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Women of the Apocalypse: Afrospeculative Feminist Novelists

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WOMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE: AFROSPECULATIVE FEMINIST NOVELISTS

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
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2017

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

WOMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE: AFROSPECULATIVE FEMINIST NOVELISTS

“Women of the Apocalypse: Afrospeculative Feminist Novelists,” seeks to address the problematic ‘Exodus narrative,’ a convention that has helped shape Black American liberation politics dating back to the writings of Phyllis Wheatley. Novels by Zora Neale Hurston, Octavia Butler, and Alice Walker undermine and complicate this narrative by challenging the trope of a single charismatic male leader who leads an entire race to a utopic promised land. For these writers, the Exodus narrative is unsustainable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is because there is no room for women to operate outside of the role of supportive wives. The mode of speculative fiction is well suited to crafting counter-narratives to Exodus mythology because of its ability to place marginalized voices in the center from the stance of ‘What next?’

My project is a hybrid in that I combine critical theory with original poems. The prose section of each chapter contextualizes a novel and its author with regard to Exodus mythology. However, because novels can only reveal so much about character development, I identify spaces to engage and elaborate upon the conversation incited by these authors’ feminist protagonists. In the tradition of Black American poets such as, Ai, Patricia Smith, Rita Dove, and Tyehimba Jess, in my own personal creative work, I regularly engage historical figures through recovering the narratives of underrepresented voices. To write in persona or limited omniscient, spotlighting an event where the reader possesses incomplete information surrounding a character’s experience, the result becomes a kind of call-and-response interaction with these novels.

KEYWORDS: Afrospeculative, Afrofuturist, Feminist,
Speculative Literature, African-American
Literature

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April, 28, 2017

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For Angel Clark

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INTRODUCTION

In Her Own Image:
Feminist Space(s) in Afrospeculative Fiction

*...born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay*

—Lucille Clifton, “won’t you celebrate with me”

In 1976, the Dogon people of Mali became exceptionally interesting to rest of the world because a book was published about their belief system surrounding a binary star system—Sirius and Sirius B—which appeared to predate scientific discovery. Sirius B, in particular, is a white dwarf star which is invisible to the human eye, and yet, the Dogon intimated precise knowledge of not only the location of the star but how long it took to complete its orbit. Robert K.G. Temple, the French anthropologist who authored the book, *The Sirius Mystery*, speculated about the traditional religion of the Dogon people and the plausibility of extraterrestrial transmission surrounding the location of Sirius B. Investigations and theories continued to revolve around these reports and in the 1990’s concluded the presence of a third star, Sirius C, also predicted by the Dogon people. While skeptics have allegedly debunked the mysteries of the accuracy or originality of their discovery, there persist pockets of people from around the world who choose to believe that the Dogon people were at worst, privy to extraterrestrial information and at best, astral travelers—and had seen these stars for themselves.

Another fascinating aspect of Dogon religious beliefs are the presence of the Nommos, ancestral water spirits, and the first beings created by the sky god, Amma. The Nommos later passed on the principles of life to human beings, and it is they who imparted to the Dogon people astronomical information such as the presence of Sirius B. The word *Nommo* means “to make one drink” and has been interchanged with “teacher” and in the tradition of their creator, the Nommos teach that harmony can be created from disharmony through the power of creativity—specifically the spoken word—in other words, a person may literally create their reality through language. This is a powerful metaphor for what Black feminist speculative novelists have achieved. Not unlike the Dogon people, for these writers, language is used to make previously invisible or marginalized voices and experiences central to a narrative—a belief that speaking something into existence will cause it to be so. Coincidentally, the duration of orbit for Sirius B is sixty years and it is the sixty years between the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Octavia Butler, and Alice Walker which I will focus on for this project.

My current interests with regard to contemporary feminist Afrospeculative writers began with Pauline Hopkins as the wellspring. The author of, *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self*, which was originally published as a serial in *Colored American Magazine*, between 1902-1903, Hopkins was editor of this publication for four years and was a pioneer in terms of speculative literature by Black American writers in the throes of the Washington/DuBois debates. Her work in particular dealt with social and racial themes. While the novel begins with very realist leanings, the protagonist, Reuel, a biracial man who passes as white and eventually comes to terms with his

African ancestry, the novel culminates in repatriation. During Reuel's travels, he discovers a hidden city beneath Ethiopia and depicts its long-lived residents as not only nobility but demi-gods. What a remarkable work to have been published during the *nadir*, one of the lowest points of racially-charged violence and social stratification in U.S. history. Not only in terms of genre does the novel wield gothic, romantic, and utopian themes, but the content turns out to be highly imaginative, speculating the royal origins of people of African descent, at a time when physical and legal disempowerment was the standard. In short, Hopkins's novel serves as a torchbearer for the feminist Afrospeculative authors to come. Not only did her work draw from and reflect the social stratification of Black Americans in the late 19th-early 20th centuries, it suggests the reorientation of a cultural narrative that draws its inspiration from the phenomenal world.

Hopkins's example set the pace for a group of Black women writers, whom I have dubbed, the Women of the Apocalypse: Zora Neale Hurston, Octavia Butler, and Alice Walker, not because they herald the end of the world, but because their work deals with the apocalyptic conditions already in the world. Whether we are talking about Hurston's *Moses*, *Man of the Mountain*, Butler's, *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, or Walker's, *The Temple of My Familiar*, these writers navigate oppressive social circumstances to illuminate certain xenophobic patterns that persist today. Through building counter-utopias, narrating from multiple consciousnesses, and exploiting the social construction of time, these authors rely upon speculative techniques to escort readers through the problematic 'Exodus narrative,' a convention that has helped shape Black American liberation politics dating back to the writings of Phyllis

Wheatley. These novels by Hurston, Butler, and Walker undermine and complicate this narrative by challenging the trope of a single charismatic male who leads an entire race to a utopic promised land. For these writers, the Exodus narrative is unsustainable for a number of reasons, not the least of which, because they demonstrate that there is no room for women to operate outside of the role of supportive wives.

Speculative literature, or what Robert Scholes calls, “fabulation,” is unique because it combines historical and imaginative materials that offer an element of escapism but also equip readers with “new equipment for our inevitable return” (Scholes, 7). The mode of speculative literature, then, is well suited to crafting counter-narratives to Exodus mythology because of its ability to place marginalized voices in the center from the stance of “What if?” Speculative literature also encourages hybridity in terms of content and form and experimentation in the sub-genres of horror, folklore, surrealism, and magical realism. I have come to consider the work of Hurston, Butler, and Walker as scaffolded—their work is at once, creative, scholarly, and socially engaged. These areas are united by two threads: the aesthetic and the political. In terms of aesthetics, these novelists are interested in plasticity, hybridity, and genre-bending which connects their creative work to their research and personal interests. Additionally, these novelists seem to consider the transformative power of art in terms of social systems and connect their creative output to the larger engagement. In terms of the political, their creative writing seeks to give voice to the oppressed and the silenced and the exiled. The tradition of Afrospeculative feminist literature focuses on community dynamics bringing

together the creative and the theoretical with regard to the psychological and systemic aspects of oppression. In a way, these authors serve as literary doulas in terms of using the novel as a tool to reshape Black American liberation politics.

Afrospeculative literature, which operates as an umbrella term to encompass all manner of speculative works by Black writers, including Afrofuturism, Afro-Surrealism, and Afrofabulism, may be applied to literature written by a Black author that is not grounded in realism with regard to content and/or form. Afrospeculative literature typically features a primary Black protagonist as well as other characters of African descent, and draws upon Afrocentric themes, folklore, mythology, and aesthetic. There is, perhaps, a danger in delineating literature by Black authors with the prefix “Afro,” in that one runs the risk of further segregating the oft ghettoized genre of speculative fiction. As Junot Diaz in a 2013 interview discerns, “The funny thing about being a person of color is you’re already being...considered science fiction” (Salon). Thus, while the impulse to appreciate works by Black authors and artists is to label the work as a genre within a genre, by emphasizing the Afro as it pertains to the speculative, the implication is that the author and the work are somehow considered fractured or not whole. That said, there are traits unique to Afrospeculative fiction that separate it from speculative fiction by writers of other ethnicities, which mostly has to do with an inherited worldview based in shared cultural experiences. In addition to drawing upon elements particular to the storytelling and cultural traditions of Black people, this literature may also revolve around decentralized narratives as well as themes of attaining agency, civil rights, and liberation based on the historical oppression of people of African descent. Moving

forward, I urge that the term 'Afrospeculative' be considered a starting point as opposed to a catch-all.

Drawing upon Afrocentric themes, folklore, mythology, and aesthetic, feminist Afrospeculative fiction reorients the long-standing perception of Anglo hetero-masculinist writing and reimagines Black women as central players in past, present, future, and parallel universes. In an interview with Alondra Nelson, speculative fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson acknowledges the necessity for continuing to write about the vestiges of racial oppression but concedes "If that's all that's getting published, I think I'm justified in suspecting that the industry was and is eroticizing black people as victims, as though that is our value to the world" (Nelson, 102). Speculative fiction for Black women writers has become a frontier to depict imagined worlds with a cast of characters that can allude to without an overt emphasis on the nebulous definition of the "Black experience."

The controversial evolution of Black literacy, let alone the inclusion of Black writers and their Black protagonists is not new news. Nineteenth century feminist and author, Gertrude E.H. Mossell (published as Mrs. N.F. Mossell) observed "The intellectual history of a race is always of value in determining the past and future of it. As a rule, a race writes its history in law and in its records. Not so the Afro-American: he could make no law; deprived of the opportunity to write, he could leave no written word" (Mossell, 49). The inaugural attempts at written works by Black Americans became largely "literature out of necessity and continues to develop along these lines infused with a desire for freedom and social equality" (53). Thus, the literature of necessity reflects a tradition of being more utilitarian in purpose as

opposed to luxuriating in the terra incognita of speculation. With literacy becoming legal so late for Black Americans, how many Black writers were going to play catch-up by pondering over time machines or space travel when racial discrimination and violence was at an all-time high right then, right there on Earth? Imagination is a luxury.

Jewelle Gomez states that works by authors such as Nella Larsen and Frances E. Harper (and I will add Madame E. Azalia Hackley and Mossell) were written, “as a deliberate response to the negative stereotypes of Black people that had taken hold in U.S. culture, as well as to the growing tide of violence against Black Americans in the decades following the end of slavery and Reconstruction” (Gomez, 950). Sentimental novels like *Quicksand* served as apologia for Black Americans and texts such as Mossell’s newspaper column and Hackley’s *The Colored Girl Beautiful* became lessons in survival. Later, during the Black Arts movement, in direct correlation to the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement, Gomez states that writers such as Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka wrote poetry as a “natural rallying point for political actions” their politics as memorable as their craft (ibid). On the other hand, writers such as Alice Walker, Ntzoke Shange, and Zora Neale Hurston have historically been met with anger and criticism by the Black community and literary critics who felt that Black literature needed to serve a higher purpose as opposed to deliberately acknowledging physical and sexual abuse or focusing on the working-class or poor people as central to the narrative (ibid). Gomez contends that this singular focus “leads our writers away from the African traditions

of spiritualism and magic that might naturally lead Black writers into speculative or even surrealist forms” (951).

In that sense, speculative fiction seems like a perfect way to depict and re-imagine alternative characteristics of previously held prejudices. The danger is that traditionally, speculative fiction, particularly the subgenres of science-fiction and fantasy, have long been viewed as trivial or lightweight reading. Even if Black women protagonists suddenly flood the market, why would anyone take their presence any more seriously just because of their increased presence in speculative literature? If someone is reading a novel where Black women characters are at the helm, why should a reader give them any more credence than say, Margaret Atwood’s “pigeons” from *Oryx and Crake*? First, readers must be willing to accept that there are plenty of formidable titles in speculative fiction which are serious literature and serve as a vehicle through which authors reflect upon and work through contemporary issues.

The complexities regarding the publication of Afrospeculative texts that feature Black women as protagonists culminates when we consider that despite advances in feminism throughout the twentieth century, Black women remain voiceless at the systemic level, polarized to the fringes of present-day conversations regarding racial and gender equality. As Hurston famously put it in the words and sentiment of Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Hurston, 14). To that end, it would make sense that Black women are rarely integrated into popular futuristic narratives or speculative definitions as central players because speculative fiction operates as an extension of how

contemporary society functions. Patricia Hill Collins elaborates on the intentionality of the exclusion of Black women:

“The shadow obscuring this Black women’s intellectual movement is neither accidental nor benign. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization. Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas...has been critical in maintaining social inequalities (Collins, 3).

Historically speaking, according to Collins, Black women are considered to inhabit three interdependent dimensions: labor (the “ghettoization” of service occupations and inner-city economic exploitation), legal equality (exclusion of Black women from rights, privileges, political office, and educational opportunities afforded to Anglo male citizens) and imagery (visual rhetoric demonstrating qualities perceived as attached to Black women: mummies, jezebels, breeder women, prostitutes, welfare mothers) have been fundamental to justify oppression. Collins insists that the combination of these dimensions, particularly when there is a blatant lack of access to literacy, work to create a “seamless web” of social control designed to keep Black women in a subordinate place and with few exceptions, suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals, in order to protect elite White male interests primarily through the pattern of omission (5).

This pattern of omission founded on a combination of oppressive factors is echoed by a key Black feminist document, the “Combahee River Collective Statement,” “we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking”

(Combahee River Collective). This statement addresses an oppressive culture of silence that Black women have inherited because of their unique combination of sexual and racial oppression. The Combahee River Collective advocates assuming responsibility for one's own liberation despite the fact that the fight against oppression means persisting without "racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor...even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have" (214).

To return to Collins, she suggests that, "Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women...Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (Collins, 243). In other words, the moment a Black woman is asked to sacrifice aspects of her humanity in a speculative narrative, we must also understand through her lens that her humanity is already being perpetually sacrificed and continues to be regarded as trivial in real time. Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" corroborates Collins in that "'Women of color' are the preferred labor force for the science-based industries, the real women for whom the worldwide sexual market, labor market, and politics of reproduction kaleidoscope into daily life" (Haraway, 93). According to Haraway, writing maintains a special significance for colonized groups. Writing is about creating access and "cyborg¹ writing" is about the power to survive "on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (94). On the other hand, bell hooks warns

¹ A cyborg, according to Haraway is a creature in a post-gender world without an origin story, an ultimate self

against focusing on the stories of women of color which appeal primarily to privileged white women as a method to “color in” and validate a set of theoretical assumptions. For hooks, stories cannot take the place of theory (hooks, 56).

The inclusion of a Black female protagonist in a speculative narrative, however, illuminates the necessity of a combination of story and theory under the auspices to ignite the imagination while remaining grounded in intellectualism. Afrospeculative feminist writers are masters of inversion—that is they utilize speculative narratives for utilitarian means, as a tool for liberation, placing black women smack dab in the center of the struggle for equality amidst a stacked deck genre for well over a hundred years. Despite some strides, speculative fiction remains a reflection of hegemony, power-mongering, imperialism, greed, and above all, the desire for dominance, which interlock at the root of race and gender and sexual constructions. According to Hopkinson, however, by situating “othered people” at the nucleus of a narrative she is able to manipulate preconceived notions with regard to how people express race, culture, class, sexuality, social structures, and gender, “one of the things I can do is to intervene in the readers’ assumptions by creating a world in which standards are different” (101). Beyond speculation, in the right hands, the effect can feel downright prophetic, re-orienting readers’ imaginations and perhaps our future.

For instance, the surmounting interest in the inclusion of transforming the body in transhumanist theory in speculative fiction can serve as a useful conduit for Black female characters in Afrospeculative texts to grapple with and transcend the daunting notion of a true intersection between gender and race. Transhumanist theory embodies the vision of futurologist theories that hindrances such as aging will

be eliminated and physical and mental prowess enhanced through the advances of technology and biology. Transhumanism is a concentrated period where humanity is expected to begin surpassing itself physiologically and psychologically and serves as a significant landmark on the road to the evolutionary age of the posthuman. The pursuit of transhumanist theory is an exciting vehicle for imagining the potential for the future as its consideration in Afrospeculative texts thus merges cultural and scientific evolution. In the case of Afrospeculative feminist authors, they situate Black female protagonists who, out of a compulsion to survive epidemics, world war, time travel, and even alien invasion, eventually foster a diverse community tailored to their unique needs and desires, dependent on the notion of both physical and psychological evolution. Often drawing upon the complexities of race, sexuality, and gender dynamics as instruments for change, Afrospeculative feminist authors assign a distinct sense of agency to their characters, often through elements of transhumanism.

As I've mentioned, agency for a Black female body is hard to come by because of her peculiar status as a subperson. Charles Mills, in his book, *Blackness Visible*, describes a subperson as not an inanimate object which has zero moral status, not a nonhuman animal which is still outside of a moral community, but an adult human who is not considered fully a person. Mills defines a subperson in Aristotelian terms as "a living tool, property with a whose moral status was tugged in different directions by dehumanizing requirements of slavery" (7). Descendants of slaves still embody the vestiges of slavery, and so contradictions between law and customs are unavoidable in that sense creating the climate for legal and social tensions between

the oppressed and their oppressors, particularly since the institution of slavery has become embedded subconsciously as normative for so many members of both parties for an indefinite amount of time, “A relationship to the world that is founded on racial privilege becomes simply the relationship to the world” (10).

Tangentially related, Judith Butler’s essay entitled, “Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscription,” “identifies the body as a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves in a location that seems to be pre-given. In other words, the body somehow constructs itself before it actually becomes an identifiable body” (Hampton). Butler’s treatment of psychic identification addresses notions of how agency evolves over time in an individual through mimesis, or rather, how one person can embody theory through the performance of their internal process as it changes as a result of their experiences with others. Butler draws upon Freud’s iconic 1917 thesis “Mourning and Melancholia” which focuses on the loss of a love-object and how the subsequent reaction to loss can affect the perception of self. For Butler, the location of the psyche manifests in the repetition of its performance, as a “signifying process through which the body comes to appear” (312). Thus, one’s sense of agency and subsequent activities are a direct reflection of and reaction to the development of psychic identification. Butler’s version of psychic identification plays out in interpersonal relationships “and the interactional structures that sustain them” (ibid). Thus, it would make sense that a person’s agency in a speculative narrative, cannot be obtained without the example set by her predecessors as well as the presence of an audience to practice newly formed theories upon.

Jacqueline Joan Kennelly reifies this concept of what she calls “relational agency” in political terms, or the “capacity to take action within the public sphere” (260). Kennelly describes three elements to theorizing agency as, “habitus (the set of common sense assumptions and embodied characteristics that are indelibly marked by such social factors as class, race, and gender), cultural capital...and field” (ibid). The most important of these to cultivate with regard to agency is the concept of habitus, which stems from habit-forming practices. She cites Nick Crossley who states:

“Habits are sedimented effects of action, indeed of repeated actions, and any account of them therefore presupposes an account of action, such that action cannot be reduced to habit in the manner that Bourdieu sometimes suggests. In a sense, he recognizes this when he deems the habitus a ‘structured structure’; habits emerge, he argues, out of an agent’s active involvement in a structured field of practice” (Crossley, 95).

To further problematize the relationship between Afrospeculative texts and traditional science-fiction, Fanon, in keeping with DuBois’ “double-consciousness” metaphor, might object that developing relational agency is synonymous with wearing a mask, a kind of impersonation, or habitus-formation based on a dependency complex of the colonized upon the colonizer’s ideologies (Fanon, 89). This also becomes problematic for Jenny Wolmark in her book, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, who maintains on the one hand that conventional or generic science-fiction narratives are encoded with patriarchal discourse, “On the other hand, rewriting the conventions from the unexpected and ‘alien’ perspective of the female subject can work towards providing a critical position from which such an interrogation could begin (Wolmark, 54).

She claims that feminist narratives are at best partial because they remain embedded in a conventional narrative structure of the genre, but they can

“nevertheless alter the focus of the narratives to reveal the equally embedded nature of the power relations within which the subject is constructed, and which define the relations between self and other” (55). Feminist appropriations of science-fiction are not necessarily impacted by patriarchal discourse, but may be seen as “cultural interventions” (ibid). Feminist narratives, although offering somewhat incomplete solutions even with empowered female protagonists, can therefore re-use convention in order to test the limits of dominant ideologies (ibid).

Christine Delphy observes in her chapter, “Rethinking Sex and Gender,” that a nonhierarchical society is practically unimaginable because of fear of the unknown but is possible—here, she echoes Crossley, “Practices produce values; other practices produce other values” (Delphy, 8). She advocates imagining what does not yet exist in an attempt to analyze what does exist. Delphy observes that with regard to our traditionally oppressive perceptions of sex and gender, we are on the cusp of a downright utopic breakthrough by considering more about how we might achieve cultures and practices that do not rely on discrimination based on either. Along those lines, feminist Afrospeculative scholar, Marleen Barr asserts that science-fiction has traditionally been seen as founded on binary opposition between gender: feminist nature vs. masculinist nature. Women are associated with nature, feelings, body-based experiences, as opposed to men who are associated with intellect, logic and reason—these elemental differences become the basis for genre division: “hard” science vs. soft fantasy (Barr, 33). Women in contemporary narratives continue to be so often equated with lower animals, feminist authors are in a position to reclaim science beyond herbal medicine, midwifery or magic in exchange for the embodiment

of the intellectual, thereby creating a narrative founded on scientific knowledge and supplementing it with emotion instead of the other way around.

In order to expand the scholarship of Afrospeculative narratives with regard to conventional binaries, there must be room for conversations regarding how Afrospeculative feminist authors contribute to this expansion. These texts, while obviously, woman-oriented reflect reality while also undermining it by “improving” upon the subjects of the narratives. Barr maintains that Octavia Butler, for example, takes what is familiar and rearranges the signposts so the result ends up being strange to the unsuspecting reader (4). Authors such as Butler, Tananarive Due, Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, and Sheree Thomas, recolonize, re-territorize landscape, hierarchy, gender, biology, and even time, to jolt readers out of their feigned innocence and constructed fantasies that reify status quo mythologies (ibid). It is with this notion of intersecting story with theory, intellect with emotion, and as Roland Barthes would suggest “mythifying the myth” that we cannot help but expect in some way for the transhumanist Black woman character, endowed with all sorts of enhancements to ensure her superiority over historically privileged whites, to wield their powers accordingly and replace male tyranny with female tyranny. As Ruth Salvaggio observes, “This does not happen” (81). Afrospeculative heroines “are dangerous and powerful women...their goal is not power. They are heroines not because they conquer the world, but because they conquer the very notion of tyranny” (ibid). The portrait of a different kind of feminism, of humanity, Afrospeculative feminist authors are writing into their characters the ability to outlive and outlast oppression.

My current project is a hybrid in that I combine critical theory with original poems. The critical section of each chapter contextualizes a novel and its author with regard to Exodus mythology. However, because novels can only reveal so much about character development, I identify spaces to engage and elaborate upon the conversation incited by these authors' feminist protagonists. In a recent lecture at Transylvania University, Claudia Rankine called poetry "a feeling space." In other words, poetry is a place where there are no definitive borders—it is here where the poet interrogates meaning more through a blurring of intellect and intuition. Because the poem can serve as a liminal space, it is poised to embrace the illogical and phenomenal realms of speculative literature. In the tradition of Black American poets such as, Ai, Patricia Smith, Rita Dove, Elizabeth Alexander, and Tyehimba Jess, in my own personal creative work, I regularly engage historical figures through recovering the narratives of underrepresented voices. For the purposes of this project, I often write in persona or limited omniscience, in order to spotlight an event where the reader possesses incomplete information surrounding a character's experience. The result becomes a kind of call-and-response interaction with these novels.

Ultimately, I have come to view poetry as a doorway, a portal suspended between dimensions. To give you an image of what this looks like, think of a film where a protagonist has reached a dead-end and needs to learn more about something they cannot see or touch. Their first step is to find a point of entry into the unknown. Sometimes they must look at what appears as a dead end from a different angle or they have to create the door themselves. For me, poetry operates in the same way, from both a writer and reader's perspective. That which had formally presented

itself as a boundary between seemingly disparate genres or concepts or even audiences now becomes an opportunity to fuse them together.

On the one hand, to craft a poem is to call upon the primordial tradition of oral storytelling. Poems are elliptical in nature, can hold conversations with folklore, mythology, ancient texts, song lyrics, belief systems, and cultural practices in a fairly short timeframe. For me, a poem or collection of poems is a tool we can use to distill abstract concepts and make them palatable, but poems also expect that the reader will know these references or seek them out to better ascertain a larger point. Poems are also sensory oriented. They have the ability to recreate experience for a reader through the information we process with our bodies. The poem is also not bound to the constraints of time and gravity and negative space. They are explorative, interrogative. Both through content and form, poems speculate that *that* which is unknown *is* knowable. Less concerned with finding answers, for me, the most effective poems seem to be more interested in identifying the query.

A brief digression. In the film, *Star Trek: Generations*, the Enterprise crew must contend against the phenomenon of an extra-dimensional realm, a temporal energy ribbon called “the Nexus” that crosses the galaxy every 39.1 years. In the Nexus, time has no meaning and one’s thoughts and desires shape reality (Memory Alpha). People caught inside can relive their past and reshape their decisions anywhere and any way that they like, or create parallel realities for themselves that include elements currently missing from their lives. Guinan, a centuries-old El-Aurian, was once trapped in the Nexus and describes it to Captain Jean-Luc Picard as “being inside joy.”

Leaving the Nexus has the ability to create intense depression and in some an insane desperation to return.

Reading narratives by feminist Afrospeculative writers creates a utopic dream-state, a Nexus-like reality where Black women are powerful, albeit sometimes dangerous, but often conscientious and community-oriented beings who subvert and undermine patriarchal conventions and power structures. The author has presented the reader with a temporal ribbon for the duration of the narrative, a literary nexus, a sweet spot, a pocket of space and time so alluring it almost causes a kind of depression to leave it behind. Feminist Afrospeculative authors can only hope that these narratives, which reflect the experiences and desires of inclusivity for Black women, work their way into the subconscious of readers, that they too can envision themselves as terra-formers, and that while the dream world is fulfilling, it is only the beginning—choosing to create real world experiences can enact the elements of possibility proffered by speculation. For these writers, liberation is still pending as these narratives continue to reflect our current crisis of social stratification which tends to redistribute hierarchy rather than remove it. But by their very inclusion, with each narrative and character, feminist Afrospeculative authors are writing Black women closer to the space(s) in society we have only ever imagined.

CHAPTER ONE

Going a Piece of the Way:

Art Imitating Life in Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*

Moses looked at the mask of her face. It looked like nothing had moved in it for years. Nothing had gone into its portals and nothing had come out. It seemed to have finished with everything and just to have been waiting on time.

"Moses, I come here this evening to ask you to let me die."

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939)

In the Old Testament, not much is said about Moses's elder sister, Miriam. We know from *Exodus*, she is considered a prophet. We know that as a child, her mother, Jochebed, asks her to hide her newborn infant brother, Moses, in a basket on the side of a river after Pharaoh orders all Hebrew boys be executed. We know that immediately following the infamous crossing of the Red Sea, Miriam dances and sings a song of victory. And we also know from *Numbers* that she and her brother Aaron object to Moses marrying a Cushite woman.² Afterward, Miriam contracts a disfigurative disease from which she recovers in seven days only after Moses intercedes to God on her behalf. Whether she is married or not, or has children or not is unresolved. In Zora Neale Hurston's, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), an allegorical retelling of the biblical Exodus story, the novel revolves primarily around the messianic title character. But it is what we learn of Miriam through Hurston's lens that we may observe some of the more unwieldy dynamics of Exodus politics, specifically as they apply to Black American women during the New Negro Renaissance.

² Cush is now known as Ethiopia.

We meet Miriam in the beginning of *Moses* as a girl-child who tells a story that sets into motion the deliverance of the Hebrews from enslavement. When we encounter her again halfway through the novel, Miriam is past middle-aged. She possesses the calloused, ruined body of a slave, which she adorns in gaudy garments and jewelry. She comes off as a pitiable but loud-mouthed shrew to Moses and his wife, Zipporah, a dark-skinned foreigner who Miriam comes to hate for her complexion, her beauty, and her status as Moses's wife. By the time Miriam asks Moses permission to die, Hurston has illuminated the predicament of a woman whose voice is so neglected she feels she has nothing left to contribute to her community or to the world.

This pivotal encounter begins with an indictment. Miriam accuses Moses of behaving dismissively toward the aid she and her brother Aaron have contributed towards Moses's campaign. Without their influence, Miriam insists that Moses would not have been able to take over as leader:

"Don't let him holler you down, Aaron," Miriam jumped in. "The Lord did call us just as much as He did Moses and it's about time we took our stand in front of the people. I was a prophetess in Israel while he was herding sheep in Midian. And that woman he done brought here to lord it over us, that black Mrs. Pharaoh got to leave here right now...Who you talking to, Moses? The Lord don't speak through your mouth alone. He speaks through my mouth and Aaron's mouth just as much as He speaks through yours" (Hurston, 300).

The argument devolves rapidly into a public contest of mystical powers. Miriam loses, and as punishment, she is cursed with leprosy. She is exiled from the Hebrew camp for seven days and when Moses heals her at Aaron's request, Miriam is thoroughly cowed by Moses's superior powers and remains mostly silent for the rest of her life. Hurston conveys through Miriam's narrative that emancipation is not a

case where everyone benefits. Women are expected to be silent yet supportive of their male leader, and when they aren't, they are effectively muzzled. Through Hurston's depiction of Miriam's increasingly miserable life, liberation is unmasked as an exchange of power between dictators—in this case, Pharaoh and Moses.

Ten years prior to *Moses*, Hurston published the autobiographical essay, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (1928) that established her as an outlier in New Negro Renaissance literature. This is the essay where she famously declares: "I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it...No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife" (Hurston, 153). This candid, almost cavalier assessment of her place in the world as Black and woman make it clear that Hurston's literary trajectory was turning away from the cultural inheritance of slavery other than to consider it, "The price I paid for civilization" (ibid). She aligns herself with the cosmos, belonging to no race or time, "I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads" (ibid). Small wonder Hurston's male counterparts, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Alain Locke chief among them, would not receive her work well, particularly, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). She appeared to reject not only her race in favor of universality but also the male gender. And the nod to sharpening her oyster knife could be viewed as a self-centered act of preparing to nourish and/or arm herself in some small yet significant, unexpected way. In this essay, Hurston removes the physical body from her evaluation of color, and for a novelist whose priority *is* the body as it pertains to race, Hurston's manifesto of independence might feel intensely disloyal not just to Black

people but specifically to Black men. On the other hand, her liberated tone is exactly what the New Negro Renaissance seemed to call for—enlightened liberation from the vestiges of slavery, an accelerated interest in freedom, motion, progress.

Could Hurston be considered privileged? The product of an upbringing that enabled an early aspiration to choose her own path? In his 1984 introduction to *Moses*, Blyden Jackson details Hurston's as a comfortable childhood in an all-Black Florida town, "a town of oleanders," as the daughter of Eatonville's mayor who was also a Baptist minister (Hurston, vii). When her father remarried after her mother's death, Hurston moved to Jacksonville until her mid-twenties. Her life then became something of a migrant's as she patched together odd jobs, classes, and a burgeoning livelihood that later flourished into a career as an essayist, novelist, playwright, and folklorist. Jackson observes that no other woman writer in the New Negro Renaissance published the amount or quality of Hurston's work. As the poster child for the movement's women writers, Hurston was operating within a context of cultural trauma much closer to the surface of slavery than any of her literary progeny, most of whom made their entrance into the canon towards the latter half of the twentieth century. While Black feminist writers who embrace speculative narratives and characters—Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Virginia Hamilton—often write from a place of inherited cultural trauma, Hurston would have had close relatives who were born slaves. She came of age post-Reconstruction and in the throes of Jim Crow, yet, as a preacher's daughter in a Florida town, Hurston was also reared among a golden age of Black American folklore and spiritual practices that would later serve as the vibrant backdrop to her work. Almost sixty years separate

Hurston from the first crop of her literary descendants making hers a generative voice.

In addition to culling Black American and Caribbean folklore as well as the community of her youth for inspiration in her novels and short stories, Hurston, like so many of her forbearers uses the Exodus narrative as inspiration for *Moses*. Jackson writes: "Hardly less than Machiavelli in *The Prince*...she discusses power—the kind of power, political in its nature, which is the prime object of concern for the Florentine in his famous treatise on statesmanship" (Hurston, xvi). Accordingly, she situates Black Americans in the place of Hebrews who were freed from enslavement under Pharaoh by the messianic figure, Moses. It is the stuff of hymns and hallelujahs, recognizable and easily converted into a palatable satire and borderline Southern gothic, the vernacular and mysticism of the Black American south and Caribbean at home in the mouths and mannerisms of her characters. Kenneth Bindas observes, "Each generation of Americans since the Civil War has had to deal with the structural and generational memory of slavery, Jim Crow, and its corresponding historical paradigm of subordination" (Bindas, 116). Through the speculative nature of allegory, Hurston calls attention to the constantly vacillating power dynamics among the ranks of Black Americans and their leaders. Thus, the novel posited a timely counter-narrative to Exodus mythology given the tempo of the New Negro Renaissance.

The biblical Exodus narrative follows the hardships of the Hebrews from their enslavement in Egypt to crossing the Red Sea, forty years spent wandering in the wilderness, and finally ends with their relocation to the "promised land" of Canaan,

“a land flowing with milk and honey” (*KJV*, Exod. 33.3). For Black abolitionists as early as the seventeenth century including Phyllis Wheatley, Absalom Jones, and W.E.B. Dubois, the Exodus narrative served as a rhetorical strategy that reflected the ever-evolving struggles of attaining equal rights in America. Because this strategy originated at a time where the Bible served as *the* standard for morality-based literature, Rhondda Thomas notes: “As Afro-Atlantic people embraced the Exodus narrative to retell their life stories, a distinct literary tradition emerged...By appropriating the Exodus story, Afro-Atlantic people posited themselves as protagonists in a major narrative of the New World...” (Thomas, 4). Subsequently, the Exodus narrative created a sympathetic correlation between the suffering of Old Testament Hebrew slaves in Egypt and slaves of African descent in America.

Because speculative writers often take the liberty of couching contemporary issues and concerns in the phenomenal world, a re-imagined Exodus narrative would have the potential to conjecture the past and future for Black Americans in order to revise the problematic allure of a utopic promised land. By representing concrete challenges of power redistribution as well as critiquing the indefinable nature of this so-called promised land, not to mention how to reach it, Hurston challenges preconceived notions of liberation in the neutral space of storytelling. In *Moses*, it is almost as if Hurston adopts the role of a *griot*, or West African storyteller whose profession is to remember and call upon historical events in order to teach contemporary audiences lessons about the past so they make decisions in the present. Because the Exodus narrative continues to be celebrated, studied, and preserved, as recognizable a part of Black American folklore as Br'er Rabbit, *Moses* serves as

familiar a story as traditional slave tales. Thus, Hurston both evokes the past through the structure and major characters in the Exodus narrative while addressing the very real needs, issues, and concerns of her day.

Lawrence Levine's classic text, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* is useful as a starting place to consider the storytelling tradition Hurston first calls upon and later undermines for *Moses*. Levine generalizes that "The slaves' plight was too serious, their predicament too perilous, for them to indulge in pure fantasy and romanticism" (Levine, Loc. 1551 Kindle). While slaves' tales relied on tricksters and wish-fulfillment, Levine argues that the reality of enslavement never allowed them to obscure their situation, even in storytelling. It is a small wonder, then, that Hurston's male contemporaries, descendants of the same literary tradition, publicly dismissed her writing abilities even before *Moses*. In a 1937 review of *Their Eyes for New Masses*, Richard Wright suggests that the novel was little more than a minstrel show: "Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatsoever to move in the direction of serious fiction... when will the Negro novelist of maturity, who knows how to tell a story convincingly—which is Miss Hurston's cradle gift, come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?" (*New Masses*). Similarly, with regard to *Moses*, Alain Locke condemns the novel as "caricature instead of portraiture," and Ralph Ellison claims, "For Negro fiction...it did nothing" (Plant, 73). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes: "Hurston's mythic realism, lush and dense with a lyrical black idiom, was regarded as counterrevolutionary by the proponents of social realism, and she competed with Wright, Ellison, and Brown for the right to determine the ideal fictional mode for representing Negro life" (Gates). The harsh critiques of Hurston's work smack of

exclusivity, as though to be validated as an artistic champion of the New Negro Renaissance, while experimentation in terms of form was welcome, a writer should not attempt to broach content that was not overtly concerned with racial and social stratification.

Hurston's works, particularly the folkloric stories, certainly may be viewed as too sprightly in tenor next to works like *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* due to her inclusion of the more mystical elements of Black culture. To return to his introduction of *Moses*, Blyden Jackson notes that the greatest remarkability about the work is that it "lacks virtually all of the characteristics endemic to the Negro protest novel...[it] confers upon itself something of a distinction among all the poetry and the prose ever written by American blacks" (Hurston, xix). And yet, the novel does not boast anywhere near the amount of attention surrounding it as *Their Eyes*. Amy Sickels observes that *Moses* "has not received the same scholarly focus, namely because the book fails in the respect that its author could not maintain the fusion of black creative style, biblical tone, ethnic humor, and legendary reference that periodically appears" (Sickels, 66). And perhaps because *Moses* is such an anomaly, critics tend to meditate less on the relevance of plot and character analysis and more on the exigency for Hurston's retelling of the Exodus story. Barbara Johnson and Christine Levecq, for instance, place emphasis on Hurston's portrait of Moses as well as the timely narrative of *en masse* emancipation. Johnson insists that despite a "fierce rivalry between the Holocaust and slavery in the United States, over which was most devastating" Hurston is directly responding to Hitler and the idealization of racial purity first and foremost before reclaiming Moses for Black popular culture (Johnson,

Loc: 1358. Kindle). Levecq, on the other hand, suggests that Hurston's motive was strategic. Following the feedback from her first two novels, Hurston may have felt the best way to move forward was "toward a more complex representation of (black) identity" (Levecq, 440). For Levecq, *Moses* is comparable to Joyce's *Ulysses* but rather than creating ordered chaos, "Hurston produces chaotic order...It is this constant movement, this constant displacement in the interaction between Moses and the community that helps the novel away from essentialism" (441).

Hurston also sporadically weaves in trickster characters, humor, magic, and vernacular in a great deal of her writing. But in the case of *Moses*, because the novel draws from these elements within the confines of such a politically infused narrative, the novel subverts the original Exodus mythology, thus operating as a counter-narrative. And conceivably in keeping with her "sharpened oyster-knife" sentiments, *Moses* provides an occasion for Hurston to return the gesture of critique with regard to prominent male leaders within the Black community. Rather than an idyllic interpretation of emancipation, *Moses* criticizes Black Americans who blindly follow whomever seems to possess the most influence, alluding to the easily-swayed and fickle hive-mind of the oppressed. If we look at *Moses* as a cautionary tale, Hurston seems to warn against the archetype of the spellbinding messianic leader, since his version of the promised land is ultimately a redistribution of power. And having so recently borne the brunt of her male colleagues' criticism, *Moses* illuminates the gaps in traditional Exodus mythology. Although beloved and touted as literal and figurative gospel in Black American culture, the narrative does nothing to empower women's voices. In fact, the free-thinking woman will not only be silenced, but cast out. Erica

R. Edwards explores gendered violence in Hurston's gothic reimagining of the biblical Exodus story and insists that Hurston shifts the genre of the Exodus story using women's power to violently confront "the masculinist structures of charismatic authority" (Edwards, 1085).³ Edwards calls the myth of Moses a "fiction of charismatic leadership" which revolves around the political fantasy where a messianic leader offers an out from a brutal structure by providing "a straight path to a new order" (1086). Even as Hurston dwells on Moses's miraculous capabilities, it is Miriam, the feminist martyr who exposes his masculinist bias.

What happens when the figurehead of a gendered text such as the Exodus narrative is undermined? Consider Harriet Tubman, who was dubbed a real-life "Moses," and personally led enslaved people across state and country borders to the North and liberation, a literal land of promise. At first glance, *Moses* may appear to be all about the title character, as the majority of the novel is written in limited third-person following his travels. But Gordon E. Thompson argues that one of Hurston's most effective devices is her ability to subvert the role of teller-of-tall-tales, a role set aside in the Black community for Black males (Thompson, 757). While she is able to impersonate or masquerade as male, personification allows her to buck "the tradition that prohibited her from writing and telling tall tales" and because Hurston is also a woman writing stories about women, the act of storytelling "is rendered gender neutral, while the power of the imagination to remake the world is again reconfigured" (ibid). Like Tubman, Hurston's ability to shape-shift and adopt a

³ Edwards calls Moses gothic because "Moses is a dark, undecidable figure who presumes the leadership of a people that, like the gothic heroine, has 'ended up with a man who might still be a murderer' (Honig, 118)" (Edwards, 1090).

version of a male voice within a pre-ordained narrative lends an air of authenticity to *Moses* as we follow the title character on his search for God. However, it is Hurston's recurring emphasis on female characters, particularly Miriam, that becomes the most illuminating and troubling as to the plight of Black women's voices in her era. "For us [black women]," bell hooks says, "true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges [the gender] politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless" (hooks, 8). Thus, Miriam's seems more and more a cautionary tale steeped in Hurston's projection of her own encounters with her male peers.

What manner of truth speaking does Hurston undertake by revealing pivotal glimpses into Miriam's life? What private sphere of women is unveiled? I argue that Hurston draws upon what Jacqueline deWeever calls a "triple voice," thus altering the foundational and most prescriptive elements of the Exodus story to not only complicate the title character but the characters surrounding him.⁴ There are at least two major concerns Hurston addresses through Miriam. First, while Moses is rendered—as in every Exodus narrative—a sterling example of masculine authority, even as a youth, Miriam is restaged as first, a girlish dreamer who fashions her own narrative of how her infant brother was saved from certain peril by an Egyptian princess from the Nile where he was set adrift in a wicker basket. Eventually, Miriam's retelling of the romanticized yet compelling version of the story sates the Hebrew community's desire to know that one of their own has transcended their plight as

⁴ According to deWeever, the triple voice is Western, Black, Female artist. According to Barbara Johnson, the triple voice stems from a triple identity as African, American, and female.

slaves and was adopted by royalty no less. Miriam's "whopper" suggests that taking ownership of one's narrative can potentially establish the conditions for emancipation, at least in a psychological sense. When we are reintroduced to Miriam, she is a prophetess, unwed, yet respected in her community, and thus able to influence the Hebrews to follow Moses. Thus, it is clear she has lived according to this philosophy she established as a child in terms of forging her own story, and subsequently comes into her own abilities despite being surrounded by the tradition of hierarchal dynamics.

We do not meet Miriam again in the novel until Moses has come into his full power as a "hoodoo man." She is introduced as Aaron's sister, and when Moses indicates that she's not welcome because she's a woman and he's called the Hebrew elders on "serious business," Aaron assures Moses:

"My sister Miriam is a great prophetess, Moses. Talking about influence, she's got plenty. We couldn't make out without her, that's all. Everybody comes to her to get things straightened out. She's a two-headed woman with power.' He looked at Moses and challenged him with his eyes. 'She can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick, just the same as you can do' (Hurston, 171).

Moses deigns to allow Miriam to stay provided she can "handle the women" (ibid). Later, however, Miriam uses her influence to create a whisper campaign against Zipporah, a demure, comely woman who dresses in style and carries herself appropriately as Moses's wife, playing the part of a supportive traditional woman to the letter. Barbara Smith argues that because Hurston's work, ever being steeped in sexual politics, the undercurrent of intra-racial identity politics, is relevant towards the way "Black women have traditionally felt towards white women and high yellow

beauties” (Smith, 28). It is through Miriam that Hurston highlights the “invisible work of women that often accounts for the successful deeds of men” (ibid). But it is not until after Miriam’s death that Moses recognizes this fact:

“She was a woman, but he never had been able to quite think of her as such what with her lack of female beauty and female attractions, and her loveless life with one end sunk in slavery and the other twisted and snarled in freedom. He wondered which had hurt her the most...He wondered if she had not been born if we would have been standing here in the desert of Zin. In fact, he wondered if the Exodus would have taken place at all...He doubted it...A mighty thing had happened in the world through the stumblings of a woman who couldn’t see where she was going. She needed a big tomb so the generations that come after would know her and remember” (Hurston, 265)

Hurston makes it abundantly clear that within the mythos of the Exodus story, like many Old Testament narratives, there is no suitable place for women, be she queen or outcast, unless she follows the appropriate prescribed role of wife or mother. Even Pharaoh’s own daughter, a princess, is depicted as having no more political power than say, Zipporah or Miriam. Erica R. Edwards argues that Moses is increasingly characterized as a tyrant: “a Jekyll-and-Hyde figure caught between his utopian vision of a democratic country free from force and the distinctly undemocratic violence required to authorize his charismatic position” (Edwards, 1094). Miriam, then, becomes characterized as a dangerous entity to Moses who threatens the patriarchal line of charismatic authority. She is rendered as a *femme fatale* who treads the line between madness and bitterness. And for that, she is punished by Moses, first through verbal assault and then through his literal curse to become an outcast leper from which she returns cleansed but silent. Ultimately, Miriam must endure the humiliation of asking Moses’s permission to die. Here, Hurston inverts the prescriptive masculinist hero worship in the Exodus narrative by illustrating what

actually happens to self-aware women who challenge their leaders—they are ultimately deserving of burial.

While Blyden Jackson contends that Hurston is critical of Miriam, I argue that Hurston is being critical of the unfortunate reception of her own complicated origins, politics, and profession which she projects onto Miriam. There are several similarities of note between them. Barbara Smith observes that Hurston did not worship male supremacy and was skeptical when it came to claims of Black superiority. In terms of racial and socio-economic politics, there is no question Hurston was conservative, but her novels belie an insight into sexual politics that Smith argues “indicate that she was inherently a feminist, a radical stance for a Black woman in her era” (Smith, 26). These qualities made Hurston anomalous. Regarding Miriam, we know her to be unique because although reared within the confines of a traditional family structure, she too, was anomalous by remaining unmarried and without children, which is often remarked upon by Moses. Miriam leads a life as a mystic, a storyteller, and a healer, someone with political influence within her community. It isn’t until Moses arrives that her authority and credibility are undermined and later dismissed. Similarly, the attacks from Hurston’s male peers and colleagues come off as personal, as they criticized not only her writing ability and her profession as a folklorist, but her personal life. Ultimately, Smith states it was Hurston’s sexual politics that relegated her to the annals of the unknown for so long, while “Richard Wright became the ‘father’ of modern Black literature” (27). Coincidentally, Miriam, for all her influence and clout as a prophetess in *Moses*, it is the title character of the novel that reaps renown.

This is not necessarily a surprise ending for the one outspoken female character in Hurston's novel, given the period in which *Moses* was published. If we consider the historical milieu of the novel's conception, the New Negro Renaissance was a veritable gumbo of conflicting ideology and the intellectuals that paved the way for Black American opportunity in formerly segregated sectors of education and literature. Ron Eyerman describes culture as the key to gaining acceptance in America and DuBois championed "the idea that one could be both African and American, loyal to a nation, but not to its racist culture" (Eyerman, 164). Millions of Black people in the wake of WWI were moving from rural to urban areas perpetuating race riots and exoticized depictions of Blacks in mainstream media. On one hand, the glamorous allure of Black Americans' music and nightlife in urban centers led to its commercial exploitation and gave rise to the practice of "slumming" in white-only nightclubs in the center of Black neighborhoods. On the other hand, Exodus mythology was pivotal in shaping ideals of the New Negro in an effort to separate from an outdated model of freedom steeped in federal law. Liberation was beginning to function on more metaphorical terms, even as it was applied to socio-economic standards.

In terms of civil rights and leadership, the single charismatic leader is deeply imbedded in the code of Black American liberation. Even as recently in the film, *Selma* (2015), which depicted Martin Luther King Jr.'s epic march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, the soundtrack features a song called "One Day" where the rapper Common draws correlations between the crucifixion of Christ, the civil rights movement, and the recent riots in Ferguson, Mississippi. His lyrics encapsulate the lingering effects of the exalted charismatic male leader prototype

featured prominently in the Exodus narrative: “The movement is a rhythm to us/Freedom is like religion to us...King pointed to the mountaintop and we ran up.” There is little room outside of the regularly trotted out Rosa Parks story, even today, for women’s roles. For example, in the film, Coretta Scott King is portrayed as King’s steadfast, loyal wife, who supports his vision for civil rights despite marital turmoil and infidelity. King’s martyrdom ensured a national holiday as well as streets all over the country being named after him. Yet, long before the term “civil rights” was coined, Hurston’s novel undermines the very narrative that spawned this concept of a fictitious promised land as well as the notion that one messianic figure could lead an entire people there, as though Black people are one amorphous disenfranchised entity with shared nationalist goals. Through the female characters in *Moses* and highlighted in Miriam’s case, the notion is introduced into this allegory that heterosexism and other issues pertinent to Black women are almost entirely neglected.

So, what then, of Black women? What specifically does Hurston attempt to reveal about the experiences of Black American women, who are a marginalized group within a marginalized group? Ronald B. Richardson, describes the literary device, *mise en abyme*, as illuminating “the piece as a whole...sheds more light on the work or displays the proportions of the whole work better than any other literary device can do. A *mise en abyme* can be considered a key to the text, a guide to how to read the larger work” (Richardson). In this sense, we might consider Hurston’s counter-narrative in *Moses*, with particular regard to the negligence of Black women’s voices as a kind of play-within-the-play. Hurston draws upon “communicative

memory” using the same cast of characters, setting, and premise provided in the Old Testament, but her socio-political commentary allows her to maneuver out of a conventional approach to the dominant narrative.⁵

Ron Eyerman argues that for people who share a common fate (not necessarily a common experience): “Cultural trauma articulates a membership group as it identifies an event or an experience...that solidifies individual/collective identity. This event, now identified with the formation of the group, must be recollected by later generations who have had no experience of the “original” event, yet continue to be identified by it and to identify themselves through it” (Eyerman 14). Thus, cultural trauma experienced in the collective memory of subsequent generations of slaves in the Exodus narrative serves as a vehicle that equips them for *en masse* entry into the promised land. But it is not just the content of the cultural memory in question, but the method and vessel with how it is being shared. Eyerman notes that “collective memory unifies the group through time and over space providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it (161). Further, Aby Warburg identifies that artifacts of collective or communicative memory may be contained within objects and images such as artwork, performances,

⁵ Communicative memory stems from the Durkheimian theory of collective consciousness, or the shared beliefs, attitudes, and ideas that unify a society. Accordingly, Jan Assmann states that “Communicative memory is non-institutional; it is not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission, and interpretation; it is not cultivated by specialists and is not summoned or celebrated on special occasions; it is not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization; it lives in everyday interaction and communication, and, for this very reason, has only a limited time depth which normally reaches no farther back than eighty years, the time span of three interacting generations” (Assmann, 111).

songs, and stories (Assmann, 109-110). Thus, through *Moses*, Hurston operates as an agent of communicative memory.

By changing the framework or “communicative genre” that previously tied together generations, Hurston is able to manipulate memory and impose a kind of forgetting of the abolitionist model of the Exodus narrative in favor of a more redemptive and personal model which invites readers to privately identify with characters. By making the characters relatable, in part, through vernacular, Hurston relies upon communicative memory to address the recent past of Black Americans in the New Negro Renaissance. And as a folklorist, Hurston would have been aware of the power of relying on a familiar mythos in order to create new tread with her audience. Thus, communicative memory allows her to transform the abolitionist allegory into a critical counter-narrative that is more reflective of her stance regarding personal liberation and the liberation of Black Americans. But perhaps to her professional detriment, Hurston’s interpretation of cultural trauma endemic to the Black American experience also violates the theretofore agreed-upon codes for writing about the trauma of slavery.

In terms of a marginalized group, the events and activities that lead to disenfranchisement are essential to maintaining the collective identity of the group. In other words, the most well-trod narratives pertaining to slavery would need to be preserved, particularly for Hurston’s generation from slavery up through Reconstruction, in terms of informing practices, behaviors, and intellectual dynamic. Because the oral narratives of slaves were the first accounts of literary expression for Black Americans, placing vernacular in the mouths of Hebrews in the formative

Exodus allegory, Hurston not only re-imagines the events of the Exodus narrative, but she also seems to suggest through a mnemonic device that mimics oral narrative, that the descendants of Black American slaves are equipped to interpret the verbal cues and codes of vernacular, and consequently, to identify with her re-imagined plot and characters. More importantly, by leaning on the *mise-en-abyme* device, Hurston also seems to suggest that her readers may co-create this new tread in the Exodus story through a demonstration that liberation is costly on both individual and community fronts. The play-within-the-play-within-the-play is enacted by the female characters given speaking roles: Puah, the midwife, Jochebed, Miriam's mother, Miriam, the Egyptian Princess, and Zipporah, Moses' wife. Each of these women represents an aspect of the Black American woman's consciousness. And each of these women represents a different dynamic of powerlessness in the face of oppression not just socio-economically or politically, but due to her gender.

And yet, in a quintessential case of art imitating life, Hurston's fate for Miriam ends in something of a grim way—in exile and silence, undeserving of the rich life she lived and the emancipation she helped achieve. Hurston's literary progeny often infuse their characters with Miriam's similar sentiments of an inability to fit in, of pervasive melancholy due to dreams deferred, but they also pick up where Hurston left off—relying on the stance that not only do Black women possess multiple consciousness but there is no one-sized promised land to fit all. And an outdated narrative such as the Exodus narrative ensures that a woman will only be able to go, as Hurston put it in *How it Feels to Be Colored Me*, “a piece of the way” (Hurston, 152). As inheritors of Hurston's legacy, Afrospeculative feminist novelists continue to complicate the more

abstract qualities of liberation and interrogate the mythos of a Nationalist utopia, whether through apparition, alien, or primordial memory.

Poetry Preface

For the poetry section on Hurston, I highlight specific moments over the course of Miriam's life that warrant an expanded conversation, either through Miriam's voice or in the case of two poems, in third person. Persona is useful here to convey meaning that the poet's "speaker" voice may not be credible on its own when dealing with investigating character. The persona poem is an illusion the poet dons to guide the reader through subtext because of the ostensible authenticity of the character's voice. When writing from the stance of this character, like Hurston, I draw upon Black American vernacular to make the language feel at home in the character Miriam's voice. And because Hurston focuses most of her attention on Moses, these poems investigate the origins and nature of Miriam's role in her community with emphasis on the qualities that make her a leader.

Poems:

Jochebed's Girl

Conjure Woman

Wishful Thinking

What Women Do

The Trouble with Miriam

What She Never Got Around to Asking Aaron

Miriam, Martyr of the Mountain

In *Moses*, we are introduced to Miriam who under a certain light, could be viewed as a little girl telling a whopper. But under another light, she is a born storyteller who seizes the opportunity to regale a captive audience. What Hurston doesn't tell us, is if Miriam is already known for telling tall-tales. In the opening poem "Jochebed's Girl," I highlight this discrepancy from the view of Miriam's mother, who reflects on Miriam's tendency to bend the truth. This is, in fact, a critical moment in Miriam's "origin story" because an inherent understanding of narrative is a crucial component to successful leadership. A good storyteller can compel a person or group of people's belief in a certain vision. In this case, Miriam gives the Hebrew people hope that one of their own, specifically an illegally birthed male child, has ascended from the mud and muck of the oppressed and into Pharaoh's own home to be raised by none other than his daughter. This introduction of myth will be passed on for generations among the Hebrew people, priming them for Moses's appearance decades later. Whether he's truly one of their own or not does not matter as much as their belief that he belongs to them. Miriam doesn't realize the effect her storytelling will have on Moses's narrative years later. As a little girl, she is more concerned with being the center of attention and intentionally crafts a story that will resonate with her audience. Thus, the story becomes more and more believable to everyone, including herself.

In the novel, Miriam combines all of the elements of a good story, drawing upon the appropriate combination of actual events to add authenticity. One, it is common knowledge among the Hebrews that Miriam's mother delivered a male child in secret. Two, Jochebed asked Miriam to take him away and watch over him from the

bank of the Nile. And finally, the Egyptian princess regularly comes to bathe in the river, and this time, noticed Miriam watching her. What Miriam doesn't know about subsequent events since she lost the basket containing her baby brother, she fills in from her imagination. "Jochebed's Girl" suggests not only is Miriam a capable storyteller from an early age, but I also imply that she possesses mystical attributes that her mother cannot entirely understand or dispute. To that end, this poem anticipates Miriam's role as prophetess with an early ability to conjure from an early age, not just story, but aspects of the phenomenal world.

Jochebed's Girl

This is not Miriam's first tall-tale.
Of that, her mother is certain.
If it's not about winged beings
living amongst the clouds,
it's about the time the girl broke
a prized pot just with her mind
and the sound of her voice calling
the clay by its secret name.

And now, this
business of an infant son,
their newborn boy,
going to live with a princess
that'd been bathing in the Nile.

Madness.
Foolishness.
All of it.

And yet—

what Jochebed is not so certain of
is why she keeps believing—
how a tale with just enough truth in it
will outgrow the teller,
come to mean more
in the wanting to believe
than what hasn't been told.

Years later, Miriam is known throughout her community as a literal conjure woman, or a healer—someone the people trust, quite literally, with their lives. In the poem “Conjure Woman” I elaborate on Miriam’s preternatural abilities using her voice. The poem begins with an epigraph from Aaron where he is defending his sister, in the novel, to Moses who doesn’t see the point in having a woman be included as one of his advisors. Because Hurston never really goes into exactly how Miriam uses her abilities within the community as an adult before Moses comes along, I found this an excellent opportunity to describe her profession as both an herbalist and also a mystic. Again, I suggest here that what people seem to want when they come to her more than the physical aspect of being healed is the emotional support of someone they perceive as having power. But I also insinuate that Miriam’s role feels hollow to her because she recognizes that any personal feeling of empowerment is an illusion to the enslaved.

Conjure Woman

My sister Miriam is a great prophetess, Moses...Everybody comes to her to get things straightened out. She’s a two-headed woman with power...She can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick, just the same as you can do.

—Aaron

One by one they come,
the women an’ the men,
in secret, for one of my hands:

a rough tumble of stones
or sometimes a bone
an’ some herbs
sewn into a hide bag
to be held,
fumbled with,
worn around the neck
or waist.

They all come, eventually.

'Cause when you ain't got power
of your own, you stay lookin'
to someone you suppose might,
hopin' some of theirs'll rub
off on you.

Too often, people look outside
what they was given for help,
for the answer they already got
even if they know as well as I do,
ain't no remedies written
in no palms or stars
for slaves.

But I'm the prophetess.
The seer.
The healer.
I'm the conjure woman.

Ain't no days off for somebody
who looks and sounds
like the spittin' image of hope.

But whatever it is they see
in me,
I wish I could see it too.

Hurston constantly illuminates Miriam's obsession with material wealth and Miriam's obsession with clothes and jewelry and high-society living translates from a young age as the trappings of success. Because Miriam is not an easily typecast female character—she is not the silent princess, supportive wife, or accommodating mother—she constantly seeks validation from external sources. As a girl, she obsesses over the Egyptian princess's luxurious lifestyle. Later in life, she bedecks herself in gaudy jewelry, so much so that it actually makes more obvious her weathered skin and limbs that denote a life spent as a slave. Finally, when Moses's wife arrives in the Hebrew camp after the exodus, Miriam's envy over Zipporah's comely appearance and wardrobe drives her to start an indignant whisper campaign against the new woman who all the other Hebrew women are fascinated by. Miriam constantly criticizes Zipporah's dark skin and calls her the "Black Mrs. Pharaoh" which suggests that the regime of liberation has been a delusion and there has only been a transition of absolute power over the between the Egyptian Pharaoh to Moses. The ultimate added insult to injury here is that another woman who has no prominent voice or discernible ability to work within Miriam's community has been placed above her in rank.

Not only is Miriam the aged spinster with no husband or children, but her involvement in state affairs isolates her further from other women. Ultimately, her lonely life spent pining after what she does not have undermines her contribution to the liberation campaign, making her come off as pitiable and desperate to everyone, especially Moses.

Wishful Thinking

Royalty is a wonderful thing. It sure is a fine happening. It ought to be so that everybody that wanted to could be a queen.

—Miriam

When you a queen
whether you sittin' down for a meal,
or goin' to bathe in the Nile,
somebody's always there
to make sure you taken
care of.

I heard it takes a royal woman
all day an' all night
to get ready just for showin' up
to see the Pharaoh pass by.

She got somebody
to comb an' plait her wig
an' place the scarabs in it,
someone else to hold her hands
for balance while she stands
over a pit of incense smoke
to make sure all her lady parts
stay smellin' nice.

An' it's three people's job
to make sure it look like
ain't a single hair growin'
anywhere on her body,
three more to mix
an' apply the oils
that make her skin soft
so it glows like dawn
peekin' out through the night.

That don't even count
the folks who apply the kohl on her eyes
an' rouge her lips and cheeks
or the ones that put her garments
an' all them glitterin' rings on.
But what I like best
is the fact that when you a queen,
you ain't never alone.
Not like me.
Not like this.

Eventually, Miriam becomes something of an easy target for Moses. The next two poems expand on this premise. Both of these poems take place after a demonstration of mystical power following an argument with Moses. Miriam is cursed as a leper and exiled from the camp and labeled unclean for seven days. After her exile she doesn't speak much anymore, "All the rest of her days, Miriam was very silent. Whole days passed by at times in which she never uttered a word. Those seven days outside the camp seemed to put a veil between her and the world which never lifted," (Hurston, 301). We know from Hurston that Miriam has spent most of her life as a prophetess in her community well before Moses arrives. But Moses dismisses her primarily because she is a single woman who seems to constantly speak outside of what he perceives as her place.

In "The Trouble with Miriam," Miriam speaks from exile following the altercation with Moses which begins with her criticizing his wife or whom she calls "that strange woman in your tent" (297). This poem elaborates on Miriam's frustration with Moses's leadership and reluctance to include her in important decisions. She admits that leadership involves a lot of tolerating people who think they know better than you as well as having to portray the semblance of leadership even when you don't always know what you're doing. This goes back to the idea of leadership being a method of storytelling or compelling people to believe in a narrative that they *want* to believe in.

In the epigraph of "What Women Do," Moses has taken Miriam's status as a prophetess away, her credibility in her community, and her health in order to assert his superiority. At this moment, after months of silence following her exile, when she

finally asks Moses if she's been punished enough, her appearance has become haggard and her demeanor cowed, and she has asked his permission to die. This poem is an internal monologue that explores how Miriam perceives that a woman will offer the very best parts of herself based on a man's impulse but in the end, what a man wants is never what a woman is prepared to give up.

The Trouble with Miriam

The trouble with you is that nobody ever married you. And when a woman ain't got no man to look after, she takes on the world in place of the man she missed.
—Moses

Each morning,
my body is a stranger.

Before,
I thought I knew my heart
an' its distance from the mind.

Thought I knew what it meant to wake,
content myself to growin' old.

(Ain't these the hands and feet of a slave?
Ain't they the hands and feet of my mother
and hers and hers?)

Now, I'm old with the hands and feet
of a slave *an'* a leper.

It's painful, this whitenin'
an' sloughin' off of skin.

Just when I thought I'd learned every ache
these limbs had to offer, here I am,
findin' I'm not so old I cain't learn
somethin' new about how the body
rearranges itself—how flesh
will worry itself over a wound,
hasten to patch up what's been broken
open.

Like kinship.

Like power.
Like love.

It's funny.

I usedta be the one doin' the castin' out
but for a lot more cause than somebody
runnin' they mouth.

When you lead a people,
you got to get used to dissent.

When you on top, literally
everybody an' they mama thinks
they can do a better job than you.

You learn to play the part of a leader
to head off confrontation before it begins.

You dress a certain way
even if you cain't always afford it.

You speak an' carry yourself
with authority even if you got none
or what you got ain't the real deal.

If you can sell it,
chile,
they'll buy it.

I thought he understood this—
what it means to make it up
as you go along an' call it divine.

But he must be new-leaf new to say
I do what I do 'cause I ain't got no man?

I don't mean no harm,
but what man alive could possibly bear
to have his wife's name
in the mouths of other people
more 'n his own?

What man in all of Goshen is there
that I could be content to care for
when in my own way,

I've already cared for all
the men of Goshen an' they women
an' chil'ren too long before he come along
with that staff and some hoodoo?

What's to miss when you know there is room
enough in the heart to harbor a world?

But then, Mama Jochebed always did say
the heart is the worst thing
to ever happen to the mind.

What Women Do

*...you locked me up inside myself and left me to wait on your hour. Moses, ain't I done
punished enough?*

—Miriam

We say, Here, take this.
Take this _____. Line it
with scriptures
an' testimonies.
Whatever points to good
magic an' you.

We say, Here, take this, too.
Take my _____. Fill it up
with sparrow bones an' aloe leaves,
antler tips, an' prism shards.
Anythin' about you that's been unmade,
in this part right here,
will be made new.

We say, Here, I ain't used this
in a very long time—I don't even
know how it works anymore.
Go 'head, rip open the seams.
Let's see what it looks like inside out.

We say, Stretch this.
We say, Tighten that.
We say, You're squeezin' too hard.
We say, Don't ever let go.
We say, I don't need much—take this.
An' this _____. An' this _____.

But you don't want any of *those* things.

What you want most,
more than the geode of us,
more than the starlit gospel of us,
more than the low-hangin' plum of us,
more than anythin' we might give
away for free, is whatever we mean
when we say, But not this.

You cain't ever, ever,
take this from me.

Please, don't take this _____ away.

By the novel's end, Miriam and Aaron are overwhelmed and exasperated with Moses's drive to serve as sole leader of Goshen. Their journey began more democratically where Miriam and Aaron, allegedly Moses's siblings, were to share power. This poem takes place between Miriam and Aaron as they consider what has unraveled of their previous roles before the exodus from Egypt. To that end, I imply that the unnamed thing they are watching die in the poem is essentially dismantled power.

Inevitably, after Miriam is buried, Moses literally strips Aaron of his robes and kills him on the side of a mountain because he is not fit to serve Israel as high priest any longer. Moses erects tombs for both Miriam and Aaron respectively, but the sacrifice was not just removing their power but their lives, the lingering and inconvenient vestiges of an outdated regime, in an attempt to bring the Hebrews to the promised land. This poem takes place not long before their deaths where they consider what's happened to their previous prominence.

What She Never Got Around to Asking Aaron

The thing lies in the dirt—
there—
writhing between them.

On either side of the path,
instead of one another,
they watch it twist and turn
in futile quiet as it loosens its grip.

It's lost most of its ribcage now.
All of its spine,
to say nothing of the heart.

It makes the most awful
sounds—does not belong
to anything human anymore.

Certainly not to them.

They pretend every breath
between them is not a small
blade snagged in what's left
of its skin.

They pretend not to time
its ebbing pulse with their eyes.

Like a Rose of Jericho plant
curling in on itself,
the thing gives up the last
of its color as they pass a flask
remarking on how long it's taken
to finally get to this point.

He's got to go,
so he doesn't wait
to see the end.

She sticks around.
For closure.
For old time's sake.

By the time it's over,
the flesh has split and cracked—
reveals dull, yellowing organs
already dissolving into ash.

She sweeps what's left
with a bare foot out of the way
to finish petrifying beneath
a nearby shrub,
wonders aloud although
no one's left to hear,

*When something dies,
why does it still move?*

Considering their tumultuous relationship, Moses deals with Miriam's death graciously. Hurston details how Moses calls a halt of the procession of the Hebrews in the wilderness for thirty days to mourn "a patriot" (Hurston, 323). Ironically, it is only after her death that Moses can afford to acknowledge her contribution to the emancipation of Israel. Moses gives Miriam a great eulogy "and orders a tomb of rocks be piled up over her grave" (ibid). But what we never see is the private moment where Miriam actually lays down to die. She asks Moses for permission to die and the next moment, the people find her body. "Miriam, Martyr of the Mountain," simulates a praisesong to the mountain where she will be buried. While Moses is left to contemplate her life after she dies, I wanted to illustrate Miriam's underlying hope that although she wouldn't make it to the promised land with the rest of her people, her story would not be forgotten. For Miriam, emancipation meant at times she couldn't tell the difference between remaining a slave in Egypt or following Moses. I wanted to provide space where Miriam is afforded a moment all to herself where she isn't obliged to consider the fate of her people. And in contemplating her surroundings and the mountain, in her final moments before death, she reclaims her voice lost along the way to someone else's version of liberation.

Miriam, Martyr of the Mountain

He wondered if she had not been born...if the Exodus would have taken place at all...She needed a big tomb so the generations that come after would know her and remember.
—Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*

O, mountain,
I am your daughter.

Once, before I knew you,

I mistook you
for a low-hangin' thunderhead.

Or thought maybe
you was a great sphinx
that had lost its way,
blinded by the sun.

O, mountain,
 stay—
be my whole horizon.

Let me never open
my eyes an' see a thing
but your grace.

You the missin'
rib of the Earth.

You the climax
of a god's birth.

You a tomb
for burnt-out stars.

O, mountain,
I wish one day
to be buried
in your third eye.

Give me somethin'
of yourself:
your posture,
your grip,
your innermost
jewel-toned seam,
so that I too, will endure.

CHAPTER TWO

Learn & Run:

Utopia in Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn*

Bodies are maps of power and identity

—Donna Haraway, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*

I don't like most utopia stories. I don't believe them for a moment. It seems inevitable that my utopia would be someone else's hell

—Octavia Butler, *Bloodchild*

Science fiction is cluttered with narratives about superhumans, transhumans, androids, automatons, cyborgs, and all manner of hybrid in-between. As technology progresses, writers and audiences maintain an obsession with the ultimate destination of humanity. These stories seek answers to these questions: What characteristics will we ultimately give up in terms of morals, psychology, and physicality, that we currently possess at this stage of human evolution? Can we still be classified as human if our species continues tinkering with its physiology? How do we adapt to the notion of what we may become? To save even a shred of our humanity, *should* we adapt to something that would make us not entirely human? Or do we go out in a ball of flames as we are? At the core of all these questions is quite simply: What makes humans so—*human*? And tangentially related, what contemporary fixtures of race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic stratification will follow us into the future? Afrofuturist works seek to explore answers to the latter.

The term, “Afrofuturism,” a sub-genre of Afrospeculative literature, was coined by, Mark Dery, in his essay “Black to the Future” (1994), where he posits: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have

subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” Dery, who is Anglo, defines Afrofuturism as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture—and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” to explore how people of color navigate life in a technologically progressive environment” (136). Dery argues in the second half of his definition, Afrofuturism is not only a subgenre of science fiction. Instead, it is a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media share an interest in imagining the future of Black people based on their respective experiences across the diaspora. Visual artist, Sanford Biggers, defines Afrofuturism as, “a way of re-contextualizing and assessing history and imagining the future of the African Diaspora via science, science fiction, technology, sound, architecture, the visual and culinary arts and other more nimble and interpretive modes of research and understanding” (Black Renaissance). In her book, *Afrofuturism*, Ytasha Womack describes the mode as progressive:

Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magical realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (Womack, 9).

What also separates science fiction from the sub-genre of Afrofuturism, particularly in works by women novelists, are the counter-narratives to what we

typically see from dominant story arcs revolving around Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" formula: an "average Joe" comes into sudden power, goes through great lengths to preserve humanity, saves the girl, and introduces a new order. Writer and critic, Joanna Russ, refers to mainstream sci fi as "Intergalactic Suburbia" with an emphasis on privilege and patriarchy, "Both men and women in our culture conceive the culture from a single point of view—the male (Russ, 81). No matter how alien the environment, characters operate from a primarily Anglo, male, heteronormative stance. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, second-wave feminists and the Black Power movement informed more inclusivity with regard to what Patricia Melzer calls formerly taboo subjects, "depictions of sexuality, violence, and race relations" that accompanied "a growing appreciation of the 'soft' sciences" which had previously been considered ineffective compared to traditional "hard" sciences such as chemistry and physics (Melzer, 5-6). She claims feminist writers like Octavia E. Butler irreversibly shaped and ignited the genre through criticisms of gender, race, and class in the 1970s, and then throughout the 1980s began to incorporate postmodern literary elements in terms of linguistics and "disrupted narrative structures" (7).

Afrofuturist narratives having to do with post-apocalyptic conditions consider worst case scenarios of "what next?" Particularly where race dynamics are concerned, novelists such as Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, and Tananarive Due, speculate assess possible futures through the lens of past and present systemic struggles. Bio-ethics, socioeconomic stratification, and technological advances are also fair game in these narratives and the most successful of these convincingly

predict outcomes on Earth or among the stars. Common themes in these works can include propaganda used to control citizens, restricted independence, exaggerated fear of the unknown, conforming to sometimes literal uniform expectations represented by a one-dimensional figurehead, and communal living. These narratives also reveal the sordid underbelly of utopias set against the backdrop of post-apocalyptic conditions in the aftermath of natural disaster, plague or pandemic, nuclear war, or a ruined Earth. Situated in the remnants of civilization where technology may be scattered and survivors are forced to resort to a more agrarian existence, pre-catastrophic living is often mythologized or idealized, and in some cases altogether forgotten or intentionally erased.

Octavia E. Butler's fiction constantly attempts to resolve the "What next?" question, and her novel, *Dawn* (1987), the first in the *Xenogenesis* series proposes a particularly troubling answer. *Dawn* opens with a Black woman, Lilith Ayapo, being "Awakened" from sleep-stasis two-hundred, fifty years after the Earth population almost destroys itself. An alien species, the Oankali, intercept a nuclear war and rescue a small population of humans in order to save humanity. Their reasoning is two-fold: 1) They don't want to waste the potential of a promising life-form by Oankali standards, and 2) They would like to gauge whether humans might make compatible partners in a genetic exchange. At the novel's beginning, the Oankali have brought everyone who's left on Earth aboard a living spaceship to Awaken other humans and allow them to return to a newly evolved Earth along with a small population of Oankali. The Oankali choose Lilith as a parent-figure to wake other

humans from stasis and prepare them for their adaptation to their rebooted planet, but also for the genetic exchange with an alien species.

The Oankali, bipedal beings that resemble sea-creatures, are gene traders, quite literally, by nature. The Oankali can't *not* trade. Genetic engineering is not only their art, but an innate component of their evolution around which all other aspects of their culture revolve. With each generation of adaptation to other life-forms, the Oankali not only embrace difference, they harvest it. They manipulate organic matter the way humans manipulate technology, and identify a mismatched pair of genetic traits in humans. The Oankali determine that humans are prone to self-destruction because they are intelligent *and* hierarchical. While the two traits are useful individually, the latter is in control thereby manifesting in the destruction of most of the Earth and its population. In a 1986 interview with Frances M. Beal about the themes in her work, Butler states, "Hierarchical behavior is definitely inborn and intelligence is something new that we've come up with...I happen to think that the combination is lethal" (Beal, 17).

The Oankali are convinced that as long as those two characteristics co-exist, the humans will continue to destroy one another. In order to discourage a resurgence of violent human tendencies, the Oankali go through great lengths to eradicate any previous evidence of humanity on Earth which they have coaxed over the course of early three-hundred years to re-evolve complete with brand new plants and wildlife and evolutionary patterns. Despite the fact that the Oankali consider themselves a society governed by consensus, in an overt display of dominance, they destroy any remaining human landmarks and structures and withhold cultural, scientific, and

technological texts and documents, as well as access to any technology (including even writing utensils and paper at first) apart from simple materials that humans may fashion into tools and use while resettling on Earth beginning in the Amazon.

The Oankali do not stop with altering the environment. It is what humans have to offer at a cellular level that seizes their attention. The Oankali keep their captive humans alive and slow the aging process almost to a halt in order to analyze their physical and psychological attributes. They experiment with and clone human DNA to learn what could be useful in a genetic exchange. For instance, the first Oankali that Lilith meets, Jdhaya, informs her that at one point while in stasis, she was operated upon to remove a crop of cancerous cells. Lilith is shocked by the fact that the Oankali consider cancer a “gift” and use it to make positive genetic modifications.

Eventually, after being indoctrinated to the Oankali way of life, Lilith is given to an Oankali family (a unit of three: a male, a female, and an ooloi—an Oankali which is gender neutral and responsible for reproduction and genetic engineering). She is paired with an adolescent ooloi, Nikanj, who is tasked with teaching Lilith as much as it can about not only the Oankali but how to eventually survive on Earth.⁶ Soon, Lilith is set up as a sort of overseer of a group of forty humans and is charged with Awakening and preparing them to go back to Earth. The Oankali genetically enhance Lilith for these purposes which include an eidetic memory and physical prowess. The ooloi alters her skin so she produces a substance that will allow her to control the ship-as-organism like the Oankali might. Lilith could now be considered only mostly

⁶ The ooloi are referred to by the gender neutral: “it.”

human. Because she is altered at even the neurological level to defend herself and engage in sexual stimulation and reproduction with aliens, it is the price Lilith pays for garnering certain privileges and the Oankali's trust. Because of the enhancements and favored status, the other Awakened humans question her humanity to the point where her life is threatened by frequent attacks. Gregory Jerome Hampton observes, "Humanity has failed to the point of near extinction and must redefine itself if it is to survive. Lilith's roles as matriarch and messenger force her into the position of a social pariah filled with guilt and self-loathing. Thus, a gift from the gods comes with a heavy price that must be paid by the strongest and most malleable" (Hampton, 218).

By definition, Lilith operates in the novel as a "transhuman," if reluctantly so. Transhumanism, a very contemporary concern, embodies the vision of futurologist theories that hindrances such as aging will be eliminated and physical and mental prowess enhanced through the advances of technology and biology. Transhumanism is a concentrated period where humanity is expected to begin surpassing itself physiologically and psychologically and serves as a significant landmark on the road to the evolutionary age of the "posthuman." The transhuman enthusiast pursues objectives of physical and mental development through technology akin to the devotion spiritualists invest in beliefs regarding an afterlife. The subject of much conversation and contention among scientists, philosophers, and spiritual leaders, the concept of transhumanism, or the concept of adapting body and mind to the promise of the of the future, is a rich conversation. James Hughes states, "Transhumanism has much in common with spiritual aspirations to transcend animal nature for deathlessness, superhuman abilities, and superior insight, though

transhumanists pursue these goals through technology rather than (or at least not solely) through spiritual exercises” (Hughes, 4).

Sounding almost too good to be true, Ed Regis observes the extremes of transhumanist philosophy as borderline cultish doctrine which he calls *f'in-de-siècle* hubristic mania, “in its pursuit of the ‘Omega Point,’ the point at which we will finally have ...Done It All...life will have gained control of all matter and forces not only in a single universe, but in all universes whose existence is logically possible” (Regis, 8). On much more a practical level, however, Ramez Naam defines the immediately applicable benefits of transhumanism as an effort to understand and subsequently heal our minds and bodies thereby gaining the power to improve them, “By unraveling how our minds and bodies function, biotechnology could give us the power to sculpt any aspect of ourselves—how we think, how we feel, how we look, how we communicate with one another” (Naam, 6).

While transhumanism in general can sound at its best as alluring as the metahumans of Marvel’s universe, and at worst, like the horrific stuff novels like *Frankenstein* or *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and films such as *The Matrix* or *Splice* are based on, even more centralized aspects of transhumanist beliefs have attracted the attention of bioethicists who resist instigated human evolution. Decried to the point of being labeled, “a crime against humanity,” by bioethicist George Annas who served on The President’s Council on Bioethics in 2000 created by George W. Bush, he argues:

“...that slowing human aging would stagnate society as the old cling stubbornly to power; That instant performance enhancers would reduce human drive and hard work; That technologies for sculpting the human mind would threaten our sense of identity; That enhancement techniques

might widen the gap between rich and poor; That the safety of these techniques cannot be assured; and that they could be used by the powerful to coerce or control the weak” (Naam, 7).

While most transhumanists argue that the area between healing and improvements are blurred and cannot be dictated, in his book, *Our Posthuman Future*, Francis Fukuyama shares Annas’s reservations in that the problems with transhumanism revolve around an imbalance of power, and suggests drawing “a red line” to distinguish between therapy and enhancement, directing research towards the former and restricting the latter, “The original purpose of medicine is, after all, to heal the sick, not to turn healthy people into gods...This general principle would allow us to use biotechnologies to, for example, cure genetic diseases like Huntington’s chorea or cystic fibrosis, but not to make our children more intelligent or taller” (Fukuyama, 206-207). Fukuyama goes on to cite Foucault who maintains that what society has previously viewed as pathological (homosexuality or dwarfism, for example) is a socially constructed phenomenon “in which deviation from some presumed norm is stigmatized” (ibid). To Fukuyama, attempting to use technology to enhance humans cosmetically, therefore, is biologically unnecessary. Naam, however, counters Fukuyama maintaining that this is essentially a debate over human freedoms. Living in a democratic society means each man and woman should determine decisions about altering their own minds and bodies. Furthermore, medical enhancements such as transfusions, vaccinations, and even birth control, have all at one point been called unnatural or immoral. Humans have adapted these manifestations of control over our bodies and subsequently our minds into our lives for the sake of betterment and useful progression (11).

The concept of transhumanism is not limited to physical achievement. Science fiction often interrogates what could happen next as result of the psychological evolution and subsequent social re-stratification of humans in the future. The allure of a future where there is no war, poverty, or social inequality on Earth continues to motivate the narratives of many sci-fi writers. At its core, a utopia is founded upon ideas that are intended to instill positive social changes—reactions to problems within a given flawed system. Thomas More’s original characterization in his work, *Utopia* (1516), spawned an entirely new genre of literature and a spin-off category, the dystopia, or an inverted utopia. “Utopia” in Greek means either “no place” or “good place,” and the fluidity of this definition is reflected in More’s narrative through plot developments that include an island where there is no poverty, shortened work days, and hardly any war. In exchange for these perks, slavery, government restricted travel, and uniforms are the price citizens of More’s *Utopia* pay. In general, a utopia is considered an idealistic concept, not grounded in reality, and tends to lend itself towards notions of a kind of waking afterlife, heaven on earth, or promised land setting. In other words, utopia is a suggested ideal that a civilization may achieve. A utopia is supposed to represent the pinnacle of human evolution—where mind and body at last correlate.

Departing from More, Fredric Jameson’s definition broadens the scope of how utopia, of which there are at least two basic varieties, may be interpreted. The first is the “utopia program” which is systemic, “and will include revolutionary political practice, when it aims at founding a whole new society” (Jameson 3). The other line of variety is less fixed in that it is the “utopian impulse,” “more obscure and more

various...liberal reforms and commercial pipe dreams, the deceptive yet tempting swindles of the here and now, where utopia serves as the mere lure and bait for ideology..." (ibid). Both utopian program and impulse depend on elements of materialism and in some cases immortality (if not literal, then ideological). Utopian elements are woven into even everyday products which Jameson states "harbor muted promises of a transfigured body" (6). The dangers, for Jameson, in utopian politics lie within the narcissistic impulses of a given collective, and that the notion of utopia can even go so far as to make an individual more aware of their mental and ideological imprisonment.

Ruth Livas describes Mannheim's four classifications of utopic idealization as chiliasm, liberal-humanitarian, conservative, and socialist-communist. Utopias and dystopias in literature tend to be concerned with investigating the dynamics of the latter two types which come about as a response to the liberal-humanitarian utopia as the type that places an emphasis on reason and free will (Livas, 84). Livas observes that the conservative model of utopia is oriented around protecting the social position of the dominant class and "is dedicated to re-enacting the past and preserving tradition. Socialist-communist utopias are primarily concerned with the collapse of capitalism and adjusting reality "to what is possible, and 'corrects itself' against the present" (86). Butler seems preoccupied with highlighting the redistribution of power amid a promisingly utopic setting—one that is somehow at once self-correcting, but also seeks to preserve the dominance of the Oankali. Like Hurston, Butler draws upon past failed attempts of social stratification to predict what will happen to humans in the future when the ideology of someone else's promised land

or utopia is imposed on them. As opposed to a dystopian novel, *Dawn* is a prime example of a counter-utopia. Peter Y. Paik notes that the power of science fiction is that, “We can conceive of our current situation in a dynamic manner through hypothetical transformations”, in other words not the abolition of but the redistribution of oppression (Paik 26).

Butler’s depiction of the Oankali counter-utopia does not only envision a future scenario, but provides us with an echo of the past for Blacks who have historically been coerced *en masse* into absorbing an oppressive ideology. Butler seems to agree that the universal relationship between the dominators and the dominated is cyclical. This ideological intersection of alien and human, where the aliens possess the upper-hand and want to use human bodies to breed sounds historically all too familiar. However, Lilith adapts to their counter-narrative because some of what the Oankali offer sounds like utopia—a sorely needed diversion from the rest of human history which ultimately led to the Earth’s destruction. In contrast to hierarchal humanity, the Oankali are depicted as being communal or quasi-tribal with no formal government—they are classless. Additionally, the Oankali revere life whereas humanity is innately destructive, and they embrace sexual permissiveness insofar as it contributes to the genetic exchange. So for every letdown there might be in terms of being dominated, Butler offers a counterexample where humans may be better off adapting in the long run. But at what cost? The Oankali deprive humans of the choice to have their bodies used not for only genetic enhancements but also extend these enhancements to the notion of crossbreeding. While they offer humans the option not to cross-breed, they also force people back into stasis or sterilize those

who resist the exchange so eventually no pure humans will be left. Additionally, the Oankali do not believe in consent as they can read the so-called physiological needs of other lifeforms in genetic code. Thus, the aforementioned gift of transhumanism from the Oankali assigns Lilith with a distinctive sense of agency.

Agency for the Black female body is hard to come by because of her peculiar status as a subperson. Charles Mills describes a subperson as not an inanimate object which has zero moral status, not a nonhuman animal which is still outside of a moral community, but an adult human who is not considered fully a person. Mills defines a subperson in Aristotelian terms as “a living tool, property with a whose moral status was tugged in different directions by dehumanizing requirements of slavery” (Mills, 7). Descendants of slaves still embody the vestiges of slavery, and so contradictions between law and customs are unavoidable in that sense creating the climate for legal and social tensions between the oppressed and their oppressors, particularly since the institution of slavery has become embedded unconsciously as normative for so many members of both parties for an indefinite amount of time, “A relationship to the world that is founded on racial privilege becomes simply the relationship to the world” (10). Regardless of how they might view their own means of reproduction, the Oankali should still be viewed as the oppressor in this relationship because of the colonial characteristics as expressed by Fanon who argues that colonialism, “turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (Fanon, 210). When we consider that Lilith is a Black woman, the correlation between her role as an overseer set above other humans charged with the task to “Awaken” and acclimate them to the Oankali insistence of genetic exchange is undoubtedly a move

of a dominant group. In Donna Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, she surmises, "Women of color' are the preferred labor force for the science-based industries, the real women for whom the worldwide sexual market, labor market, and politics of reproduction kaleidoscope into daily life" (Haraway, 93).

Butler transposes the oppressive master/slave dynamic through human interactions with the Oankali. In Lilith's case, privilege is designated primarily via her species, and she becomes the liaison and later the enforcer of this dynamic. Even though Oankali dominance over Awakened humans and the fate of humanity appears benign, it is unquestionably absolute. Privilege is bestowed only via human acquiescence. Paradoxically, Lilith is keenly aware of her subperson status despite the privilege she ascertains as a result of her consent to Oankali practices. She agrees to their terms insofar as she can further understand their design and maybe a way to counteract it. In the later *Xenogenesis* novels, we learn later that Lilith does surrender fully to the Oankali requirements for remaining on Earth, however, in the case of *Dawn*, she has not yet given up hope that the remnants of her humanity may still find a loophole. The one factor Butler plants in this novel that may provide Lilith and her cohort with some wiggle room to negotiate their liberation, is the fact that the Oankali cannot anticipate the results of their genetic trade with humans; therefore, if a Oankali-human pairing cannot be predicted in this new paradigm, because of the influence of self-destructive human tendencies at the cellular level, what is to stop their progeny from recreating the terms of their previous demise?

Butler continues to draw parallels between race and gender literature and mythology to illustrate the dynamic of oppressor/oppressed between humans and

the Oankali, using Lilith as the fulcrum. First, the hard-won and complicated vestiges of privilege Lilith experiences could be compared to the 19th century “tragic mulatta” motif in Black American literature.⁷ When she is periodically Awakened, Lilith, who we know has been trained as an anthropologist, is kept against her will in a small room, sometimes naked, sometimes without anywhere to use the bathroom, and examined off and on for two-hundred, fifty years until the Oankali are satisfied that she is the correct choice for their devices. She is put through torturous physical and mental trials and the process calls to mind the slaves who endured the rigorous and dehumanizing selection process upon the auction block. And while Lilith has not necessarily been abandoned in the traditional sense, there is no maternal figure or other family members for her to rely on, her husband and son having been killed before the nuclear war. In the first half of the novel, Lilith is primarily left on her own to make the most out of her capture and to try and navigate Oankali culture and the conflict over the future ownership of her body. There are also additional physical ramifications of Lilith’s involvement with the Oankali. We could view Lilith as a “tragic mulatta” in that her DNA is manipulated by the Oankali. After having minor

⁷ Eva Allegra Raimon’s definition of traits of the tragic mulatta are useful here: “For all its problematic formal and narrative significations, the motif of the mixed-race female slave constitutes a central and indispensable element of antislavery reform literature...The typical plot summary of such writings involves the story of an educated light-skinned heroine whose white benefactor...dies, leaving her to the auction block and/or the sexual designs of a malevolent creditor. The protagonist, sheltered from the outside world, is driven to desperation by her predicament and perhaps to an early death...One characteristic of the “overplot” of such works is that the heroine is somehow abandoned. Either she is an orphan outright or she “only thinks herself to be one, or has by necessity been separated from her parents for an indefinite time.” To the standard plot design of women’s fiction is thus added the overlay of slavery, miscegenation, and the prevailing crisis over national identity, making the figure the perfect emblem for exploring racial hybridity amid a newly “motherless” and embattled body politic” (Raimon).

enhancements throughout the novel, pushing her further and further away from being classified as strictly human, Lilith is ultimately impregnated with both the human DNA of her human lover and Oankali DNA. Thus, this can be considered a tragic compromise in that Lilith, now transhuman, is forced into an irreversible turn of events.

Secondly, Lilith is not only a woman of color with a complexion that brings to mind soil, loam, something primed to be implanted with Oankali seed, but she could also be compared to the Hebrew legend of Lilith, the alleged first woman, the original femme fatale, who was created, not from Adam's rib, but also from clay and refused to "lie under him." Michelle Osherow reminds us:

"According to Jewish legend...the first woman was named Lilith. She was created with Adam, and considered herself his equal. Adam disagreed. Lilith, valuing independence above male companionship, flew away from Adam and Eden. Legend tells us that she subsequently joined forces with Satan and gave birth to armies of devil children. Her punishment for abandoning her first mate is that one hundred of her children will die each day" (Osherow, 70).

In terms of Butler's novel, Osherow observes that Butler's narrative is "revisionist mythmaking" and "combines elements of history and legend, culminating in a celebration of a hitherto feared and ephemeral female figure" (75). Let us first consider the setting of *Dawn*. The Oankali ship, while not the Eden humans are familiar with, is unique in that it functions completely organically (the Oankali manipulate organic matter the way humans manipulate technology). The ship is vast encompassing whole towns of Oankali and more than enough room to store any remaining humans and even simulate an Earth rainforest. Lilith must learn how to navigate around the ship, its foreign flora and fauna, and among its inhabitants.

Osherow argues that Butler's Lilith resembles the "she-devil" Lilith. Innately resistant, curious, and in places downright bold, she is gifted with special powers and when confronted by human males, resists rape and other manifestations of overt male hostility. It is significant to note here the appearance of the Oankali who resemble bipedal sea creatures with delicate and potentially lethal sensory organs instead of ears, eyes, and so on, make Butler's Lilith appear to be even more of a sell-out to her human counterparts. While she has adjusted to the appearance of the Oankali, Lilith is also impregnated with what could be called "devil's spawn" and admits that her child, "won't be human...it will be a thing. A monster" (Butler, 262). Eventually, Lilith loses her lover, Joseph in an act of violence at the hands of another human male, and left alone again, she is sentenced to a kind of exile from her human counterparts who refuse to trust her, particularly the males whose sentiments of manhood are constantly threatened by Lilith's dominance. While stronger and more knowledgeable about Oankali customs than any other human she personally "Awakens" aboard the Oankali vessel, Lilith's alienation from other humans ultimately stems from her lack of true authority, "Her survival depends upon compliance, for it is through her biological potential for motherhood that Lilith maintains her place within the Oankali order" (Osherow, 77).

Lilith is also constantly aware of the eminence of death. Her fight or flight impulses save her life on more than occasion. She pre-meditatively assesses the danger in waking up a series of testosterone-driven human males and asks her ooloi, Nikanj to enhance her strength and agility so she might protect herself. Eventually, one of the Awakened human men under Lilith's supervision attempts to rape a

recently Awakened woman. When Lilith intervenes, she is attacked by three men. As she instinctively defends herself, she breaks one man's arm and snaps another's head back leaving him unconscious before he hits the floor, "Lilith looked at each of Peter's people, daring them to attack, almost wanting them to attack...she had never come closer to losing control, killing people" (Butler, 178). Her sentiments in this scene could be considered diabolical, but on a less overt level, five days after this scene, Lilith realizes the humans' meal is drugged and does nothing to warn them, except for her lover, Joseph, of the impending presence of the ooloi who arrive to claim human mates. Even though she realizes the impending consequences of the Oankali presence and the horrific implications of the humans finally being confronted with an alien lifeform, Lilith essentially lets events unfold as they will chalking up the experience to inevitability.

In keeping with the concept established in 1969 by Carol Hanisch that, "the personal is political," Donna Haraway asserts that Butler is not necessarily interested in claiming one extreme of either sameness or difference between human and alien lifeforms, but where the two intersect, "Drawing on the resources of black and women's histories and liberatory movements, Butler has been consumed with an interrogation into the boundaries of what counts as human and into the limits of the concept and practices of claiming 'property in the self' as the ground of 'human' individuality and selfhood" (Haraway, 226). Similarly, Cathy Peppers argues "...the Oankali genetic engineers are neither simply "dispensable" aids to human evolution nor "deadliest enemies"; the dialogue between these two versions is never neatly resolved" (Peppers, 54). What the Oankali perceive themselves as doing cannot be

compared with human standards anyway, which, again, are steeped in a hierarchical worldview. Genetic engineering for the Oankali is not meant to be hierarchical, but is intense, personal, can be pleasurable to the point of erotic, “the Oankali seem to be engaged in biophilic, not eugenic, uses of technology” (55).

It is with this assertion in mind I turn now towards Lilith’s role in one of the most controversial aspects of *Dawn*: sexual liaisons between humans and Oankali. Lilith’s first interaction with an adult human male occurs after she has been accepted by and indoctrinated into an Oankali family for which she will eventually provide hybrid offspring. Lilith becomes obsessed with seeking out human companionship and eventually she is introduced to a man in another Oankali town. Paul Titus, has, for the most part, grown up among the Oankali, having been Awakened during adolescence. He has been granted special privileges as a result of the measure of trust the Oankali place in him. Able to manipulate the ship like a right proper alien, he shows off for Lilith as they engage in fairly neutral banter about their status among the Oankali. The conversation takes a sour turn when Paul attempts to seduce Lilith who resists his advances. Eventually, Paul tries to rape Lilith and then beats her to the point of unconsciousness angered that he has been deprived of intercourse—or an opportunity to bond—with a human female. Later, Lilith conjectures from this experience the ramifications of humans not being allowed to interact with one another and the psychological damage the Oankali have inflicted on others by neglecting them human companionship long-term. This scene with Paul Titus in particular is a turning point in the novel as Lilith becomes rather amenable to her Oankali captors afterward and begins to learn in earnest about their culture and how

to be trained according to their plans for humanity to re-settle on a newly evolved Earth. Eventually, rather than return to isolation or sleep-stasis, Lilith instead hopes to teach other humans everything she learns about the Oankali and most importantly, how to retain one's humanity whilst living among them. Her mantra then becomes singularly that of a trickster, of progression, of forward motion, "learn and run" (Butler, 248).

This drive for companionship with another human plays out in later scenarios as a way for humans to re-establish community amongst themselves without the aliens as interlopers. Humans choosing to have sex with humans is a way to feel as though they have maintained a sense of control over their circumstances. Unfortunately, at least for the duration of *Dawn*, this sentimental attachment to community grounded in human intercourse is an illusion. The ooloi, who, again, are neutral in terms of gender, but also responsible for reproduction, neurologically imprint themselves onto their partners programming their synapses to respond to stimulation specific to each family. Upon Awakening the other humans, Lilith gravitates towards a Chinese American man, Joseph, and eventually chooses him as her lover. Lilith's ooloi, Nikanj, reveals itself before the other humans to Joseph because of his status as Lilith's paramour. Eventually, Nikanj alters Joseph similarly to how it altered Lilith and seduces Joseph while he is still under the influence of biochemical stimulation. The ooloi serves as a third partner between mates and must actually lie down in-between partners during the Oankali version of lovemaking (which, like humans, does not always have to do with reproduction). The stimulation

is a complex act taking place primarily in the consciousness of two partners with the ooloi serving as a conduit for pleasure through its sensory arms.

Joseph and the other Awakened human males (all heterosexual) tend to classify the ooloi as male and while persistently resistant to the idea of sex with aliens, cannot deny their physical attraction to the sensations an ooloi is capable of eliciting from its partners. Eventually even the touch of a human partner without the intervention of an ooloi feels unnatural because of the nature of the neurological imprint. Lilith feels somewhat helpless when it comes to Joseph because she internally battles the lack of choice the Oankali give to humans but wants him protected and to remain in allegiance with her. Despite the bio-chemistry Nikanj utilizes in imprinting on Joseph, hearkening back to Harraway's assessment that women of color are those most oft selected to commit science's dirty work, ultimately it is Lilith who aids in Nikanj's seduction of Joseph because of the nature of Joseph's attraction to her. And because of her request for Joseph to be protected, Nikanj in turn enhances him allowing him to accelerate in strength and regenerative capabilities, thereby simulating a transfer of power which, unlike Fukuyama's assertion that transhuman qualities will bestow favor on an elite few, costs Joseph his life at the hands of other humans. The consequences of being chosen by the Oankali as matriarch endure for Lilith. Now considered a social pariah, she becomes consumed with self-loathing as well as the focus of hate from the other humans.

Because of the psychological and social effects of Oankali interference on human genetics, it is not sufficient to assert that the interpretation of humanity represented in *Dawn* is purely a combination of physical distinctions. Humanity

revolves around a socio-emotional space as well. According to Ian Hacking, whose essay on the future of human identity explores the nature of how biosocial groups are forged:

“...almost everyone came to realize that everything is not in our genes...If the genome begins to override culture, then all citizens must rise up and insist that social bonds are what make us people. But we must also understand that knowledge of genetic ‘identities’ will forge social ones, creating new communities of shared recognition based on partial science. That is not intrinsically bad, but it is still a phenomenon that can be grossly abused...Because no matter how much intellectuals, both humanists and scientists may inveigh against it, people can hardly avoid thinking of their genetic inheritance as part of what constitutes them, as part of who they are, as their essence” (Hacking, 92).

To build on this notion of social identity steeped in genetic inheritance—for the Oankali, this is an accumulation of all the lifeforms they’ve absorbed. The Oankali possess a genetic memory and the ooloi are able to read genetic histories. For the Oankali, this is sufficient in terms of remembering one’s origins. According to Haraway however, the concept of social memory is foreign to the Oankali because ultimately, “Their own origins are lost to them through an infinitely long series of mergings and exchanges reaching deep into time and space” (Haraway, 227). This is problematic for humans to conceptualize because communicative memory is not based strictly on genetic exchanges but also socio-cultural exchanges through the exercises of mythmaking and rituals, and therefore considered to be sacred. In fact, this ability to process information beyond genetics, persists in a nebulous yet distinctly human trait which the Oankali can barely describe beyond, “horror and beauty in rare combination” (Butler, 153). The Oankali are irrevocably attracted to

humans even though at first they were repelled by this combination. They literally cannot keep their hands and reproductive parts off of them.

In a brief treatise on the prospect of alien life entitled, “The Monophobic Response” (1995), Butler points out that human beings are not nearly ready for interstellar neighbors. She observes that we are good at creating aliens because we need them—we need to know that we are not alone in the universe. Ironically, we project alienness on to one another here on earth—we can attack what we don’t understand and feel threatened by:

“In our ongoing eagerness to create aliens, we express our need for them, and we express our deep fear of being alone in a universe that cares no more for us than it does for stones or suns or any other fragments of itself. And yet we are unable to get along with those aliens who are closest to us, those aliens who are of course ourselves” (Butler, 416).

By the end of *Dawn*, it is clear that in Butler’s eyes, humans have less to worry about in terms of becoming the test subjects for alien mating rituals and more to worry about becoming the Oankali—they are the ultimate posthuman. Driven by sensory stimulation and gene trading, they care nothing for music, for scholarship, for the art of remembering one’s origins. They are bland and almost culture-less, and it is why they are obsessed with appropriating human complexity. In *Dawn*, Butler answers the question: What makes human so human? It is the value we place on social bonds created through shared memory—this is how we learn from our errors, even if it takes a long time. Entrenched in a utopic setting that resembles the all-too familiar home planet, Lilith comes to understand that when free will is removed, the promised land can be worse than the plantation.

Poetry Preface

The poems revolving around *Dawn* feature Lilith's inner-monologue as she adapts to her new life among the Oankali. Butler focuses primarily on Lilith's outer world as she is obliged to adjust her actions to the Oankali social structure, ship, and her role among the strangers she Awakens. This new setting is quite literally alien to her, but she seeks out what seems familiar in her environment and relationships in order to make sense of how she will survive. I argue that in order to adapt to her new body and the conditions surrounding her favoritism among the Oankali, Lilith would have to interrogate the remnants of her past self in order to negotiate the conditions of her new self. She would feel compelled to use her past experiences in terms of her understanding of oppression as a reference in order to create a new narrative populated with new people amid a new paradigm.

Poems:

The View from Down There

On Love (After the Apocalypse)

Driver

Lilith Speaks

Paradise

Learn & Run

In *Dawn*, not much is said of Lilith's previous life on Earth. Unlike with Hurston in *Moses*, where we are painstakingly led through the events surrounding the Hebrews' dramatic exit from Egypt, Butler places us alongside Lilith in her present. This is useful for a number of reasons in that the audience equipped with limited omniscient narration, making discoveries alongside Lilith. That said, I am interested in the vacuum created by this omission. What is at stake for Lilith moving forward is rooted in what she has left behind and can never retrieve—including the inability to express herself with written language. Not unlike the confines of enslavement in the U.S., the Oankali have forbidden literacy on this plantation-as-ship. What is revealed of Lilith's character is primarily her actions as her transhuman self and I wanted to draw attention to the human traits she would have had to compromise of her identity.

"The View from Down There" is a moment that illustrates the kind of "pillow talk" Lilith would have enjoyed with a lover out in the middle of a field on a starry night. The poem, while focused on a romantic moment, also foreshadows her future intimacy with alien lifeforms. I also want to demonstrate that human beings believe they are attracted to another person of their own volition (physiologically or otherwise). In other words, Lilith's later relationship with Joseph almost feels desperate by comparison—going through the motions of love because there is a small pool of accessible mates. However, the conversation I propose with her lover in this poem, someone who has for all practical purposes freely entered into a relationship with Lilith, is that this person is ultimately more concerned with not feeling alone. This is someone who wants his partner to be able to remind him of the narratives of his home planet. This previous relationship then is no different from what goes on

aboard the Oankali ship with Joseph. In “The View from Down There” and “On Love (After the Apocalypse)” I explore what makes human companionship so sought after? Is it an innate compulsion because humans choose potential partners based on who is available to connect with or because we share experience and therefore common narratives that have shaped our worldview or because part of being human is not knowing why you love whom other than they feel familiar?

The View from Down There

Before the bad thing, a man I loved
once told me how he believed
in all the space operas
and how he was going to show me
until I believed it too.

He was going to take me
to the field behind his home
out past the creek where alligators
sometimes found themselves lost,
past the pines and gargantuan
azalea bushes and the trail
where he said we could bike,
if we were so inclined,
for twenty-five miles straight.

He said at night the field was not
a field at all—had gluttoned itself on stars
which, like the gators, had lost their way.

*I'll take you to that place, he said,
and we're going to lie down in grass
that's no longer grass but spiral-arm galaxies
and listen to the owls sing their hunting songs
and we won't be able to tell what is earth
and what is sky, but we're gonna stretch
out on our backs anyway and look for lights
on sleek, oblong discs that move too fast
to be made of this world.*

And when I wanted to know why
he needed me there at all,

he figured when they take us, you'd want
somebody else along for the ride who knows
something of this world—

Remember Earth, he said,
his eyes turning lavender with lost stars
as they contemplated a future with me
that he would never know,
Man, I miss everybody.

On Love (After the Apocalypse)

She moved over beside Joseph...She took his hand, held it for a moment between her own, wondering if she were about to lose him. Would he stay with her after tonight?

—Octavia Butler, Dawn

How—how?

How does anyone find anyone
else in this world?

How?

We are all so much like this new night

chorus in summer beneath a sateen sky,
where there's more dark than light

and even here, the trees go moonlit
cathedral for crickets and other wild bodies

that pirouette around one another,
clamoring until dawn.

Blind, we strain to hear
something familiar,

something we can recognize
in another's song.

We make so much noise,
it's a marvel

we can even hear ourselves.
How—how?

How do we keep moving this way?
What propels the throat to open so,

voice lifting in the unruly dark
until finally, *finally* we graze

against someone who sounds
most like home?

In “Driver,” I draw upon the role of select slaves appointed to positions of authority on plantations in the antebellum South. Particularly in cases where a master was not physically present, landowners who owned larger plantations would ensure productivity by enlisting the aid of middlemen to maximize crop profitability. Thus, the reputation of the Black driver was often stereotyped as having the personality of a bully—someone who was equipped with special privileges that gave them dominance over their bondsmen and women. If we consider the ooloi, Nikanj, as a kind of overseer—someone assigned to supervise the newly Awakened humans from the Oankali side—it would make sense that the Oankali would also use a member of the human species to corral and quell any potential uprisings and rebellions. Thus, Lilith, in the role of a driver, would be expected to produce progressive results from her charge of humans while also easing their transition into newly populating the rebooted Earth and keeping them cooperative would primarily benefit the Oankali during the genetic exchange.

I was especially compelled by this notion of Lilith’s physical transformation induced by the Oankali after years of living among them. Nikanj alters Lilith’s genetic chemistry in order to protect her against an uprising of humans. Through biochemical changes, it makes her physical potential stronger, her reactions quicker, her ability to heal more rapid, and it grants her *carte blanche* to kill in self-defense. When Joseph seems appalled by the shift, Nikanj explains, “I helped her fulfill her potential...I haven’t added or subtracted anything. I brought out a latent ability. She is as strong and as fast as her nearest animal ancestors were” (Butler, 156). The psychological ramifications of Joseph’s transformation prevent Nikanj from giving him added

strength, most likely because of his gender, and so it is Lilith who is chosen to sacrifice her humanity first in this way. Eventually, Lilith comes to accept the alterations including the removal of cancerous cells from her cervix before she was Awakened. In “Driver” I explore to what extent her survivor’s guilt might linger.

Driver

When she awoke, at ease and only mildly confused, she found herself fully clothed and alone. She lay still, wondering what Nikanj had done to her. Was she changed? How?
—Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn*

I Awake and find my body
is a traitor.

I am glad there are no mirrors
here—I would cover them—
I do not wish to see
the chimera I’ve become.

My voice is not my voice.
I speak with words that were born
among the stars.

These limbs are not my limbs.
Muscles move without my conscious
command or stay still as an animal
hunting in the tall grass.

For the first time,
they have a scent, my captors.
They smell of metal,
of something scorched.

I should be more surprised,
I think, or frightened of them.
Those things would be normal
for anyone else.
I should want to fight.
I should want to flee.

But I am more afraid of the dreams.

In the dreams, I am vast.

Disembodied.
No bones or cells.
No blood or hair.
No tongue.
No pores.
No spine.

And everyone is still alive—
my husband, my son—
and they do not know my touch
I am the gauzy apparition
that lingers with no way
to reach the living
through the film between worlds.

In dreams, they have all forgotten me
and in waking, I have all but forgotten them.

How is it that I can be reborn this way
and still feel dead?

One of the primary elements missing from this proposed future, Butler points out in *Imago*, the third novel in the Xenogenesis trilogy, is music. In “Lilith Speaks,” I elaborate on how missing music is just sort of one aspect of what’s missing in the new paradigm as constructed by the Oankali. It is, perhaps, their most alien quality in many ways because music and other cultural artifacts are how humans communicate memory and share culture. While music is eventually reclaimed after a fashion by both humans and constructs, the Earth has become a more primitive version of itself and the music produced emulates it. What other cultural pastimes might Lilith find conspicuously absent from her present? Memories of her former world would no doubt surface and be mourned. “Lilith Speaks” then is an itemization of the incidental experiences average humans in the U.S. would share. This listing should feel like an archival process, as though she is thinking about each pastime as though examining the contents of a time capsule before burying them.

Lilith Speaks

You know what I never expected to miss?
Not the people.
Not the museums.
Not the parks.
Not New York City in spring.
Not shopping for a pair of coveted heels
or a new fragrance with my shiny new paycheck.

I miss the cinema.
I miss skipping work
to pay to go sit in the dark
at a B-List movie on a Tuesday
during the discount matinee.
I miss cramming exorbitantly priced popcorn,
sweet, plastic candy and a soda down my throat.
I miss how long the previews went on—and on.
I miss corny, low-lit love scenes,
high-blood pressure inducing chases,

slow motion and aerial views
and holding my breath just before
someone dodges a blow or ends
up in a whirlwind kiss.

I miss music—the kind you take risks to.
Loud, rowdy outdoor concerts.
The sort you go to in cut-off shorts
and smoky eyes to swoon with the ache
of an unbridled electric guitar sailing up
and over the ricochet of elaborate
drums on an amphitheater stage.
I miss being penned in by a torrential crowd.
Standing too close to the amps.
A stranger's tongue in my mouth.
And I miss beer.
God, do I miss beer on a sticky night
in summer from a plastic cup.
I miss a lead singer waggling his hips
in too-tight leather and how he cups
the microphone like a lover's jaw.
I miss the sweat-slick of bodies
standing too close,
lighters held aloft in the air.

I miss hotel rooms.
I miss the Holiday Inn.
I miss wondering what strangers
had slept in the pristine sheets
before I checked in.
Did they snore or make love or stay up
all night waiting for their cellphone to ring?
I miss the little stupid soaps that dry you out
and the weak, watery lotion
that couldn't moisturize a crack
in the ground let alone your skin,
but you collect the bottles anyway
because they're complimentary.
Room service on the company dime.
Yes, I'll have the prosecco,
the roasted rosemary chicken breast,
the new potatoes,
the free HBO for a night
with a freshly sanitized towel
wrapped around my head,
and wake-up calls just because,

and pulling clothes from a suitcase.
I miss the house-cleaning knock that always
comes too soon and the bill slid under my door.
I miss being able to turn the heat
all the way up and walk around butt-ass naked
if I choose, because I'm only there for one night.
For once, I can afford to be careless.
No one ever goes to a hotel to stay.

I miss weekend brunch.
I miss holidays off to go to the lake.
I miss sparklers.
And birthday cake.
I miss long, hot showers after a day of gardening.
And groaning over Christmas decorations
showing up too early in stores.
I miss road rage.
And laughing so hard, my cheeks burn.
I miss tiramisu.
And Jameson & ginger ale on the rocks.
I miss staying up all night on the phone
with someone who makes me twirl
my hair around my right index finger.
I miss slowly unwrapping a gift.
And the occasional menthol after a night out.
And turning straight to the comics on Sunday mornings.
And rainy fall days full of grilled cheese and tomato soup
and a black & white classic movie marathon on TV.
And backyard shrimp-boils over a fire-pit
with friends and a home-made screen
during the first away game of the season.
I miss chai lattes made with almond milk.
I miss chewing gum so my ears will pop on a plane.
I miss being a stranger in a strange place.

And I miss not knowing
what will become of us.
I miss being able to forget
what already has.

In contrast to the previous poems, in “Paradise,” I wanted to focus on how the Awakened humans would perceive an unsolicited utopia. Although the planet has been terraformed by the Oankali, they have altered the flora and fauna to match their needs as much as they have the humans. Genetic alteration was drastic in some cases and would make what might have seemed like negligible traits in the past, potentially lethal. When the humans train in the artificial jungle on the Oankali ship, they do so to prepare them for their return to a newly-minted planet that was wild and beautiful and hostile. In a way, this could be viewed as a symbolic and fitting return for the species that almost destroyed the planet in the first place. Lilith has learned as do the other humans that the perception of a virgin wilderness being a kind of heaven-on-Earth is a matter of perspective and also survival. Discovering how to adapt to a new environment means a process of forgetting everything you knew about what brought you there in the first place.

Paradise

She thought she could probably find her way home in the dark, but she did not want to have to. The Oankali had made this jungle too real. Only they were invulnerable to the things whose bite or sting or sharp spines were deadly

—Octavia Butler, *Dawn*

You have to be careful
what you touch here—our keepers
liked that some of our flowers
were attractive but could protect
themselves with thorns.

So, now, you might admire a field
of wildflowers, but to wade through
for a bouquet is perilous—
sort of takes the shine off leaning in
for a whiff of a daisy or poppy
when they’re three feet taller than you
and come with quills.

Animals are different too.

I saw a terrapin with gingko leaves
instead of legs sunning itself
on a log yesterday.

A full-grown buck stepped into my path
the size of a small dog before he darted
back into the underbrush.

It seems like everything has had
the beauty bred out of it.

It's all camouflaged or could kill you.
Or both.

Like us.

The moon is the same, though.
Same old indifferent moon.
Just no one left to write songs about her now.

To return to Butler's essay, "A Monophobic Response," in this final poem, "Learn & Run," I wanted to make a nod to the notion that humans create aliens because we are afraid of being alone in the universe, but we may never be ready for life from other planets as we cannot live next door to one another right here, right now. Lilith is perceptive enough to recognize that the Oankali way of doing things is strikingly similar to how humans have instigated oppression of one another. Perhaps, the Oankali appear initially more benign on the surface to violent warfare, but ultimately, their form of dominance is more permanent. The Oankali systemically override and undermine almost all vestiges of human independence—on the one hand, humans in Butler's future Earth come off as chattel and on the other, as cherished pets. While the Oankali by their nature cannot not trade genes with other lifeforms, perhaps they would not have intervened at all if humans were not on the cusp of destroying themselves in the first place through internalized dominance and hierarchal tendencies? I suspect that is the observation Butler is making in *Dawn*, no matter how monstrous we portray alien invasion—why would we need these speculative aliens in our narratives if we did not fear that we might tear ourselves apart first?

Learn & Run

If we have the problem you think we do, let us work it out as human beings
—Lilith, *Dawn*

Like everyone, I wondered
about who or what would come—
would descend as epidemic
or anarchy to do away
with what remained in us
of our gods.

Yes, I read the same stories
and watched the same programs
and kept an eye on a conspiracy
theory or two about UFO's.

What did we hope, then?
That they would be wiser?
More advanced?
Compassionate?
Or did we hope for something
to show up so cruel
it would unify us all.

I did not know
they would take so much
without asking.

I did not know how
very much like us
they would be.

CHAPTER THREE

We are All of Us in Heaven Already:

Reincarnation as Liberation in Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*

Oh, some people, even my mama and papa, commented on how I didn't seem to have, as they put it, 'no certain definite form,' but to them I looked enough like myself from day to day so that it didn't matter—Miss Lissie, The Temple of My Familiar

On August 15, 1973, Alice Walker stepped out of a plane near Eatonville, FL, the birthplace of Zora Neale Hurston, on a sojourn to track down the prolific author's burial site. Walker found the sunken, unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, hidden among waist-high grass, home to anthills and poisonous snakes. She spoke with people who'd known Hurston while she was alive and found that the author had suffered a stroke and later died of malnutrition, penniless. Walker's efforts resulted in purchasing a headstone to mark Hurston's grave inscribed with the words: 'A Genius of the South,' and later, the restoration of one of the most important and poignant voices in American literature. Over fifty years separate the writers' respective births, but given the parallels between their lives, it is no wonder that Walker felt a familial connection to Hurston, going so far as to call herself Hurston's niece while searching for her grave.

Lillie P. Howard calls Hurston and Walker 'call-and-response' voices that are situated on either end of the twentieth century. Both writers were born in the South. They were both born into families with eight children, both considered sensitive girls growing up who were close to their mothers, and they both traveled far from home to find their artistic voices in college under the mentorship of progressive scholars and activists. Both led and have led increasingly secluded lives in their later years.

And, Hurston and Walker's work, linked by two significant artistic epochs, the New Negro Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement, have been praised for the same trait—the embrace of the spectrum of Black American culture from rural to urban spaces. Walker, who was fifteen when her literary foremother died, found a kindred spirit in Hurston's voice after auditing a class with the poet, Margaret Walker, who was teaching the famed writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston's name, at the time, had been a footnote among her male peers, such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes. During Walker's research in 1970 on vodou practices in the South, she discovered *Mules and Men* and was astonished and delighted at its unabashed embrace of the entire spectrum of Black culture both in language and content. Walker observed in an essay about Hurston's work that it possessed an overwhelming characteristic of 'racial health,' "a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings" (Walker 14). It is this same longing for completeness in Walker's characters that Lillie P. Howard observes in *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), "To achieve wholeness, they each must journey back through the past to pick up (i.e., retrieve) those pieces of themselves that they have lost" (Howard, 142).

Yet not since Hurston has the reception of a Black woman writer's work been so picked apart by critics and peers. While *The Color Purple* (1982) ensured her place in the annals of literary triumph, Walker's later work, *The Temple of My Familiar*, baffled readers. Unhinged from a traditional plot, the characters' respective narratives overlap occasionally, but mostly go about their own business sometimes around and near one another. Chronology in the arrangement of the novel almost

seems to be an afterthought. While Hurston and Butler certainly flirt with temporal storytelling in their novels, Walker flouts not only time, but voice and structure. *Temple* reads more like a story-cycle than a plot-driven narrative and because there seems to be no clear seam joining most of her protagonists, we are left to divine Walker's intent in placing their respective stories alongside one another without a clear-cut guide. Bonnie Braendlin describes *Temple* as pastiche, indicative of belonging to a postmodern era and states that "Walker's interrogatory text works to alienate us from our cultural and ideological complacencies...*Temple* urges us to reflect upon our cherished beliefs and to consider other countercultural responses to contemporary personal, communal, and global issues" (Braendlin, 49). Lest we forget that Walker coined the term "womanist,"⁸ her main characters, women of color and primarily Black women, take on sexual liberation with aplomb—they entertain more than one lover at a time, discover masturbation in adulthood, and declare that despite the fact they love their spouses, they do not wish to subscribe to the institution of marriage anymore. Small wonder reviewers seemed skeptical—the themes are alarming and dense and again, the narrative reads as polygonal.

Brimming with folklore and mythological references laced into everyday scenarios, the novel smacks of magical realism and treats the phenomenal world as

⁸ Alice Walker first used the term in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She defines womanist as, "A woman who loves another woman, sexually and/ or non sexually. She appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility...[she] is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health... loves the spirit... loves struggle. Loves herself. Regardless."

every day.⁹ For instance, the character Miss Lissie, a goddess who has reincarnated hundreds of times, recollects her personal history as a Pygmy, a lion, and a white man as matter-of-fact. On the other hand, activities in the terra firma of the tangible world—the sewing of a feathered cape, cooking for a lover, listening to music, are described as sacrosanct and almost otherworldly in nature, revered as singularities. Magical realism as a speculative device is useful for Walker because as Oralia Preble-Niemi observes, “The novelist does not rationalize the presence of the supernatural in the created world as a concession to the reader’s possible disbelief. Instead, because of the matter-of-fact acceptance of the supernatural within the sphere of the narrative, the reader is induced to suspend disbelief in this regard, insofar as the fictional world is concerned” (Preble-Niemi, 102). Therefore, abstract concepts are more effortlessly integrated within the realm of the novel, or the liminal space of an art object that, because of its form, begs a suspension of disbelief from the reader.

On the other hand, like Hurston’s, Walker’s work was originally censured at a craft level. In a 1989 review, J.M. Coetzee writes: “Such cliché-ridden prose is not representative of the best of ‘The Temple of My Familiar,’ but there is enough of it to give one pause. How deep can Fanny’s liberation run when its very language is secondhand?” (Coetzee, *New York Times*). Another review by Julie Rubenstein of *Publisher’s Weekly* states, “Black women have suffered most, is Walker’s message, since they were subjugated both by whites and by men. Unfortunately, didacticism

⁹ The term “magical realism” is defined by Sainz de Medrano as “the perception of magic and its acceptance as a normal fact...not something peculiar to the heirs of ancestral, aboriginal cultures, not in short, a matter of initiates, but an American experience within reach of any mortal” (Prebele-Niemi, 102).

mars the narrative; theorizing and pontificating take the place of action. Thus, though it has its own strengths, the book never achieves the narrative power of *The Color Purple*" (Rubenstein, *Publisher's Weekly*). David Gates in his *Newsweek* review, said the novel "is fatally ambitious. It encompasses 500,000 years, rewrites Genesis and the Beatitudes and weighs in with mini-lectures on everything from Elvis (for) to nuclear waste (against)." David Nicholson of the *Washington Post Book World* felt that *The Temple of My Familiar* "is not a novel so much as it is an ill-fitting collection of speeches...a manifesto for the Fascism of the New Age....There are no characters, only types representative of the world Walker lives in or wishes could be" (*Washington Post*). Paul Grey noted that "Walker's relentless adherence to her own sociopolitical agenda makes for frequently striking propaganda, but not for good fiction" (*Time*). And so, *Temple*, perhaps Walker's least celebrated work, assessed by critics to be revisionist at best and pedantic at worst, bore a resemblance to the reception of Hurston's *Moses*. Additionally, both authors bore the brunt of having these later works suffer by comparison to their first novels. With its nod to folklore and mythology, womanist themes, and experimental chronology, the *raison d'être* for Walker's novel seems to mystify audiences.

While Katie Cannon does not necessarily focus on *Temple*, she does point out the power of Black women's literature and its use of the oral tradition, upon which the novel so strongly relies, "is a way of establishing new and larger contexts of experience within which African American women can attend to the disparity between sources of oppression and sources for liberation" (Cannon, 76). The theme of reincarnation as a window to psychological and physiological liberation persists in

current scholarship surrounding this novel. Felipe Smith argues that liberation in Walker's work is about saving lives on physical and metaphysical levels: "To save someone, in Walker's eyes, includes the obligation to liberate her/him from an oppressive cycle of violence" (Smith, 438). This would include sexual oppression. The concept of Black women reclaiming their sexuality, sometimes overtly, from an inherited legacy of the body as site-of-crisis, is necessary to the "canon formation" (76) to which Cannon refers. *Temple* could be viewed as instructive in granting the reader permission to view self as a source of sexual pleasure. To be self-centered in this regard is a privilege afforded to someone who establishes ownership of herself. To claim the privilege of owning oneself is a crucial rewiring of the narrative of sex as submission. This is the same conversation that Hurston instigates in *Moses*. If a character like Miriam, who is for all intents and purposes depicted as asexual, is unable to liberate herself, the goddess Miss Lissie on the other hand is like a later manifestation of Miriam where previously conceived sexual taboos are permitted. In other words, to a liberated person, or someone who is an active participant in her community and the cosmos, choices made around sex, with oneself or a partner, are divinely inspired. Thus, a choice made in the present around intimacy demonstrates someone who is not just liberated in terms of ownership or geographically, but also operating unfettered by past experiences.

Walker's characters constantly search for their respective pasts. Walker suggests that to collect and preserve experience not only immortalizes a person (in the case of Miss Lissie, quite literally), but also provides a blueprint for survival in the future. Memory, then, particularly in the case of Miss Lissie, serves as a fulcrum

around which the future orients itself. And the present is where people store memory. Like Smith, Ikenna Dieke is aware of Walker's tendency towards redemptive impulses in her narratives and describes the core of her novel as that of an ideal unity, "the unity of culture, moral truth, and imaginative thought and emotion" (Dieke 507). For Dieke, Miss Lissie embodies these concepts of salvation and liberation in addition to advocating kinship and unity. Lissie is a storyteller and can tell stories of hundreds of her lives over a thousand years of living. It is through her memory and the art of recollection that she provides access to liberation, not just for Suwelo, but for the reader.

Dieke observes, "Memory is eucharistic; it is also therapeutic/psychotherapeutic ...The iconography of memory as a doorway to the eternity of the past and of those loved ones that have passed away subtly subserves not only a *participation mystique*, but also a certain normative value of fundamental human relatedness" (509). In other words, relating memories and the narratives they inspire is integral to what makes us human. For Dieke, Lissie's recollective art is a strategy to relocate the lost self which he describes as "protean/ metempsychic" as a result of Walker's preoccupation with reincarnation and with that part of the human self which is part of the infinite (511). Therefore, *Temple*, like *Moses*, is not only redemptive, but instructive for the Black American reader.

Walker, a practicing Buddhist, says in an interview, "At one point I learned transcendental meditation...It took me back to the way that I naturally was as a child growing up way in the country, rarely seeing people. I was in that state of oneness with creation and it was as if I didn't exist except as a part of everything" (Belief Net).

Much as with Hurston, in this instance, we cannot entirely separate Walker's worldview from her characters. In the same way that Hurston assesses the problematic redistribution of power through Miriam's lens, Walker uses her characters, some of whom we were first introduced to in *The Color Purple*, to keep up an ongoing discussion about God and the dynamics between oppressor and oppressed. For example, Olivia, Celie's daughter, at one point says to a potential lover:

"After all, since this world is a planet spinning about in the sky, we are all of us *in heaven* already! The God discovered on one's own speaks nothing of turning the other cheek. Of rendering unto Caesar. But only of the beauty and greatness of the earth, the universe, the cosmos. Of creation. Of the possibilities for joy. You might say the white man, in his dual role of spiritual guide and religious prostitute, spoiled even the most literary form of God experience for us. By making the Bible say whatever was necessary to keep his plantations going, and using it as a tool to degrade women and enslave blacks" (Walker, 147).

Walker, through the medium of her characters, particularly Lissie, becomes the ultimate proprietor of a countermyth to the Exodus narrative. The fact that Lissie is a Caribbean woman in this incarnation is not incidental, because she becomes something of a conjure woman through her ability to tell stories, thus communicating identity through language. Not unlike Miriam, Lissie is aware of her vastness as a spellbinder, if in a less formal rank. We are benignly introduced to Lissie at first who is an elderly woman living out her final years on the island of her birth with her first husband, Mr. Hal. Walker draws us in as she does Suwelo with Lissie's intoxicating storytelling abilities and the magical appeal of her past lives. Lest we doubt that Lissie is reincarnated, she discusses her affair with a photographer, Henry Laytrum, who is able to capture on film several of the other women Lissie has been in past lives. Lissie is thrilled to see that her other selves were real after years of confusion and gaps in

her memory creating inconsistencies: “It was such a kick. The selves I had thought gone forever, existing only in my memory, were still there! Photographable. Sometimes it nearly thrilled me to death” (Walker, 92).

Like Lilith, Miss Lissie could be considered a transhuman lifeform, in that she transcends the typical lifespan and abilities of a typical human being, reincarnating into another version of herself. Yet, Walker accentuates elements of the “Great Goddess” character for Lissie, elements that would place her more in the category of ancestor. Santsh Kumari suggests that ancestral eternity, a concept in Walker’s work, blurs the terms of historic existence, “Thus ancestral figure is generally perceived as timeless creation representing a complex relationship between past and present” (Kumari, 17). Because the concept of time, like race, is largely a social construction, in both content and in form, Walker seems to rely on a more polychronic perception of how time is measured.¹⁰ To a reincarnated entity, time would become even more fluid, providing a wider spectrum of events and experiences to be taken into account by Lissie as she imparts her wisdom and guidance to both Suwelo and subsequently, the reader. Kumari goes on to observe that the vastness of Lissie’s consciousness encompasses not only her present physical self, but that, “Her elevated status symbolizes the eternity of ancestral character that deems to meet the primary standards of benevolence and generosity” (18). In other words, through the collection of her consciousnesses reaching back to the beginning of creation, Lissie recalls how

¹⁰ Anthropologist Edward T. Hall argued that in monochronic societies, including Europe and the United States, time is perceived as fixed and unchanging, and people tend to complete tasks sequentially. In polychronic societies, including Latin America and much of Asia, time is more fluid and people adapt more easily to changing circumstances and new information (Smithsonian).

human conflict was brought out by greed and lust, results of imperial expansion and capitalism that “devastated human values” (ibid).

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois created revolutionary terminology in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, which distinguishes the twentieth century from the nineteenth by summarizing the spirit and conditions of living for Black Americans at the time. In terms of racially charged violence, the turn of the century, known as the *nadir*, was the worst in American history. Du Bois’s text helped to create an intellectual argument for Black socio-political freedom in the new century. *Souls* not only contributed the terms “double-consciousness,” “the veil,” and “the color line” as well as a close examination of the “talented tenth”¹¹ ideology, but advocated an emphasis on education as opposed to industry, as well as the rise of the Black middle class. Denise Heinze articulates Du Bois’s revelatory double-consciousness theory as “a state of affairs in which an individual is both representative of and immersed in two distinct ways of life” (Heinze, 5). Further, double-consciousness can become a permanent condition with no resolution, especially considering that, as Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. observes, double-consciousness suggests that the dual personalities are in conflict with one another (Bruce 354).

Double-consciousness theory is revolutionary because it continues to serve as a touchstone for articulating the necessity for racial equality moving into the twentieth century and beyond. Yet, to assume that there is only one veil that encompasses any one experience—for instance, a veil dividing Blackness from

¹¹ “Talented Tenth” was coined by Henry Lyman Morehouse several years before DuBois popularized the term.

Whiteness, is to suggest that there is only one type of experience beholden to these labels. If we consider bell hooks's original grid-work of race, class, and gender, as adding additional layers of consciousness to Du Bois's model, we must also consider that the veil for one person's experience may not apply to another's. For example, Black men and women may share certain cultural experiences behind the veil of racial oppression in America, but because of her gender, a Black woman also experiences systemic patriarchy in ways that Black men do not. Whether we are speaking of gender or race, none of these labels should be generalized as there is no one consistent set of experiences that define them. Thus, double consciousness as a starting point can provide an awareness of the disparate elements included in a person's experience, but should not be considered conclusive by any means.

The notion of multiple-consciousness can be applied to Lacan's theories of the 'ideal image' and the 'mirror stage' in terms of the visibility and projection of expectation upon a person's formation of identity. As Jane Gallop argues, "The mirror stage is a decisive moment. Not only does the self issue from the mirror stage, but so does 'the body in bits and pieces' ...It produces the future through anticipation and the past through retroaction" (Gallop 121). If we combine aspects of DuBoisian and Lacanian modules to *Temple*, Miss Lissie, then, operating as a transhuman, becomes a kind of template or suggestion for recognizing one's wholeness as one is. Deborah K. King argues that these fragments (or veils) are essential to construct a whole and that among other vital qualities, for Black feminist ideology, "It is in confrontation with multiple jeopardy that black women define and sustain a multiple consciousness essential for our liberation" (King, 72).

Lacan's definition of the 'ideal image' is useful here. The ideal image is ultimately a projection that is formed when the self is unrecognizable. Part of the cultural inheritance of the oppressed is paranoia—the perceived identity of the oppressor as the ideal, particularly in terms of privilege and dominance. Thus, the oppressed person comes to both hate and aspire to an identity that she can never attain because her identity at that point exists outside of herself. In terms of how this translates to the mirror stage, the oppressed person constantly exists in a metaphorical infancy because she only recognizes identity as complete through an image outside of herself. So, in seeking liberation, the oppressed person is only really working from someone else's definition as an organizing principle of development. In *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts states, "Not only does this concept of liberty leave inequality intact, but it overlooks and sometimes precludes efforts to eradicate inequality. Once liberty is set up to protect only the interests of the most privileged, it then excludes the equality claims of the dispossessed" (Roberts, 297).

To continue with Lacan, upon self-reflection, when the oppressed person assesses her *own* image, the fractures, or veils, separating her from the ideal, create a sense of alienation. The image she aspires to alienates her and the physical body appears to exist only in fragments, divisions of identity—race, gender, class:

"The function of the mirror stage thus turns out, in my view, to be a particular case of the function of *imagos* which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality...This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the individual's formation onto history: the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that

will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure” (Lacan, 96-97).

Lacan’s theories of how identity is lodged in speech and language continue to be useful here because the stories we tell ourselves and one another about our place in the world create false ideals. But it is here, through narrative, in Walker’s novelistic world, that Miss Lissie does not consider herself fractured despite the fragments of her many selves. Through a realignment of having lived so many lives, she observes that all of her lives and the experiences therein, remain part of the same person. Ultimately, Lissie comes to recognize her identity because she views her selves adding up to one continuous life despite being reborn as a different race or gender or species. She recognizes that her present self as she is *is* the ideal image. Lissie uses language when talking with Suwelo—narratives of her previous lives—as the scaffolding to understand and depict her current self as complete in her present state and longer maintains any expectations of what a new incarnation will be—in fact, she believes this is her last life, which is no surprise because it took living through *all* of her incarnations to finally recognize herself as complete.

As a counter-narrative to Exodus mythology, which emphasizes being led physically to an external site as the ideal embodiment of liberation, something that can never be attained without the redistribution of power by other parties and thus equally unsatisfactory as oppression, Walker suggests through Lissie that an individual not only is able to determine herself as liberated despite the fragments of her identity but that she is able to experience freedom wherever she is because there is no expectation of what freedom looks like. Imagery is how people create

memorable or persuasive rhetoric, so to say there is a promised land, the suggestion is that emancipation is a geographical destination. While there *was* a geographical place named in the Old Testament, for Black Americans, even repatriation is problematic because where does one choose to go on the continent? Liberation for Black Americans is more abstract a concept, so a promised land is actually more a state of mind than an actual place. Liberation would have to be perceived more as a cultural space or an identity space than a geographical space which means the definition of the promised land is and should be perceived as fluid and adaptable given the respective needs of the individual and collective.

Thus, liberation as a concept can become more interrogative, warranting further self-evaluation from the individual, rather than relying upon a declarative and finite definition. Defining liberation according to the preset narrative established by an oppressive system is to continue to remain a captive within that dynamic of oppression, free or not. True liberation is an acceptance of one's multifaceted parts and the freedom to make choices that may or may not result in mistakes along the way—there is no guilt in liberation, no shame, no self-judgment or judgment of another. One person's version of freedom is not more pious or righteous than another. The promised land is not a one-size-fits-all destination. In fact, the promised land does not exist outside of ourselves.

Lissie's mutability as an individual sets her apart from the other characters in that she surpasses all their unique experiences. Her perspective is broadened as she's had much more time to consider her identity and her place in the cosmos. She finally confesses to Suwelo that a person can never abandon the life or role that has been

dispensed and yet she is uncertain of her future, “I am tired of it. Not tired of life. But afraid of what living is going to look like and be like next time I come” (190). Taken altogether, Lissie’s stories suggest that there is no one type of promised land and that no one needs to find it at some preordained time or location. Life for humans, according to Miss Lissie, moves in cycles of creation and destruction, mimicking the cycles of the universe. Beyond the fact that Lissie believes there is clearly no one fixed place someone might consider a utopia, she serves as living proof that life can be appreciated as is without worrying so much about the next place—everyone moves and should move at their own pace. To confirm this, in a 1994 interview, Jody Hoy asks Walker why she has included several happy endings amidst so much suffering and tragedy in *Temple*, to which Walker responds, “I do it because they’re not happy endings, they’re plateaus. I think everybody has a plateau and then they start all over again” (Hoy 136).

Unlike Butler, Alice Walker is not considered a speculative writer. However, the suggestion of the transcendental world in *Temple* is unmistakable. Published around the same time as Butler’s *Dawn*, *Temple* is situated in the same pocket of time at the twilight of the twentieth century, where the struggles of Black Americans had moved away from the en masse mythos of the Exodus story and seemed instead to search for personal meaning in the gap of the mythical promised land. The model that Hurston originally presents in her work, where liberation as a Black woman is unlimited by one’s race or country of birth, but belongs to the cosmos, comes to fruition in Walker’s character. In interviews, Alice Walker speaks about possessing a “global heart” and also of the richness of silence. While she asserts that meditation, or

finding God (whom she refers to as 'Mama'), is a practice that involves activities that require she not speak, in *Temple* Walker allows her characters speak for her. The novel-as-artifact, is an art-form most often meant to be imbibed in meditative silence. The novel, which I earlier noted was a vessel for communicative memory, is a useful tool to engage or access the imagination, or more specifically, the subconscious. It is here where Walker imbues principles of universality. Historically, Black American women have inherited a culture of silence as a language of survival. It is in this shared, companionable silence that Walker communicates her stance on the distribution of the cosmos within.

Poetry Preface

As a reincarnated goddess, Miss Lissie's character in *The Temple of My Familiar* is the most obvious of outliers in the three novels I chose for this project. She is similar to Miriam and Lilith in that way, but she has knowledge of all of her past lives which informs her worldview in her present life and give her insight into her future that the other two protagonists do not possess. Miss Lissie has already come to a kind of peace with her identity and she shares her stories with Suwelo as a way of transmitting not only insight into how a person can be reinvented in even one life, but how they can choose to reinvent themselves through surrender. In that sense, Lissie is comfortable in her acceptance of her life as a Black woman and makes decisions based on what she has learned about herself from within. But this takes time. And it is important to note that it was over the course of many lives that Lissie, whose name means "the one who remembers everything" comes to this conclusion. Lissie recalls in one of her early lives, how in order to impress a white man, she traps and silences her familiar. She later concludes that the ability to do so is not worth the loss, as the familiar eventually escapes.

Madelyn Jablon observes that, "Male storytellers tell tales about others; female storytellers tell tales about themselves or tales that they discover within themselves" (Jablon, 49). In that sense, it is not just for others' benefit that she relates her past lives—Lissie understands more about herself through the telling. For the following poems, I wanted to create a sense of Lissie as someone whose subconscious vacillates between concrete experiences of the tangible world and the incessant creation of herself out of myth. Because memory is not only an act of remembering the last time

we remember an event, memory is also informed by the present. We remember an event or person based on our current state of mind which means we remember something differently every time—colors change or locations shift—to actively remember the past is to create a new version of the self in a kind of infinite loop. How memory and time correlate to Lissie could be likened to a Möbius strip—a surface with only one side and one boundary. Thus, the poems in this section will do the same—they will attempt to recreate this paradox and inhabit the multiple layers of Lissie’s palimpsest life.

Poems:

Woman Waxing/Waning Gibbous

Black Mermaid: A Bop

Before,

Manifesto for Shapeshifters

The woman is round

The Secret to Eternal Youth

The following three poems are meant to feel like large, sweeping, mythical poems that herald the presence of the ancestral in Lissie, or rather, who she is beneath all the incarnations. The first poem, “Woman Waxing/Waning Gibbous” draws from the imagery of the moon, which is so closely associated to many female goddesses around the world as well as fertility rites and agrarian cycles of planting and harvest. I wanted Lissie to speak from her ancestral/goddess self, or the stance of an archetype—someone who is both familiar and comfortable with the impact of the phenomenal world on the corporeal world. As a storyteller, I wanted to imply here that Lissie would perform her most compelling spellbinding beneath the moon when she feels most like herself. The piece is also written as a ‘contrapuntal,’ which is a musical form imitating a counterpoint technique in music composition where two disparate melodies combine to create a third which could not have existed without the other two. To preserve the form, the poem is kept onto its own page and should be read as three poems in one. The left and right sides can be read individually as two separate poems, then read across, left to right. Punctuation at that point should be suspended and the reader can use their own sense of internal rhythm to decide where to pause or stop.

Woman Waxing/Waning Gibbous

On nights like these,
I am full of myself,
I let myself go—swell
steady over the dark
climax of night,

lean into lapis fields of stars,
lure admirers off-road
for what tumbles forth

from my spangled mouth.

Gilt like so, I linger,
peer through windows,
invite lovers and lunacy along—
we all intend to outlast
our welcome, come dawn.

You'll want to stand back—

I make room for my own incandescence.

I cannot help it.

I am full of myself.

Soon, soon,
I will reveal all

beneath

this ever-mounting light.

Like any celestial body,

I know
when to bow out.

I know when to leave 'em
wanting more.

I've seen Mars up close
glow amber in spring.

The Perseid shower, the rings of Saturn—
a funhouse, a dark ride.

There is only so much
I can do and say in so little time.

And I know when to take my leave—
when to inch towards the curtain
amidst the muted applause
of night-crawlers and asteroids.

I do not tremble at the ebb
of my own bright pulse.

What is there to fear for one
such as I?

Haven't I known the company
of naiads,
the onslaught
of oceans?

I am just one
more version of them—
tide collapsing into tide collapsing into
_____.

“Black Mermaid: A Bop” is also a musical form which tells a story. This is a contemporary form, invented by Afaa Michael Weaver, and contains three stanzas. The first stanza of six lines establishes an issue or concern, the second is eight lines and expands on the issue, and the third stanza returns to six lines and either resolves the issue or explains why the issue cannot be resolved. Between each stanza is a repeated lyric. In this case, I’ve incorporated a line from the Erykah Badu song, “On & On” which is mystical in nature. Some interpretations of the first part of this lyric intimate being born underwater as the astrological sign Pisces which is symbolized by two fish completing a circle, or a complete balance of yin and yang. The ‘three dollars and six dimes’ would refer to three-hundred, sixty degrees, or a complete circle which is also referenced as a ‘cypher’ in the song, a term used in the belief system of ‘Supreme Mathematics’ by Five-Percenter aka the ‘Nation of Gods and Earths.’ In any case, it’s a fitting lyric to serve as a metaphor for a character who Walker depicts as a reincarnated ancestor channeling divine properties on Earth. Additionally, the mermaid is repeated frequently in diasporic deity tradition as Erzulie, Mami Wata, Yemeya, as the Nommos, the simbi, the jengu, and so on. While what we know of Lissie is that she incarnated on earth as humanoid and lived in a jungle, I wanted to imply that the creative and destructive power of a water goddess is still present just below her surface.

Black Mermaid: A Bop

There are days I cannot say whether I am real,
or I’ve made myself up—cannot tell my body
apart from my mind. Am I memory? Am I a dream?
Surely this is me, right here, right now, scrying
for myself in the scrim surface of a midnight lake.
Or, am I the moonlit woman who always looks back?

I was born underwater with three dollars and six dimes

Once, I followed my children across an entire ocean

when they were swallowed by a monstrous wooden whale.
When I could go no further, I swam their dreams instead,
showed them star-maps so they would know the way back
from anywhere. Overcome by the salt and water in us all,
they would learn to recognize my voice, my face in their own
reflections and tongues. What whale could possibly stomach
a vastness such as this?

I was born underwater with three dollars and six dimes

Sometimes, I believe myself too good to be true.
I can hold this form for as long as it takes,
but when no one is looking, I tend to dissolve into a mirage
as soon as I cross from sand to tide. I confess, my body knows
its own mind—goes archipelago, exchanges skin for scales
lungs for gills, and feet for fins—reminds me I am not
only a woman, but something else entirely.

I was born underwater with three dollars and six dimes

In the poem, “Before,” I take a cue from Walker’s inverted creation myth to create a litany of forms women took before they settled on becoming human. By living an existence as different non-human life forms, the idea is that women would learn what they need of the elements and the planet to endure as women. In other words, if a woman like Lissie, on a ‘dream memory’ level remembers all of her past lives, that quality grants her the ability to carry her liberation with her wherever she goes because she remembers not being beholden to just one life or type of life—she possesses an innate understanding of what it means to learn from each stage of existence and adapt that understanding to each subsequent form, constantly reinventing oneself and worldview—the idea of transcending the physical body with memory then in this case, would mean that a woman could not ever truly be oppressed.

The subsequent poems, “Manifesto for Shapeshifters” and “The woman is round” continue with the idea that women do not have to view themselves as marginalized if they recognize their power of adaptability. To return to the concept of hooks’s gridwork or intersections of race/class/gender/sexual preference/religious background, both poems serve as illustrations of this concept—in other words, Black women defy classification. There are too many aspects of identity to consider making a singular experience one-size-fits-all—and that *because* of all her revolving elements, she is not fractured, she is whole. From this stance, particularly in “The woman is round,” I imply that the man who desires to think of the subject of the poem as any one aspect will never be able to possess someone like this because he can never really know all of her.

Before,

Some people don't understand that it is the nature of the eye to have seen forever, and the nature of the mind to recall anything that was ever known

—Miss Lissie, *The Temple of My Familiar*

When women were birds
and soared above lolling hills
and pines and snowdrifts,
they sang of nothing
but wingtips and bright plumes
of wind carrying them high, up
to the rungs of clouds.

When women were wolves
and roamed across woodland floors
and open fields and in the rain,
they howled of nothing
but earth scent and the heat
of another's body running
fast like river current
alongside their own.

When women were whales
and floated through ocean
and sea and mist
they hummed of nothing
but kelp forests and the bright,
eyes of strange, scaled beasts
that illuminated the dark.

When women were trees
and grew tall in groves
and in swamps and on mountainsides,
they bloomed of nothing
but the tongues of thunder,
knew by heartwood
the pulse of a planet.

When women were women,
and strode on two strong ankles
and carried babies in their bellies,
and buried loves,
and wept in joy,
and clapped or held hands,
and took turns carrying the sky,

they remembered Before, when
they flew, and ran, and swam
and stood straight through storms,
their bones hollow or marrow-filled
or overrun with hot sap and seed,
or cooled despite by deep descent,
they bent and bent and bent
and changed and became new
again and again and again
but they did not ever break.

Manifesto for Shapeshifters

Grow horns and mane.
Grow scales and fins.
Grow wings and talons if you must.
Grow a tail.
Grow too vast.
Too loud.
Too tall.
Tower.

Grow new bones,
new cells,
new blood,
new hair,
new tongue,
new pores,
new lungs,
new spine.

Grow hot
with embers tumbling
in your gut.

Yes, speak.
Sing.
Run.
Bloom.
Dive.
Lift.
Stand.
Soar.
Descend.

Be born.
Be reborn.
You hydra.
You wellspring.

Do whatever pleases you
enough to always, always
bear the weight
of your own
name.

The woman is round

The woman is round
the way he likes,
but her hair is a constellation
and her teeth are shards of glassy quartz
and her clavicle is a tomb
in which he thinks he would like
to enshroud his lips,
and her garment is a forsythia bush
slipping from her right shoulder
so when she turns to look back at him,
he can make out the birthmark on her back
which is a mammatocumulus cloud, adrift,
and her spine is a blue bottle dangling from a limb,
and her gaze is the New Testament,
and her left temple is a grove of pear trees,
and the cleft above her upper lip is a pier
where she docks 11:11 wishes,
and her beauty mark is a mantis
trapped in amber,
and her ears are hyacinth blooms,
and the tops of her breasts
are waves cresting at dusk,
and her knuckles are hard candy,
and her scent is that of a newborn fawn
or the underside of a banana tree leaf,
and her dreams are mason jars
full of sparrow beaks
and butterfly wings
and possum bones,
but he finds he can't ever touch her—
 his fingers slide off her skin
 which is a patchwork quilt of rainbow
 light spun from prisms
 trapped in a gold room—
no matter how tightly he closes
his fist.

Finally, “The Secret to Eternal Youth” is what kind of advice I would imagine Lissie giving to Suwelo, who is nursing heartache after separation from his wife, Fanny. After having two husbands in this current incarnation and countless partners and other lovers both men and women in her others, Lissie, in seeing him in distress, might comfort Suwelo from the sage wisdom of not just a woman in her twilight years but as the ancestral—as the goddess imparting counsel to a petitioner.

The Secret to Eternal Youth

I'm not angry...I'm mad. I'm mad about the waste that happens when people who love each other can't even bring themselves to talk
—Suwelo

Fall in love.
Often.

As often as possible.

Stay with someone until
you've heard all their stories.

Then fall in love again.
With them.
Or another.
No matter.
The heart is a muscle.
It wants exercise.
Each little tear can only make room for more.

It does not matter who or how many
or how often you love,
just that you do.

There is no time in love.
What is an hour?
What is a year?
What is a hundred years?
Love does not know these names.
Love is only constructed of love.

How else might one see

what they are capable of—how vast
and how limitless a being—unless
one's love is reckless and careless
and given freely without fear?

Love like a child.

There is no shame in love,
and there is no shape to it.
It fills whatever vessel can hold it—
an ark as easily as a thimble.
The thing itself does not change.

In love, there are no soulmates.
There are no husbands.
No wives.
No children.
No siblings.
No friends.
There is only love.
And we are all on its path—
companions.

On this path, there is no such thing
as who loves more than whom—
one person's love is not more
efficient than another's.
There is no piety here.
No conditions.
No calculations to resolve.

After all, what is the unit with which
you would measure all of your tears?
All of your sighs of pleasure or despair?
How much does your sleeplessness weigh?
And what of happiness?
How tall is your contentment?
How deep is your surrender?
What is the circumference of how much
love has changed you—each and every time?

So, what happens when you find yourself
at the bottom of love, where you think
you have excavated every acre of your abandon?

What else, you might say,

*is there possibly left to know or perceive
that I have not already?*

That is where you must plant yourself—
in *that* space of unknowing and wait
until you recognize in everyone that you have loved,
in everything you have ever looked for in another—
that the extended hand
 holding a hand
 holding a hand
 holding—
is your own.

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Yaszek, Lisa. "Afrofuturism: Science Fiction and the History of the Future". *Socialism and Democracy*. Issue 42. Vol. 20, No. 3. 2011.

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EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
M.A. English Literature & Creative Writing
Transylvania University
B.A. History
Minor: Studio Art

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

Centre College; Danville, KY
Writer in Residence
Georgetown College; Georgetown, KY
Lecturer
University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY
Teaching Assistant
Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY
Lecturer
Transylvania University, Lexington, KY
Writer in Residence
Bowling Green Technical College, Bowling Green, KY
English Instructor

PROFESSIONAL & RELATED TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning
Literary Arts Liaison
Apex Magazine: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror
Poetry Editor
pluck! The Journal of Affrilachian Arts & Culture
Managing Editor
Kentucky Humanities Council
Lecturer
The SwallowTale Project: Creative Writing for Incarcerated Women
Creator & Program Director

HONORS & AWARDS

Sallie Bingham Award; Kentucky Foundation for Women
Kentucky Foundation for Women Artist Enrichment Grant
Ellershaw Award for an Outstanding Ph.D. Candidate; University of Kentucky
Pushcart Prize Nominee; *Duende Literary Magazine*

Al Smith Individual Artist Fellowship in Poetry; Kentucky Arts Council
Lyman T. Johnson Academic Fellow; University of Kentucky
Pushcart Prize Nominee "All That Glitters"; *Muzzle Literary Magazine*

PUBLICATIONS

BOOKS

Call Her by Her Name; Northwestern University Press (2016)
The Galaxy Is a Dance Floor; Argos Books (2016)
How Swallowtails Become Dragons; Accents Publishing (2011)
Kaffir Lily; Wind Publications (2010)

EDITOR

Undead: A Poetry Anthology of Ghouls, Ghosts, and More; Apex Publications (2017)
Black Bone: 25 Years of the Affrilachian Poets; Wax & Wane Media (2017)
Circe's Lament: Anthology of Wild Women Poetry; Accents Publishing (2016)

POEMS IN JOURNALS & ANTHOLOGIES

"How to Say Goodbye (When You're as Codependent as Two Moons)"; *Osedax* (2017)
"Big Black Bitch"; *ROAR Magazine* (2017)
"Night on Rand Avenue"; *Oxford American* (2016)
Uhura on the Moon; *Full*; Two of Cups Press (2016)
"In Kentucky, To Porch is a Verb"; *Journal of Kentucky Studies* (2016)
"Leda to the Neighbor's Girl"; *Journal of Kentucky Studies* (2016)
"To the Woman I Saw Who Wept In Her Car"; *Journal of Kentucky Studies* (2016)
"Automaton"; *Apex Magazine* (2016)
"What Women Are Made Of"; *Circe's Lament: Anthology of Wild Women Poetry* (2016)
"Alchemist"; *Circe's Lament: Anthology of Wild Women Poetry* (2016)
"Red Giant Heartthrob"; *Obsidian* (2016)
"Praisesong for a Mountain"; *Chattahoochee Review* (2015)
"What They Don't Tell You"; *Union Station Magazine* (2015)
"The Way I Feel About You"; *Union Station Magazine* (2015)
"Praisesong for Home"; *Grantmakers in the Arts* (2015)
"Medium: A Bop"; *Still: The Journal* (2015)
"You Can't Step in the Same River Twice"; *Louisville Review* (2014)
"Dead Blood"; *Drunken Boat* (2014)
"Mixed Media in the Age of Anthropocene"; *Duende* (2014)
"Hounded"; *Duende* (2014)
"Lynching Postcard"; *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (2013)
"Beyond the Bridge: The Lynched Woman Speaks"; *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (2013)
"My Kinda Woman"; *Red Holler: Contemporary Appalachian Literature*, Sarabande Books (2013)
"Legend of Negro Mountain"; *Red Holler: Contemporary Appalachian Literature*, Sarabande Books (2013)

"I Would Make a Good Owl"; *Red Holler: Contemporary Appalachian Literature*, Sarabande Books (2013)
 "On the Moon"; *La Fovea* (2013)
 "Jengu"; *La Fovea* (2013)
 "Field Song"; *Langston Hughes Colloquy* (2013)
 "Ornithology Lesson"; *Red Room, TheThe Poetry Collection* (2013)
 "She Says to Him Over Her Rim"; *Small Batch Bourbon Anthology*; Two of Cups Press (2013)
 "Practice Round"; *Small Batch Bourbon Anthology*; Two of Cups Press (2013)
 "Why I Do Not Write Poems About the Moon"; *The Louisville Review* (2012)
 "I Would Make a Good Owl"; *Still: The Journal* (2012)
 "Alchemist"; *Still: The Journal* (2012)
 "Daughter of Nu Wa"; *Still: The Journal* (2012)
 "Legend of the Boy and His Box"; *Conclave Journal* (2012)
 "At Needlepoint"; *Conclave Journal* (2012)
 "Kamaishi Seashore Song"; *Conclave Journal* (2012)
 "Simbi"; *Conclave Journal* (2012)
 "How the Pythia Will Rot"; *Conclave Journal* (2012)
 "What the Alewife Knows"; *Verse Wisconsin* (2012)
 "What Women Are Made Of"; *Verse Wisconsin* (2012)
 "All That Glitters"; *Muzzle Magazine* (2012)
 "Legend of Negro Mountain"; *Appalachian Heritage Magazine* (2011)
 "Frank X Walker: Exemplar of Afrilachia"; *Appalachian Heritage Magazine* (2011)
 "White Space"; *White Space Poetry Anthology* (2011)
 "On Falling"; *White Space Poetry Anthology* (2011)
 "Out of Body"; *November 3rd Club* (2010)
 "Waterbody"; *Union Station Magazine* (2010)
 "Omen"; *Union Station Magazine* (2010)

ESSAYS

"Lost in Orbit: Satellite Star Trek Fans"; Essay; *Fan Phenomenon: Star Trek*, Intellect Books (2013)
 "All Black is the New Post-Black"; Essay, *Tidal Basin Review* (2011)

OP-EDS & ARTICLES

"The Black Woman's Quiet Rage & Fear"; Lexington Herald-Leader (2016)
 "When Love is (Sometimes) Enough"; Kentucky Arts Council (2016)
 "Date for Your Bourbon Type"; Her Kentucky (2016)
 "Celebrate Power of Fear & Loathing"; Lexington Herald-Leader (2015)
 "Literature is also Creative Art"; Lexington Herald-Leader (2014)
 "Nikky Finney: The People's Poet"; Ace Weekly (2012)
 "The Bibelots of Charlie Williams"; Ace Weekly (2010)
 "Jesco: A Living Jack Tale of Epic Proportions"; Ace Weekly (2010)

BOOK REVIEWS

"Unexpected Stories"; Octavia E. Butler Society (2014)

INTERVIEWS

“I Don’t Deny the Impulse of Daydream or a Blurring of Worlds”; Accents Publishing (2016)

“Lyric Essentials”; *Sundress* (2016)

“Bianca Spriggs Has Tips for the Budding Surrealist” (2016)

“An Interview with Bianca Spriggs”; *Chattahoochee Review* (2015)

“How Swallowtails Become Dragons”; *Speaking of Marvels* (2013)

“I’m A Writer”: An Interview with Bianca Spriggs; Accents Publishing (2013)