

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: **RACING IMAGINARIES: LIMIT AND RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN’S SPECULATIVE FICTION**

Alexandria Jochebed Nunn, Doctor of Philosophy, 2023

Dissertation directed by: Associate Professor Lee Konstantinou, Professor, Department of English

Speculative fiction is sometimes described as a genre of the future—a genre that celebrates technological and scientific progress and that envisions limitless possibilities. However, for persons already estranged by the reality manufactured for them, the apparent strangeness of dystopian futures, state surveillance, or reproductive and genetic engineering is not so distant nor so fictional. In this dissertation, Alexandria Nunn elucidates the consequences of writing and reading science fiction for authors of color at the intersection between realism and speculative modes. In this exploration of contemporary science fiction by Black women authors, Nunn examines the speculative literature of Nalo Hopkinson, Octavia Butler, and N.K. Jemisin as they challenge generic assumptions and reframe the stakes of science fiction and Black literary theory. “Racing Imaginaries: Limit and Resistance in Contemporary Black Women’s Speculative Fiction” specifically attends to a conversation between Black realist thought and history’s continuance into the present and future, which foregrounds histories of anti-blackness, alongside speculative fiction by Black imaginative authors which negotiates with the language of possibility even in repressive spaces where opportunity and expression are being silenced.

Nunn maps a dialectic between Black realism and Black speculation in major works by Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and N. K. Jemisin, three of the foremost authors of the late 20th and early 21st century in the realm of American science fiction. Each author showcases the limitations of perceiving futures apart from race, while likewise suggesting alternative possibilities for growth and thriving. The conversation between these writers provides a template for understanding how speculative forms uniquely impact writers and authors of color operating with and against real-world phenomena so outlandish and often horrifying one would think them fantastic. Ultimately, Nunn suggests that Black creators frame science fiction not as a "literature of the possible" but rather as a "literature of the limit," reminding readers both of the limits of contemporary lived reality and of the opportunities that already exist at their fingertips.

RACIAL IMAGINARIES: LIMIT AND RESISTANCE
IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN'S SPECULATIVE FICTION

By

Alexandria Jochebed Nunn

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Lee Konstantinou, Chair
Professor Zita Nuñez
Professor Julius Fleming
Professor Sharada Balachandran Orihuela

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Healing from Recovery: Restoring Sites of Medical Violence in Nalo Hopkinson’s <i>Brown Girl in the Ring</i>	23
Chapter 2: (De)Construct: Mixed Race and Belonging in Octavia Butler’s <i>Lilith’s Brood</i> and <i>Fledgling</i>	53
Chapter 3: “The Earth Will Be Just Fine”: Personhood and/as Posthumanism in N.K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth Trilogy.....	81
Coda.....	113
Bibliography.....	118

Introduction

I had the chance recently to read Tochi Onyebuchi's novel *Riot Baby*, a Black science fiction story chronicling the lives of two Black siblings around and after the 1992 LA riots. At one point during the story, Kev, an incarcerated Black youth, experiences vivid hallucinations while in solitary confinement. He later describes to his sister Ella a precise memory of participating in a rodeo; being sent to reign in bulls or be chased by them, the energy of the crowd, and the humiliation mixed with the adrenaline that drove him to keep moving. Ella, who herself has psychic and magical powers, is disturbed and mystified by his retelling, seeing as how Kev had never been incarcerated at or seen a place with rodeos. What stood out to me most, however, throughout this whole retelling was the way in which I the reader found myself between reality and imaginary when it came to the prison rodeo as a concept onto itself.

Prison rodeos are very real. The Louisiana State Penitentiary dubbed Angola prison still ran them into 2020 with virtually no safety measures for the incarcerated participants. The prison offered bare minimum incentives to compete, such as compensation as low \$0.02 an hour to sit on an enraged bull rope-less and saddleless with the borderline inevitability of being trampled. These rodeos were open to the public and stopped only by the pandemic. A vague memory, perhaps something I read in another book a few years back, arose of prison rodeos in the mid 20th century and how majorly Black inmates were forced to participate, but I wasn't certain. Another memory, a lot less fleshed out than the first, grasped at something my great-grandmother and grandmother from Louisiana and Arkansas may have mentioned at some point, albeit piecemeal. The overall affect was disorienting, and I was unsure enough of my own knowledge that I found myself asking if there really such a thing as a prison rodeo, or if this was a feature of the fantastical environment that Onyebuchi was creating, however morbid a feature it may be. I

would hardly have been surprised if they were real. I read this book in July 2020, and with the fervor of police brutality I saw day in and day out, the stories my family told of relatives dead and alive, with all the things I'd seen, I didn't expect to be shocked. Indeed, I wasn't shocked by what I learned when I stopped reading the novel and googled for more information to confirm what I already suspected.

The interesting object, I noted, was my dislocation from the genre of the book I was reading. The term 'speculative' to describe an impossible, unlikely, or even just strange phenomena had slipped. Science fiction (SF) in this text did not suggest a break from reality that is usually emblematic of the genre. A stranger than fiction element had arisen, one that I suspected was in fact real, but in a science fiction context, had become so surreal I wasn't confident enough to name it one way or another, truly surreal all over again for a form of violence I had somehow found a way to make normal in my mind. A prison rodeo in a speculative fiction story could be literal or metaphorical to the untrained eye. The cruelty of it could be too cruel for reality, comparable to the horror of John Carpenter's *The Thing* or the unnatural torment of a sci-fi dystopia cast into the distant future. Yet such was not the case, and the strange truth stood out in the strange fiction that was a supposedly imaginary narrative. The border between realism and speculation emmeshed to focus on truth, regardless of what the object of the story was. Even if I had learned that prison rodeos were not real, for Onyebuchi's purposes, they still would have been real or made real. The purpose of speculative literature, in this author's configuration, was not to portray an imaginary scenario. At best, it was simply to portray an eventuality or an equally likely development that hadn't happened yet, but in this case, Onyebuchi was portraying a reality so strange that reading it in an SF context made that reality seem strange again.

This dissertation analyzes the landscape of contemporary Black American science fiction through the texts of three of the genre's foremost authors: Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and N.K. (Nora Kieta) Jemisin. Each has been a prominent writer in her own right through the end of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, with Butler and Hopkinson doing their major work in the early nineties and the late aughts, and with N.K. Jemisin starting her writing career at the beginning of the twenty-tens. Consequently, all three women have subverted the moniker 'sci-fi' to accommodate the lived realities of Black marginalized bodies, and I argue, foreground reality in a genre that usually foregrounds non-mimetic phenomena. These authors have similarly emphasized Black narrative storytelling in their emphasis on characters of color, reenactments of historical events, and attentiveness to the ongoing dehumanization of nonwhite, nonmale, and/or neurodivergent persons in future and speculative settings. It is through this reshaping and reorienting of the genre on a mass-cultural stage that this study assumes in depth.

In the past few years, science fiction studies has taken an intentional turn to closer examine the role of Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color (BIPOC) in its literature¹. This has included examining how racial coding of alien and othered beings can reinforce stereotypes, but critically this has warranted a deeper examination of the work of BIPOC SF authors and BIPOC SF readers. By dissecting the fundamental makeup of SF, many scholars of color like Grace Dillon, Isiah Lavender, and Joy Sanchez-Taylor have found the conventional definitions of what makes science fiction 'sci-fi' insufficient, especially as it applies to the idea that a reader is estranged from reality by necessity of entering into a speculative world, and that that supposedly imaginary world can even be considered otherworldly.

¹ The Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA) and the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts (IAFA) have each centered their annual conferences on a combination indigeneity, Afrofuturism, and coloniality on at least two occasions in the last five years, including the 2019 SFRA conference for which Nalo Hopkinson was keynote speaker.

Past frameworks for science fiction study and critique have focused primarily on the distance speculative texts put between real and surreal phenomena in their narratives. Speculative, in this context, would be comparable to any non-mimetic form, which Marek Oziwicz famously defined as a divorce from what represents the real, that which fails to ‘mimic’ the world with which we’re familiar. Mimetic or realist forms, on the other hand, would operate in line with what the reader would expect from the world with which they’re familiar without any magical or technological phenomena that bear no resemblance to real objects. Along similar lines, Darko Suvin, by and large considered to be one of the originators of SF theory and study coined the term cognitive estrangement to describe what was and wasn’t science fiction. He defined cognitive estrangement in a rather on-the-nose way as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (7-8). Estrangement, in this regard, amounts to simply a displacement from one’s familiar setting and the rules therein, essentially messing with the cognitive assumptions of the audience. A genre that would depend on estranging the reader (or more colloquially taking them to another world) would constitute an estranging genre, like science fiction or fantasy.

Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin are emerging and re-emerging at a critical cultural moment where the question of what SF is meant to do and what fits its criteria is becoming a fulcrum conversation. The idea of disconnecting or pulling away from a set reality is not present in any of their texts. In fact, even as each text incorporates imaginary or otherworldly aspects, the core of the narrative will focus majorly on the realist experiences of characters experiencing bigotry, violence, and isolation. The succinct chronology at play between these authors, each

writing less than two decades apart, creates a uniquely intimate conversation that concentrates the themes of each text and makes their ideas more pronounced. By focusing on health disparities, racial formation, mixed race, posthumanism, state brutality, etc. at the turn of the century, we are provided with a time capsule of how SF was responding to its present moment and incorporating more non-mimetic aspects. This dissertation is meant as a contribution to that ongoing dialogue and a reframing of theoretical and critical discourse for critical race theorists and science fiction scholars alike.

I argue that Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin reapproach science fiction at a base level by shifting the center stage away from the speculative into the limited realities of the present. The speculative aspects of these novels are almost identical to the retellings of real historical events and phenomena each author chose to make her focus. All three artists are interested in the question of what constitutes humanness and who determines or fails to determine the value of human life, with special emphasis on Black experience as a form of social death. Each text I examine deals very specifically with the displacement, dehumanization, and disruption of bodies oppressed by outside forces against the backdrop of technological marvels. Bodies placed on the line between objectification by other beings and actualization as fully realized subjects devise new modes and languages of resistance that seem to make dehumanization strange again, essentially weirding violence in an SF context. Rather than a form of speculative literature driven by fantastic visions of the possible, these authors use realism and mimetic representations of history to make the reader aware of the ongoing limits on select persons that often make living impossible even as survival keeps bodies alive. These limits are explicitly based in past and present actualities for marginalized flesh with speculative futurity almost serving a decorative purpose.

However, the second and equally important piece at play in Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin is their rejection of pure pessimism in favor of reading certain kinds of disruptions, like uprising and apocalypse, as new opportunities for resistive joy and new imaginaries. In essence, by approaching SF storytelling through a particular attention to the antithesis of speculation (realism, mimesis, etc.), contemporary Black women authors draw new limits for the genre. These limits can better evaluate and develop critical race theories and critical speculative theories like futurity and estrangement at the same time.

I also argue that SF is uniquely positioned as a genre to enter into a conversation on Blackness and being. While adjacent speculative genres are equally poised to address how the imaginary functions as refuge, relief, and a stage for resistance, particularly as it applies to Afro-surrealism, there is an ever-present futurity to SF that insists on some level of progress and achievement to exist. Even alternate timelines, which propose different possibilities or divergences in past and present histories usually submit ways in which our world could be improved. It is the inherent optimism of SF that distills the key aspects of each field.

In the past few years, there have been several conversations on how readers of color experience SF texts differently as it applies to estrangement. A common thread follows the inability of the genre's baseline philosophy to fully capture life for persons of color, LGBTQ+, and other people on the margins. Certain problems arise for peoples who are already estranged in a manner of speaking from the real worlds in which they live, so much so in fact, that scholar Seo-Young Chu suggested a complete alternative take on SF as a genre; that SF is in fact hyperreality because of the work it takes to create a new world, making everything that happens within an SF narrative realistic in some way, shape, or form. By inserting reality at the fulcrum

of SF, scholars of color have opened the door to revitalized possibilities for writing and framing that don't always center on estrangement or futurity.

As put aptly by Black SF scholar Isaiah Lavender III, Black Americans throughout history have been living as persons read through the lens of science fiction (as in Social Darwinism, the science of outlandish stereotypes, etc.) and marginalized by science-fictionesque, bordering on dystopian rules (sundown towns, segregation, etc.) A minstrel show, for example, in its stranger than fiction donning of a Jim Crow caricature may cross over into surrealism or SF to the uninformed outsider but is simply the reality of living and having lived in the US as a black person. If the genre of SF is supposed to be understood as the literature of non-reality or estrangement, how does it converse with authors and readers who are already estranged? To be estranged from one's environment and struggling to cognitively rectify the real from the unreal is, under the best of circumstances, meant to motivate a desire for change in the estranged reader. In the writing of this work, I found myself longing to illustrate how the slip between realist representations and speculative representations may necessitate new reading scripts and languages BIPOC readers and authors.

When I argue that Black SF is doing radically different work and reframing speculative fiction as the genre of limitations, I refer primarily to the breach of definition many such stories choose to take. SF is considered speculative and non-mimetic (imagined and not representative of the 'real' world). Black SF toys with speculation, but almost always comes back to a real analogous event, oftentimes the real event itself. Mimesis is the expectation for the authors I'm examining, based in the belief that art however farfetched will keep with the principles of the lived reality of Black flesh. The authors I examine in this study acknowledge any forward momentum and advance in passing, paying quiet lip service to spaceships and medical miracles.

Where the spectacle of the future is usually in part the core focus of SF, Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin choose to foreground the human cost of the future, and question whether ‘future’ is worth distinguishing from what came before. What happens to those individuals who are designated a technology in service to a technological future? Their worlds feature organ harvesting, human batteries, enslavement, genetic manipulation, forced reproduction, and far worse in such a way that the glamor of a sterile colder technology fades. Rather, the limitations put upon characters, whether they be physical, social, or emotional take center stage.

Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin do not stand alone in the lineage of Black science fiction. Interestingly enough, it could be posited that early Black speculative fiction came as direct response to the colonialist framework of early genre fiction, namely in the form of the lost world genre. The lost world, featuring a typically white male or group of white male protagonists being washed ashore in a new world and forced to grapple with their environment, was meant to inspire a sense of awe and wanderlust in the reader, as a parallel to an age of imperialism in the West hellbent on ‘discovering’ supposedly ‘new’ worlds here on Earth. Spearheading the deconstruction of this era of writing, arguably heralded by H.G. Wells’ distinctly anti-colonialist *War of the Worlds*, were turn-of-the-century Black American authors Sutton Griggs and Pauline Hopkins. Although hugely distinct writers, one known for his unflinching realist depictions of violence and the other for her romanticist and classical style of serial storytelling alongside less bloody but no less impactful scenes of Black life, Griggs and Hopkins wrote extensively on alternative frameworks and visages of Black American futurity. For both authors, the future took the form of a tension between total rejection of white American values and culture and the ongoing hope that Blacks will one day be granted dignity and safety in the US, in spite of its racist origins. In *Imperio and Imperium*, Griggs conceives of a group of Black men rebelling

against the violent lynchings of the South through the formation of a new nation, a nation enemy to the US. Similarly, Hopkins' *Of One Blood* imagines a world apart from the US in Africa, where native Africans remain untouched by racism and colonialism to which Black Americans may one day return and live in peace.

In both these instances, the escapist sentiment of early speculative fiction and science fiction is palpable, yet not in contrast to the more modern writers discussed in this dissertation. The desire to escape an extremely violent era in American history is similarly far from dated, and far from censured in modern Black speculative storytelling. Rather, Griggs and Hopkins pioneered the sentiment that Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin would go on to elucidate further; the sure knowledge that the strangeness of everyday life under oppressive circumstances is not nearly as odd as the fiction, be it a group of Black men assembling to at last assert their personhood, or an upper-class passing man traveling across oceans to escape a life of surveillance and fear. If any one author were to have more of a concrete kinship with early Black speculative fiction, it would likely be Octavia Butler, not simply due to her being the earliest writer, but moreover insofar as Butler's characters are habitually swept away wanderers seeking meaning, even as that meaning is contradictory to their social circle.

Dawn, as we will later discuss, plays out very much in line with the otherworldliness of earlier forms fused with a desire for resistance and peace simultaneously. Butler's Lilith is actualized to her environment as a stranger, essentially a stand-in for the reader, and grapples with the shared horror and wonder of a new world she wishes to know better, even as there lies and old world she would love to protect. In this same spirit, Nalo Hopkinson and Sutton Griggs share a commitment to realism and to pure horror that could only truly arise from a genealogy of Black protest novels in conjunction with the body horror of New Wave science fiction. Film and

short story work to create their horror through shocking circumstances, whereas Griggs and Hopkinson utilize situations that were already shocking. Either way, the horror stands as equally impactful.

As it applies to N.K. Jemisin, it is instantly evident that she draws influence from more science fiction artists than it is reasonable to count, including but not limited to the vivid imagery in all of her works that evokes Afrofuturist aesthetics like the Parliament Funk ship in *The Stone Sky* and her casual slang and improvisational style that invites comparisons to artists like Sun-Ra and even a little Sugarhill Gang. Even so, I would cite one of Jemisin's key science fiction predecessors as Ursula LeGuin. While not a Black author, Jemisin has responded more directly to LeGuin's work, namely LeGuin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", than any other author, even more than Octavia Butler two whom she is most often compared. Jemisin has habitually resisted the idea the suffering is a strictly necessary part of life, although it does often show up, and that optimism, even against atrocious circumstances, is seen in LeGuin's world building at a base level and character building on a superficial level, particularly in her novel *Left Hand of Darkness*. Jemisin and LeGuin's recharacterization of suffering alongside Jemisin's keen awareness of Black literary traditions casts the latter's work as more of a reconstruction project than an imaginative suggestion. In the case of all three authors, Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin are very much attentive to the world of those who preceded them with a particular emphasis on rewriting the functions of their genres along the lines of what constitutes the weird and surreal.

The main goals of this project are threefold. Firstly, I aim to assess how Black-authored narratives challenge, affirm, and/or speak to conventional notions of SF. Towards the beginning of her career, Octavia Butler received correspondence from a reader asking what science fiction

did for black people. In response, Butler wrote back in her anthology *Bloodchild and Other Stories* answering the question with another question: “What good is science fiction’s thinking about the present, the future and the past?” In the same spirit, this project is historical, characterizing the cultural landscape of the 90’s, 00’s, and 2010’s that shaped the creation of these works, and most critically, the long history of black art, tradition, and discourse that have formed contemporary SF thought consciously and unconsciously. I document how Black SF has spoken back to the racial realities of its time and shaped speculative fiction around a present moment. We must fundamentally reorient our conception of what SF is in the wake of how Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin have framed limit. Even within these limits, though, there are new forms of imagination, joy, and interconnectedness that the language of the otherworldly cannot always accommodate.

Secondly, this project seeks to determine whether the language of limit yields a constructive reading of SF. Limit in this context is reminiscent of philosopher Georg Hegel’s understanding of the limit as the definition of an object or thing, in the same way that an antithesis defines the thesis in a dialectic. Dialectic here, often construed as two oppositional forces meeting and coming to a middle ground, is more about those two objects defining one another and necessitating one another whilst perceiving the other as something entirely different. In the most common example, the master requires a slave to be a master, and the slave requires a master to be a slave. Such is the comparable principle for limits. The circumference is the limit of a circle and, were the circumference to take on any other qualities or fail to be equidistant from the center at any given point, the object would cease to be a circle or better yet, cease to be an object at all and become blank space. The circle’s border is the definition of the circle, not the inside ‘contents’ of the circle itself. It is defined by what it is not, the boundaries it cannot

exceed. In the same way, examining what constitutes a limit in a genre or mode of writing is to examine what defines that mode of writing. I've elected to pull from this older framework for a contemporary American literature study for the simple reason that this brand of dialectical thinking continues to shape much of how SF (and indeed, many other modern genres) chooses to define itself. This is so much the case that a far-right group of SF fans dubbed the Sad Puppies tried to eliminate Jemisin's second Hugo Award Win in 2018 by the insistence that her work was not 'true science fiction.' SF in this haphazard configuration then is limitless until an author, namely a woman of color, chooses to incorporate an unfamiliar or uncomfortable aspect of reality. Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin foreground realist and mimetic frameworks in a genre commonly defined as non-real and non-mimetic.

This is not to say that the non-real, non-mimetic, or cognitive estrangement frameworks cannot be explored well, only that it requires some mitigation. My definition of SF and a reframing of cognitive estrangement are borrowed mostly from Dr. Joy Sanchez-Taylor, who suggested a new form of estrangement emerges called double estrangement in her book *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction by Authors of Color*. In her introduction, Sanchez-Taylor defines double estrangement as the meeting ground between Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement and W.E.B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness. DuBois's reading of double consciousness emphasizes two critical realities implicit to the black experience; the inability to be recognized in a sphere of reality wherein one might perceive herself and be perceived similarly to her understanding of herself, and the nebulous stereotypes and roles overlaying the black body from the outside, see the minstrel show example. Likewise, the veil, DuBois describes, is the fracture between how a black person sees themselves and how the white American world sees the black person. This fracture forces a black individual to be doubly

conscious of who the world sees them as (for their own safety) and who they know themselves as, however contradictory as those two visions may be.

Sanchez-Taylor takes the idea that readers go to SF and the speculative to experience a world similar enough to their own with a few outside differences, like technology and time period, and the idea that upon ‘returning’ to the real world, they may find that they have consciously or unconsciously adapted a new outlook on their society as compared to the fiction of the other world. However, when double consciousness is taken into account as a perpetual form of estrangement, rather than being an unconscious process, POC authors and readers go to SF texts intentionally to get confirmation as to the strangeness of their experiences. Seeing the oppression of Orogenes in the harsh environment of *The Fifth Season* is not meant to feel otherworldly, or at least not *that* otherworldly, nor is the environment meant to feel limitless. Rather, limit is the end goal of Jemisin’s work, by means of its connections and ties to real world societal ills. It is almost a mathematical phenomenon: estranging an already estranged marginalized experience brings the reader back to reality in the midst of the speculative.

Normalized violence begins to feel estranged in the world that normalized it. Setting the language of limit against the language of the limitless is particularly critical for a genre like SF, wherein a cursory Google search for definitions of science fiction will yield more iterations of ‘limitless’ and ‘possibility’ than tangibles like ‘robot’, ‘alien’, or ‘spaceship’. Curiously enough, it is a definitional hazard scholars struggle to escape from even when they would like to. Diana Mafe, author of *Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before*, debates the merits of limitless language in SF, simultaneously aware of the very real limitations for black female characters but likewise recognizing that, at least in theory, SF works best “as a subgenre of speculative fiction ... as fiction that stretch[es] the limits of imagination and plausibility” (2).

‘Limitless’ has become a convenient signifier for the author’s ability to write eventualities we see as less likely. In pursuing this topic, I aim to demonstrate that defining SF as limited in the way Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin put into practice does little to undermine the unique flavor of the genre and the potentialities that lie in speculative fiction. If anything, the language of limitation expands those possibilities.

Finally, this dissertation is interested in an ongoing conversation between Afro-Pessimism and Afrofuturism on a meta-level. Afro-Pessimism as defined by Frank Wilderson III is less a theory and more an interpretive lens that centers anti-Blackness as one of Western societies key defining traits, hence inescapable so long as society depends on it. This psychological mass addiction to anti-Blackness renders Black persons in a state of perpetual social and death; read as less than human so that ‘real’ humans can understand themselves as not Black, therefore genuinely worthwhile (1-2). Jared Sexton similarly frames Afro-Pessimism as shifting the conversation around racism away from white supremacy into anti-Blackness, essentially making racism a matter of proximity to Blackness as a marker of how well of an individual is and isn’t². Afro-Pessimism as a framework insists on the ontological separation between Blackness and humanness, which, while significant to a project engaged in losing and regaining humanity, does not easily allow for that aspiration towards restorative modes of being that Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin are interested in. Even Jemisin, who has vocalized an affinity for Afro-Pessimism and engaged with the question of whether or not ‘human’ is a

² Consequently, Sexton’s framework has transferred over into a similarly dogmatic understanding of Critical Mixed Race Studies, which he described in his aptly-titled book *Amalgamation Schemes* as complicit in a conservative project of anti-blackness that privileges multiracial identity over what whites would dub “radical blackness”, and participates in a project of anti-blackness and normative sexuality, the co-opting of which stands to undo many of the gains of the Civil Rights Movement (4).

signifier worth pursuing (as we will explore later) habitually insists on the need to hope, recognize one's life and value even as others fail to do so, and to transform society for the better.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Afrofuturism as been most frequently defined as the inclusion of Blackness in future settings and with future aesthetics. For our purposes here, I will be drawing influence from Reynaldo Anderson and defining Afrofuturism as the rectification of past and present Blackness in the future, dealing with relevant issues as well as unique possibilities for ongoing representation (viii). While not explicitly optimistic, there is a sheen on Afrofuturism that some believe to be ignorant of black historical realities, if not divorced from the reality of the present completely³. This project will not engage with either of these frameworks as a movement, or even explicitly as a lens through which to interpret Hopkinson, Butler, and Jemisin. However, the ideas and themes central to Afro-Pessimism and Futurism are undeniably relevant to the texts in question, and often dialogue with topics like posthumanism, race and/as technology, futurity as utopia/dystopia, apocalypse, and hybridity. Even as I do not engage strictly with the main tenets of these two schools of thought, their influence is worth acknowledging even though we'll be focusing more of our attentions on the intersection between Blackness, SF, and the making of the human. Afro-Pessimism's framing of blackness in the wake and social death feeds on the possibility or impossibility of blackness as life or reframed outside of physical signifiers (as we'll see again in Jemisin). Afrofuturism encompasses each author's desire to situate and create imaginative possibilities for their characters of color.

³ Ironically, any Afrofuturist scholar worth their salt wouldn't dare conflate futurity with a lack of historicity. To quote Lavender again, who defines Afrofuturism as "a transhistorical method that rereads [Black-authored texts] as if they were genre SF, highlighting the way the black experience in America and around the world has always been an experience of spatial and temporal dislocation and disorientation" (2) or even to go back to one of the original sources, Mark Dery's 1993 "Black to the Future" for the seminal question of Afrofuturism: can a people with a erased and censored past and a hostile present possibly imagine futures? (180) At a baseline, Afrofuturism answers yes, and tells the reader how. We have no evidence that the future won't be as surreal as the past and the present. In fact, living in the present would suggest the contrary. This is where futurism is vital, even though I argue it ought not be the dominant framework for Black SF reading.

Underlying both forms are the stakes of considering the future or studying futurity. Butler, Hopkinson, and Jemisin paint futures that are neither pure utopias or pure dystopias. The quality of the future in these works is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, as both joy and misery alike are byproducts of Black life.

Healing from Recovery: Restoring Sites of Medical Violence in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) critiques the supposed inferiority of indigenous medicines and calls attention to the impossibility of an ethical medical practice that not only degrades patients, but relies on their suffering. The story follows a young Black-Caribbean mother named Ti-Jeanne living in a shelled-out inner city Toronto. In Hopkinson's not-so-remote future, the poor live in fear of having their organs harvested by the rich, and hospitals are seen as places of death. It is only through learning to practice Yoruba, communing with the gods, and performing empathetic care that the protagonists survive the forces against them.

In spite of the mass suffering surrounding them, the rich, predominantly white government outside of the city praises the advances in modern medicine that could theoretically enable organ harvesting from live animals, essentially growing five to six compatible hearts in pigs for later use. Western medicine is perpetually framed as 'this close' to perfection throughout the narrative, whilst being completely devoid of empathy. Similarly, the trials run on the poor as test subjects and involuntary donors strongly evoke real world atrocities such as the Tuskegee Experiment, the work of J. Marion Sims, and the covert 'discovery' of HeLa cells. On a more positive note, Hopkinson likewise demonstrates the power of a restorative care that derives from indigenous medicine and home practices as an equally viable alternative to the trauma of some

forms of Western medicine, similarly paralleling the historical importance of enslaved black healers and modern black doulas in communities of color. While seemingly benign on the surface level, Hopkinson is making a drastic intervention into the genre of SF. I will explore how the character of “Doctor” (apart from being overwhelmingly white and male) typically plays the essential role of enforcing a sense of objectivity, propriety, and indispensability in their profession. In shows like *Star Trek*, books like *I Robot*, and films like *The Thing*, the propriety and trustworthiness of the doctor figure is meant to be inscrutable even in the most questionable situations, so much so that a violation of a code of ethics isn’t necessarily grounds for disciplinary action. The fallibility of Hopkinson’s healers, on the other hand, is critical not only to their practice, but to their ability to empathize with their patients.

The limits of healing and recovery are laid out very clearly in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, not just by way of critiquing Western medicine’s dogmatic solution-based matrix, but also by way of questioning whether or not recovery is even a helpful framework in healing. Characters experience major trauma and heal gradually without a destination. Ti-Jeanne is still left broken by her experiences throughout the novel, but only slightly less so come the final chapter. The emphasis is on a journey, not a cure, runs contrary to most forms of modern medicine and even therapy. Recovery is often framed as a goal in discourse, the ultimate end as well as what patients/victims are entitled to. Hopkinson presents evidence for healing as a critical growth step for her characters, but refrains from including recovery, echoing an Afro-Pessimist sentiment that the afterlife of slavery cannot be paired with the reality of being rendered raw materials and socially dead. Black healing and black joy are essential yet must be divorced from recovery. Hopkinson better frames living in the wake, to borrow Christina Sharpe’s term, as constant

healing mixed with constant relief without the expectation that the afflicted must ‘get over’ the suffering that ails them.

(De)Construct: Mixed Race and Belonging in Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling*

In this chapter, I argue that Octavia Butler’s construct characters stand in as analogies for mixed race identifying persons in an SF context. This exploration of mixed race in SF teases out some of the ongoing conversations around mixed identity scholarly communities have discussed in the last few decades; namely, whether or not mixed race around Black/white intersections is a valid identity given the history of America’s one-drop rule. Butler is in conversation with this question, though she doesn’t answer it directly, and rather focuses on how the hope for the future, often inscribed onto mixed bodies as the emblem of a post racial, neoliberal society, falls short. In the end, it is the way that Butler’s construct characters resist the roles assigned to them that best fosters change, while likewise speaking back to the benefits of self-identifying along Black/white mixed communities as a means of augmenting one’s relationship to Blackness, not undermining it.

The Xenogenesis trilogy begins a couple hundred years after the destruction of Earth at the hands of its warring inhabitants. A 28-year old black woman named Lilith awakes on an alien ship and is informed that the aliens (called Oankali) have saved a select few humans in exchange for their compliance. The Oankali would like to reproduce with the humans, effectively breeding the hatred and hierarchical thinking out of their population, at least so they claim. Conversely, the contradiction of being human (a human is intelligent but hierarchical, according to the Oankali, and thus perpetually doomed to failure) is not seen as a contradiction or a flaw at all by many of the humans, who resist Oankali domination. In the middle of it all are the children of

Oankali and human parents called constructs, who are trying to find their place in the world their parents both create and destroy, depending on whose perspective you ask.

I focus on the Xenogenesis Trilogy primarily, with reference to *Fledgling* as a control. *Fledgling* has often been read for similar themes as Xenogenesis, and features much more blatant metaphors for mixed race. I also explore how mixed race has manifested in SF specifically, typically as a form of anxiety around a ‘pure’ body becoming contaminated. In Xenogenesis, human resister colonies make their fear of contagion obvious by fleeing the alien, attempting to kill them, and most importantly refusing to have children with them. The alien’s anxiety manifests more covertly, in their meticulous handling of construct births until they’re deemed ‘safe’ from their hierarchical tendencies. They refuse to grant humans autonomy or the ability to produce children outside of unions with them, and are even hesitant around their own construct children, whose true natures may reveal themselves in surprising ways. These children or ‘constructs’ are products of a great contradiction, manifesting intelligence but risking hierarchical thinking, human yet not human, us yet not ‘us’. There are more contradictions at play here than just the one, and in those contradictions lie an even larger and more critical subject; the characters and people onto which these tensions are projected. Contamination and contradiction meet at the nexus of experience, as the Oankali-human constructs grapple with being read as belonging, as outsiders, as clean and as contaminated, but no matter what, never ever as safe.

“The Earth Will Be Just Fine”: Personhood and/as Posthumanism in N.K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth Trilogy

Finally, N.K. Jemisin reframes a critical debate around humanness in SF and critical posthumanism as it relates to the moniker of ‘human’ being an aspirational term. Throughout the trilogy, Jemisin demonstrates how marginalized peoples have always been denied their humanity, and as such have been perpetually subject to a form of post humanity that is neither novel nor revolutionary. Rather, it is in rejecting the categorical human classification as anything worthwhile that Jemisin’s characters find freedom and re-engage with their own personhood. Strong links between Blackness as a form of social death and the fictional orogene people as monstrous underlies much of this conversation.

The Broken Earth trilogy (2015-2017) follows the woman Damaya/Syenite/Essun through three major phases of her life as she takes on three different names/identities in an effort to come to terms with her cruel world. As an orogene, she is given the power to control the tectonic plates below the Earth, but because of her great power, the world fears her and those like her and oppresses them. In the wake of several escalating horrors, Essun takes action against those who wronged her alongside several other orogenes. Meanwhile, the debate as to whether or not humanity is worth saving rages on in the foreground and the background. The orogenes have been made literally and figuratively into a technology, so much so that many of their children are partially lobotomized and hooked up to wired generators to serve as ‘human’ sensors for oncoming earthquakes; essentially they are little more than a machine component.

In this regard, the utter dehumanization of the orogenes is meant as a clear parallel to black and native enslavement in the US, with a particular emphasis on the forced breeding practices that ensued in the Antebellum South and the use of black bodies as disposable chattel and technology (tools) for an economic purpose. With dehumanization as a critical ingredient to their oppression, the characters (and by proxy their author) question the value of ‘human’ as an

ontological category for persons so thoroughly made into tools. The perception of the oppressed renders their bodies akin to technology, virtually non-sentient in the eyes of their oppressors, and any intelligence the oppressor is willing to grant their subjects is perceived as artificial, a parroting of the true intelligence of actual humans with worthwhile lives. The aftermath of being human is neither speculative nor grandiose. ‘Post human’ taken as literally as possible is simply a reality for those who have been denied the rights of a human being. This is where the question of personhood becomes interesting.

Personhood in Jemisin is rightly divorced from traditional transhumanist and posthumanist philosophies. I will be elucidating how historical and modern perceptions of transhumanism in SF fall short in capturing the full picture of an ‘after-human’ project, and gesture to the need for a new category that includes life rendered socially unhuman but still undeniably are people. As a subset of posthumanism, transhumanism has historically been one of the more popular SF concepts despite its troubled association with eugenics. The selection of desirable traits ‘worth saving’ has rightfully garnered critique from disability scholars and critical race theorists. Even posthumanism, meant as a response to human-centric thinking, risks blurring the lines between animal and human in a way that harkens back to the historic animalization of BIPOC, disabled, etc. bodies.

Transhumanism and posthumanism have to some degree neglected the realities of racism, sexism, and bias in its striving for a non-corporeal future. Critical, then, is Jemisin’s invention around personhood and which persons have been rendered tools/technologies. Moreover, in being so rendered as ‘nonhuman’ technologies, a form of posthumanism has already come by way of what is allowed to be human or not.

Losing our bodies as they are was never the problem. Jemisin makes clear that the aftermath of our corporeal forms or even our individual consciousnesses still leaves open the possibility of racialized bias insofar as race can be defined as physical difference. The main character Essun undergoes several changes from her name eventually her transition from what species to another, but the emphasis on her personhood is a critical throughline that disrupts her 'humanity' as a worthwhile descriptor. Furthermore, framing resistance in terms of a singularity echoes real-world conversations that make consciousness tantamount to wakefulness, while likewise reconstituting race and racism as technologies and emphasizing the importance of collapse and rebellion as a means of ongoing development.

Framing science fiction as the literature of limit is meant to explicitly remind the reader of the limitations of our own lived reality. If the core benefit of cognitive estrangement was to return to our own world and recognize similarities, the language of limit is meant to take us to a speculative text and frustrate us with how little things have changed and to motivate us towards real world transformation. Ideally, SF literature would be limitless, or at least less limited. It is a thing worth striving for. Yet because all literature, speculative or realist, must reflect its society, so too must the limits of that society be discussed.

Healing from Recovery: Restoring Sites of Medical Violence in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*

In her book *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, Esther Jones revisits an old Catholic legend of two doctors coming to a small town to find many people in need of their services. Among them is a white man in need of a gangrenous leg amputation. However, per the legend, endowed by divine knowledge, the two doctors Saint Cosmas and Saint Darian are given clear instructions on how to transplant a leg from a recently deceased Black man, dubbed a 'moor' or an 'Ethiop' per the language of Medieval Europe pre-Islam. The leg transplant is a success, and the Miracle of the Black Leg was christened. Black medical humanities scholars have observed this scene and its depiction for some time. In most visual art depictions, the dead Black man is seen off to the side, discarded after his use is through as the living rejoice around him. In a total rejection of bodily autonomy or respect for the dead, the leg of the dead man is often seen animated by the live man as he awakes. One of the more famous depictions of the event displays the white man rousing from a fevered sleep in a bed to smiling faces, while the body of the black man lies on the floor slumped over, devoid of any use value and hence unworthy of respect in the eyes of the doctors. Esther Jones asks quite simply of these depictions "Who was this 'Ethiop'? How did his body become available for harvesting? Was he alive or dead during the transplantation?" (94). It is not so much material that answers to these questions would at all alleviate the unnerving callousness with which the Black body is discarded, but rather that such questions over the course of centuries and canonization in the Catholic Church as a miracle were never asked or engaged. With a keen eye on the resources Western medicine has sought to rob from the Black body and an overwhelming focus on the life and prosperity of select populations, author Nalo Hopkinson addresses the limitations to the

health care system as is, with a special attention for other radical possibilities that could redefine the lines between care and recovery for Black and other marginalized persons.

Of all Nalo Hopkinson's works, her first novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* has the most in common with the society we inhabit in the early 21st century. Outside of the fantastical inclusion of Yoruba gods and voodoo magic, the setting is one with which many people are already familiar. Gentrification, poverty, total lack of medical access, organized crime, and early pregnancy & parenthood are equal parts of a narrative that sometimes seems to put its speculative aspects on hold, although it always brings them back. The role of the fantastic is to gesture to alternate possibilities beyond despair and death, but there's something equally fantastical about the kindness the protagonists elect to show one another in the face of difficult circumstances. *Brown Girl in the Ring* is not a 'comfortable' dystopia, utilizing the trappings of an oppressive system but very intentionally couching any despair or frustration the main characters feel in hope and resistive joy. While Hopkinson operates and engages with the study of the flesh, biopolitics, and the Black body rendered capital, I will be arguing that her key intervention into those fields lies in the restorative medical practices headed by majorly Black women in their communities. Similarly, Hopkinson reframes traditional Western medicine and the figure of the doctor less as the most knowledgeable informants to the human body and more as a form of knowledge severely lacking an understanding of healing.

Engaging with Hopkinson in this manner hardly begets new territory. Scholars like Esther Jones, Harriet Washington, and Dorothy Roberts have made field-altering contributions studying Black medical atrocities, alternative medicines in marginalized communities, and inherited trauma and weathering that impacts the long-term health outcomes of Black women and men, and I will be discussing their work in depth. However, while Jones and a handful of

other scholars have examined Black medicine and experimentation on the Black body in science fiction (SF), the differences between a conventional Western understanding of recovery and a more fluid understanding like healing haven't been as explicitly elucidated. I will be looking at how the idea of recovery in and of itself begets many assumptions on the severity of the initial injury, whether that injury is physiological or psychological. I will also be observing how situations where recovery is impossible are approached by traditional and non-traditional medical practitioners, intersecting somewhat with disability studies, but more focused on the notion of accelerated healing and results-based care. The intermingling between bodies as capital for their organs and other raw material, the commercialization and obscene profit margin of privatized health care, and the overwhelming lack of access for marginalized groups to receive care in the first place all contribute towards Hopkinson's framing of a not-so-futuristic health care practice that gleefully mirrors the capitalist society of which it is a part. Here I emphasize the ways in which traditional medicine can and has called attention to its proximity to progress rather than its actual achievements within and outside speculative fiction. Hopkinson illustrates how the language of forward momentum and the inscrutability of the doctor figure disallows any possibility of critique and furthers a tension between alternative and state-supported medicine. In contrast, the language of healing and its attention to an ongoing process shifts medicine and care from the exterior to the interior, recognizing the limits of recovery (achievable for some, but unachievable for many) and redefining what it means to be 'unwell'.

In an interview with Alondra Nelson in 2002, Nalo Hopkinson, in answer to a question on why she chose to write SF responded: "As a child, I just vaguely knew that I wanted to write stories that transcended the quotidian 'life sucks and then you die'" (Nelson 98). Hopkinson was comparing mimetic forms of literature (realist storytelling that seeks to reproduce real-world

possibilities, encounters, history, etc.) and non-mimetic forms like SF and speculative fiction. While she emphasized that she respected realist fiction and did not want to undermine its importance, even going as far as to characterize all fiction as imaginative, SF in her mind represented a nexus point where the impossible could be made possible. In fact, that was the entire point of SF in the first place. Hopkinson gave this interview not long after the popularization of the term Afrofuturism to describe the long-reaching potentialities of Black visual, writing, music, and representation beyond just the present moment. Her framing of SF as emphatically imaginary becomes interesting against her equally strong commitment to portraying the realist aspects of the Black experience in nearly all her novels.

Brown Girl in the Ring is set in a post-apocalyptic version of Toronto, where massive economic and environmental fallout in the middle of the city led to supply chain shortages, and later riots. The violence of these riots escalated beyond the point of the city's control, and soon the rich denizens of the city began to flee outside of the Burn, as the center is called, to the outer suburbs, leaving the poorest and most disenfranchised stuck. These Burn residents are unable to cross borders into the rest of the town except by extenuating circumstances, and begin to develop their own economy and politics, built mostly around mob law and bartering. The kingpin of this town is Ruby, a West Indies immigrant and violent magic user who holds his victims hostage by possessing their bodies and wills. Unbeknownst to the reader initially, he is in fact the estranged grandfather of the main character Ti-Jeanne and the ex-husband of her grandmother, Gros-Jeanne. Ti-Jeanne is a young teenage mother who had a child by one of Ruby's cronies, Tony, a former nurse who was overtaken by drug addiction. Ti-Jeanne's main desire at the beginning of the story is to have a life with Tony, putting her into conflict with Gros-Jeanne who distrusts him. Gros-Jeanne is known to have healing powers and the spiritual intuition to know who

means well and who means harm, due in no small part to her intense connection with the Yoruba spirits of her homeland religion. The plot begins in full force when a wealthy outsider from the Angel of Mercy Hospitals approaches Ruby seeking a human heart for transplant into the dying Premier (Prime Minister/Mayor) of Toronto. Angel of Mercy Hospitals are known for being predatory in their supposed care for their patients, often ignoring poor people in need of medical assistance until after they've passed and their organs are viable for harvesting. It is fully known and understood by the citizens of the Burn that the state system of medical care is not for them, and that the ironically named hospital trucks that go through their neighborhoods are basically only omens of death. Having both worked at one such hospital in the past, Gros-Jeanne and Tony have a particularly tense relationship with Angel of Mercy, albeit in opposite directions. Where Gros-Jeanne sees the evil taking place and rejects it in favor of a home practice, Tony is often seen fighting for the respect and stability he had at his old job before he was fired for being a buff (drug) addict. The representative of Angel of Mercy that approaches Ruby asks for a heart by any means necessary, and Ruby agrees to obtain it.

From there, the narrative follows Ti-Jeanne's efforts to work around the powers that be who would seek her body for capital in one way or another. The bildungsroman form of the story is straightforward in a way that calls particular attention to the characters, their desires, and key for this conversation, their bodies and their intentions to harm or to heal. Every character in the story has some affiliation with a medical or a healing practice, whether it be Gros-Jeanne's desire to help as a former nurse or Tony's disgrace as a nurse who failed to heal himself. Similarly, the broken family rift between Ruby, Gros-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne, Tony, and as we later learn Mi-Jeanne (Ti-Jeanne's mother) sits in the foreground as an object in need of permanent severance or ongoing care, depending on the individuals involved. It is also worth mentioning that much of

the dialogue and language of the text is written phonetically to highlight the accents of the West Indian, Jamaican, and other Caribbean characters. This writing creates heavier contrast between the folk inside and outside particular discourse communities to highlight the shared background of the central Caribbean family and their relationship with West African and West Indian religious traditions, namely Yoruba.

From the start of the story, Angel of Mercy's ironic lack of concern for human life takes center stage in the first sentence of the prologue: "As soon as he entered the room, Baines blurted out, 'We want you to find us a viable human heart, fast'" (Hopkinson 4). Baines, the doctor, is seen here petitioning Rudy, the leader of the criminal underworld, for raw human capital to save the life of a government official, Premier Uttley. Of note is the speed of this conversation, but not necessarily the urgency. We notice that Baines blurts and speaks eagerly and emphasizes how 'fast' the heart should come, yet he still uses 'want' to denote desire rather than 'need'. There is something held back here, almost as though even the life of the government official is a preference rather than a matter of the utmost importance. In this moment, as Rudy assesses the "scared-looking man" that appeared before him, we get more allusions to his need to save his own life, as he comes in with a bullet-proof vest, above even the life of his patient. Nevertheless, as their conversation continues, key information arises as to why a human heart is of interest in the first place. Hopkinson's version of Toronto has alternative options for organ donation. Certain pigs are bred specifically to hold several viable artificial hearts and the hearts are harvested for human use. This Porcine Organ Harvest Program (POHP) is not without controversy, however, as Baines explains: "I'm afraid that porcine material just won't do in this case. Ethics, you know? ...She [Premier Uttley] demanded a human donor. Says the porcine

organ farms are immoral. You know the line: human organ transplant should be about people helping people, not preying on helpless creatures”” (Hopkinson 4-5).

Naturally, the word ‘ethics’ in this passage seems more than a little out of place, so much so that Baines struggles to get the word out and stumbles over his words. The people outside the Hub of Toronto keep a ceremonial relationship with ethics and morality through their concern for animal life. Despite this, the value of human life as compared to animal life remains murky, particularly in Baines’ and Uttley’s emphasis on ‘helpless creatures.’ The phrase helpless creatures is used here to denote pigs, but could pertain to any being that cannot, in the eyes of those determining what constitutes valuable life, help itself. More important than that, ‘helpless’ implies the opportunity or ability to help, theoretically of importance to a doctor, even more noteworthy where Uttley’s successful operation comes in. This form of helpless is juxtaposed starkly with the Hub’s form of helpless, which those outside the city perceive to be without the chance of success, without hope, and therefore without value. From Baines’ fear and his casual acceptance of the Hub’s violence, we can read that he and those he represents understand the human population of the Hub to be beyond help, hence serviceable for use as a raw material.

Baines goes on to discuss the specific features he would like in a ‘donor’, that it be a small person, preferably a woman, with an AB positive blood type. It is worth noting that this is the second rarest blood type, and that one can interpret that, even under life-threatening circumstances, rich suburbanites are looking for an exceptional product. The tailoring of this request skims over the fact that Baines is looking for a human donor, regardless of his claims to the importance of a human heart and focuses rather on the objectified pieces of the human he is interested in; no tissue trauma, small-framed, a child could work but not a child with a drug addict mother, etc. (Hopkinson 8). The human life of the Hub has become raw capital for the

outside world, a new site of harvesting or, as Baines initially introduced his project, “an experiment.” The reader immediately understands the low value placed on the people of the inner city, and their status as bare(ly) life in the eyes of outsiders is cemented.

The low premium the people of the outer city place on life in the Hub may be best read through the lens of biopolitics and bare life, wherein certain kinds of bodies are categorized not as person but as capital. *Brown Girl in the Ring* from start to finish is built around this concept of raw human capital i.e. the body as material that can be harvested, manipulated, and dissected for ‘good’ parts as necessary to serve the state. A biopolitical approach (simply put, the politics of the body in its select society) to BIPOC, female, poor, LGBTQ+ etc. bodies has a lot of precedent. Renowned biopolitical scholar Giorgio Agamben following in Michel Foucault’s footsteps famously dubbed life the state saw as unworthy of being lived as bare life or sacred life, dating ‘sacred’ back to its early Latin meaning of meant or doomed to die. In his assessment of biopolitical perceptions of supposed ‘lesser’ bodies in the wake of Nazi Germany, Agamben submits that bare life is not optional for the existence of a society, and that every civilization has deemed its undesirables, so to speak; those that it perceives undeserving of life or dispensable (81). Even more fascinating is the means by which he chooses to define this reality:

“Every society sets this limit – even the most modern – decides who its ‘sacred men’ will be. It is even possible that this limit, on which the politicization and the exceptio of natural life in the juridical order of the state depends, has done nothing but extend itself in the history of the West and has now... moved inside every human life and every citizen. Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being” (Agamben 81).

Within and outside of an SF context, this quote would affirm an ongoing study of limitation and limit as it applies to marginalized bodies. The limit of what constitutes the human is in fact the definition of bare life in a dialectical fashion. Within SF texts, however, Agamben’s theorizations are allowed to become increasingly literal, as bare life being ‘confined’ or ‘moving

inside' a person's flesh need not refer to a potentiality. In the case of Hopkinson, bare life dwells in the biological body of every living being by virtue of the organs that sit within them, whether they be human, dehumanized, or otherwise.

The idea that society always sets its limit, laying out the boundaries for what constitutes and fails to constitute life, has been built upon thoroughly twentieth century critical theory. Drawing directly from Agamben and Foucault's original definitions of biopolitics, Achille Mbembe coins the term "necropolitics" to refer to death and 'death-making' (murder) as a means of determining bare life and protected life in a society. In the beginning of his text *Homo Sacer*, Agamben defines state sovereignty or control as creating a system of power yet not being subject to its rules (17). Mbembe builds on this concept by asserting that sovereignty is not only freedom from one's own rules but asserted and maintained in the ability to take and give life. Sovereignty, in this configuration, is the capacity to assign value to a life and call it protected and to demean other life as rightless or worthless to the point of social and often literal death: "From this perspective, the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the production of general norms by a body (the demos) made up of free and equal men and women" (Mbembe 13). Mbembe utilizes segregation as a prominent example of willfully and visually defining which lives are of significant worth, not so distinct from how flight from the Burn to the suburbs and the border-crossing between them distinguishes life in *Brown Girl in the Ring*.

Mbembe similarly converses with Black Atlantic scholar Paul Gilroy who theorized the mass suicide of enslaved persons jumping from the ships that contained them may be seen as a way of taking sovereignty back from those who displaced and devalued them: "Slave life in many ways is a form of death-in-life" (Mbembe 21). As such, the bodies of Black persons so thoroughly and historically became objects that the sovereignty of dying out of despair could

humanize the captive by trying a line between herself and the animal. This concept echoes one of the key principles of Afro-Pessimism by calling attention to Black death as social death and actual death working as one. Indeed, throughout Hopkinson, the degradation of Black flesh by outside parties and Rudy's desire for power are manifested as not only death-making, but life-and-death making in the form of the duppy.

In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, a duppy is a person's spirit disconnected from their body. This is accomplished by Rudy and is achieved through prolonged abuse that wears the body down or through a ritual wherein the victim is flayed alive on an altar and the contents of the person's outer and inner shell are stripped away. The spirit is then put into a calabash. If there is already a duppy/previous spirit in there, the new spirit is fed to the old one. If there is no prior spirit in the calabash though, that spirit turns into a disembodied zombified minion. The novel does not shy away from describing this process in grotesque detail, as a sort of twisted mirror for the otherwise tender care Gros-Jeanne prefers to apply, or even the cold clinical medical care of the Angel of Mercy hospitals. At one point, shortly after trying to escape the Burn, Tony is recaptured by Rudy, who performs this process on his longsuffering assistant Melba to scare Tony into compliance: "Her [Melba's] exposed eyes goggled, and lipless, her exposed teeth gave her a ghastly grin. The drug that incapacitated her must also do something to delay shock. Deprived of their skin, the largest organ in the human body, any other human being would have died by now" (Hopkinson 103).

This passage is only a snippet of a much more explicit exploration of Melba's dissection, but the focus on her face is the most revealing as it comes to her total dehumanization. Her features, singled out as grotesque, and her suffering made pitiable not-so-distantly parallels language used across the African Diaspora to demean the bodies of Black enslaved and suffering

peoples by their oppressors. Mbembe offers as an example the found skulls of victims in the Rwandan Genocide, utterly deprived of dignity and fragmented, yet still very much eager to say something for themselves. There is a regard in which humans have ceased to be even before their deaths, as Tony comments in the text when he becomes aware that Melba should already be long dead. In this regard, Rudy is performing an exercise seeking sovereignty not so dissimilar from the hospitals that gave him incentive towards violence initially. Melba's death and Tony's fear are in the interest of procuring a human heart for an interested party that has no desire to see death, but every need to ensure it takes place. The duppy Rudy created and the state between life and death he inflicted on Melba operate as shorthand for servitude or slavery, as neither is granted bodily or even spiritual autonomy.

If sovereignty is a shorthand term for life-making and death-making, the liminal space between sovereignty and bare life would be the ability to give and define death accompanied by a refusal not to. Gros-Jeanne, easily one of the most powerful people in Hopkinson's story, is not a sovereign subject in the traditional or complete sense, as evidenced by her eventual murder. Nevertheless, her role in respect to determining life worth living and healing under the confines of a society that would wish her dead puts her at the impasse and toys with her supposed role as a bare life subject in an interesting way. Come the end of the story, Gros-Jeanne 'Mami' will have her heart placed in Premier Uttley's chest and gain a form of autonomy that way, but before that, Mami's role as an arbitrator of life and death is foreshadowed in her communion with the spirits. Partway through the story, Mami holds a ceremony to gain protection for her Ti-Jeanne and Tony. Ti-Jeanne is possessed in the middle of the ceremony by the Prince of the Cemetery, the god of death. He confronts Mami, who is very calm in his presence even as he tries to goat her: "You only tell half the story. Prince of Cemetery does watch over death, yes, but he control life

too, when he come as Eshu. Why should I frighten?" (Hopkinson 74). The difference between life and death appears to Mami as a smooth line rather than a fracture. To live is to have components of death, and vice versa for death having aspects of life. In a reading that would include social death and sovereignty as key components, Mami's relative ease and joy with death of all kinds would run parallel to the totality of death that the other characters perceive. Likewise, Mami's disillusionment with the power to make life or take life is a form of sovereign surrender, maintaining a power not unlike her ex-husband Rudy, but having no need to demonstrate sovereignty by determining what does and doesn't constitute life. Mami observes the means by which power and suppression occur whilst neglecting to assign any significance to them outside of a desire to help those impacted. To Mami, raw capital does not exist, and from that rejection of devaluation comes a focus on medicine, recovery, and healing infused throughout the entire narrative.

The term 'doctor' is used very particularly in *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Namely, it's never applied to Mami, Ti-Jeanne, or any of the traditional healers in the Burn outside of a handful of mentions of 'witch doctor' or 'bush doctor' and rarely in a positive context. In either case, healing is qualified as something specifically different from the medical practitioners at the Angel of Mercy hospitals, so much so that the verb 'heal' only appears twice in that context, as we will examine further later. Most of the uses of 'doctor', on the other hand, appear in the hospital sections, though not as one would intuitively think.

We find the core framing of doctor as an identity and a practice in the Angel of Mercy scenes, whenever the narrative changes to Premier Uttley's perspective as she sits in the hospital awaiting surgery. Counter to many of Mami's patients, Uttley is belligerent and primarily focused on her recovery. With an upcoming election on the horizon, Uttley is determined to

prove that human heart transplants are better than animal transplants. She recruits her PR officer and spin doctor Constantine, notably dubbed ‘Doctor Shark’ to enact her plan: “A lot of people underestimated her soft-spoken policy advisor with the smooth nothing features and his smooth, nothing body” (Hopkinson 26). I call attention to this section to illustrate how the featurelessness of Constantine makes him more metaphor than character. We don’t learn nearly anything about Doctor Shark’s identity outside of the fact he is a policy advisor. His body and features are described as smooth and nothing, as a contrast to the people of inner-city Toronto whose bodies are hypervisual. Doctor Shark is invisible with no race or cultural markers in his appearance or language. His body removed from examination and scrutiny due to his status, whilst the objects of his attention, as we soon learn, are under constant surveillance.

From the conversation between Doctor Shark and Uttley, the reader learns that Uttley was in fact unaware of any designs for a human donor, and fully expected to receive a pig heart. It was Constantine that acted behind her back and ordered a search for a human heart in order to boost her polls right before a major election. Even though Uttley is immediately on board with this plan and in no way innocent of wrongdoing, we see an instant change in dynamic with the realization that the entire search for the heart is (for lack of a better word) doctored. I would argue that it is no coincidence Hopkinson chose the term ‘doctor’ to describe Constantine even whilst medical doctors interacted in the same scenes. By pairing the two connotations of the word as one, Hopkinson is calling attention to the manipulated and arbitrary nature of care, be it in a medical system most people cannot afford that robs the poor of their bodies, or in a political system that, in Doctor Shark’s own words has “voters [that will] eat up” a moral plea without interest in the moral means.

More than anything, the emphasis in Uttley's scenes rest on the lust for recovery over the desire for healing, the former of which demands a return to the status quo, the latter of which knows the status quo can never fully return, and that healing is an ongoing process. Uttley is described as "shifting" "glancing" "brooding" and "furious", all means to support her total displeasure at her situation and her discomfort with being unwell (Hopkinson 26). Her eagerness to get past her situation and 'back to normal' is augmented by the rapid heart monitor tracking her movements and growing frustration each time she is told she must wait for the next step. Similarly, the medical doctor in charge of surgery is equally rushed to operate: "I don't care what you tell the media we put into your chest, Premier, but by next week, I'm going to have a healthy heart beating in there" (Hopkinson 27). "Healthy heart" is another turn of phrase that supports the objectification of human bodies on the same or a lesser level than animal bodies in its vagueness alone. While the medical doctor's rush may be justified, paired with Doctor Shark's eagerness, the overall haste to get Uttley back to full health is sharply contrasted with Mami's understanding of healing as something that cannot be rushed without dire consequences.

Alongside taking assessment of the many medical crimes committed against Black bodies and how those crimes influence the telling of this novel, I would like to assess the similarities and differences between Mami as a healer/medic and other well-known SF doctors/medical officers, for the simple reason that Hopkinson is elucidating a clear split between the figure of the knowledgeable, composed doctor and the caretakers of the Burn. The role of doctor in SF is not negligible, as evidenced by shows like Star Trek and Doctor Who. Moreover, Hopkinson's direct conversation with and confrontation of what a doctor is in popular speculative storytelling speaks to how Black women SF writers are fundamentally shifting the stakes and perspective of medical narratives against the backdrop of Black life. In particular, the language of advancement

and advanced medical technology is undermined by the basic, holistic healing Mami and eventually Ti-Jeanne choose to adopt.

In a Canadian medical journal published the same year as *Brown Girl in the Ring*, two medical experts conducted a friendly back and forth debating which fictional doctor is the best depiction of the practice. One doctor had suggested Dr. Nick from *The Simpsons* was actually not as bad a doctor as he seemed, in a sort of tongue-and-cheek gag. In response, medical ethicist Michael Yeo shifted the conversation to SF and put emphasis on a very different sort of doctor:

“I submit that the role model Canadian physicians need to follow as we move into the next millennium is someone who has broken free from the yoke of ethics and practices the art and science of medicine beyond the stultifying opposition of paternalism and autonomy. A free and independent thinker and, indeed, someone even beyond role models. Patterson and Weijer may like Dr. Nick Riviera, but I nominate TV’s only true physician: Dr. Bones McCoy” (Yeo 1477).

As satirical as this exchange was from the start, Yeo’s back and forth with his colleagues proves to be revealing at least in part as a historical document for Canadian medicine at the time of Hopkinson’s writing, alongside illustrating the closeted frustrations a selection of doctors were experiencing in the split between fiction and reality. Yeo cites medical paternalism, the idea that the physician knows what’s best for their client regardless of the clients wishes, as opposing patient autonomy. The underlying tension, he sardonically suggests, may be to admire doctors with free and independent approaches to medicine that moves beyond the trappings of the conversation entirely. Like most works of satire, this exchange hits at the core of a public or societal perception. The doctor as the figure of authority, the main reference point for the distant/remote world is arguably as old as SF itself. Dr. Frankenstein informs the reader of the paranormal occurrences that have come about in his stead, and even as an informed reader may ponder whether or not his perspective is reliable, we are still for the majority constrained to his perception and forced to rely upon his expertise. The Creature can be read as both subject and

patient, clearly a person in need of care, yet dismissed by his creator because his birth was not perceived a success by the standards Frankenstein himself created. A similar phenomenon arises in much later works of SF, specifically in short stories and television.

Isaac Asimov's genre-defining anthology *I Robot* features Dr. Susan Calvin as one of its few recurring characters over the course of several short stories. Dr. Calvin is not a medical doctor of humans, but rather a robotics doctor. She is one of the main robot engineers and programmers creating a new generation of AI technology to do jobs far too dangerous or undesirable for humans. A good portion of Calvin's duties is to troubleshoot malfunctioning robots and make sure that they adhere to her world's three laws of robotics: a robot cannot harm a human being or allow him/her to come to harm, a robot must obey all orders given by human beings except where those orders would conflict with the first law (for example, you could not order a robot to murder someone else), and finally, a robot must protect its own existence unless it conflicts with the first or second law. For the purposes of this argument, Dr. Calvin's relationship to her robots can be made comparable to a medical doctor's relationship to their patients. The anthology states at many points that Calvin does not seem to like humans very much and prefers the company of robots, and cares for them in a particular way. While she speaks with humans, most of her primary interactions are with the very beings she's designing and creating. Similarly, her adherence to the companies that she works with to create robots is tentative at best. She's often a consultant called in to lend her expertise, or alternatively, she serves on a board or as a director far enough up that she doesn't have to answer to anyone. By the end of the anthology, Calvin is so untouchable that she is more legend than employee, as she is seen conducting an interview with a Time Magazine equivalent. All this to say that Dr. Susan Calvin is seen within the universe of the story as a sort of robot whisperer and expert on their

anatomy and psychology, not so different from how a modern medical doctor is typically positioned as an expert in human anatomy and physiology; a resource to be respected and not questioned. The untouchability of Calvin comes into question, however, in one story where her supposed care for robots drops its façade.

In this aptly named story “Liar!” Dr. Calvin creates a borderline omniscient robot that can read minds and detect the truth of any situation. Initially, this robot is heralded as a massive success and rather uncritically deemed one of Calvin’s best creations. The doctors’ care for this robot is evident. He is given the name “Herbie” and tested carefully. The many doctors working on him share with him their deepest darkest desires and secrets, even particularly vulnerable ones like the crushes they have on their co-workers and their longing for promotion. Calvin herself is caught up when Herbie reads her mind, notes her romantic desire for one of the other engineers, and tells her that he has feelings for her too. Everything comes to a head, though, when Calvin discovers that her co-worker is already romantically involved, and that her previously beloved robot is in reality a pathological liar. In an instant, Calvin’s humanization of Herbie turns into malice as she sees him once more as an object and seeks to punish him for following (what we soon learn) is his programming: “She whirled suddenly and shrieked at the robot, ‘Get away from me! Go to the other end of the room and don’t let me look at you!’” (Asimov 73). Herbie, as it turns out, has no choice but to lie because of the first law of robotics; he cannot harm a human in any way, hurt feelings and disappointment included. Therefore, he tells people what they want to hear.

Fundamentally this is by no fault of his own, but Dr. Calvin immediately abandons all clinical distance and becomes more malicious and emotional than at any other point in the anthology. She willfully gets Herbie stuck in a fallacy loop to drive him insane and then orders

he be turned into scrap metal, more raw material for a better ‘success.’ Calvin’s rage is singular in her narrative, but not so dissimilar from the anger and frustration that permeates every Angel of Mercy scene in *Brown Girl in the Ring*. In both instances, the impetus is put on outside factors to ‘fix’ or even ‘scrap’ a subject, whether it be the need for an unethically sourced heart, or the rage induced by a programmed error, really the human equivalent of an illness or disorder. In both instances, the doctor is framed as a neutral and distant party, incapable of either right or wrong and wholly without ethical responsibility. Calvin, Dr. Shark, and Uttley’s doctors neglect their own rules without consequences for themselves. All consequences are projected onto the patients, who are expected to be success stories and recover, no matter the cost to themselves or others. It is this recovery-based mindset, with particular emphasis on quick healing and the objectivity of the doctor figure that reaches both forward and backward from Asimov’s story.

In one of the earlier SF stories penned in the 1930s, John W. Campbell’s *Who Goes There?* casts the doctor as the tether to reality. Later adapted into John Carpenter’s horror movie, *The Thing*, a handful of explorers are trapped in Antarctica by a blizzard, and slowly but surely begin to realize that at least one person in the building isn’t actually human. In fact, an alien creature has dethawed from ice and has taken the form of one of the explorers after first consuming his body. The surviving explorers discover who is still human by pricking for blood and testing that blood to see whether it is still pure or not⁴. However, all hope is lost when the doctor, the person most qualified to administer such a test, goes insane and haphazardly plots an escape. He is caught and locked in a shed, but his insanity marks the turning point in both the

⁴ John W. Campbell, a contemporary of HP Lovecraft and his source of inspiration for *Who Goes There?* (Lovecraft’s famous story *At the Mountain of Madness* features several identical story beats) notoriously shared many of Lovecraft’s social views, up to and including being a segregationist and refusing to publish any Black-authored work during his tenure as the editor of *Weird Tales*. In a study more focused on Campbell’s work as juxtaposed with Hopkinson, Butler, or Jemisin, one can clearly see the racialized anxiety surrounding contamination present in his novella insofar as blood is the indicator of whether a person is truly ‘human’ or not.

movie and the original novella. If the doctor is not well, than no one can be. Conversely, in the original *Star Trek* series, Bones McCoy's emotional outbursts are treated as a character fluke, and get the crew of the enterprise into trouble at many points, particularly as it comes to cultural sensitivity. However, no one questions McCoy's judgement or challenges him because the figure of the doctor is so critical to the ongoing success of their mission. In both cases, the sequestering or tolerance of the doctor continues to put his/her role on a pedestal. Should the doctor be at all unable to complete a task, there are no alternatives for healing, and a community is expected to endure much from the doctor in order to maintain access to their medicine.

Rick and Morty has been one of the most popular television shows of the past decade, infusing SF a nihilistic cynicism to contrast more optimistic or even pessimistic interpretations of the future. Because anything and everything can happen simultaneously in *Rick and Morty*, the optimist/pessimist dialectic is broken by the constant occurrence of every circumstance. Even as it negotiates with new genre conventions though, Rick in the role of the doctor and expert and Morty in the role of his student, his patient, and his experiment holds true. In the first episode of the show, Morty breaks his leg trying to climb a tree. As he writhes on the ground in pain, Rick nonchalantly tells him to wait and leaves. The viewer is then shown nearly 15 seconds of Morty laying on the ground screaming before Rick returns with a serum to heal his leg. His recovery is instantaneous, and the entire exchange is played off as a joke. The quick-healing capacities in the universe of the show are so ingrained that pain in and of itself is not significant. The folly of Morty's pain plays on comedic tropes and slapstick humor, but the prolonged exposure we have to his body as it moves and tries to recover is based in the fact that he is lesser than Rick. Rick's nonchalant approach to his grandson's pain is clinical, a problem seeking a solution. The audience is put into the role of a caretaker gone wrong, unable to relieve but only watch.

Detachment is a criteria for recovery, because to be invested would risk confirming a false result. The attachment critical to a healing practice, particularly a spiritually driven one, cannot cloud the result. Western medicine, in its fiction and in its reality, expects a form of care that transcends and gets results, as Dr. Yeo suggests however tongue in cheek. This is what makes the stark contrast between healing for growth and healing for results so strong.

Healing serves a very specific purpose in *Brown Girl and the Ring*. Unlike traditional medical care, organ trading, and goal-based recovery, Hopkinson frames healing as the ongoing lifestyle and practice of marginalized peoples. To heal, in the context of her narrative, is an inevitable byproduct of continuing to live in an oppressive society, and as such it cannot happen on a timetable. Likewise, when set against the many medical injustices committed against Black bodies and women's bodies, the approach Mami and Ti-Jeanne take to their own healing serves as an act of resistance to the powers that would seek their flesh as a resource.

Healing in the novel is best understood in Mami's statement of purpose: "But all you have to stop calling the thing 'obeah'. I don't work for the dead, I serve the spirits and I heal the living." (Hopkinson 37). Obeah refers to a practice of harm or mischief, using the spirits and powers that be to work harm on one's enemies. Mami is stating her own Hippocratic oath here by swearing that she does no harm and wishes to help those living around her. Mami's dismissal of death also serves to demonstrate her optimistic understanding of what constitutes life, perhaps as a contrast to a more Afro-Pessimist view on marginalized Black flesh. Like her cruel Angel of Mercy counterpart, Mami defines her healing practice by what she can do for others, but unlike the hospitals, she does not turn away or feel as though she can define the terms on which life can exist nor does she rest her identity on what she can save. Per her own words, she simply serves.

Mami first states her *raison d'être* when Ti-Jeanne and Tony ask her to conduct a ceremony to help them escape from the Hub to the mainland where they can live free of fear from Rudy. The ceremony and its aftermath build on Mami's definition of healing as well as her attentiveness to joy and growth in the midst of targeted oppression. Prior to the ceremony itself, Mami gets a minor injury and Tony helps her. Being a former nurse, he has no issue with the technical side of dressing a wound. However, when he announces to his surroundings that he "should be healed in no time" Mami turns away from him with clear frustration (Hopkinson 45). We see from this passage a sense that Mami knows some of what the reader knows; that Tony will betray her and just moments before drew some of her blood from the wound to see if she was AB positive. But even more than that, Mami's aversion to Tony's specific statement and methods begin to shine through. Tony says the wound will be healed in "no time" and uses old supplies from the hospital to fix the wound (Hopkinson 45). Tony's expectation to heal quickly and his use of Angel of Mercy tools immediately create a rift between the two characters, not to mention his carelessness when it comes to dealing with her as a 'patient' however informal their relationship. Where Mami is very personable, Tony is very quick and cold, just like his former employer.

Any bond they may have had breaks for good during the ceremony when it is revealed that Tony still uses 'buff', the choice drug of inner city Toronto, as evidenced by the slash marks on his arm. These marks are described, for the one time in the novel, as "hardly healed" and "half healed" (Hopkinson 57). This pushes Mami over the edge, and she disowns Tony completely as the father of her great-grandson as he "'ain't use [his] hands to heal" (Hopkinson 59). We learn that Mami's do-no-harm rule applies across the board, both to other bodies as well as one's own body. In this regard, there is an interesting tension between patient autonomy and

patient wellbeing at play in the concept of healing; namely that healing as defined by care cannot do its work insofar as it hurts even a sovereign individual. Mami recognizes healing as a two-way street wherein the healer cannot hope to heal others if they do not first recognize their own need to heal. Even in this, though, we see hope, as Ti-Jeanne describes Tony's wounds as half and hardly healed, foreshadowing the possibility that he too may someday have access to the healing he's refused up until this point. The framing of healing as an ongoing process leaves open the possibility for growth whilst removing the pressure of a timeline or the expectation that the injured party should be 'better' by a given date.

Scholars of Black women's medical humanities have habitually focused on the medical atrocities committed against Black women's bodies and how communal practices have lent agency and dignity to persons so used to being denied care. Harriet Washington famously framed her work in *Medical Apartheid* as a historical project driven to call attention to the many medical crimes to which the Black body has been subject: "When it comes to the abuse of African Americans, a different set of ethical standards has long prevailed. Abusive researchers have historically been closer to the norm than we would like to think" (Washington 12). For my work, I've found that this different set of ethical standards can be effectively summed up as 'experiment mentality', based on the notion that Black bodies, dispensable as they are in the white supremacist cultural zeitgeist, serve as ideal test subjects for information that could not otherwise be learned on higher-value white participants. Seen keenly as early as the 1840s with the research of Dr. J Marion Sims on enslaved Black women who were cited as having a higher pain tolerance than their white counterparts, experiment mentality frames Black bodies or even portions of bodies as viable for play and exploration insofar as it would benefit other more valuable bodies. In a notably similar vein, the discovery of HeLa cells and the fact that they were

kept a secret from involuntary donor Henrietta Lacks' family speaks in a large part to the ease with which her body was immediately deemed property and how Lacks' community and familial ties were immediately cut out of the picture. Records of the last days of Lacks' life speak not only to the pain she was in, but to the experimental way in which she was read by her doctors at Johns Hopkins: "'Henrietta is a miserable specimen. She groans, She is constantly nauseated and claims she vomits everything she eats. Patient acutely upset...very anxious'" (Skloot 66).

Henrietta is first of all a specimen or an object of study, and only reluctantly a patient a few beats later. She is observed in the fashion of a typical person receiving care but documented in such a way that suggests surveillance. She is constantly nauseated and constantly watched, and her body is narrative as a grotesque display rather than as a human. The doctor appears put off that she is not feeling well, remarking that she is miserable, upset, and anxious, as though he would expect to find her in another more pliable condition. Henrietta's sadness and fear at her own impending mortality is remarkable in the most literal sense through the eyes of this physician. Even while receiving end of life care, Henrietta is held to a certain standard as a black woman to behave and coach her emotions and behavior, combined with the assumption that her pain ought to be more bearable. It is said that she 'claims' the vomits, not that she actually does or does not vomit, suggesting that the doctors and nurses to not lend credibility to her experience.

Her body at large is fading, but her cells flourish, and this piques the interest of the doctors more than anything else about Henrietta as a person. Accounts vary as to whether or not chief physician George Gey ever visited a dying Henrietta in the hospital as her cells were being recognized for their potential. It is this very ambiguity that emphasizes how insignificant Henrietta's person had been rendered in place of her body. However, even the contested recorded instance of them interacting yields further confirmation of an experiment mentality

“[George] leaned over to her and said, ‘Your cells will make you immortal.’ He told Henrietta her cells would help save the lives of countless people, and she smiled” (Skloot 66). I read this passage not as George talking to Henrietta, but as him talking about Henrietta, speaking to the vessel that bore him HeLa cells, but not to the person that gave them. Henrietta is reported to have smiled and been happy to help many other people, and while we cannot speculate as to what Henrietta the person may or may not have said, we can read her response and the tearful way in which the speaker delivers it as being more focused on the lives to follow Lacks than on care for Lacks herself, who is a depleted resource beyond a successful rescue anyway, and hence less worthy of time and focus. Experiment mentality values an individual insofar as what they can provide or a point they can prove by surviving. Moreover, if the raw material a body can provide exceeds the value of the individual, then the person will easily be sacrificed for their biological output.

We have read how the Black body can be determined in real life to be worth little enough to experiment on, and how trespassing the limits of ethics on Black flesh helps define what is unacceptable for other forms of human life. Interestingly enough, when Black women SF authors have spoken back to the real-world atrocities committed in the sphere of medical research, they have done so with an emphasis not on receiving better care, but on receiving alternative care within their communities of origin. Washington notes of Black Americans that “no other group deeply distrusts the American medical system, especially medical research.” (5). As such, Jones argues that Black women SF authors are interested in the utopic possibilities of acknowledging the failures of conventional medical systems and finding alternative modes of care within one’s own community. She utilizes an example from one of Hopkinson’s other novels *The Salt Roads*, to illustrate how temporal displacement and relationship between the many variations of oneself

across history can serve as its own form of healing independent of mainstream systems. Likewise, the capabilities yielded by speculative genres to feature LGBTQ+ doctors going back in time to nip HIV/AIDS in the bud or Octavia Butler's Dana using modern medicine and antiseptics to care for her abused ancestors can serve as a form of healing for female, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ readers of SF who are estranged within their reality as neglected bodies into the modern day. Healing in Black women's SF is an intertextual and extratextual affair. The "impossible" healings still represent a deeper reality and desire for a particular form of care, and the means of medicine that may otherwise be destroyed or ignored, such as Gros-Jeanne's attention to plants and herbs in her practice, are foregrounded. If indeed Black women's SF is the literature of limit as well as the literature of mimesis and reality, so too would that SF be perpetually invested in defining the framework for care whilst assigning a new boundary or limit around what healing even ought to mean. Hopkinson's work as a critical question; what would happen if we took a recovery framework out of healing entirely?

The second half of the healing discourse in this story rests in Hopkinson's aversion to quick or rapid healing, at least more rapid than it is meant to be. I alluded earlier that there are only two uses of the verb 'heal' in Uttley's scenes, the first of which is based around speed: "The cellular growth factors suspended in the binder would promote accelerated healing" (Hopkinson 100). This is in reference to Uttley's heart surgery. That the word 'healing' would only appear after 'accelerated' is integral to our understanding of Angel of Mercy's form of medicine, as well as how we contextualize Ti-Jeanne and Gros-Jeanne's resistance to rushed healing. Accelerated defines much of how Uttley and her compatriots interact with their own bodies and desires, often seeking a form of immediate gratification. Rudy's approach to his own body makes the danger of accelerated healing all the more evident and disturbing. Because of his communion with the

spirits of other worlds, Rudy is able to heal his body quickly, basically as soon as he is injured. He demonstrates this ability in a fight with Ti-Jeanne where she puts a hole through his abdomen, which seems to injure him somewhat before the hole is filled and returned to normal as Ti-Jeanne watches (Hopkinson 119). Accelerated healing, in this instance and the one prior, is a mark of something gone wrong. As Ti-Jeanne's spiritual connection grows, she learns from a spirit of the dead that where Mami considered herself a servant of the spirits, "Now Rudy, he does try to make the spirits serve he" (Hopkinson 130). The linkage between service and healing is critical here, as Hopkinson suggests that it is impossible to have one without the other. Rudy's power begins to fail because his debt to the spirits and the harm he has caused in the world falls upon him in such a way he cannot recover from it. Similarly, Uttley's accelerated healing at the Angel of Mercy hospital in combination with their medical practices defy service even to their own customers who must pay, and certainly to those whose bodies they rob. By putting accelerated progress and service in opposition, we once again see parallels to a Black care practice of restoration, community, and individualized care that defy a physio-capitalist need for recovery and turnover, as though patients and their wellbeing were materials and products respectively.

The second time 'heal' is mentioned in the Uttley scenes hardly applies to the Angel of Mercy at all, rather the heart that is being put in Uttley's body. The hospital has acquired Mami's heart as a match, but Uttley's body is struggling to accept the organ. In Uttley and Mami's spiritual subconscious, we see a battle for control, not only a matter of who will have the heart in a physical sense, but in a relational sense. Uttley attempts to quell Mami's spirit/heart by saying that she is here to help her; essentially, pleading for her service in the way Mami has defined herself prior to her death. However, 'the heart' as it is called spreads to other parts of Uttley's

body, slowly taking control and subsuming her identity⁵. Uttley fears the total loss of herself, but shortly after the heart spreads through her head comes to accept its presence: “And then she was aware again. Her dream body and brain were hers once more, but with a difference... She had been worried for nothing. She was healed, a new woman now” (Hopkinson 140). Whether or not Uttley is actually still her own remains ambiguous, particularly given the awakened Premier’s frequent quips calling things ‘stupidness’, a favorite line of Mami’s throughout the novel. Even then, healing in the context of this passage is a summative representation of its role in the story overall. The anxiety felt around wellness and the journey to it is nullified by the recognition of further work to come. It is the process that defines the characters that heal best throughout the novel. Interesting also is Mami/Uttley’s ethical baseline remains similar, although amended. Under Mami’s influence, Uttley still finds pig heart farms to be unethical, but wants to set up an automatic enrollment program affiliated with ID for Toronto citizens who can opt out if they so choose (essentially what we have now). The fact that the initial bad faith ethical concern is not invalidated but converted to a good-faith argument with a good-faith solution is also worth noting against the backdrop of healing and recovery. Contrary to a system that overhauls or cuts out weaknesses like a cancer, a framework of healing within and outside of medical practices can help reorient the revolution that is all forms of restoration and care, and indeed, even utilize flawed aspects of a part to strengthen a whole.

In March 2022, two months after his heart replacement surgery, Marylander David Bennett died from unknown complications. Yet his semi-successful surgery made news, as

⁵ This scene seems to draw from Ray Bradbury’s 1948 short story “Fever Dream” in description, right down to the depiction of Uttley’s brain cells being taken over. Hopkinson calling on one of the Golden Era SF authors is a nice parallel to what she’s doing in the passage itself. A woman is terrified of being subsumed, but in fact finds the ‘outsider’ a nice addition, perhaps a comment on how Hopkinson felt joining the early ranks of Black SF writers as they were coming to prominence in the 90s.

Bennett's had been the first life to be significantly prolonged by a xenotransplant. Rather than a human heart being placed in his body, Bennett had received a pig's heart and lived 40 days longer than the last successful xenotransplant recipient. The strange euphoria that overtook the scientific community even in the wake of his death was palpable. Said one doctor: "We gained invaluable insights learning that the genetically modified pig heart can function well within the human body while the immune system is adequately suppressed" (NPR). Adjacently, Bennett's surgery was only made possible under Maryland compassionate use laws: because the patient was ineligible for another type of transplant, doctors were given permission to experiment. The certainty that Bennett would not have a chance at a full recovery any other way created a window for a work-in-progress practice that wasn't particularly likely to extend the patient's life much farther. This entire story and the way that Bennett's medical team evenly responded provoked in me two questions that carried over into this study: the first, how does the language of success and recovery affect Black and nonwhite relationships to medicine alongside historical medical crimes that have been inflicted on marginalized communities? The second more urgent question pertaining to those historical medical atrocities was, where have we seen this before?

An inevitable byproduct of studying SF is to watch fiction slowly but surely become reality, because the fiction was never so untrue in the first place. With xenotransplant en route to becoming a reality and Black women's mortality rates in childbirth remaining three times higher than their white counterparts, the fact that the few purely speculative aspects of Hopkinson's first novel foreground healing are critical to our reading of medicine in SF now and ongoing. Ti-Jeanne's final conversation with the Yoruba spirits comes after she has defeated Rudy, but likewise just as she is coming to grips with the finality of her grandmother's death. One god, Osain, comments to the god of death and life, Legbara "Your daughter [Ti-Jeanne] still need

plenty healing yet... Body get better, but spirit still bust-up, I think'" (Hopkinson 171). To even her own surprise, however, Ti-Jeanne refuses the healing offered to her by the gods, and insists that they have already begun the work of healing her, but that she can and must take care of the rest of the work herself. Ti-Jeanne's insistence on seeking her own healing leads her back to the community of the Burn who hold a funeral for Gros-Jeanne and center relationship with one another and the ideals Gros-Jeanne held as the ultimate form of healing to which everyone has a right. Even Tony, Gros-Jeanne's murderer, is welcomed into the funeral to heal and begin to atone for what he has done. Esther Jones frames the project of Black women's communal care and self-care as "generating methods of survival while forging an alternative ethics of 'relationality' that refuses to marginalize and mistreat others in the same way they have been treated" (4). Relationality, in this context, is not strictly limited to the interactions between other bodies but also within one's own body; between one bone and another, hand and foot, etc. The relationality that the Black woman has to her own body and spirit, in Jones' reading, demands of the healer or caretaker the same attentiveness and kindness to the self as to those outside the body. The doctor and/or healer, in essence, but do right by their own body and must have right done to their body by outside forces to be able to heal.

Black women's SF is not only a means by which to express new modes of care, but also to highlight the limitations of old modes that are not critically examined. Similarly, Hopkinson refutes the notion that recovery is the ultimate goal of healing, which makes a critical differentiation between a language that asks marginalized groups to heal whilst in actuality asking marginalized peoples to recover completely and forget past trauma. The inability for healing to ever truly end sets it apart from a more colloquial understanding of healing as an antithesis of justice. *Brown Girl in the Ring* thrives on an unremitting insistence on the utter

dehumanization of Black bodies in medicine, the limited perspective reaped from a traditional SF construction of the doctor, and the wild potentialities of constant healing as an alternative to a recovery-based medical system.

(De)Construct: Mixed Race and Belonging in Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* and *Fledgling*

On August 2nd, 1931, a young woman by the name of Philippa Schuyler was born to black essayist and Afrofuturist pioneer George Schuyler and wealthy white Texan Josephine Cogwell. As could be expected, the prominence of this celebrity interracial relationship was the subject of much debate in early twentieth century America. However, paling in comparison to any supposed scandal of their mixed relationship was the peculiar nature of their family dynamic and the motive behind Philippa's conception. By all accounts, Philippa Schuyler's mere existence was as an experiment made human in the eyes of her parents; a litmus test as to the sustainability of black and white mixed heritage with the main goal of proving the superiority of the mixed race 'specimen'. From a young age, the girl was fed an unusual diet (consisting mostly of raw meat), had her every move rigorously documented, and trained as a concert pianist. All this under the watchful eyes of her parents and the New York social scene. Both parties were intensely interested in how Philippa's strange development would reflect on future interracial unions and their resulting offspring. Philippa's mother often attributed any assertive or above average behavior on her daughter's part to 'hybrid vigor', loosely defined as the increased energy a mixed person would theoretically have just from being mixed.

It was not until her teenage years that the full extent of Philippa's powerlessness was made aware to her, in the form of a scrapbook her parents gifted her, a venerable archive documenting every moment of her life in scientific detail. Rather than being charmed by her parent's hyper vigilance, Philippa grew despondent with her racialized popularity and the attentions of the press, so much so that she left the US shortly after, and assumed a variety of alter egos that allowed her to pass for Portuguese, Spanish, and Latina, but most importantly, as anything but Philippa Schuyler.

The project of Schuyler's birth and the oddity that was her childhood may seem to modern readers a life stranger than fiction, borderline fanatical, if not the stuff of a perverted mad science experiment. Indeed, even George Schuyler did not shy away from science fiction (SF) as a mode for exploring race relations, biological race, and othered anxiety. Although Schuyler's early exploration of these topics laid the groundwork for the black speculative work moving forward, his own intimacy with these ideas, coupled with his far-right politics, tends to count against him in any deeper analysis of hybridity in media, arguably with good reason. Conversely, Octavia Butler, one of many to succeed Schuyler as a Black SF author, would push the boundaries of what makes the other 'Other' in indispensable portrayals of hybrid being that questioned the very nature of 'being' in the first place. Even so, in Schuyler's time as well as Butler's time, Blackness and mixed identity were already being juxtaposed with a hyper-fixation on the 'ideal' mixed subject, a trend that would carry on into the modern era.

Years after Philippa's surreal story, notes of a similar attention echoed in Barack Obama's presidency and the racialized scrutiny that followed him. While there was a marked transition from Obama's status as a mixed race candidate from Hawaii to the first serious Black candidate for President of the United States following his nomination, for our purposes today, I am more interested in responses to his presidency in its aftermath. In a special issue on colorblindness at the tail end of his second term, Andre Willis suggested that Obama's all-together lackluster response to serious issues and his inability to truly challenge the racial status quo of his country was an indicator of "a particularly malicious betrayal given that he relied so heavily on African American support and persistently appealed to Black trust" (185). Willis goes on to illustrate how Obama's push for the neoliberal post-racial status quo did more harm than good to Black communities, but I'd argue that the sentiment expressed here cuts to the quick of

what many expected out of the President versus what he provided. A particularly malicious betrayal implies an initial loyalty while also assigning an intentionality to Obama's failure to better challenge existing racist systems. Not only that, but Obama has also become an opponent to Black Americans in this phrasing. There is now Obama contrasted with African American support and Black trust, with Obama's identity as a Black American not being allowed to overlap or exist in the gap. In many ways, this betrayal also inscribes a loss of self for Obama, as though his inability (malicious or not) to make genuine strides for Black America negates a certain aspect of his Black identity. In Willis's words, "crowned by white democratic elites, [Obama] never passed through the crucible of Black scrutiny... to earn [their] requisite trust" (191).

I bring Willis's argument up not to invalidate Obama's role in the perpetuation of a colorblind self-reliant post-racialism that haunts us to this day. Rather, I'm more interested in the easy dismissal of Obama as Black for the purposes of argument. If, as Willis says, Obama situates himself as an 'insider' (not a true insider, mind you) to Black culture rhetorically whilst being a tool of the project of white liberalism, how would Obama's paradoxical insider/outsider role as Black yet not to the ideal degree work? Like Philippa, Obama is mixed race and arguably framed as an experiment also, albeit the experiment of the Black president wherein we discover what we really expected of such a person.

This chapter explores how mixed race identity has historically operated and does operate in Black fiction, with a keen focus on Octavia Butler's writing at the turn of the mixed race movement. During the publication of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, mixed race persons from all intersections were campaigning for the inclusion of a two or more racial category on the US census. The inclusion of this category, granting individuals the option to check more than one

race as ‘theirs’, was granted in 2000, and marked the first return to acknowledging mixed identity since the 1910 census.

I argue that mixed race identity (namely along the intersection of Blackness and whiteness) is coded into Butler’s *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, and the stakes of considering mixed race being or mixedness as a core ideal within Butler’s oeuvre. Considered with and against Black studies, mixed race (particularly light-skinned presentation) has sometimes been read in opposition to monoracial, dark skinned identity as a means of obscuring or distracting from a larger racial culture, particularly as it applies to passing narratives. To make Black/white mixed race a distinct entity from Blackness may be read as an attempt to distance from Black communities, not to mention a history of race in the US that has perceived all Black heritage regardless of the degree as a ‘taint’ per the one-drop rule. Butler, writing against the backdrop of a rising conversation on the ‘death’ of racism (as a precursor to similar rhetoric in the age of Obama) and colorblind ideology was far from naïve to these conversations. However, I argue that Butler’s attentiveness to mixedness makes a point to dialogue with Black studies at every interval. Butler weaves together a tension in the overlap and submits to the reader that recognizing the unique effect of mixed race analogous characters in a ‘us vs. them’ story structure provides a lens through which to read real-world representations of race. Mixed race activists working at the height of Butler’s career cast mixed race as a discursive tool to negotiate multiple identities in a liminal space without compromising any one background. Butler’s response, be it by design or by accident, lies in a world that fast illustrates the limits of a hybrid utopia where hatred is bred out of the population, acknowledges the subjectivity of characters of multiple, seemingly conflicting backgrounds, and invites the reader to consider speculative

storytelling as a means by which to better understand mixed race identity across multiple intersections, not just Black/white.

Insofar as this project focuses on the limited realities of the present as opposed to the marvels of the future, Butler's exploration of the subtleties of mixed identity, belonging, and community continuously parallel real-world experiences of mixed persons so much so that her main characters throughout the trilogy often stand in for mixed race folk by way of analogy. Mixedness in Butler's work has often been read in her final text, *Fledgling*, a story that explicitly centers a half-human, half-vampire child trying to reconcile her two peoples and fight for justice on behalf of herself and others. However, there is substantially less work on mixed race in the Xenogenesis trilogy, due in part to these themes being less explicit, but nevertheless, no less poignant. In this chapter, I note much of the near-identical language between *Fledgling* and Xenogenesis to suggest that this trilogy serves as a companion piece in the same conversation, assessing what the role of a person shaped to be 'between worlds' actually entails and implies.

Concurrently, Butler's questions on the viability of humanity into the future are intrinsically linked to language around contamination and ingrained biological tendencies, eugenicist language that has historically impacted Black and mixed bodies as it applies to the anxiety of preserving white purity. Butler ultimately suggests, as her own contradiction, that exploring mixed race in an SF environment by way of analogy makes clearer an adjacent real world reading of mixed race as it relates to Black, Indigenous, and other person of color identities impacted by the legacy of colonialism. Furthermore, by incorporating themes like the inevitability of dehumanization and the pain of being read as raw materials, Butler complicates the idea of social death in her hybrid characters who initially attempt to pass as human, but later operate openly as human and alien at the same time with growing acceptance. Whether or not

that acceptance is genuine is up for debate, but nevertheless stands as a major point of challenge to any philosophy that reads Black flesh as visually and necessarily opposite whiteness.

The Xenogenesis Trilogy, written by Octavia Butler is composed of the novellas *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*. It initially ran from 1987 to 1989 and chronicled the rebirth of Earth after the fallout of nuclear war as well as humanity's subsequent rescue and 'discovery' by an alien species called the Oankali. However, the Oankali have mixed motives for saving the humans, and demand a 'trade' out of the survivors. The remaining humans must reproduce exclusively with Oankali and create a hybrid generation as payment for their rescue. The series was later republished as one volume under the name *Lilith's Brood* in the early 2000s, right as a renewed appreciation for Butler's early work was starting to permeate SF discourse. Both titles place special weight on the Oankali-human 'construct' children of Lilith; the half human, half extra-terrestrial offspring of a post-apocalyptic Earth and the titular new, alien 'brood'. Fundamentally, this is their story; the steps that led to their creation, their experiences in Oankali-majority and human-majority cultures, and the expectations put upon them by their different sets of parents to be more than any other person that preceded them.

Butler's construct characters stand in as analogies for mixed race persons engaging with the environments around them and negotiating with conventional understandings of race and biology. Their engagements gesture to more malleable configurations of identity and corporeality that break away from racial absolutism. While not necessarily mixed race characters in the traditional sense⁶, human-Oankali constructs experience key moments in their upbringing that bare a strong resemblance to common experiences of mixed race individuals, whether it be in

⁶ Akin of *Adulthood Rites* does have a black human mother in the form of Lilith and an deceased Asian father named Joseph, but the role real-life mixed race plays in the universe of *Xenogenesis* is less significant than its allegorical counterpart, the human-Oankali constructs.

how they're perceived as fetish, as repulsive, as cause for anxiety, or ultimately as the future. It is in their 'futureness' that the constructs parallel real-life conceptions of mixed race most strongly. The comparable language, backgrounds, and even family dynamics that contribute to a mixed allegorical reading of these characters are not solely mixed experiences (questions of identity, disassociation, relationship, etc.), but are certainly augmented by the incorporation of a mixed race framework where one person is often called upon to serve as a cultural bridge between two parties.

I argue that the means by which Lilith of *Dawn*, Akin of *Adulthood Rites*, and Jodahs of *Imago* rectify their own changing bodies against the backdrop of strict Self/Other dichotomies dialogue with traditional representations of Black-white mixed race persons⁷ in more realist forms, namely as it applies to passing, tragic mulatto tropes, and mixed utopia narratives. Moreover, in drawing comparisons between non-fiction, realist fiction, and speculative fiction portrayals of mixed race, I propose that a transformative focus on experimentation and subjectivity would indicate yet other core aspects of racial identity and its operation in contemporary discourse. Furthermore, I hope to add to the ongoing dismantling of the biological race narrative a means by which to re-constitute SF's sordid history with critical race studies and self/other binaries. It is ultimately in reading mixed analogous beings as resisting standard constructions that racialized biology and (multi)racial fetishization that we gain a clearer reading of Butler's work, while likewise affirming mixedness as a critical vein through which to deconstruct and re-construct racial futurity that can be utilized for reparative critique.

⁷ While sources focused on black-white mixed race will be my primary guide, there is also a wide breadth of Asian/white and Hapa research that elucidates similar themes in near identical ways. Research as well on POC intersections is slowly coming into prominence. For the purposes of this exploration however, Butler's clear influences tend to ground themselves more in the African American literary tradition than anything else, as I will go on to demonstrate.

At the start of Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, 28-year-old Lilith awakens trapped in a room, under observation by a mysterious and yet-unknown association. Lilith initially assumes her captors to be ransomers or government agents but is even more shocked to hear that an alien abduction of sorts has taken place. In the aftermath of the nuclear apocalypse, extra-terrestrials named Oankali voyaged to Earth in search of a new home and chose to save a few of the planet's remaining inhabitants. Lilith learns from an alien named Jdahya that furthermore, after centuries of study and scientific research, the Oankali have chosen humanity to participate in a trade; in exchange for saving human lives and restoring them to a healed Earth, the humans must bear Oankali-human offspring and exclusively Oankali-human offspring. Humanity and Oankali as they are now will cease to be and instead become more than the sum of their parts.

Every key problem throughout *Dawn* and the subsequent novels revolves around the horror of human-Oankali intermingling. Lilith is naturally horrified by the prospect of alien "medusa children", as she calls them, and the other human characters that awaken later are also none too keen. Their repulsion derives from two key sources; the total lack of agency implicit in this 'trade', but even more unsettling, the terror of birthing offspring that will in some way be 'alien' or not truly human. The lack of human agency speaks for itself. Lilith's first awakening within the constraints of the narrative is not in fact the first time she's awoken. Each time the Oankali woke her up to talk to her prior, she rebelled against them, either staying silent or aggressively trying to escape her containment. The long bouts of sleep she'd been undergoing were meant to 'prepare' her for her new reality. As Jdahya explains: "'Someone handled you badly— underestimated you. You are like us in some ways, but you were thought to be like your military people hidden underground. They refused to talk to us too. At first. You were left asleep for about fifty years after that first mistake'" (Butler 17). Of all the passages in the inaugural

“Womb” section of *Dawn*, this one perhaps bears the strongest underlying threat. The Oankali frame their work as fundamentally humanitarian (in the most literal sense), and the idea of simply putting someone back into stasis in order to try to get information at some later date doesn’t ring as cruel, or even all that peculiar. Jdahya’s remark that Lilith has been underestimated in the past also speaks to a need to anticipate her behavior, or perhaps simply her unpredictability. Critically, Jdahya never clarifies whether that first mistake was the Oankali’s fault or the human’s fault. He just blanketly calls it an error, leaving Lilith to determine whether or not he’s being self-depreciating or making an ominous threat about a future circumstance if she doesn’t behave. A great moment of foreshadowing as, later in the novel, that exact form of punishment does take place for several human resisters, who are put to sleep never to be awakened again.

Equally important is the way Jdahya tries to divorce the Oankali-human union from ideas like ‘interbreeding’ and ‘crossbreeding’, but Lilith refuses to estrange reproduction as a simple ‘trade’ or an interesting experiment. Human reproduction and physical intimacy is erased in Oankali genetic engineering, where a third gendered alien called an ooloi will wrap its tentacles around a human male and female and effectively take their genetic material. This process completely erases any desire the man and woman might have for one another outside that context, with simple touching being construed as repulsive. Moreover, the Oankali have taken away humanity’s ability to reproduce sexually even if they tried. This altered means of creating new life is the story’s core conflict. Offspring produced by human/Oankali unions are called constructs by their Oankali parents but are envied and desired by humans as children for their human characteristics. Desire mingles with hate for the human resisters in particular, who long for human children but hate the strings attached. Many go so far as to kidnap construct children

and cut off ‘alien-looking’ parts of their anatomy to make them as human as possible. This framing of the constructed children as people akin to a science experiments fused with the creation of a product situates them in the tense place between object and subject, as outsiders and their own parents alike seek to understand ‘what’ they are rather than ‘who’ they are.

However, the first person rendered an object of suspicion for their supposedly dubious origins and enemy ‘taint’ is not any of the construct children, but rather their mother, Lilith. Taint truly does serve as an operative framing device here, running alongside anxieties of contagion, contamination, and the supposed inevitability of human destruction. Lilith asks her alien ‘abductors’ early on whether or not it would ever be possible to restore humanity to its former glory following the nuclear apocalypse. It is apparent to Lilith and everyone else that humanity failed to sustain itself, sought to destroy itself, and could not salvage itself without outside intervention. The Oankali happened upon earth at just the right moment before nuclear winter and managed to save a few survivors.

What is less apparent are the reasons the Oankali feel the same scenario is doomed to repeat itself, and why as a result they have chosen to mitigate and erase the so-called troublesome aspects of humanity all together. The Oankali see (or at the very least, believe that they see) the larger picture, namely how the aggressiveness of domineering people is the result of a deeper ingrained contradiction written in our species’ genetic code. Humans are intelligent, more intelligent in fact than any other species the Oankali have encountered, yet they are also hierarchical, and hierarchical tendencies are viewed as the second and stronger characteristic: “When human intelligence served it [hierarchical thinking] instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem... That was like ignoring cancer. I think your people did not realize what a dangerous thing they were doing” (Butler 39). The Oankali’s

relationship to their human counterparts is perfectly set up in this one quote. Between the condescension and the concern, there lies a sort of mesmerizing attraction that keeps the Oankali coming back. The Oankali Jdahya even confesses that his people could not get rid of humans, as if they were already grafted into their beings.

The allure of humanity's mismatched DNA combined with its many surprising biological capacities is just too enticing. The fetish of the contradiction and its unanswerable question, how did one species manage to survive so long against supposedly insurmountable odds, is juxtaposed with cancer, a 'treasure' in the eyes of the Oankali because of its regenerative properties. They are able to use humanity's 'talent' for cancer to regrow limbs and heal mortal wounds. What might have killed Lilith saved her closest Oankali companion. However, Jdahya does not mean cancer here in its strangely positive context. His fear underlying this contradiction is apparent. Jdahya's words are terse and clipped. His body language as read by Lilith is 'shrinking inward.' There is something fundamentally uncomfortable about two incompatibilities becoming compatible. Nearly all the successive events in the trilogy will focus the Oankali's attempts to mitigate the contradiction's effects, prevent any of its natural damage, in order to eventually eliminate it all together. In short, the contradiction is Oankali cancer, cancer as a human would understand it, the taint besmirching their new conquest. The 'talent' for cancer and the 'curse' of the contradiction make no sense together, so much so that Jdahya struggles to explain it without the equivalent of deep sighs. The entirety of humanity is a nonsensical mess in desperate need of fixing, or perhaps more specifically, curing by an outside party. As might be expected, the humans awoken after Lilith see contact with the Oankali as a contaminant in an of itself, as though the disease of non-humanness could spread simply by virtue of anyone's contact with them, in this case Lilith.

The cure logic perpetuated by the Oankali and to some degree the humans (those who wish to have human-like children by cutting off alien body parts from constructs) becomes even more fraught when racialized and ethnic biases are incorporated into the schema of the ‘helpers’, or for a real-world parallel, the white savior. In the case of *Xenogenesis*, it is the Oankali trying to find the cure for human essence. In the case of real-world humans, it more often takes the form of trying to ‘cure’ a racialized or gendered Other of their apparent ailments or psychosis, all without running the risk of being contaminated by otherness, becoming ‘ill’ simply by association. Even more than that, mixed race studies is dictated very much by the taint or contagion, as Isiah Lavender dictates in his book *Race in American Science Fiction*: “A fundamental fear of contagion drives the fear of the racial other, and this fear results in reactionary measures to resist, avoid, or stop social, environmental, and cultural change such as violence are attempts at isolation” (120).

If we are to read the Oankali and humanity within a Self/Other dichotomy, we can see these behaviors manifest in both species, especially when we incorporate miscegenation, referred to by Lavender as an ‘ailment of race’, that is, a biproduct of two different groups of people capable of reproduction spending any amount of time together. Miscegenation focuses on the sexual relationships between persons considered to be of different races. At the core of fear of the Other is the fear of becoming Other, which miscegenation anxiety best encapsulates. When this fear is incorporated into cure logic and a larger cultural understanding of other Self, anxiety around not only contamination but bastardization emerges in the fear of miscegenation’s evidence; the fear of the mixed child.

Throughout the latter half of *Dawn*, Lilith is coaxed into the role of a makeshift ambassador on behalf of the Oankali. Her task is to awaken other humans, introduce them to the

situation, and prepare them for life on a new Earth. It doesn't take long for her to get branded as an enemy collaborator, or at the very least a liability, by most of the humans. The question of whether or not she is 'one of them' is summed up pointedly when a woman Lilith saves from rape asks her straight out if Lilith is truly human shortly after rescuing her. Lilith is exasperated: "How many times would she have to answer that question? And why did she bother? Would her words ease anyone's suspicions?" (Butler 180). In essence, the fear that Lilith is not human, not human enough, or a traitor to the human cause leads not only to a shift in the way she's perceived, but a transformation of the way she sees herself. As she constantly tries to re-assert her humanity around familiars and alien others, the core of what it means to be human no longer holds. If it is biological, Lilith's humanness is enhanced by the super strength the Oankali gave her, and therefore how human she is would be up for debate. If being human is cultural or ideological, the very battles that destroyed humanity centuries before would never have taken place. There would be no biological basis for the contradiction, as the Oankali assert, nor would the tensions between humans develop if there was indeed a shared universal human ideology. Yet if 'human' is a constructed signifier, not much different than the construct children she will later have, Lilith's humanity can be just as easily deconstructed and melded, standing somewhere between human and alien, self and other. The first instance of mixedness in the text is not presented in the form of an individual born 'mixed' or 'hybrid', but in the form of a person rendered self/other/neither by circumstance, as a sort of appetizer for what is to come.

While her children will deal with the self-identity paradox in more obvious ways, Lilith is not exempt from the questions of 'who' she is, even though she is not a construct. Everything that may have been credited to her as human is shifted when her embodiment changes (the Oankali granting her inhuman strength), her performance as human is disrupted by her

sympathies with Nikanj, and finally, when her proximity to human fellows collapses. The speculative nature of *Xenogenesis* estranges the historical realities of ‘human’ and racial classification, yet Butler still poses an intriguing possibility; that the disruption of categorical thinking is both externally and internally determined. Lilith cannot convince the group she sees as her ‘in-group’ that she belongs with them. Humanity has assigned her to the Oankali, biology aside, and the Oankali still know her to be human. She is pushed into the liminal space between persons, in many ways a state of total unbelonging, in other ways very clearly belonging. It is ultimately in continuing to live, selecting aspects of humanness and relationships adjacent to alienness that she is actualized as both/and. This decision can hardly be called a choice, let alone a choice to self-identity. However, due to Lilith’s role as mediator expelled and welcomed almost cyclically, we can assess that there are at least echoes of a conversation here that will be further developed in the subsequent novels.

The choice to self-identity is one of the most oft discussed topics in mixed race studies, namely whether or not an individual has the ability, let alone the right, to identify her own race and have her answer be taken as invariable fact. Self-identification proved particularly important for individuals who have more ambiguous features that cannot be read or scripted onto any one race or group of races. Their ambiguous presentation, common enough to the mixed race experience that the Critical Mixed Race Association regularly gives out “I Am Not a Guessing Game” buttons in response to common ‘What are you?’ questions arguably necessitates need for self-identity as a core framework, but even so it is not without controversy. Societal conceptions of mixed race across intersection are among the most varied and nuanced racial ideologies in their respective countries. It is essential to recognize, then, that the US’s perception of mixed race persons particularly along black-white intersections has been relatively clean cut as a result

of historical patterns of classification. The one-drop rule or rule of hypodescent formally and only recently informally specifies that an individual having any black heritage, whether it be a black parent or great-grandparent, is entirely black under the law, and hence subject to the restrictions pertaining to black persons at the height of the Jim Crow era. However, the ‘type’ or figure of the mulatto or the light-skinned passing man (although more often woman) has far from faded into the background of black studies discourse. Although not always discussed against the backdrop of miscegenation explicitly, the popularization of passing narratives in African American literature and later their problematic commodification in white pulp cinema gestured to a fascination with the mixed that didn’t fully wane, at least not so much as we would like to think. In reading Butler’s work, we see negotiation with the same ideas, the same representations, and the same struggles as in these early century narratives, albeit by way of analogy. Yet that analogy is what empowers Butler to look beyond form into framework, revealing the means by which racial formation happens, and the fundamental limitations at the heart of all modes of social construction.

Naturally, the means by which mixed race is read in Butler’s SF universe is not divorced from real world constructions of race and being. Drawing from a similar investment in racialized portrayals of biology in her book *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Create Race in the 21st Century*, Dorothy Roberts revisits the motivations behind a biological conceptualization of race and the agenda it aided. Moreover, she learned in her personal walk how closely linked the notion of the hybrid is to institutionally racist discourses:

“I used to cherish the fantasy that the intimate hybridity of my own biracial, multiethnic family constituted a blow against the racial order. But that was before I formed my own moral allegiance to black people based on a sense of common struggle against racial oppression. Looking back, I can see my childhood fantasy was not only unenlightened but privileged by my middle-class existence, largely disconnected from the majority of black residents in other parts of the city” (229).

The term 'hybridity' is highlighted as a negative signifier of human racial categorization, not akin to species in this case so much as a divorce from marginalized Black being on the Black/white binary. Interesting also is Roberts' linking of her childhood fantasy to her isolation from one aspect of her heritage, later rectified by her reuniting in common cause against anti-Black and racist agendas. For Roberts, an affinity with Black racial identity develops out of an understanding of Black being rather than a summative 'pure' embodiment of Black body. Mixed race identity, as such, remains a privileged concept in these instances, one that not only reinforces fixed notions of race, but likewise requires an isolation from the injustices faced by colonized and/or marginalized monoracial contributors to mixed offspring.

As evidenced by many ongoing debates, the concept of mixed race remains aloof and controversial for real-life persons due to its linkage with biological race concepts. What then, do we make of fictional and speculative renderings of mixed analogous characters who are metaphorically mixed race? How has the field of sf addressed this issue in the past? Is there any way to read texts that would account for this apparent complication while likewise recognizing the complex and important existence of mixed identity? In the mid to late 1990s, sociologist Naomi Zack took the 'mixed question' head on, acknowledging the built-in flaws in discussing mixed race as a concept, but nevertheless making clear "that American racial categories are too rigid, because they unfairly and, at times, brutally have imposed identities on individuals that do not fit them. We believe that everyone ought to be allowed to self-identify racially" (xv). Herein lies the primary dispute where mixed race studies is concerned: can an individual be reasonably relied upon to select their own racial identity distinct from exterior classification, i.e. the assignment to a category based on aesthetic, place of origin, cultural practice, etc. and if not, why not? Stanford scholar Michele Elam has rather famously resisted self-identification politics

where black mixed people are concerned. Elam's concerns over the viability of mixed identity bear a striking resemblance to Roberts' anxieties. Elam further critiques the growing tension between mixed race and blackness as signifiers for similar reasons:

“Both the popular and, with important exceptions, the social scientific characterizations of mixed race tend to reinforce the perception that monoracial identification is, by contrast, collective, perceptive, trapped in the antiquated race mentality...In this context, black identity is frequently seen as a conscripting, discriminating, and oppressive force that is damaging the hearts and minds of the next generation” (Elam 10-11).

Again, the emphasis on one aspect of mixed identity detracting from its other part is reiterated in this passage, alongside reminders that mixed discourse risks characterizing 'pure' single race identity as an antiquated race mentality.

While mixed identity, particularly across the Black/white binary, does risk alienating an individual from aspects of marginalization, Elam's thesis that mixed activists frame Blackness as oppressive and conscripting for mixed individuals would only be viable insofar as the mixed black subject seeks that alienation. Such alienation from Black identity, while not unheard of, would have to be consistent, prominent, and more or less inherent to all forms of mixed identification. Elam speaks of Black-white intersections, but would the same rules apply to BIPOC intersections like individuals of Black-LatinX or Black-Asian backgrounds? Does defining oneself in these contexts risk equal dilution of Blackness and even if not, should these conversations be bedded completely in Black Studies, as Elam suggests for black/white intersections? Such alienation, in other words, may be demonstrated in Elam's concern with self-identity, wherein hyper-individualist subjects feel the need to operate outside of grouped communities rather than as a part of a racialized category. Obliging Elam for a moment, we find ourselves amidst a new contradiction. If the mixed being ought to not identify as mixed for risk of isolation from any aspect of her communities of origin, who should identify her? Can a mixed

person refuse consent to an external racialized identity, or are the social and aesthetic factors at play in daily interactions too significant to be overridden by so-called ‘internal subjectivity’? Butler does not shy away from these questions. In fact, she elects to put them center stage.

This brings us to Akin, the protagonist of *Adulthood Rites*, and the first male human-Oankali construct born of a human mother. Akin’s very existence is understood as a risk by his birth society and seen as an insult by his supposedly human ‘others.’ Akin’s role as experiment is set up at the very beginning of the story, when his parent Nikanj and his mother Lilith debate the possible futures their infant might have. His creation is marked as a momentous occasion, but Lilith remains undecided as to what he represents for the continuation of both species. Lilith speculates, rather accurately, that humans will resent Akin for existing in a liminal space between human and alien, looking correct but ‘not quite’ correct (Butler 258). This space of (mis)recognition parallels more-realist black passing narratives of the early twentieth century, such as *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* or *Imitation of Life*; however, in the case of the speculative, Akin’s ‘giveaway’ so to speak, takes the form of a long, gray tongue that doubles as his eyes. Even more curious is the intentionality with which Akin’s features are assigned. His Oankali parent Nikanj maintains the ability to select ideal traits for the child and foster them even while he grows in Lilith’s body: “‘Nothing in him is mismatched. He’s very healthy. He’ll live a long life and be strong enough to endure what he must endure’” (Butler 254).

‘Mismatched’ in this passage, refers to a randomness in DNA assignment to which humans are accustomed. The speaker, Nikanj, recognizes limited human capacities to select their children’s traits, and adds to that unpredictability its own foresight. In this sense, Nikanj’s role as ooloi (a genderless selector of ‘good’ traits), may be interpreted as an exercise in eugenics, but just as much an exercise in experimentation. Nikanj and the other Oankali see themselves as able to

shape the future, so when said 'future' turns around and begins shaping them back, they're caught off guard.

After being kidnapped by humans and learning more about their society, Akin returns to the Oankali settlement and advocates for a new world for humankind where they can live, reproduce, and die in peace without Oankali interference. The Oankali are none too fond of this idea, particularly the Akjai, the living ship on which the Oankali travel and likely the oldest known form of the Oankali before their many generations of genetic alteration. He says of Akin: "You're very human. You skirt as close to the Contradiction as anyone has dared to go. You're as much of them as you can be and as much of us as your ooaan dared make you. That leaves you with your own contradiction" (Butler 474). The contradiction of humanity, its apparent intelligence and hierarchical nature rolled in one, is not the contradiction causing the Akjai anxiety here, but rather the contradiction of being both/and, of intentionally resisting conventional modes of being for the benefit of a marginalized subgroup. Akin uses his dexterity or passing ability throughout the novel to sympathize and gain sympathy. His role as an experiment or ideal future being pales in comparison to the way in which he always tries to reassert his connection to the past. Akin works to preserve humanity, even while he knows that humanity will never want him preserved, simply because he's learned that the utopic features of any given society are rendered moot if its citizens do not perceive them as utopic. Claire Curtis, disputing the assumption that utopia must in some way be eugenicist uses Octavia Butler's work as evidence of a text that rejects 'cure' logic while still maintaining utopic thinking. She also emphasizes that the text resists the idea of categorizing either people group as fully villain or fully hero. Instead, there is discomfort: "Discomfort is not anxiety; rather it is a moment or recognizing the 'messy experience of corporeality' and the equally messy experience of those

bodies trying to live together peacefully” (Curtis 27). Utopia is often read into *Xenogenesis* for good reason. All diseases are healed, humanity fights together for a common cause, and ultimately, the hope in the end is for a conclusion to the fighting, a peaceful future. I argue that the utopian aspect scholars are reading into this trilogy lies in a mixed imaginary often construed as the ‘ideal future,’ not only in a posthuman deconstruction of humanity. When I speak of the mixed imaginary, I refer to the ways in which mixed persons are read against the backdrop of the future, if not utopia. It is the idea that the future will bring about a new race of a sort that encompasses all other races that preceded and, more disconcerting, that that race will be the ultimate embodiment of humanity at its finest. The mixed imaginary refers to those present and past mixed bodies that are often caught up in this societal ideal and who must grapple with and against the expectations put upon them to embody and achieve an ideal simultaneously. Society may claim there a certain potential of a half-blank, half-blank, and as such insists that it can be used to ‘rescue’ a broken world. Assigning restorative possibilities to one being or group of beings results in the same sort of issues as in any other society, only this time more pronounced.

Understanding that, Akin’s story ends with a disruption of a post racial utopian ideal. Akin’s physicality diverges radically depending on whom he interacts with and for what periods of time. While he is able to ‘pass’ for human as a child, his transition into adulthood is marked by a thorough shift into a more alien appearance. The transformation from passing to non-passing takes a toll on Akin, although not for aesthetic reasons. He is aggressively and quickly severed from one of his parent communities, in a way not so dissimilar from his initial kidnapping at the beginning of the novel. In conversation with a human who asks about his change, Akin replies: “Of course I mind. Oh, god. How many resisters [humans] will trust me now? How many will even believe I’m a construct?” (Butler 500). The exact nature of Akin’s

lament is ambiguous, but underlying it is a fundamental sadness at being divorced from human companionship. The character's status as a construct has allotted him alliances with both human and alien, but his shift in appearance now negates that fluidity. Mixedness remains the scene of tension but will not be read as a site of restoration until the conclusion of the series, *Imago*. However, in terms of Butler's larger oeuvre, the cumulation of mixed analogy as the site of resistance comes in her final work, for which *Imago* may be considered a dry run.

A half-human, half-Ina (vampire) hybrid, Shori Matthews progresses through *Fledgling* with little to no concept of her heritage. A victim of a hate crime perpetuated by other vampires in her community, Shori scrambles for her life and for justice with little grasp on what either will grant her. It is this isolation from her past that most intrigues her vampire allies. Says Shori: "Sometimes I recall disconnected bits about myself or about the Ina in general. But I've lost my past, my memory of my families, symbionts, friends...The people of my families who are dead are so completely gone from me that I can't truly miss them or mourn them because, for me, it's as though they never existed" (Butler 207). Beyond its augmentation of Shori's tragedy, I believe this passage is playing with conventional notions of hybridity and identity for the purposes of pointing out their inaccuracies. Where Elam may conceive mixed identity in opposition to monoracial or specified heritage, Butler removes Shori's connection to her past in order to demonstrate not only the importance of her social relationships, but also the ongoing vitality of those relationships distinct from self-identity. Shori does not, *cannot* see herself as Ina without the investment of fellow Ina re-educating her.

Nevertheless, the character's actions, sometimes vampire-like, other times human-like, locate her in a liminal place interdependent on those with whom she interacts. Revisiting Hampton for a moment, "To be identified as a hybrid in Butler's fiction is, often times,

synonymous with becoming a survivor and a signifier of the future” (100). Indeed, Shori can only place herself in the future, not only by her design (she was, after all, very intentionally created to withstand sunlight), but also by her mentality. Additionally, the attempts of others to classify her, while technically accurate, prove fruitless in her re-conceptualization of self. Beyond expressing on several occasions a closer affinity for humans (the first people she encountered after her memory loss) than Ina, Shori’s identity is perceived as unstable and incomplete by the vampire community. As a result, more is asked of her than of others: ““You, more than anyone, must show that you can follow our ways. You must not give the people who have decided to be your enemies any advantage. You must seem more Ina than they” (Butler 266). The idea that Shori must become ‘more Ina than Ina’, so to speak, calls attention to the performative aspect of her identity; that which can provide evidence for her supposed ‘right’ to identify as a vampire. Whether or not Shori sees herself as Ina yet is incidental in the eyes of her fellows; in this case, her self-identity does not matter. Still she must act as though she is, and always has possessed this aspect of her being even though she herself does not recognize it. In this regard, Shori’s struggle to become what she supposedly already is situates her as a hybrid being on two levels. The ‘migration’ of Shori’s body via the constant re-reading of her selfhood reflects Hampton’s conception of the ‘hybrid journey’, or simply the act of becoming oneself. Likewise, the juxtaposition of Shori’s identity against human and against Ina places her in the crossfires of race as technology, specifically in Shori’s utilitarian origin. Any categorization of Shori as purely human or purely Ina falls flat upon further examination.

Designed specifically with darker skin, the character is meant to serve a purpose (in this case, daytime resistance to sunlight) just as much as she is meant to be a ‘person’. Shori is, however, first and foremost an experiment; cited at one point as proof that intermingled genetic material can prove ‘stronger’ and ‘faster’ than singular ‘pure’ DNA” (Butler 225).

It is here that any intersection between hybrid being and real-life mixed race becomes muddled and borderline problematic. As evidenced by the story of Philippa Schuyler and others like it, stereotypes of the superior mixed specimen can have irrevocable damages on conceptions of selfhood and otherhood. And yet, a total distinguishing between hybridity and mixed analogous readings of hybrid beings does not account for the continuing comparisons between the two representations throughout the field. The new task, then, is to conduct conscious readings of hybrid beings that address the false assumptions often projected onto mixed- identifying individuals, while at the same time rectifying those assumptions by proving their ultimate untenability. Put simply, any mixed experiment, so long as it is cast as experimental, but be read as a failure if it is ever to prove a true success.

The key similarity between Akin, Shori, and Jodahs is their original design. Not unlike the real-life misadventure of Philippa Schuyler, all three characters were birthed to be controlled experiments under the tutelage of their ‘stable’ creators. Also not unlike Philippa Schuyler, all three characters failed in some way to live up to their supposed purpose. I suspect these failures were no mistake on Butler’s part, as they are arguably responsible for nuancing the characters’ statuses as mixed beings. But for the epitome of Butler’s hybrid being traversing into the mixed analogous through experimental failure, we must look to *Imago*’s Jodahs.

Situated shortly after the events of *Adulthood Rites*, the final installment in Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy follows Jodahs, a construct born male before transitioning into ooloi, the Oankali’s third gender, upon reaching adolescence. This sudden transformation into ooloi marks the first occurrence of such a change in a construct child. Unlike Jodahs’ older sibling Akin, though, this transition comes totally unexpected, and with total consequence for Jodahs’ and its family. The creation of Jodahs is seen as incompetence on the part of its parent Nikanj, and

because of this mistake, the family is forced to leave their place of refuge for fear that the error could spread to other human/alien constructs, going on to encounter human resisters that may not resist as well as they would have hoped.

The intersections of Jodahs' identity are twofold along the lines of race and gender. 'Ooloi' is described not as a mix between male and female, but as a classification onto itself with the special ability to manipulate and construct DNA. As a result, Jodahs is a sort of double construct designed to design, imbued with a power the Oankali believed to be very much their own. Even towards the end of the novel, the Oankali do not see Jodahs' existence as the next logical step of human-Oankali trade, but as an accident that may have even created an entirely new species in their minds. When Jodahs and its new ooloi construct sibling Aor find themselves in the midst of a new resister colony and would like to be sent mates for interested parties, the Oankali deliberate and agree but not without voicing stark doubt:

“Oankali and construct opinion also took on a recognizable same from the apparent chaos. The head that they were attached to was the generally accepted belief that Aor and I were potentially dangerous and should either go to the ship or stay where we were. The lowland towns [settlements on Earth] were apologetic, but they still felt unsure and afraid of us. We represented the premature adulthood of a new species. We represented true independence—reproductive independence—for that species, and this frightened both Oankali and constructs. We were, as one signaler remarked, frighteningly competent ooloi” (Butler 741-2).

Of the things going on in this passage, it is the idea of creating a new species that proves particularly odd, as construct ooloi would not be incorporating any of their own genetics into the reproduction process, but still drawing from Oankali and human DNA for the creation of children. Jodahs doesn't dispute that it is in fact of the same origins as every other sentient being at play in this story, and hence not of a different species entirely. However, the designation sticks, and what's more, becomes a motivating factor for Oankali, constructs, and humans alike to come to Jodahs' new settlement. Jodahs' appeal as a concept and an individual is so potent

that even a staunch human resister admits he never stood a chance against liking it for its fusion of ooloi and human traits. The degree to which an ooloi construct is a part of or a part of creating a new species is incidental to the value of the signifier; a value based in the fetishization of hybridity, juxtaposed against Jodahs' reluctance to plant a town and fall in line with the conditions the Oankali stipulate in return for mates. Only in a settlement under Oankali control are the Oankali willing to grant Jodahs' request. The anxiety surrounding ooloi constructs doesn't fade, but it is mitigated by an attempt to put geographical and intellectual boundaries around them as a construct. These ooloi constructs have, in effect, become an experiment once again, but this time with the subtle promise of a future disruption, and this promise lies in Jodahs' initial transformation.

There are many layers to Jodahs' reveal, beginning with Nikanj's summation of its new identity: "You'll be able to change yourself. What we [ooloi] can do from one generation to the next – changing our form, reverting to earlier forms or combinations of forms – you'll be able to do within yourself. Superficially, you may even be able to create new forms, new shells for camouflage. That's what we intended" (Butler 547). Throughout the trilogy, subtle parallels between the liminality of sex and the liminality of race (I mean 'race' in the broadest sense of the word to refer to the human and alien) have manifested, but none so clear as in this passage. For Jodahs, transcending singular classification as human or Oankali bridges over into transcending male and female classifications, regardless of its preferred gender identity. It is indeed the surprise of Jodahs' new identity, the unveiling of its form, so to speak, that ties back into all other forms that preceded it. Jodahs develops camouflage, access to the past, as well as the future, becoming a fully transcendent version of its previous self.

Nevertheless, the anxiety surrounding Jodahs' transformation is palpable, and the full extent of Nikanj's error is haunting: "I made a mistake. I only realized earlier today what I had allowed to happen. I...I would not have done it deliberately...Nothing could have made me do it. It happened because after so many years, I had begun to relax about our children. Things have always gone well. I was careless" (Butler 540). This moment marks the point at which hybridity as an experimental ploy falls apart in the world of *Xenogenesis*. While Nikanj blames the error on laziness, Jodahs neither embodies nor accepts its transformation as an inherent problem, or even as a 'mistake.' It becomes, as Nikanj forecasted, exactly what it was meant to become, not unlike its older sibling Akin. Moreover, Jodahs' role as ooloi makes it critical to the reproduction process: in other words, self-sustained, self-identified, and self-selected, and capable of enabling other identities to prosper and flourish. As such, Butler constructs Jodahs as the ideal divorce from the project of hybridity into the lived reality of mixedness. This mixedness comes naturally of its own accord, recognizes prior contexts while also self-actualizing its own personhood, and above all makes it a point to participate in the inevitable transformation of ever-shifting social signifiers across time and across generation. In doing this, Jodahs retains the defining aspects of all its accumulated identities. Jodahs is the first main character in *Xenogenesis* to speak of itself in the first person, because its actualization as an individual trumps its role as a construct, an ambassador, or even a peacemaker. Its end goal is simply to become itself.

Throughout this chapter, we've examined how mixed race operates as a framework in *Xenogenesis* with the intent to prove why it is a strong lens through which to view Butler's work. Reading race with and against the trilogy is strong, but we have likewise seen that a critical mixed race angle does similar work while centering the mixed subject in only a way that a focus on mixed race can. A mixed reading puts special emphasis on identity formation, liminality, and

subject-centering, but at this point it's a matter of asking how a mixed framework operates differently and what its unique benefits are.

Liminality in a mixed configuration is built for collapse, which is to say that any fixed point in reading our text, whether it be a character's identity or an ideological foundation, is subject to deconstruction. This is especially prominent in the experiment language of *Imago* as we see the presuppositions we have been operating with up until this point fracture, forcing our understanding of human and Oankali alike to reconstruct. Where liminality may be constructed as a space between or as ambivalent, Butler reframes the state as a space of protest in and of itself, resisting hegemonic definitions of identity and selfhood. The bridging of two modes of being up until this point considered untainted is addressed, but broken down through gestures to ongoing collapse, not simply on a societal level, but on a personal one.

Similarly, identity formation is an integral component to an engaged study of mixed race, as we saw in our earlier discussion of mixed race theory over time. The apparent conflict between self identity and group identity is put center stage in *Xenogenesis*, particularly in *Adulthood Rites* where Akin's insistence on his own versatility is undermined by his transforming body, which at one time speaks to one part of his heritage, other times to another. Most importantly, self-centering is among the more distinct and potentially among the more controversial themes present in Butler's text. In considering the role of the self/other dichotomy, liminality between the two often finds itself recognizing even without rejecting the set difference between familiar and unfamiliar environments. Moreover, we discussed how hybridity and outward-looking examinations of amalgamated society do not always consider the individual cost or investment of individuals considered an embodiment of these principles.

Leaving out these important perspectives is costly. As the evolution of critical race theory leans further towards analysis of being and race-oriented ontology (consider the ‘thinging’ of Blackness), we must ask after the stakes of failing to ‘thing’ mixed race in a similar way in similar works of literature. Xenogenesis makes no secret of its investment in mixed being, and as such seemed suitable for deeper consideration along these lines. The sparse mixed readings into Butler’s work up until this point is not so much a failure as much as it is an opportunity to re-read commonly accepted tropes where mixed and mixed analogous bodies are concerned. The vitality of mixed race readings, in non-fiction, realist and speculative modes lies in the intersection between self-identity and communal identity, the necessity of continued racial classification coupled with the knowledge that such categories are subject to change, and finally, in the intrinsic severance between intentional and fetishized human design and the human the self designs. In reading Butler, we see a proposition, and it is a proposition to look not towards the future, but the present, at the long-ingrained history of race, experimentation, and everything in between.

“The Earth Will Be Just Fine: Personhood and/as Posthumanism in N.K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth Trilogy

In her early drafts of what would eventually become the Hugo Award-winning Broken Earth Trilogy, N.K. Jemisin negotiated what racialized portrayals would look like in her worldbuilding. She had elected to incorporate parallel representations to real-world racial categories, but she hadn’t nailed down any deeper significance to each phenotype or identity. The treatment of oppressed minorities had to be comparable even if the appearance of a minority group diverged from what we would understand in the real world. She discusses her ultimate decision in her blogpost ‘Creating Races’, and how that decision would put her in conflict with past speculative works and force her readers to re-consider the baseline assumptions they bring to SF:

“It used to bug me to see ‘race’ used in lieu of species...That approach seemed to encourage treating orcs, demons, etc., as substitutes for human non-white races, which is super-problematic. But I think using ‘species’ may feed into the tendency of fantasy to treat groups that are equally sapient as somehow lesser because they’re different. ‘Race’ emphasizes *personhood*, IMO [in my opinion], where ‘species’ emphasizes inhumanity. And in the case of the Broken Earth trilogy, *personhood* matters.” (Emphasis added)

Indeed, the contrast between human-hood and personhood frames every conversation in the trilogy, from the epic to the mundane. ‘Human’ is a troublesome, slipping signifier weaponized against society’s most vulnerable. ‘Person’ includes more creatures than anyone in the Broken Earth Trilogy could ever imagine. The tension between species and race, human and not quite human enough is a major theme in the novels. While criticisms surrounding Othered beings in speculative fiction are prolific and worth engaging, Jemisin plays an entirely different game in her answer to the question of what constitutes humanity. Rather than trying to come to a conclusion, she rejects the value of ‘human’ altogether in favor of something infinitely more

constant and complicated than a mere biological signifier. Personhood represents more than physicality and being, and in doing so emerges into a new relationship with apocalypse, identity, and the environment. For bodies that have so often been denied the classification of human, this new framing is radical. It is not impossible that the human species as a whole could become irrelevant one way or another, as Jemisin illustrates. It may even be preferable under the correct circumstances, as seen at the end of her Trilogy. But by no means can we risk, even under the direst of circumstances, persons becoming irrelevant.

This chapter examines posthumanism in *The Broken Earth Trilogy*, particularly the first novel in the series, *The Fifth Season*, with the aim of demonstrating how Jemisin's rejection of human as an ontological category and subsequent embrace of personhood revitalizes our understanding of Black and posthuman philosophy alike. Posthumanism as a descriptor has not been a consistent term since its inception. As such, determining what constitutes the posthuman as compared with the transhuman, the trans-corporeal, etc. is an inherently fraught endeavor. I will be drawing on Rosi Braidotti's assertion that "the common denominator for the posthuman condition is an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself" to form my own position (2). In essence, all forms of posthumanism are marked by a shift away from so-called 'naturalistic' structures into new modes of being and representation apart from rote ecological, biological, and ideological constructions. The assumption is one that recognizes all forms of life as vital and refuses to privilege non-human lifeforms we may consider to be worth less, anything from moss to wild animals. Likewise, posthuman scholar Cary Wolfe conceives that, by situating the human being in their environment while dethroning the human as 'ruler' or 'steward', the posthuman both precedes and follows an era of Humanist philosophy that had previously centered man (and man specifically) as the

center of his universe(xv-xvi). In short, displacing human superiority is nothing new even while it remains occasionally controversial. This plays a critical role in my figuring, though this concept is not true of all posthuman theories across the board. The de-centering of the human as dominant, superior, or universal is a key component of critical posthumanism, which rejects the Western Enlightenment ideology of the self-determined and individualistic. This form is largely favored among posthuman scholars, so I will be centering it in this paper even as I compare this form to other forms of posthumanism.

As a school of thought, critical posthumanism has often been in tension with critical race theory, particularly given the sub-human classifications so long enforced on Black and brown bodies. Posthumanism, after all, implies having been granted the status of human by society at large in the first place, in a cultural and social environment that has made Black bodies comparable to chattel. Even as it gestures to alternative possibilities, posthumanism often struggles to rectify the malleable porosity central to its main thesis with the lived reality of Blackness rendered bare by social death. The tension between fictional bodies and the lived experiences of real bodies past and present underlies much of my conversation. However, in recognizing the troubled limitations of ‘human’ as a value judgement in the first place, the ultimate aim of this study may be achieved ironically the rejection of humanism and posthumanism alike. A pivot to personhood, as Jemisin suggests, would necessitate privileging new signifiers. The new aim is, in a sense, to become post posthuman.

The life of the planet and the mysterious othered non-human lifeforms that occupy it operate with and against a human society that continues to perpetuate bias and hierarchy akin to real world injustices. In particular, Jemisin emphasizes the dissolution of the family unit (family separation, forced breeding, re-education of children, etc.) as a mundane yet potent means of

highlighting dehumanization under oppressive systems. On the surface, Jemisin's non-human life forms seem incidental, if not figments of the imagination, distracting from Essun's struggle for peace, justice, and literal stability. However, as we peel back the veil, so too are we encouraged alongside the characters to reject conventional constructions of social order. In lieu of a government order that has made multiple attempts on their lives, characters find alternate modes of community building and history-making outside of surveilled spaces, while still emphasizing the need for cataclysmic hope in the face of cataclysmic disaster. The question is not 'how' to survive an apocalypse, but rather, for what purpose. Such a question cannot be answered in a mere urge to preserve one's species, but in a deeper need to connect and grow one's community.

Where Afrofuturistic science fiction is primarily concerned with the presence of the Black body in future anti colonialist societies, Jemisin's posthumanism is less invested in the phenotypical signifiers that would denote race and class (although that is certainly a huge component of her work), and more interested in the radical potentials for certain types of posthumanism to rescript the Black experience onto new bodies, new societies, even onto the very planet itself. Embodying one's lived trauma, joy, and anger is an inevitability in *Broken Earth*, even as bodies alter and change.

It is people that survive the collapse of all things. Personhood may initially seem an equally reductive substitute for 'human' as a descriptor but encompasses more than a biological or species-based reality. A person as defined by philosopher Willy De Craemer may vary from culture to culture, but might be defined in social terms as a sense of ongoing indebtedness to a community. There is a moral and conscientious element to personhood that is, in a word, necessarily socially responsible towards other members of a community (De Craemer 31). The shift from universalizing our shared traits and privileging them to recognizing the deeper

capacities for morality and consciousness in larger spheres of living is the next step for posthuman discourse; often longed for, but rarely manifested as beautifully as in Jemisin's work: "They [humans] notice what's there... They do not notice what's missing. But then, how can they? Who misses what they have never, ever even imagined? -- How fortunate, then, that there are more people in this world than just humankind" (151).

I open this chapter with a close look at the first book in The Broken Earth Trilogy, *The Fifth Season*. This novel more than the subsequent novels establishes the horrors that Jemisin's 'unhuman' characters are being made to undergo and goes further to explore how that dehumanization was instituted and enforced by systems of power throughout this world's history. I likewise take a closer look at real world engagements with eugenic projects and other dehumanizing practices that bare striking similarity to what Jemisin is elucidating in her text. I go on to read posthumanism into Jemisin's books more explicitly, with a focus on language that explicitly rejects human as a meaningful signifier for the characters, alongside the complications that have often risen from posthuman theory as juxtaposed with Black studies. Finally, with a particular emphasis on the final book of the series *The Stone Sky*, I examine how characters go about reasserting their personhood even as they decide to resist humanity. Jemisin's resistant characters meet the criteria for the 'robot' uprising at some points, returning to the original meaning of the word to denote 'forced' labor, insofar as these subjugated persons overthrow the oppressors that handled them whilst still keeping human as an identity at arm's length. Understanding resistance and reunification (between the self and one's community) as joint reveals the sort of humanness we have been taught to privilege and some combative steps towards a broader understanding of being in the real world and in speculative environments. Ultimately, the overlap between Black studies and posthumanism is at its strongest when anxiety

around the end of the world is reconstituted into the truth of the matter, that a demand for justice from the suffering is not the end of the world and that “when we say the world has ended, it’s usually a lie, because the planet is doing just fine” (Jemisin 18).

Set in an ever-apocalyptic world called the Stillness, *The Fifth Season* takes place on a planet subject to perpetual collapse. Long winters, deadly animals, and more importantly constant earthquakes or ‘shakes’ plague every aspect of day-to-day existence. All the peoples of the world live together in relative harmony, but over the course of history, several humans have evolved the ability to use orogeny, a form of magic that allows them to feel or ‘sess’ out the movements of the Earth and control its elements. As handy of a skill as this seems, orogenes are considered dangerous and unstable second-class citizens at best, barely domesticated monsters at worst. In particular, the tendency for orogene children to react to threats with their orogeny and cause damage is seen as a critical threat to the social fabric of the world, and it is every citizen’s duty to ensure that children with such abilities are either sent to the capital of the world to hone their powers, or killed on the spot lest they destroy anyone nearby by accident. The novel follows the life of an orogene through three major phases of her life; as the child Damaya as she is sent away to live in the capital Fulcrum and train as a state orogene, the young adult Syenite who has become a full orogene and now works under the so-called training of a master orogene named Alabaster, and the middle-aged Essun who escaped the life of the Fulcrum and lives in hiding trying to conceal her orogeny and that of her two children who inherited it as well. Forced into lives of containment, slavery, forced breeding, and with the ever-present threat of lobotomization or death hanging over their heads, Essun and other orogene characters grapple with the merits of protecting a world that so adamantly fails to protect them, or tearing the Earth down from the bottom up and beginning anew. The answer to the dilemma is not long in the making, as the first

few pages depict Alabaster summoning an earthquake that breaks the fabric of the world and threatens to create a permanent fifth season of death and destruction, the titular season the residents of the Stillness are trained to prepare for, but cannot even come close to dealing with for longer than a few years. In the aftermath and through flashbacks, we the reader are invited to consider this question over and over: what and who is really worth saving?

Each chapter in *The Fifth Season* focuses on the institutional violence that Damaya/Syenite/Essun faces and is haunted by even after the collapse of those institutions. Damaya is taken to the Fulcrum at a young age; a part-school part-prison that masquerades as a safe haven for orogenes like her, but in reality tortures and enslaves any so unfortunate to pass through their gates. The education young orogenes or ‘grits’ receive focuses only in part on learning to control their powers (although that is a major component). The truer lessons, Damaya quickly learns, have to do with stripping them of their personhood, and reinforcing their status as barely human. Older teacher orogenes discipline and torture them under the guise of mercy: “*You are representatives of us all*, the instructors say, if any grit dares to protest this treatment. *When you’re dirty, all orogenes are dirty. When you’re lazy, we’re all lazy. We hurt you so you’ll do the rest of us no harm*” (Jemisin 192-3, emphasis added). This assimilatory attitude is the cornerstone of orogene identity formation, akin to the formation of racialized identities under oppressive systems. Likewise, the insistence on the part of the older orogenes that any one individual stands as a representation of a whole subtly alludes to forms of racialized synecdoche common to colonialist literatures like *Heart of Darkness*, where piles of limbs or pairs of eyes diminish the physicality of a whole person and rather reduces them to the sum of their parts. Jemisin’s depiction of re-education and child/parent separation also mirrors atrocities inflicted on Native, Black, and LatinX bodies over the course of American history, namely as it applies to

indigenous children who were forcibly taken from their families and sequestered in similar camps and schools. Moreover, the homogenizing of peoples from distinct to collective results in a contradiction best exemplified by Damaya's response to the previous statement: "The children of the Fulcrum are all different: different ages, different colors, different shapes...one cannot reasonably expect sameness out of so much difference" (Jemisin 93). As the people across the Stillness are forced to meld together, their distinct characteristics are rendered moot, almost silent. The inability to express difference actually serves to augment it, or rather removes the language to critique bigotry as it arises. The word 'rogga', a pejorative for orogene, is banned within the walls of the Fulcrum, despite the orogenes being treated exactly as the word connotes; animalistic, dangerous, and below human. In the same way, Jemisin is rendering transparent the folly of a colorblind approach to race in the real world through an allusion to erasure in the world of her own design. The forced homogeneity of the orogenes is the first step towards labeling them as Other.

The visible disparity between peoples in the Stillness is not the main object of conflict in the Fulcrum, with only occasional allusion to any tension. When we encounter Syenite (the young adult Damaya) she suspects her orogene peers of disliking her because she is a 'midlatter mongrel', or a mix of backgrounds. The truth behind their hatred, however, is much more insidious, and more in line with the class and caste system set up by the Fulcrum. Shortly after meeting her mentor, Alabaster, he catches on to the fact the Syenite is a 'feral', that is an orogene born in the outside world rather than bred to order by the Fulcrum. We are never explicitly told how Syenite's feral-ness is recognizable, only that it has no physical signifier. It is a felt thing in her composure and her orogeny, and a dangerous thing at that: "What it actually means is that they couldn't *predict* you. You're the proof that they'll never understand orogeny. It's not

science, it's something else. And they'll never control us, not really. Not completely" (Jemisin 72). Unsurprisingly, orogenes are framed as unpredictable and dangerous not simply because of their abilities, but because of the Fulcrum's inability to foresee their occurrence. This framing damages Syenite even in the eyes of other orogenes, who see her as a particular hazard, or at the very least, embodied justification for their oppression in the eyes of the world. The risk as conceived by the powers that be lies not in the actual persons or their inclinations, but in how they can, or in this case cannot be controlled. A biological justification for orogene inferiority would better enforce the Fulcrum's hold on the populous, but while orogenes are incapable of 'passing' (any person with orogenic powers will exhibit them in times of distress at one point or another), the species distinction non-orogenes desperately crave is untenable. The actual humanness of orogenes is a given but does little to alleviate the constant abuse put upon them or earn them human rights.

In a rather macabre sense, designation of sub-human or even non-human for Black and Indigenous people of color living under imperialism suggests a sort of constant post-humanity. The Middle Passage for Black bodies was, after all, one of many fundamentally posthuman experiences, in that it took place in response to an attempt to deprive humanity and personhood. Having in a sense always been posthuman, how does Black scholarship respond to the potentialities and risks of a collapsing corporeal/intellectual/ecological world? A biopolitical emphasis on deprecation and the production of Black flesh cannot be distinguished from even the most optimistic assessments of future possibilities. Alexander Weheliye, building on Giorgio Agamben's understanding of bare life highlights the process and eventual state of becoming simply flesh: "If the body represents legal personhood qua self-possession, than the flesh designates those dimensions of human life cleaved by the working together of deprecation and

deprivation” (39). While this may initially appear a reinforcement of a dialectical divide between the body and the mind or spirit, Weheliye’s conceptualization is rather a response to the dualisms that so often governed Black flesh, in effect yielding a division where there was none to begin with, and ultimately refusing to reconcile the bareness of life with its fulfillment among oppressed subjects. Death-making, in this regard, has become so emblematic of the Black experience that any suggestion to de-link the flesh from qualified life is about the farthest thing from science fiction, given its intimacy with reality. Moreover, life ‘in the wake’, as Christina Sharpe puts it, has so significantly weathered the Black body as to alter the very makeup and integrity of the flesh. Disparities in health care, epigenetic inheritances, and the trauma of memory demonstrate the explicit failure of the humanist project while likewise centering corporeality and embodiment as lynchpin determining factors for human identity making.

In more ways than one, this was a gap humanism was meant to fill, namely by way of concretely assigning human value. The predecessor of posthumanism, humanism is not so explicitly distinct from its descendant as the name would imply. Few scholars have illuminated the fundamental issues with humanist philosophy as it applies to non-white bodies as lucidly as Sylvia Wynter. Having several times over re-traced the genealogy of Christian liberal humanism, Wynter illustrates how the reductive and restrictive dualisms of white Anglo-European manhood have universally diminished the capacity for self-recognition. Through an analysis of Vitruvian Man, the ‘Man’ of humanism, Wynter demonstrates how the figure of the human is, for lack of a better descriptor, manmade, and therein subject to all the same exclusions, biases, and oversights that would imply. The celestial, divine mandate of Man and his relationship to a perfect Creator God was not actually at work in the representation of man to himself or to his others, and was necessarily scrutinized by those considered outsiders: “The category of the celestial was being

submitted to the activity of the *humanista*, bearers of the inferior mode of knowledge, a mod which had now begun to constitute itself as a new *ordu* or *studium*” (Wynter 28). Ironically, the idea of the celestial being drawn down to Earth and the inferior ‘least of these’ becoming the visionary first has implicit Christian overtones, but centering of supposed inferior knowledge itself and the modes of knowing is Wynter’s primary focus here: the order reversed, the hierarchy unstable, the only logical conclusion therein being to operate not merely in an afterlife, but in a resistive life against the grain. As Walter Mignolo puts it in her critical genealogy, “Wynter’s work has consistently called into question whether the ‘post’ – in poststructural, postmodernity, postcolonial – is a useful conceptual frame, thus putting it aside in order to understand, instead, how particular epistemologies are unthinkable and/or unarticulated within hegemonic Western categories of knowledge and the philosophy of knowing” (106). ‘Post’ readings by nature privilege the structures that are supposed to precede it, conceiving them as so dominant and untenable that the aftermath is the radical oddity rather than the radical normal. Moreover, the ‘unthinkable and unarticulated’ bodies within these old and new systems are asked to continue living in spite of their oppressors. True ‘post’, in Wynter’s construction, must be anti whatever preceded it, in the same way the post-racial must give way for the anti-racist, and indeed, in the same way that the posthuman must give way to the anti-human, the non-human, or, in Jemisin’s configuration, what can only be described as human antipathy. /

The failure of human as an ontological category for rightless subjects is no better exemplified than in Chapter 8 “Syenite on the Highroad.” By far, this is one of the most critical chapters in the whole novel, not simply in terms of worldbuilding and stakes, but in terms of ideology and message. Like Syen, we are forced to stare head on into the violence rendered by the Fulcrum through false narrative, experimentation, and ultimately social and literal death. Yet

in the face of violence, we are likewise encouraged to look beyond the systemic expectations that force marginalized bodies to insist on their humanity into divergent possibilities.

It begins with Syenite and Alabaster on the road to a Comm (community/city) in need of their unique services. Along the way, they have sex under duress with the aim of producing a powerful orogene child for the Fulcrum's use. Their mutual hatred for one another yields no civility, and hence no subtlety as Alabaster begins to challenge everything Syenite assumed about life as an orogene. When she asks him why he's quelling miniature earthquakes around the area when there are already other orogenes doing so as their job, Alabaster fires back at her that every 'rogga' should see the conditions in which those orogenes are forced to work. The use of the word *rogga* here, a derogatory term in the Stillness on par with *n-----*, unsettles Syenite, but she is more surprised by his ease with the word than his use of it: "It's such an ugly word, harsh and guttural: the sound of it is like a slap to the ear. But Alabaster uses it the way other people use *orogene*" (Jemisin 120). As orogenes aren't allowed to use the word without consequences from the Fulcrum, so Alabaster invoking it is meant to signal a clear movement into resistive space.

Later, after insisting that they go out of their way to visit a node station where the earthquake-quellers ('node maintainers') live, Alabaster asks Syenite directly why she hates him. However, rather than accepting her answer, he invites her into a realm of imaginative possibility: "You hate the way we live. The way the world makes us live. Either the Fulcrum owns us, or we have to hide and be hunted down like dogs if we're ever discovered. Or we become monsters and try to kill everything. Even within the Fulcrum we always have to think about how they want us to act. We can never just ...be.' He sighs, closing his eyes. 'There should be a better way'" (Jemisin 123). 'Monster' alongside 'rogga' are two recurring descriptors throughout this chapter

with loaded meanings. In the above passage, Alabaster emphasizes becoming a monster or being forced to become one. It also emphasizes the surveillance necessary to maintaining the order under which orogenes operate. There is no refuge within or outside of the Fulcrum's walls, yet Alabaster's recognition of this fact in and of itself creates a space of anger as an aside of sorts. The desire to just 'be' is not akin to the desire to be seen as human, Syenite's deepest longing throughout her chapters. Rather, 'being' takes on a different context outside the realm of representation and social acceptance into the peace one may have with oneself to exist without surveillance, marked by Alabaster closing his eyes as he muses as if to remove himself from the world around him. Moreover, Alabaster's casualness with the semantics of his identity indicates less an interest in any aspiration towards acceptance, and more a desire for being as a way of solitude. While he longs for community and a new system under which to operate, he just as much recognizes the need to negotiate alternatives in the present, hence his engagement with a complacent Syen that might otherwise be risky. When Syen eventually admits to herself that she dislikes Alabaster simply because she can, this too is in negotiation with the power stolen from her. Disliking Alabaster is a sphere of influence that makes no difference to her oppressors, a choice she has against the many choices she can't make. A sanctuary in mutual hate, of all things, is formed between the two and ends up preserving their bond over the course of decades.

Alabaster's 'other way' is diametrically opposed to the laws of the land, the Stonelore. Stonelore is equal parts history, survival manual, and anti-orogene propaganda, teaching the people of the Stillness ways to live through climate disasters and be on guard against the very people that might mitigate those disasters. Each chapter in *The Fifth Season* ends with a Stonelore quote, perhaps none so on the nose as the one that bookend's Syenite's introduction:

"Tell them [orogenes] they can be great someday, like us. Tell them they belong among us, no matter how we treat them. Tell them they must earn the respect which everyone

else receives by default. Tell them there is a standard for acceptance; that standard is simply perfection. Kill those who scoff at the contradictions, and tell the rest that the dead deserved annihilation for their weakness and doubt. Then they'll break themselves trying for what they'll never achieve" (Jemisin 76).

The maliciousness in this passage is notable for its unabashed transparency. There is no attempt to couch the plan with justifications, no insistence on the inferiority of orogenes (at least not as of yet). It's the sort of bigotry that almost shoots right back around to being lucid and self-aware, but never crosses the threshold. Yet even the clarity of Fulcrum's self-admitted practices does little to assuage Syenite's desire for their promises; namely a sense of belonging, being respected, and believing that the contradictions implicit in her marginalization are as reasonable as anything else.

As she continues to defend Stonelore for its efficacy, Alabaster points out the ultimate contradiction that Stonelore paradoxically is not set in stone: "'There's a reason Tablet Two is so damaged: someone, somewhere back in time, decided that it wasn't important or was wrong, and didn't bother to take care of it'" (Jemisin 125). It is later discovered that this tablet, unlike many of the rest, recognized the importance orogenes held in society as well as the history of their creation, a fact that isn't confirmed for the reader until the final book in the trilogy. Like Leonardo DeVinci's Vitruvian Man, Stonelore is as much a construction as a technology, subject to the same implicit biases and blind spots, and moreover equally impossible as a metric for value. Similarly, the Stonelore is only valuable inasmuch as it is malleable, accepting those changes and alterations forward and backward. The warning to never alter Stonelore is misguided, but at no point does Alabaster or Syenite proposition its utter destruction. Rather, allowing historical matter to undergo the changes needed to suit their environments supersedes all forms of erasure, be that matter a living document or a living being. The hubris in the

Stillness's name is twofold; first in its assurance that the world will not change, and second in its deeply held belief that it ought not change.

The Fulcrum's belief in Stonelore is not so distinguished from their desperation to breed ideal orogene subjects for their means. Alabaster and Syenite are being compelled to reproduce and create a strong child, with the underlying imperative deriving from Stonelore. The pressure put on successful breeding outcomes (not just for orogenes, but for other classes) is not unique to the Jemisin's novel. Jemisin creates a dialogue between real-world examples of eugenics and transhumanism to augment the horror of these ideologies. In spite of a large body of scholarly work dedicated to disentangling transhumanism from critical posthumanism, American popular culture and SF especially are prone to equate one with the other, having created a literary and cinematic canon that further enforces posthumanism as strictly corporeal, necessarily progressive, and fundamentally humanist. As such, dialogues with transhumanist thought, even as a form of resistance, are proven necessary in ongoing scholarly conversations.

The term was coined by Julian Huxley in 1957 to encompass what he believed was a new dawn of human evolution. Living in the aftermath of the eugenicist boom of the early twentieth century, Huxley was intrigued by the capacity for humanity not simply to evolve, but rather to evolve itself, in a manner of speaking. The extraordinary processes exclusive to homo sapiens left them uniquely qualified for the task of future-shaping, or as Huxley puts it "the biggest business of all, the business of evolution—without being asked if [humanity] wanted it, and without proper warning and preparation. What is more, [humanity] can't refuse the job" (13). Transhumanism, as Huxley christens his ideology a few pages later, is therefore not an entirely volitional engagement. Humanity can transcend itself, if it so desires, but more significantly, cannot fail to exceed its limits, and operates under a burden of responsibility to itself and to its

inferior Others. The decision in transhumanism is whether to participate in the positive emancipation of the human from his/her (usually 'his') restrictive forms or to remain passive in the species' failing points. Transhumanism posits corporeal death with an ease that has often unsettled embodied subjects, in that the supposedly inevitable end of the human body is read as a moment of thrill and finality rather than a sort of second death in spite of consciousness beyond the flesh. Transhumanists fundamentally suggested that disposing of the flesh and all the differences therein (race, gender, etc.) were critical to the next stage of human evolution. As an extension to the eugenicist movement that preceded it, there was a keen emphasis on the development of certain cultural frameworks with the intention of purging undesirable bodies and means of interacting. In this light, it became fundamentally important to critical posthumanists not only to reject the idea of transcendence, but likewise any hierarchical reading of human and non-human matter. Critical posthumanism in this regard was framed not as an all-out rejection of corporeal limitations, but rather the idea that the perceived limitations are by nature transgressive; a philosophy not without its faults, nor as divorced from its predecessor as it would like, which we will go on to explore.

However, as it applies to the Broken Earth Trilogy, the Fulcrum's genetic engineering, cold and pragmatic as it is, reaches what is arguably a transhumanist ultimate cumulation, combining compulsory breeding, the death of the human body, and the grotesque transformation of the human into the object. Syenite eventually acquiesces to going to a node station, but only after a devastating earthquake decimates a nearby village. Shortly after arriving, she learns the horrible truth for the first time. The node maintainers are not adults but are in actuality children deprived of all their somatic functions and hooked up to a machine. Essentially a crude parody of a transhumanist out-of-body consciousness, series of hanging wires and tubes act as a life

support system for a child stuck in the perpetual hell of reacting impulsively to the miniature earthquakes around them. This particular child's concentration was ruptured when a rich townsman paid to sexually abuse them. As he explains this, Alabaster re-emphasizes the slur rogga, and this time Syenite grasps the concept: "A dehumanizing word for someone who has been made into a thing. It helps. There's no inflection in Alabaster's voice, no emotion, but it's all there in his choice of words" (Jemisin 140). The slur puts distance between the terror of a humanity violated and the reality of ongoing violation for 'mobile' orogenes. The trauma of objectification, the technologizing of the oppressed body, is perpetually hanging over the character's heads. Alabaster's final assertion of their monsterhood comes when he declares himself to be "just another useful monster, just a bit of new blood to add to the breeding lines. Just another fucking rogga", a declaration that would later spur the end of society at his hands (Jemisin 143). To insist on one's humanity in the face of so much inhuman behavior is presented as a logical fallacy, if not an unethical decision. As Syenite begins to describe herself as rogga from this point on, she does so with a sort of intellectual integrity, compelled by the truth of the matter to cast off a politeness that proved more insulting than the reality. Orogene humanness revealed to be a comfortable fiction that, in Alabaster's view, does not merit further engagement. He rejects the ontological category that has constrained him for so long, the carrot dangled in front of his face, and refuses to fight for something that he will never achieve. It is only in rejecting humanity as an aspirational identity that characters are able to fight against the Fulcrum's standards and establish new modes of interaction. Jemisin's anti-humanism in the context of *The Broken Earth* is a refusal to buy into the fallacy that a body rendered raw material ought also masquerade as a respected citizen for the benefit of their oppressors, so long as their status as less than human is so starkly apparent.

In her essay “Ethics in the Anthropocene: Traumatic Exhaustion and Posthuman Regeneration in N.K. Jemisin’s Broken Earth Trilogy”, Maria Fernandez San Miguel defines trauma and posthumanism as antithetical concepts operating in constant tension throughout Jemisin’s narrative. After all, posthuman by design suggests a sort of recovery from corporeal trauma that isn’t always possible: “From the perspective of trauma, the Other represents a threat to the individual’s subjectivity and stability...From the perspective of the posthuman, the encounter with the Other entails the recognition and assimilation of the trace of the Other within the self” (San Miguel 472). Because otherness and selfhood are in constant tension, gestures towards recovery and reconstruction are particularly difficult. The capacity for traumatized individuals to embrace the stipulations of the posthuman is greatly diminished by its insistence on network and mutual cooperation.

As a result, Jemisin foregrounds the restoration of the self with the self before exploring how new ways of relating can do restorative work. Damaya/Syenite/Essun is perpetually fractured within and outside the context of the narrative proper. We learn her story in three forms corresponding to her three persons: ‘You’ (Essun) in second person, as told by a first-person narrator yet to be revealed, Syenite and Damaya in third person limited, as conveyed by the same narrator. The first-person narrator has less of a stake in *The Fifth Season* as compared to the later novels but does serve to illustrate how severed Damaya/Syenite/Essun is from her own story. Essun is not written in the first person at this point or any point in the future. This disconnect from herself embodied in the form of the text is seen often in the aftermath of real-life traumatic episodes and similarly impairs Essun from trusting her own story. Additionally, Essun’s failure to ‘slip’ between past and present moments creates a twist in the narrative where the reader discovers they’ve been reading about the same character but calls into question her relationship

to time and her personal evolution. Damaya, Syenite, and Essun are in effect different characters, and the task of the next few novels is how to reconcile those persons into one body, a body that is distinctly not human come the end of the story.

Towards the beginning of Syen's story, Alabaster comments on how jealous he is that Syen had a birth name linking her to the outside world. While all orogenes are made to choose new names reminiscent of gems and stones at a certain age, original names are a by-product of being feral; again, a frightening signifier within the Fulcrum. While Damaya's relationship to her birth family is abruptly severed and none-too-positive, her link to the 'world of humanity' puts distance not just between herself and others, but herself and her self. Upon choosing her new name, Syenite differentiates her between her newfound strength and Damaya's previous weakness: "It forms the edge of a tectonic plate. With heat and pressure it does not degrade, but instead grows stronger'...Crying is weakness. Crying was a thing Damaya did. Syenite will be stronger" (Jemisin 331). Syenite and later Essun's aversion to weakness end up being their Achilles heels in later novels, but for the time being, Jemisin takes the time to illustrate both the making of inhumanity and the unmaking of human desire. You/Essun is the final name, one she fully gave herself outside of any hierarchical context and likewise, the name that allows her to relate to others in community unlike any other role she'd been led to fulfill prior.

In calling for a critical re-examination of the posthuman, I am by no means calling for its complete dismissal. Posthumanism serves as an important lens through which to negotiate subjectivity, evolution, critical ecology, and biopolitics. Even transhumanism, flawed as it is, gestures if not overemphasizes the longing for metamorphosis essential to any ongoing scholarly conversation. We and our non-human constituents are evolutionary beings. Neglecting attention to that point would be to neglect the transformative possibilities of discourse around any given

term or moment. Moreover, the need to destabilize future presumptions of being, whether they be physical, emotional, or spiritual is indispensable to speculation in the present. The making of Man may have been the catalyst for moving beyond, but the remaking of Persons is the fulcrum of humanities work. One can never fully distinguish identity-making from the speculative imagination, i.e. what exactly we are being made into. A posthuman project integrated with black studies, therefore, will always put emphasis on the implications of making human and value synonymous. Black posthumanism can simply understood as foregrounding the becoming process, the first step in the epistemological shift into personhood.

Similarly, the links between humanity as being, humanity as study and its productions (literature, media, art, etc.) are more firmly entwined in the posthuman imagination. Acts of creation, writing, and image-making are posthuman acts in and of themselves, living on past their creators, yet always signaling back to the ongoing narrative that produced them.

At its best, critical posthumanism is a revolutionary examination of the dualisms under which Western society has operated with the aim of dismantling the hierarchy it has set in place. However, problems arise when confronting those hierarchies comes at the cost of inscribing racialized bodies back into scripts once used as a form of violence. Similarly, the privileging of individuality and self-determination over acts of care, community, and mutual aid arguably remove the essence of what makes humanity human in the first place. Says Sherryl Vint:

“Without community and the material world, ethical posthumanity is not possible because the move toward posthuman identity will be grounded on disconnections from the rest of the world and our ethical responsibility to it. Only by articulating our posthumanism within a social network can we find a non-solipsistic way to move beyond our current concept of what it means to be human” (25).

Critical posthumanism’s primary commitment is to the forms of matter that have been lost in the humanist conversation, foregrounding those who have been rendered subhuman by sexism,

racism, xenophobia, ableism, and other forms of bias. Indeed, ecocriticism and animacy studies have done work to incorporate speciesism as a form of liberal humanist domination, gesturing beyond the human entirely while still negotiating its larger impact. The mothers of critical posthumanism, Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, suggest that the interrelations between man and machine and ‘nature’, or even a woman and herself, fundamentally resist a dualistic approach akin to the Cartesian dialectic; that is, the firm distinction between mind and body. The slippages between body, body-making, and mind-making cannot be ranked, and can barely be categorized: “Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway 11). The ‘frightful inertness’ here is not implicitly fatalistic, as Haraway later clarifies, but rather operates in reference to humanity’s complete misunderstanding of Self. In a configuration that perpetually distinguishes the Other while refusing to comprehend it, the Self is infantile and estranged. We see this starkly in the character or Essun, who is perpetually referred to in the second person, and who is even called “whoever you are now” by way of re-introduction at the end of *The Fifth Season*. It is only through the undertaking of becoming whilst acknowledging the indispensable ties between the natural, artificial, human, non-human, etc. that any true, social posthumanity can exercise itself.

Veronica Hollinger likewise describes the central posthuman ingredient as the “openness to becoming Other”, similarly rejecting Hayles’ conception of ‘the condition of virtuality’: wherein mass access to information is seen as more important than comparable material forms (268). The ongoing relationship between supposed subjects and supposed objects, imagined superiors and imagined inferiors, is much more critical than simply their biological make-up. In

this regard, the ontological category of human can itself be read as a social construction, subject to all the shifts and slippages therein. The death of the nature/culture divide has implications beyond humanism, and therefore cannot be constrained to a strictly sociological conversation. The various forms of modern-day posthumanism (be it digital landscapes, the threat of climate collapse, artificial intelligence, etc.) are still at their core social affairs with the implicit biases of powerful groups built into their code. The morality of even still considering humans, let alone humanism, as the central focus of study is consistently undermined by human atrocities that suggest anthropocentrism is the problem, not the solution (Braidotti and Gilroy 4). Similarly, the unstable future created by those who have no concern for non-human climates, ecosystems, and what they deem the sub-human Global South has fractured the optimistic vision of the techno-future and called to question the progressive narrative so prominent in Western discourse, a narrative that comes at the expense of lived bodies it considers non-essential (Braidotti and Gilroy 5). Reconciling posthumanism with ongoing social activism and the need for political engagement is the main goal of the critical school of thought. Escapism from the world, embodiment, and society is rejected in favor of a trans-corporeal liminal approach to future being in light of present realities.

At its best, critical posthumanism is a revolutionary examination of the dualisms under which Western society has operated with the aim of dismantling the hierarchy it has set in place. However, problems arise when confronting those hierarchies comes at the cost of inscribing racialized bodies back into scripts once used as a form of violence. Cary Wolfe's reading of the triangulated relationship between African natives, white femininity, and Elephants as metaphors for male fragility in Ernest Hemingway, for example, while not overtly injurious, walks a fine line between the real parallels Hemingway likely intended and the touchy implications that

would inscribe whiteness and blackness on plains of humanity and non-humanity respectively. The framing of flesh and matter as mutually reliant and entangled may speak to a deeper ecological imperative towards care on a larger scale, but doesn't implicitly speak to the necessary work of re-inscribing value onto persons made subhuman by comparison to those same ecologies.

Animacy, animal studies, and ecology have all grappled with the multiple intersections between BIPOC bodies and non-human Others, to various degrees of success. Political scientist Claire Jean Kim calls for a multi-optic approach to animal and racial violence in her book *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age*. In this configuration, race and species are intertwined less by likeness or even a trans-corporal lens, but by comparable treatments such as chattel slavery, human zoos, etc. The emphasis, then, is not on trans-corporeality and interrelation, but on the multiple frameworks through which to read speciesism and racism while still making key distinctions between bodies. Multi-optics is an essential approach to any race/species conversation, and neglecting it has pushed even the most seasoned posthumanists into gray areas.

Zakiyyah Imam Jackson's survey of critical posthumanism in light of critical race studies yielded similar questions with similar concerns. Like Wynter, Jackson notes how the continued reliance on humanism as an epistemological term undermines the very framework and 'endgoal' of posthuman study. Naturally, scholars take stock of the animalization of those rendered subhuman and assess the language of primitiveness that surrounds it with all the bile it deserves, but how are those bodies being engaged on and off the page? What are the realities being brought to bear as evidence for new forms, and are they equally influenced by the very Western science that made such racist classifications in the first place? Says Jackson: "Indeed I wonder if

posthumanists are willing to go one step beyond a critique of the discourse of ‘primitivity’ by also engaging the knowledge production of those deemed primitive? I wonder how a collapse of hierarchical distinctions between philosophy/critical theory and non-Western cosmology might alter posthuman analysis” (681). She goes on to reiterate Wynter’s insistence that Man is a genre, and pushes for posthumanists to consider how their philosophical and ontological bases for analysis may not necessarily be that distinct from the liberal humanism it aims to make its antithesis. More vocal critics of posthumanism articulate similar frustrations with promises to move out of reductive dualisms while reinforcing rote differences between inner systems and outer systems, within and outside the body, technology and nature, etc. As it applies to critical race theory at the intersections of posthumanism, the risk of enforcing these dualisms intentionally or unintentionally increases severalfold.

At this point, the Broken Earth Trilogy and its keen rejection of humanity speaks both to critical posthumanism and its critics, highlighting Jackson’s thoughts on collapse and mass cultural shift. In the universe of the story, apocalypse is such a normal part of existence it seems strange to deem the world ‘post-apocalyptic’. However, we learn in the final book in the trilogy, *The Stone Sky*, that the world of the Stillness wasn’t always so hostile, and that it was in fact made hostile by an oppressed people group thousands of years ago who saw it necessary to alter the social order, even at the cost of disaster. Throughout *The Fifth Season*, Essun is followed by a mysterious boy that seems to be made of stone, or at the very least eats stone. This stone-eater turns out to be one of many, although the origins of his people and his true identity are not disclosed until *The Stone Sky*. As it happens, the boy Hoa was once part of an oppressed group of magic wielders born thousand of years before orogenes called ‘tuners’, who sought to destroy the world out of anger at being enslaved, but ended up sparing it and becoming the creatures they are

now. Even as Hoa's humanity is called into question, his personhood is affirmed over and over by Essun, and indeed, by himself, as we learn that he is the first-person narrator speaking to the second person 'you', i.e. Essun. Hoa and the other stone-eaters' past as biological humans scorned by their peers is critical to the way they understand oppression, empathize with orogenes, and frame the narrative.

The entire trilogy is being told from the bottom up. Additionally, the three-way intersection between post humanity, racialized coding, and speciesism that would spell disaster in any other context instead strikes at the essence of value in personhood. The fact that Hoa is made of stone in contrast to the carbon-based Essun does little to undermine the fact that these two persons are mirrors of one another. The 'death' of tuners is not death, but birth. The new mode of being that is 'stone-eater' merely implies a new code, being post-tuner, but not post-being. In fact, by the end of the story, Essun has become a stone-eater as well without any memory of her past life, leaving Hoa to tell her the very story the reader has read thus far. Jemisin recognizes that the code must and will go on, a person must go on even after being made un-human, and that recognizing all being as a formation perpetually subject to collapse and rebirth best exemplifies the changing modalities that likewise govern real-world representation, as signifiers collapse and are engineered. Jemisin pushes for an evolutionary, dynamic means of understanding personhood. Attentiveness to small shifts and collapses as they happen in real time is therefore of the utmost importance.

There are three major 'selections' that take place in *The Stone Sky* where an individual's body is concerned; Hoa giving up the complete destruction of the planet, Essun giving up her breast, arm, and later her life entirely, and Nassun giving up her hand. I say selections because these are all choices characters make concerning their bodies, not choices that were made on

their behalf. The first of these echoes the trauma of the child in the wire chair Alabaster and Syenite witnessed, with some alterations. ‘Houwha’, as he (Hoa) was called thousands of years ago, is fully aware anytime he goes into the chair, and does so at different intervals fully conscious. He is an outlier, however, as the rest of his people with the exception of six have been victims of genocide and forced into chairs in semi-comatose states. Leading up to a mission spurred on by ecological devastation, Houwha has his ‘personhood’ awakened through the kindness of Kelenli, an orogene who shows him decency despite his subservient status as a bio-engineered human. Describing his biology and his first encounter with Kelenli, Houwha reflects that he and his kin are “fragments of the great machine...just as much a triumph of geoengineering and biomagestry and geomastery and other disciplines for which the future will have no name. By our existence we glorify the world that made us, like any statue or specter or other precious object...We do not understand that what Kelenli has come to give us is a sense of peoplehood” (Jemisin 50).

A humanist or even posthumanist approach to Houwha’s character is complicated by the question of his initial humanness, at least in a physical sense. We aren’t given too many details on his biological make-up and/or just how engineered he really is, and in many ways it’s beside the point. Houwha is more constructed than even orogenes (who can be born naturally to non-orogene parents), being read as more of a cyborg or robot than a human. In this regard, Houwha’s decision to end the world and resist his creators has overtones of a robot uprising, but from the perspective of a robot who knows he’s a person, regardless of what his creators say. From the lens of an oppressed racialized minority engaging in an act of resistance, Houwha’s act may similarly be read within against the backdrop of personhood reclamation, refusing to entertain the ramifications of not being considered human in favor of emphasizing a right to be

treated as a person⁸. The composition of stone eaters is incidental to their peoplehood, and peoplehood is so essential that humanity has to make way for it.

When Houwha is placed in the wire chair thousands of years before the events of the story, he initially is eager to fire back at a society that never fully acknowledged his worth: “They have never believed us human, but we will prove by our actions today that we are more than tools. Even if we aren’t human, we are *people*. They will never be able to deny us this again” (Jemisin 329). While the intentions of Houwha and the other stone eaters were simply to destroy Syl Anagist, the civilization that enslaved them, the Earth itself awakens and rebels against its exploitation at the hands of the surface-dwellers, unsettling the mission and opening the door for utter destruction. Ultimately, the only thing that stands between the end of humanity and its continued existence is Houwha’s connection to Kelenli, recognizing her affection for him and that for that reason, if anything else, life like that is worth living. The Seasons begin when Houwha pushes the moon away from the Earth to shift its balance. The Seasons end when Nassun, daughter of Essun, chooses to pull the moon back for the same living, an act which turns Essun to stone entirely as she stops fighting her transformation in order to let her daughter make the decision to save the world.

Nassun’s powers as an orogene are limited at first but grow to surpass her mother’s over the course of the novels, with devastating consequences. The relationship between Nassun and Essun is fraught, starting from childhood when Essun would take her daughter out of the Comm and train her as an orogene using the same methods the Fulcrum used on her. It is in Nassun’s recollection of her final ‘lesson’ that we see a dominant symbol that will shape the rest of the

⁸ Wendy Chun similarly frames race and/as a technology, and in this frame work we could read any act of racial resistance against white supremacist systems as a form of technological uprising (people made into tools refusing to be deemed ‘artificial’ intelligence and overtaking their oppressors, hence a mass societal anxiety around the singularity in transhumanist and older SF works).

series come to the forefront. After blowing up at her mother and refusing to do a task, Essun's Fulcrum training kicks in, and she reenacts the same violence she experienced as a child on her daughter by grabbing Nassun's hand and breaking it to teach her control and respect: "She said it didn't m-matter if I hated her. It didn't matter if I didn't want to be good orogeny. Then she took my hand and said don't ice anything. She had a round rock, and she hit my, my...my hand with it" (Jemisin 154). The entire scene is devastating for a variety of reasons, but critical here is Essun's emphasis on the significance of bonds (or more so, the lack thereof) and the attention to Nassun's hand. This will later be the hand that Nassun loses fighting her mother when she exceeds her capacities as an orogene, the consequences of which result in portions of one's body being turned to stone. Essun has already lost her arm and left breast by this point for the same reason but turns completely to stone when she stops fighting her daughter, sacrificing her life so that Nassun could live before ultimately laying it as a sacrifice before her mother's stone body. In the same way *The Fifth Season* opens with one son's death and ends with another, *The Obelisk Gate* opens with a hand being used as a bond breaker, and later as a bond maker. Nassun does not have a choice as to whether or not she'll have her hand broken, but she does choose if and how to give up her hand entirely. Her subjectivity is key here, not only to her ultimate ability to survive and thrive in the world after Seasons, but in her ability to reform bonds with living and non-living matter. Nassun's trans corporeal relationship to orogeny is portrayed as erratic up until the very end, at least in Essun's eyes. While she tries to imagine and construct orogeny as the science she was raised to believe it as, Nassun combines magical and scientific forms to create a whole new means of 'sessing'. The combination of constructed forms of knowledge with alternative systems of relating mirrors Alabaster's allusion to altering Stonelore and altered history not as antithetical to a resistive project but key to its ongoing development. Moreover,

Essun's decision to restore the bond with her daughter not through control but through surrender brings her characterization full circle. She is frozen in stone crying, acknowledging her need to love and be loved in a way that she has thus far rejected.

It is this same act that costs Nassun the use of her hand as she over exerts herself in a project as large as pulling the moon back to orbit, and her hand turns to stone as a result. Nassun lays her severed stone hand besides her stone mother in the aftermath of the restoration, in-universe as a testament to the impact Essun had on her, and for our purposes, as an indicator of how the bodies of these two marginalized persons are ultimately restored with their rejection of biological signifiers as their main identity lenses, into an emphasis on their more personal connection their striving to be recognized as humans when they know they're already people. To be a person is not and ought not be a volitional identity that their society can or cannot remove, and the surviving characters ultimately conclude that a new world where their status as people has to be taken as fact is the only way to move forward: "She [Nassun] does not balk at the notion of forcing people to be decent to one another" (Jemisin 282). Come the end of the story, Essun is resurrected as a stone-eater, no longer human as she so often longed to be, but a fully-realized person that can recognize and acknowledge all forms of life in the aftermath of her humanity.

As it applies to posthuman and critical race philosophy, resistive substructures have reconstituted critical racial posthumanity with emphasis on narrative and relationship, drawing from Vint's insistence that an ethical posthumanism must likewise be a social posthumanism. In her book *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination*, Kristen Lillvis introduces the language of posthuman blackness to refer to "the empowered subjectivities in black women and men to develop through their coincident experiences in multiple temporalities...posthumanist

readings of contemporary black women's historical narratives reveal that individual agency and collective authority develop not from historical specificity but, rather, temporal liminality" (4). Lillvis likewise complicates the 'post' aspect of humanism, coloniality, modernism, etc. that stands to incorporate more from these ideologies than it rejects, but insists on the potential for posthuman blackness to recognize the untenability of the prefix by undermining it completely. 'Post', in this configuration, is a state of always being, one that moves between and before whilst still remaining in the present. As oxymoronic as it sounds, black bodies having always been interconnected with apocalyptic 'posts' like the Middle Passage, slavery, and Reconstruction have the capacity to move between liminal spaces and times. There is no moment of posthumanism achieved so much as there is a lifestyle of posthumanism. Even so, the 'human' portion of it, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, lives tensely alongside the denial and violence brought to bear on the term as a biological classification gatekept by Western false sciences. Initial responses to liberal humanism from critical race scholars like Wynter in the mid-twentieth century were less about gaining admittance into the club of the capital 'H' human, and more about displacing the order Humanity as built by white neoliberal oppressors had over colonized subjects (Jackson 672).

Like Vint, Kim, and Jackson, I would like to suggest some barebones steps towards ethical posthumanism, ecological study, and work within and against the species dialectic as it applies to Black studies. I concur with Lillvis that a central ingredient of Black women's posthumanism is temporal liminality, not simply where narrative construction is concerned, but also wherever the Black body is portrayed. The flesh itself has out-of-time and place porosity and acknowledging the multiple subjectivities and intersecting identities of Black persons across past and future histories is of the utmost importance. Additionally, recognizing how categorical

exclusion has and continues to injure bodies is essential. When dealing with future visions that may or may not incorporate phenotypical blackness or race of any kind, the question of whether or not classism and bias still exist is seldom addressed, or often glossed over. Acknowledging the continued struggle for righthood and statehood even as classifications rise and fall grounds posthumanism in the lived reality and identities of those engaging in the same work. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, I would postulate that posthumanity's engagement with Black critical race theory necessitates a restoration of self before one can begin to imagine the interrelated trans-corporeality of the body in relation to that outside itself. As Alaimo said, human life is by nature porous, and attention to inflicted trauma surrounding and resulting from the body is critical. Equally critical is the reconceptualization of the body in relationship to incoming phenomena, as we will explore later. Agency, subjectivity, and the embodied experience are the first steps on a journey towards interrelatedness for all matter, and neglecting that agency ultimately works against the very systems any given individual is trying to alter. In this regard, Black posthumanity, in addition to its temporal liminality, is about examining physicality in a constant state of tension between privileged and maligned, limited and enabled, held close and pushed farther out. These apparent dualisms are less one-to-one comparisons, and more just a few examples on an itemized list of features encircling one key question: why 'human'? What does it do that something else cannot? Why, more than anything else, do I desire *that*?

As we will see in Jemisin's text, all humans are people, but not all people are humans. Human refers to a biological reality. Person refers to a lived reality responding to its environment. The Vitruvian Man in all his stagnant beauty is a monument to the human as ill-equipped to address personhood as trans-corporeal blackness is well-equipped: constantly

undergoing evolution, dependent on social and communal forms to thrive, recognizing consciousness and morality in all matter within and outside itself while vitalizing its own agency and being. Posthumanism idealized is a syllogism to developed personhood, and the bridge between the two can challenge the former whilst refining the latter. Ultimately, however, in the privileging of personhood, we find relatively little risk. Instead, there is an attentiveness to a breathing world, the still and moving matter, that acts as its own agent alongside us.

Coda

In 2021, years after an initial television series was optioned, it was announced that N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* would be adapted as a movie trilogy in collaboration with Sony/Tristar. Similar projects to adapt Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and its ensuing works have been in talks for years, headlined by *Selma* director Ava DuVernay. An independent film adaptation loosely based on *Brown Girl in the Ring* came out shortly after the initial release of the novel to a warm reception, though it quickly faded from public consciousness. The popularity of these works, in essence, have always been linked to the racialized stage on which they emerge, and the inherent controversy around their existence in the first place, especially where N.K. Jemisin is concerned.

Following her second Hugo win for *The Obelisk Gate*, Jemisin came under attack from a far-right group of SF writers dubbed the Sad Puppies. The group was essentially a loose collection of voting members within the Hugo organization and other SF affiliates like the Nebula awards who intentionally targeted authors of color, LGBTQ+ persons, and other writers they understood as diverse without talent and spammed them hateful messages, threats, and demands that they be removed from consideration from any award category. The group and its splinter sects eventually dissolved in 2017, but not before Jemisin had the opportunity to respond to them with an assertion that reactionary movements are, by nature, doomed to die out so long as there's nothing left to latch onto, and that she, by compulsion, must always write what "feels real"; in this case, the very story containing mass reactionary movements happening over the course of millennia in a vicious cycle. I bring this up to demonstrate that Jemisin, Butler, and Hopkinson independent of one another each insisted in interviews that the pursuit of realism was not a volitional engagement for them, and that their reception in broader mediums like film, television and comics ultimately stands as a mirror to their initial statements on page and in

journalism. Estrangement, arguably, is impossible in a culture that seeks to estrange its writers of color from their own existence on a daily basis.

New languages around estrangement and otherworldly fiction are where the field is heading, and something we desperately need at that. In this text, I've indicated multiple spaces where the refraction of reality into fantasy makes reality odd again. This phenomena has only grown in the last few years. Rian Aimar Scott's anthology *The World Does Not Require You* features a short story called "The N_____ Knockers" where the act of doorbell ditching as it is colloquially called is re-imagined as an act of resistance, built on a historical tradition of enslaved persons knocking on their enslaver's door as a means to distract them and to enable their escape. Come the end of the story, however, the narrator learns from his friend (a friend who wrote their dissertation on "n----- knocking") that everything he wrote and researched was made up, based on nothing but an interesting concept, and easily passed off as authentic simply for sounding like something that would very likely be true. Even so, the narrator refuses to accept the truthlessness of the dissertation, embarks on a mission to recreate it after the final copy is destroyed, and participates in what he sees as a tradition of knocking on his neighbor's doors in the dead of night and running away just as they're about to open. The truth of the matter is more or less incidental to whether or not a new behavior framed historically could create new modes of resistance. At the heart of Scott's story (and indeed, his entire anthology) are modern Black actors wondering if the speculative, the surreal, is even possible anymore in a world where the most outlandish things happen on a daily basis. "The N_____ Knockers" also features a young Black man being nearly beaten to death for the crime of doorbell ditching in a predominantly white wealthy neighborhood with no repercussions for the mob that beat him. To

call an event like that surreal seems a disservice to the real, which is the conundrum that Black and person of color communities have found themselves in as of late.

The languages of estrangement are by necessity evolving, to return to Sanchez-Taylor's concept of double estrangement and Chu's concept of hyperrealism. Both frameworks focus on the insufficiency of a real/speculative dichotomy to address the value of more speculative forms. Chu suggests that science fiction and fantasy can be read as a form of realism more intensive than traditional realism, in that it takes more intellectual labor for the author and reader alike to manifest speculative phenomena. The author may describe a chair with little more than aesthetic notes as to size, markings, or weight and the reader is reasonably expected to understand what the chair does and what its purpose is. Alternatively, when the author offers schematics for a spaceship or a description of a never-before encountered planet or species, the writing not only needs to give enough description to entice the reader to continue, but the reader too has to do the work of making the material 'real', or at least real enough to envision and accept, for the purposes of continuing the narrative. Interesting then, that many of the key Black-authored SF works of the last few decades seem to operate in a space between realist and hyperrealist creation. Phenomena like organ hunting, lobotomizing for easier slave labor, and forced reproduction with invading forces surely require intellectual labor on the parts of the author and the reader, but they equally rely on the author and the reader's adjacencies to realism in order to fully enjoy the writing. To write or read the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* without a strong understanding of Black history and a respect for speculative forms is impossible. It is the marriage, like in Sanchez-Taylor's principle of double estrangement, that spurs author and reader alike into a liminal space beyond realism and speculation; a space that may prove a more powerful tool for resistance and social change than a less-integrated approach to genre.

Double estrangement approaches the odd state-of-being that authors like Jemisin, Scott, Hopkinson, Butler, and many more have found themselves negotiating with. The idea that a reader of color is estranged once from an SF text and then estranged again when they find that text re-enacting the violence of the real world continues to suggest that estrangement takes place at every level, that it is an inevitability to speculative thought and reading. Yet in all of the works discussed here to some degree, the sense of estrangement draws less from the novelty of a hyperreal phenomena like a ship or an alien, and more from the sense that one has yet to be estranged at all, or at least that in being already estranged, the mimetic aspects these authors have selected for their works gain a new, necessary strangeness to them. It ought to be very strange for a young black man like Ralph Yarl to be shot twice in the face for knocking on the wrong door in Kansas City, as happened last week at the time of writing. Many readers know this ought to feel strange even as it feels normal but may only find it strange if the gun becomes a phaser and the door is on the moon. If the purpose of estrangement as originally conceived was to make the reader covetous of another better world, then how much more so a language that allows the reader to articulate what has gone wrong in a way that cannot be spoken against the backdrop of supposedly abnormal things happening quite normally.

In this spirit, estrangement seems only to encapsulate for Butler, Jemisin, Hopkinson, and others a first step, with unsettling or stranging reality being the more critical gesture. In stranging reality and SF alike, these authors perpetually call into doubt the verisimilitude of pre-conceived structures that demand interrogation even when they do not receive it. Stranging violence and bias in a different world than our own may be seen as a template for articulating that bias better, but more so encourages persons already aware of or under marginalized violence to not grow complacent or to mistake frequency for normalcy. In the evolving conversation on how to

articulate SF and speculative fiction's main purpose and vision, this language cannot omit the possibility that authors and readers facing racist, homophobic, sexist, etc. violence have not already devised their own purposes for otherworldly literature that does not acquiesce to the concept of a world improved by the knowledge of another. Rather, it is the knowledge that another world is doing what ours has done already that provides a script for restoration, joy, and resistance in the midst of ongoing attempts to traumatize and deprive persons of their humanity.

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