acceptance of the promise of modernity leads to worlds whitewashed of any real presence of Blackness. Whether this is done out of discomfort with Blackness, or out of some naive "I don't see color" sentiment, the effect is the same. On the other hand, rejecting modernity entirely and presenting Black people in a premodern, preracial setting, as happens in fantasy, or in adventure sciene fiction, likewise avoids problems of Blackness that only arrive from its contact with modernity. If such works do address race it can lead to essentiallizing and the reinforcement of such stereotypes as the "noble savage." Works of science fiction and fantasy that go in these two opposing directions tend to stay safe from white scrutiny.

They reinforce the myth of rational progress from the premodern era of magic and superstition to an era of enlightened progress.

When genres come into dialogue, however, these comforting assumptions become unstable. Reading the character of Rufus I was forced to consider whether there really was a gap of modernity between myself and this despicable slave owner. Such questions are always uncomfortable, and deeply challenge western narratives of moral supremacy. The idea that the products of modernity might not always manifest in modern ways, that modern rationality might in fact lead to outcomes opposed to the aims of modernity, is antithetical to the myth of constant progress that western culture subscribes to. That anyone might oppose modernity seems inconceivable. The slogan of ex-president Donald Trump was, "Make America Great Again." Inherent in this slogan is the myth of continual progress that might be interrupted by forces opposed to modernity. We only have to look at Trump's incredibly bigoted remarks on the campaign trail and in office to realize who is opposed to modernity: people of color. The most insidious part of this slogan is that, in a way, Black people have in many ways been opposed to modernity. Yet, when legitimate criticisms of the ways in which modern rationality has been used to systematically justify the oppression of Black people it is portrayed as an attack on the ideals of modernity itself, not upon their execution. Claims like, "leftists say math is racist" or that Barak Obama was secretly a muslim and wanted to institue "barbaric" Shariah law, are perhaps some of the most hyperbolic examples of this tendency, yet are nonetheless alarmingly prevalent. In response to this sort of sentiment, well meaning people go in the opposite direction, celebrating the achievements of Black scientists and presentations of Black futurity. Yet such

visions of the future, while countering many harmeful stereotypes, fails to really attack the root of the problem.

Genre fluidity in speculative fiction is perhaps one of the most powerful ways of exploring Blackness. It does not shy away from the conflict between modernity and Blackness. It recognizes that Blackness has changed and evolved throughout history. It does not ignore the past, nor does it hide in an idealized version of it. Authors of genre fluid speculative fiction have the opportunity to fearlessly wrestle with the legacies of the past and the shortcomings of promised futures. Attacking the most cherished narratives of western culture is risky work. The danger of being misunderstood is always present, particularly when the comfort of many audiences relies upon not understanding. Yet being able to blend genres is a powerful tool. The ability to be able to pull from across history as well as to draw from the future and the present is not a luxury most writers of fiction possess in such abundance as the writers of genre fluid speculative fiction. Writers of genre fluid speculative fiction have the ability to take the reader and confront them with the past, then fast forward into the future to how the past informed it, then rocket back to the past to talk about how those people conceived of that coming future, and what their ideas of progress looked like. All the while this dialogue does not take the reader out of the narrative. No, the dialogue between the past and the future drives the plot forward, it is integral to the works themes, integral to our character's identity. As readers we want to see technology based on magic, or the struggles of someone plucked out of time and hurled into the past. When faced *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* or a work of thrilling genre bending specculative fiction, the choice is not particularly difficult. Perhaps now it

is clear why Black authors of speculative fiction write works where genre is fluid, that challenge

preconcieved narratives of Blackness and genre tropes in equal measure.

Works Cited

Akomfrah, John, director. The Last Angel of History. Icarus Films , 1997,
https://icarusfilms.com/if-angel.

Allen, Ricky Lee. "WAKE UP, NEO: WHITE IDENTITY, HEGEMONY, AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN 'THE MATRIX.'" Counterpoints, vol. 209, 2002, pp. 104–25, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42979490. Accessed 29 Apr. 2022.

Appiah, Anthony. In My Father's House : Africa in the Philosophy of Culture. Oxford University Press, 1992.

Attebery,et al. The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Barber, Tiffany E. "Afrofuturism and the Question of Visual Reparations." African American Studies, edited by Jeanette R. Davidson, 2nd Edition, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, pp. 280–91, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv1hm8hkb.25. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Bernardi, Daniel. "'Star Trek' in the 1960s: Liberal-Humanism and the Production of Race." Science Fiction Studies, vol. 24, no. 2, SF-TH Inc, 1997, pp. 209–25, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240604.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation." American Sociological Review, vol. 62, no. 3, 1997, pp.467.

Booker, M. Keith, et al. The Science Fiction Handbook, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/conncoll/detail.action?docID=428197.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Eshu". Encyclopedia Britannica, 11 May. 2015, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eshu. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Butler, Octavia. "Black Scholar Interview with Octavia Butler: BLACK WOMEN AND THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE." The Black Scholar, vol. 17, no. 2, 1986, pp. 14–18, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41067255. Accessed 4 May 2022.

 Butler, Octavia E. Kindred. Beacon Press, 1988.

Burnett, Joshua Yu. "The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction." Research in African Literatures, vol. 46, no. 4, 2015, pp. 133–50, https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.46.4.133. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Carroll, Siobhan. "Nnedi Okorafor: An Introduction." Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts, vol. 26, no. 1 (92), [Brian Attebery, as Editor, for the International Association for the Fantastic in the

Arts, International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts], 2015, pp. 19–20, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26321076.

Cox, Lara Decolonial Queer Feminism in Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985)Volume 41 Issue 3, Page 317-332, ISSN 0264-8334 Available Online Oct 2018

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose". Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture, edited by Mark Dery, New York, USA: Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 179-222. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822396765-010

Du Bois, W. E. B., and Patricia H. Hinchey. The Souls of Black Folk. Myers Education Press, 2018.

Edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, and Adam (. C. Roberts. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group,Abingdon,2009.ProQuest,https://login.peach.conncoll.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/19-critical-race-theory-part-ii/docview/2137948630/se-2?accountid=10255.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." CR: The New Centennial Review, vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, pp. 287–302. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41949397. Accessed 22 Apr. 2021 Gilroy, Paul. The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Haraway, J. Donna. "A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century." The international handbook of virtual learning environments. Springer, Dordrecht, 2006. 117-158.ekan Ogar.
https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4020-3803-7_4

Hopkinson, Nalo and Alondra Nelson. "Making the Impossible Possible: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson." Social Text, vol. 20 no. 2, 2002, p. 97-113. Project MUSE
muse.jhu.edu/article/31932.
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/31932/summary

Hopkinson, Nalo. Brown Girl in the Ring. Warner Books, 1998.

Hurley, Jessica and N. K. Jemisin. "An Apocalypse is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N. K. Jemisin." ASAP/Journal, vol. 3 no. 3, 2018, p. 467-477. Project MUSE,
doi:10.1353/asa.2018.003

Jackson, Sandra, and Julie Moody Freeman, eds. The Black Imagination, Science Fiction and the Speculativel, Routledge, February 27, 2015. Print.

Jemisin, N. K. The Fifth Season. New York: Hatchett Book Group, 2015. Print.

Kenan, Randall. "An Interview With Octavia E. Butler." Callaloo, vol. 14, no. 2, 1991, pp. 495–504, https://doi.org/10.2307/2931654. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Lavender III, Isiah. Race in American Science Fiction. Indiana UP, 2011.

Lipski, Jakub. "Rewriting Crusoe: The Robinsonade Across Languages, Cultures, and Media." (2020).

Mark Bould. "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF." Science Fiction Studies, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, pp. 177–86, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241520. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Mousoutzanis, Aris. 46. Apocalyptic SF (Part IV Subgenres). Edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, and Adam (. C. Roberts. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Abingdon, 2009. ProQuest, https://login.peach.conncoll.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/46-apocalyptic-sf-part-iv-subgenres/docview/2137943637/se-2?accountid=10255.

Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction: Future Texts." Social Text, vol. 20 no. 2, 2002, p. 1-15. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/31931

Okorafor-Mbachu, Nnedi. The Shadow Speaker. Jump at the Sun, 2010.

Okorafor, Nnedi , The Black Imagination, Science Fiction and the Speculative

Pahl, M. (2018). Time, progress, and multidirectionality in nnedi okorafor's who fears death. Research in African Literatures, 49(3), 207-222. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.49.3.12

Rieder, John. Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction. Middletown: Weslyan U P, 2008

Reid, Michelle. "Crossing the Boundaries of the "Burn": Canadian Multiculturalism and Caribbean Hybridity in Nalo Hopkinson's Brown Girl in the Ring." Extrapolation (Pre-2012), vol. 46, no. 3, 2005, pp.314

Romdhani, Rebecca. "Zombies Go to Toronto: Zombifying Shame in Nalo Hopkinson's Brown Girl in the Ring." Research in African Literatures, vol. 46, no. 4, Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 72–89, https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.46.4.72.

Rowell, Charles H., and Octavia E. Butler. "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler." Callaloo, vol. 20, no. 1, 1997, pp. 47–66, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299291. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Samatar, Sofia. "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism." Research in African Literatures, vol. 48, no. 4, Indiana University Press, 2017, pp. 175–91, https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.48.4.12.

Salvini, Laura. "A Heart of Kindness: Nalo Hopkinson's 'Brown Girl in the Ring.'" Journal of Haitian Studies, vol. 18, no. 2, 2012, pp. 180–93, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41949211. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Slusser, George Edgar., and Eric S. Rabkin. Intersections : Fantasy and Science Fiction. Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Sunday, Lekan Ogar. "The Cultural Value of Nsibidi in the Contemporary Era." International Digital Organization for Scientific Research ISSN: 2550-7974 IDOSR JOURNAL OF ARTS AND MANAGEMENT 2(3): 1-7, 2017.

Turner, Stephanie S. ""wHAT ACTUALLY IS": THE InSISTEnCE OF GEnRE in OCTAVIA BUTLER'S KInDRED." Femspec, vol. 4, no. 2, 2003, pp. 259. ProQuest, https://login.peach.conncoll.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/what-actually-is-insistence-genre-octavia-butlers/docview/200048330/se-2?accountid=10255.

Warren, Kenneth W. What Was African American Literature? Harvard University Press, 2011. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjghtk7. Accessed 29 July 2021.

Womak, Ytasha L. Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture. Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.