

NUCLEAR REPRODUCTION: RACE, GENDER, AND REPRODUCTIVE CONTROL IN  
US COLD WAR SPECULATIVE FICTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

Mark Edward Collins: Nuclear Reproduction: Race, Gender, and Reproductive Control in US Cold War Speculative Fictions  
(Under the direction of Jennifer Ho)

This dissertation argues that race, gender, and reproduction together played a major role in shaping the Cold War American imagination. Using an intersectional approach, “Nuclear Reproduction” finds that normative notions of reproduction grounded in whiteness and masculinity organized much of American domestic life but so too did the threatening specter of nonwhite female reproduction. From the 1940s to the 1980s, US culture was permeated with racialized and gendered reproductive images, such as the cookie-cutter nuclear family, the unassimilable Asian immigrant, and the bad black mother. These figures appeared frequently in speculative fictions, or texts that map out potential futures. From civil defense manuals and nuclear war scenarios to overpopulation polemics and science fiction novels, speculative fictions helped to construct the ideal of the nuclear family, police the racial borders of the national body, and offer strategies to survive in a post-nuclear world. Within these fictions, the interplay between racism and sexism was crucial, albeit paradoxically, to Cold War understandings of American freedom, domestic harmony, and cultural democracy.

Each chapter in this dissertation explores a different decade of the Cold War in relation to a larger reproductive issue. Chapter one, about the years immediately following World War II, looks at the emergence of the nuclear family as a strategy of domestic containment in civilian nuclear defense and post-nuclear-war fiction. Chapter two, covering

the late 1960s to the early 1970s, focuses on the anti-Asian racism and xenophobia that suffused fears of a global population explosion as expressed in overpopulation fiction.

Chapter three, on the Reagan Era, uncovers the interspecies dependencies that sustain post-nuclear life in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy and that disrupt conservative reproductive ideologies of the 1980s.

To Erin—my life and love.

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## INTRODUCTION

The birth rate must be brought into balance with the death rate or mankind [sic] will breed itself into oblivion.

—Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*

With a sense of alarm rarely expressed in scientific writing, Paul Ehrlich's 1968 *The Population Bomb* brought a new Cold War threat into the American national spotlight.<sup>1</sup> This threat did not stem from nuclear proliferation or the spread of communism, although it borrowed heavily from the apocalyptic language and anti-communist rhetoric of both.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Ehrlich identified another target of US containment in human reproduction. Ehrlich asserts in the introduction to *The Population Bomb*, this introduction's epigraph: "[t]he birth rate must be brought into balance with the death rate or mankind [sic] will breed itself into oblivion" (xi). Ehrlich's logic is simple. Confronted by limited resources, the world's ever-growing population will be racked by widespread famine, disease, and conflict. The future will be doomed without radical measures to stem the disaster of overpopulation.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ehrlich acknowledges that the book was a collaborative effort between his wife, Anne H. Ehrlich, who was uncredited, and himself. In a jointly authored retrospective article published in 2009, the Ehrlichs explain that the book's single authorship was at the insistence of the publisher and not their personal preference (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 63). Still, I refer to the text by its sole named author. This rhetorical choice risks denying Anne credit for the monograph's fame as well as displacing her from the culpability of the overpopulation movement's more unsavory strategies. Nevertheless, my goal is to expose the discourse swirling during the book's reception; this discourse was undergirded by gendered assumptions about who could claim the mantle of scientific authority and win public appeal. These assumptions launched Paul into the national spotlight but not Anne.

<sup>2</sup> Although always important elements of the American Cold War consciousness, the threat of nuclear proliferation and the spread of communism were particularly prominent issues at the time of *The Population Bomb* due to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the escalation of the Vietnam War in 1964. For more on the apocalyptic language and anti-communist rhetoric in *The Population Bomb*, see chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Ehrlich's prognostications of the future, however, are paradoxically rooted in the past. In the first chapter of *The Population Bomb*, the Stanford biologist begins with an anecdote from a family trip to Delhi, India several years before the book's publication. As he explains: "I have understood the population explosion intellectually for a long time. I came to understand it emotionally one stinking hot night in Delhi a couple of years ago" (15). For Ehrlich, the project of defining overpopulation is inherently affective. The turn to personal narrative here is a move intended to capture overpopulation within a constellation of emotionality tinged with the "stink" of nonwhiteness. Overpopulation becomes a visceral experience, a gut reaction prompted by simmering racial anxiety.

For this reason, Ehrlich starts his popular science book with a decidedly unscientific story about a taxi ride in India with his wife and daughter. The scene is worth quoting in its entirety:

As we crawled through the city, we entered a crowded slum area. The temperature was well over 100, and the air was a haze of dust and smoke. The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people. (15)

In the passage, overpopulation features as an intensely distressing experience, triggered by feelings of fear towards those nameless masses of "people, people, people, people." The repetition itself erodes the personhood of the individuals, moving them further and further from the category of human. Instead, the Indian passersby become brute-like, defecating, urinating, and screaming; their essences are reduced to the basest of acts.

By drawing on a trip to India, Ehrlich moves the overpopulation problem into a particular racial geography: the congested slum of a major metropolitan area of an under-

developed country.<sup>3</sup> Matthew Connelly explains the tendency of Ehrlich and other population alarmists to personify overpopulation by giving it an Asian face. According to Connelly, “the layout of Indian cities, with narrow paths following irregular patterns, gave the impression that the whole country was impossibly overcrowded—more than a century earlier British visitors had come to the same conclusion” (*Fatal Misconception* 89). In Ehrlich’s (neo)colonialist perspective, India serves as the paradigmatic example of overpopulation, a horrifying harbinger of humanity’s future encoded in the Orientalism of South Asia.

By locating overpopulation within the developing world, Ehrlich situates population growth as a distinctly racialized problem—one directed at the proliferation of brown bodies outside the West. In this racial formula, Ehrlich and his family become passive white onlookers, witnessing the grotesque and pitiable lives of the Third World inhabitants. Distance is created through the walls of the cab so that Ehrlich and his family are removed from their culpability in the problems that contribute to poverty in the developing world. At the same time, those whom Ehrlich describes become interpellated into a horrific scene. As characters in a narrative, the Indians evoke feelings of suffocation and terror rather than inspiring empathy or compassion. The developing world features more as a narrative prop than a lived reality—its racial contours meant to stir up emotions of dread and fear in the Western (read: white) reader. These feelings are then mapped onto the problem of overpopulation. As Ehrlich will admit: “since that night I’ve known the *feel* of overpopulation” (16; emphasis in original). Here his words allude to a complicated web, both

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<sup>3</sup> Terms associated with development, like “developing nations” and “developed nations,” reinforce a global hierarchy between nations, cultures, and peoples—so too with the terms “First World” and “Third World.” While normally “global North” and “global South” would provide suitable (if still imperfect) substitute terms, I retain the terms more widely used during the time Ehrlich released *The Population Bomb*. I do this to maintain a focus on the racial and (neo)colonialist logics perpetuating and perpetuated by these terms.

narrative and discursive, that marshals emotions derived from particular racial geographies in order to crystallize world population growth as a pressing social problem. The moral of the story seems clear: whites must change global population trends lest their civilized world degenerate into the world of these vile, suffering brown people.

Rather than regard Ehrlich's anecdote as a bizarre personal aside in an otherwise scientifically rigorous text, I argue that Ehrlich's racialized fears about reproduction fit within a pervasive Cold War discourse on the American home front. This discourse celebrated the modernity and superiority of the US as a nation tasked with keeping, as Winston Churchill stated, "the safety and welfare, the freedom and progress, of all the homes and families of all the men and women in all the lands" (par. 6). Along with freedom and safety, "home and family" quickly joined the core values of American democracy in the years following the Second World War—an addition alluded to by Churchill's confusing parallelism.<sup>4</sup> The white nuclear family unit became the paradigm of American freedom and liberty, a convenient heuristic for the conservative American ethos that fended off Soviet communism. In these reproductive terms, the gravest threat to the American way of life was nonwhite reproduction, a proliferating brown bomb of "people, people, people, people" that infiltrated the American consciousness. In the cultural imaginary, nonwhite reproduction harbored a multitude of Cold War fears, including the spread of communism, the acceleration

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<sup>4</sup> This quote comes from Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech made at Westminster College in rural Missouri in March 1946. Churchill's speech seems especially relevant to my thesis about the implicit racialization of America's "homes and families" given that, as historian Brenda Gayle Plummer notes: "Westminster College, the site of the famous 'Iron Curtain' speech, accepted no black students. An appeal from Churchill to endorse Anglo-American hegemony could not, in that context, fail to arouse suspicions among people of color. Afro-Americans widely protested the speech.... More than two thousand persons representing a variety of union, fraternal, church, and civic groups picketed a dinner given Churchill at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York on March 16, 1946. A similar demonstration protesting 'Anglo-Saxon world domination' took place in Los Angeles" (169).

of overpopulation, the stoking of mass immigration, and the chaos of civil and international unrest.

My dissertation explores the racist and sexist reproductive ideas that swirled at the heart of Cold War domestic discourse. Using an intersectional lens, which links analyses of race and gender, I work to unravel the cultural narratives that form the basis of American life. I look specifically to speculative fictions—a term I define more fully below—in order to trace the racialized and gendered representations of reproduction, family, and kinship that emerge in the period.<sup>5</sup> Like cultural critic Alan Nadel, I find these representations constructed a particular norm, “a pervasive image of a normative American: white, heterosexual, upwardly mobile but always middle class (regardless of income or occupation), generically religious, and uncommonly full of ‘common sense’” (*Containment* 298). Yet what is so often missed in studies of Cold War culture is the way race, gender, and reproduction together helped to construct the average American life. In “Nuclear Reproduction,” I argue that racialized and gendered notions of reproduction, particularly those circulating in Cold War speculative fictions, were important to the imaginative borders of the nation.<sup>6</sup> Unassimilable migrant families, the unfit black mother, and the submissive white housewife—these are some of the discursive figures that helped to fashion dominant

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<sup>5</sup> My analysis assumes that race, gender, and sexuality are not static, but socially constructed categories, embedded within certain historical and social contexts. Here my work draws from many theorists, but especially the racial formation theory of Omi and Winant. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, racial formation entails “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (55). For the social construction of gender, see Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. For more on the social construction of sexuality, see Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*.

<sup>6</sup> My dissertation draws from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* by defining the nation as “an imagined political community” (6). For Anderson, national print media helped to construct a collective imagination of the national community (46). In the American context, I argue, speculative fictions had a role in constituting the imaginative borders of the US and the American way of life.

conceptions of the ideal family, the American national body, and the prospects for humanity's future. Yet conceptions of the family, the nation, and the future were not static or uncontested.<sup>7</sup> As Joanne Meyerowitz has pointed out, "as a political discourse adopted by a wide range of conservatives, liberals, and even radicals, Cold War language had different meanings and different uses in different political contexts" (107). Against the prevailing view that Cold War discourse merely "contained" or narrowed the representations of American life, "Nuclear Reproduction" reveals the extent to which these representations were subject to debate, contestation, and sometimes outright rejection. Just as speculative fictions helped to consolidate notions of family, nation, and future, they also provided a means of subverting and critiquing dominant cultural ideals. Speculative fictions, in other words, worked within larger American cultural narratives by sometimes settling and sometimes unsettling fundamental ideas about the American way of life.

My dissertation's title "Nuclear Reproduction" highlights the volatile nature of reproductive ideas during the Cold War by making use of the multiple definitions of "nuclear."<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, in a manner evoking the "nuclear family," I mean to highlight the ways that white middle-class domestic ideals became consolidated as *the* paradigm of American life and normality. The white family model was "nuclear" in its rigid structure—

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<sup>7</sup> Even Nadel, who argues for "the general acceptance during the cold war of a relatively small set of narratives by a relatively large portion of the population" during the peak of the Cold War in America from 1946 to 1964, finds within these narratives various "contradictions" that gave rise to postmodernism in the subsequent decades (*Containment* 4; 298).

<sup>8</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* categorizes the associations with "nuclear" under two major definitions. The first major definition is given as "Of or relating to a nucleus, centre, or core" ("nuclear, adj."). Under this label are several sub-definitions, the most relevant to my project being: "Constituting a source or centre in or around which something develops or is organized; pivotal, seminal, original. Also: representing that which is central in importance; essential, basic." The second major definition is given as: "Relating to atomic nuclei." The most salient sub-definition here is: "*figurative*. Having an intensity or power likened to that of a nuclear explosion or nuclear radiation; (*slang*) very impressive."

based around a single node, or nucleus, of white male heterosexual authority. The nuclear family was also “nuclear” in its supposed naturalness—as an essential, base component of society. On the other hand, my use of “nuclear” refers to the corrosive, radioactive, and explosive elements of Cold War reproduction more akin to the characteristics of nuclear weapons. The representations of family, reproduction, and kinship I explore were “nuclear” given their roots in the depraved soil of American white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.<sup>9</sup> The unfit mother, the breadwinner, and the domestic help among other examples are socially constructed ideas, tainted by their manufacture and function within racist and sexist systems. These terms accrue toxicity as parts of a corrosive cultural discourse premised on dehumanization, exploitation, and hierarchy. Thus, reproduction was nuclear, first, in that it featured the white, middle-class, and heterosexual nuclear family as the cornerstone of American society and American values and, second, in that it helped to construct American self-perception and an American cultural imaginary atop a toxic bedrock of racism and sexism.<sup>10</sup> The doubleness of nuclear reproduction, as I show, permeates Cold War culture.

### **(De)Constructing Cold War Reproductive History**

Although the Cold War makes up the historical frame of my dissertation, it is difficult to define. Framed as the tense standoff between the USSR and the US with profound impacts

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to argue that white supremacy, heterosexism, and patriarchy are ahistorical social systems. Here, I look to the work of Stuart Hall, who defines racism not as an *a priori* category of analysis but as a historically specific structure of power with different logics, effects, and intensities that universally dehistoricizes by “translating historically-specific structures into the timeless language of nature” (342).

<sup>10</sup> In a similar rhetorical move, Paul Williams uses nuclear weapons to look at the double-sided nature of white supremacy. Williams’s study in *Race, Ethnicity, and Nuclear War* asks: “how have nuclear weapons been read as representative of the scientific achievement, military superiority and responsibility of white Europeans and their descendants? How have they also been interpreted as manifestations of the destructivity, racism, and recklessness of white civilization?” (1).



on foreign policy and domestic culture, the Cold War was fundamentally a discursive struggle between two competing ideologies—the capitalist democracy of the West and the Soviet-style communism of the USSR and its allies. This conflict seeped into American culture and reconfigured American foreign policy with the intent to “contain” the spread of communism. Historians debate the precise bookends of the Cold War. Some date its beginnings to Churchill’s 1946 speech about an “iron curtain” descending across Europe; others to the pronouncement by Bernard Baruch, advisor to President Harry S. Truman, that “we are today in the midst of a Cold War” in 1947 (Glass, par. 3). The end of the Cold War is likewise marred in uncertainty—as it is sometimes marked by the resignation of the last Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 or else with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. I am less concerned with the exact beginning and end dates of the Cold War, however, than with the more nebulous cultural narratives that ebb and flow in its general temporal frame. For my purposes, I take the Cold War period as the roughly fifty-year span from the end of the Second World War to the decade preceding the new millennium.

The Cold War period oversaw one of the most dramatic transformations in reproductive and family life in the United States. While the immediate postwar decades were marked by conservative reproductive ideals, the Cold War era overall entailed a marked expansion of reproductive freedom—especially for white women. In 1963, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* identified the sense of ennui experienced by many white middle-class housewives as “the problem with no name.” Friedan’s text provided one catalyst to a burgeoning feminist movement. Among the many outcomes of this movement, feminists touted that “the personal is political” and connected women’s reproductive and domestic lives—previously considered “private matters”—to their larger political struggle. The second

wave of feminism, as it would come to be called, made reproductive freedom a central objective and brought the homelife of women into the public eye by revealing the patriarchal power that permeates the home.

The feminist movement dovetailed with a growing focus on women's issues in health and medicine. In the 1960s and 1970s, an emerging women's health movement advocated for a greater female voice in medical care, more humane approaches to childbirth, and an end to body shaming. These feminists challenged the paternalist relationship between doctors and their female patients and pushed to grant women more authority over their bodily decisions. The publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which provided information about women's bodies and health written by and for women, sutured feminist calls for bodily autonomy with the need for more knowledge for and about women. As historian Adele E. Clarke finds, such demands coincided with an increasing focus on human reproduction in the American life sciences.<sup>11</sup>

Among other breakthroughs in the reproductive sciences, the invention of the hormonal birth control pill, or simply "the pill," in the 1950s, afforded women greater freedom by decoupling sex from reproduction. Yet the availability of such technology was often hindered by state law. After the Supreme Court rulings in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) and in *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), birth control information and contraceptives like the pill became accessible to all persons, at least in principle. These decisions held that an unwritten constitutional "right to privacy" protected citizens from governmental intrusion

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<sup>11</sup> Clarke goes on to argue that the alliance between reproductive scientists and birth control advocates from roughly 1915 until 1945 eventually marginalized many feminists' demands for greater reproductive autonomy. Instead, "reproductive scientists ultimately captured definitional authority as physicians, eugenicists, and neo-Malthusians conservatized the birth control movement into one for family planning and population control, displacing feminists from key organizational positions" (263).

into their sexual lives. This legal reasoning provided the groundwork for the 1973 Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, which declared abortion to be a constitutionally protected right. Proclaimed a major victory by the second-wave feminist movement, the *Roe* decision ended back-alley abortions and expanded access to safe abortion care.<sup>12</sup>

The mainstream Cold War narrative of reproductive and bodily freedom, several components of which I have just sketched out, overlooks the reproductive issues faced by women of color and working-class women. The new freedoms afforded by the birth control pill, for example, were derived at the expense of Puerto Rican women, on whom the pills were tested before governmental approval.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the “right to privacy” that most white middle-class feminists applauded after *Roe* had the effect of blocking many women of color and working-class women from adequate health and reproductive services. While *Roe* affirmed a women’s right to an abortion in the abstract, the decision did little to guarantee the right in practice.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the passage of the Hyde Amendment and similar state laws soon after *Roe*, blocked taxpayer dollars from helping women pay for abortion services.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> Here I mean the mainstream liberal feminist movement, as other feminists (especially radical feminists) would not see this state-derived right to abortion in the same light. Supporters of reproductive justice would view the Court’s attachment of abortion to an individual’s right to privacy as an obstacle, arguing that women also need access to abortion through government funding and other public means lest abortion only be available in the abstract.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, Laura Briggs argues that concerns about overpopulation in the Third World is what actually led to the concerted development of the birth control pill—as the knowledge that progestin inhibits ovulation was discovered a decade earlier (130). For more on this dark history, see Laura Briggs’s *Reproducing Empire*, chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> A distinction that the American anti-abortion movement has capitalized on since *Roe*.

<sup>15</sup> Exceptions to the Hyde Amendment’s funding ban has varied. “After hard-fought battles in Congress, the fiscal 1978 Hyde Amendment contained -- in addition to the exception for life endangerment -- new exceptions for rape and incest victims and women whose health would be severely damaged by carrying a pregnancy to term. However, in 1980 the Supreme Court decided *Harris v. McRae* (formerly *McRae v. Mathews*) and upheld the constitutionality of the original Hyde Amendment language containing a single exception for life endangerment. Thereafter, Congress enacted the Hyde Amendment with only that exception from the second half of fiscal 1981 through fiscal 1993. In fiscal 1994 and 1995, the Hyde Amendment again contained exceptions for rape and incest victims” (“Access Denied,” par. 7). These exceptions continue in the present.

mainstream feminist reproductive movement of the 1960s and 1970s, for its part, did little to mobilize on behalf of issues central to women of color and working-class women. Instead, the movement moved towards a single-issue approach—around the issue of abortion or birth prevention—and drew upon a conservative framework that sought to resist any intrusion into women’s lives by big government. As Silliman et al. have found, “while this framing brought moderate and conservative voters to abortion rights, it was at the expense of dividing feminists, alienating poor women, women of color, more radical white activists, and those from the holistic women’s health movement” (32).

Rather than cast these marginalized women as passive victims of the mainstream reproductive rights agenda, I want to emphasize their efforts to advocate for an expanded notion of reproductive freedom during the Cold War. Becky Thompson has argued that to center a history on the period from the 1950s to the 1970s would miss the increased activism around a multiracial feminist movement that occurred in the decades following. According to Thompson, “Ironically the very period that white feminist historians typically treat as a period of decline within the movement is the period of mass mobilization among antiracist women—both straight and lesbian” (344). During the nadir of mainstream white feminism from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, numerous organizations arose to advocate reproductive issues salient to poor women and women of color.<sup>16</sup> Feminist responses to sterilization abuse provides one example.

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<sup>16</sup> Silliman et al. also reveal that, besides creating their own separate organizations, women of color often worked within existing organizations to promote reproductive freedom. The authors quote Loretta Ross, who argues that: “Sometimes we [women of color] work with predominantly white organizations that marginalize issues of race and class, and privilege abortion rights over other issues of reproductive justice....Some of us work with people of color organizations that marginalize gender and class issues, and where women’s reproductive health issues are tangential to struggles against racism....Some women of color work with anti-poverty organizations that sometimes neglect race and gender issues altogether, assuming that class issues subsume concerns about reproductive health” (35-36).

In 1973, just months after the *Roe* decision, the mainstream media brought national attention to two black girls in Montgomery, Alabama. The sisters, Minnie Lee (age 12) and Mary Alice (age 14), were sterilized without their consent by order of the Montgomery Community Action Committee, funded by the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). Outrage from this incident was compounded by the subsequent revelations that the sterilization of African American, Chicana, Puerto Rican, and Native American women was rampant across the country. As Angela Davis notes: “Carl Shultz, director of HEW’s Population Affairs Office, estimated that between 100,000 and 200,000 sterilizations had actually been funded [in 1972] by the federal government” (218).<sup>17</sup> In response to these findings, a multinational coalition of women formed organizations like the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA) in New York City. In 1977, the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) formed, which “placed opposition to sterilization abuse on a par with support for abortion rights” (Silliman et al. 33). The organization exposed the contradiction in federal reproductive policy that denied federal funds for abortion through the recently passed Hyde Amendment, while funding sterilizations for women of color.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the grassroots movement against sterilization abuse by women of color and other activists pressed the mainstream feminist movement to adopt a broader definition of reproductive freedom—in line with reproductive justice—and to combine their analyses of gender oppression with the effects of race, class, and sexuality.

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<sup>17</sup> Besides surgical sterilization, long-term contraceptive injections of depot medroxyprogesterone acetate or Depo-Provera were incorporated into state birth control programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, despite its status as an investigational new drug under examination by the Federal Drug Administration. As Hornblum et al. explain: “Poor black women in the South tended to be the overwhelming recipients of the drug. Threats, deception, and the loss of welfare benefits were recurring themes in many of these anti-pregnancy programs” (194).

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Roberts notes that white middle-class women encountered difficulty getting voluntarily sterilized during the same time period (95).

Although the brief Cold War reproductive history given here may suggest that white women netted reproductive gains as women of color, working class women, and LGBTQ+ women suffered reproductive oppression, the picture is more complicated. In particular, I reject a simple narrative of liberation and empowerment or, conversely, of oppression and discrimination when it comes to reproductive autonomy.<sup>19</sup> Instead, “Nuclear Reproduction” shows how reproductive gains for certain people were often made by propagating harmful assumptions about the reproduction of others. For example, the domestic ideal that many white middle-class families sought in cookie-cutter suburbia came at the expense of many African American middle-class families denied the elevated status of homeownership.<sup>20</sup> Due to the interlocking axes of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism, rarely does an advancement along a single axis translate to justice for all. Even so, speculative fictions demonstrate that reproductive freedom is not a zero-sum game. Indeed, Cold War speculative fictions map out more equitable futures as much as exaggerating present inequalities. The true imaginative work of speculative fictions comes in calling out systemic violence, positing new alliances to bring about change, and conjuring images of reproductive freedom.

In order to unravel the guiding threads of my argument, I want to return to the opening anecdote from *The Population Bomb*. Ehrlich’s vignette helps to illustrate three important areas of scholarship in which my project intervenes: 1) the definition and function of speculative fictions in the Cold War period; 2) the central role of reproduction and domesticity in Cold War cultural narratives; and 3) the utility of an intersectional reading of

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<sup>19</sup> Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert fall under the sway of such an interpretation when they argue that “the history of sexuality in postwar America is thus the story of increasing liberalization, first within and then outside of marriage” (5).

<sup>20</sup> The racial disparity in American homeownership will be expanded upon in chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Cold War speculative fictions. Although these three points appear in this introduction as discrete scholarly threads in Cold War scholarship, my analysis in subsequent chapters will expose their frequent overlaps.

### **Defining Speculative Fictions**

Despite the important role of speculative storytelling in *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich would not have thought of himself primarily as a storyteller. At the time of the book's release, Ehrlich was an academic scientist at Stanford University, a professor of biological sciences whose publications were mostly concerned with butterfly populations.<sup>21</sup> Yet Ehrlich understood the importance of expressing the problem of overpopulation by looking beyond statistical projections and scientific reasoning to story-telling. For Ehrlich and other overpopulation scientists, stories acted as important ways to ground statistical data, elucidate abstract hypotheses, justify calls for broad social reforms, and tap into emotions unreachable through scientific rationality alone.

Stories gain significance in their ability to map onto the larger cultural narratives that define American social thought. Ehrlich's introductory anecdote, in other words, was made intelligible by virtue of its hemming close to hegemonic notions of American life and values.<sup>22</sup> Alan Nadel makes clear the relationship between the personal stories of individual

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<sup>21</sup> Based on the publication history listed in his curriculum vitae, Ehrlich's interest in population biology began in the early 1960s and, unsurprisingly given his prior scholarship, related to the study of butterflies. The evolution of Ehrlich's entomological interests into studies of human population was not unique. Another founder of the Zero Population Growth (ZPG) movement, Charles Lee Remington, was also a preeminent American entomologist and considered the father of modern lepidoptery.

<sup>22</sup> I use the terms "story" and "narrative" here interchangeably to denote the personal and more diffuse cultural modes of organizing experiences into networks of meaning by using stock characters, plots, and other elements. Personal narratives map onto wider cultural narratives, which invest them with increased social significance or salience. For example, Ehrlich's anecdote, in which his family and the nameless Indian denizens are the central

writers and the larger cultural narratives that make them legible. In the Cold War period, specifically, Nadel argues that cultural narratives “unify, codify, and contain—perhaps *intimidate* is the best word – the personal narratives of its population” (*Containment 4*; emphasis in original). For Nadel, personal and cultural narratives operated under the US strategy of containment, at least in the earlier Cold War decades, by attempting to valorize conservative values against internal dissent. From Disney’s *The Lady and the Tramp* to J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, Nadel argues that certain tropes existed in popular culture that “performed the ideological task of constructing narratives that allowed a significant portion of the population to link its sense of self—the story of its life—to national history” (8). Literature and popular culture provided salient narratives that helped to fashion unique American notions of security, freedom, and futurity. My dissertation looks specifically at the larger cultural narratives reflected in what I deem speculative fictions.

Within literary studies, the genre of speculative fiction is difficult to define.<sup>23</sup> It is generally considered an umbrella term encompassing science fiction, fantasy, horror, utopian fiction, magical realism, alternate histories, and other non-mimetic fiction.<sup>24</sup> However, debates continue about the definition of the term and the forms speculative fiction takes in

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characters, conforms to a larger cultural narrative in which white America and the “uncivilized” South Asian continent are the primary actors.

<sup>23</sup> The best illustration of speculative fiction’s muddled ontology is the Cthulhu-like organism created by Ward Shelley in the image “The History of Science Fiction.” Although termed “science fiction,” Shelley’s sprawling genealogy underscores the ambiguous classification of the genre with tentacles drawn from mythology, fantasy, horror, and detective genres with wormholes that rupture and rend a linear teleology into frayed strands. To view this image, visit [www.wardshelley.com/paintings/pages/HistoryofScienceFiction.html](http://www.wardshelley.com/paintings/pages/HistoryofScienceFiction.html).

<sup>24</sup> The term “speculative fiction” was originally coined by Robert A. Heinlein in 1947. The term became popular in the mid-1960s to mid-1970s as a way to differentiate speculative fiction from science fiction, especially by those who eschewed the narrow masculinist and technologically-focused genre of science fiction in postwar pulp-writing. The desire to distinguish speculative fiction from science fiction exists in the present as well—consider Ursula K. Le Guin’s 2009 dispute with Margaret Atwood about the classification of Atwood’s fiction as speculative fiction or science fiction. For more on this dispute, see “Margaret Atwood on Science Fiction.”



literary history.<sup>25</sup> One particular area of debate has stemmed from authors, readers, and critics of color, who contest the assumption that speculative fiction (especially science fiction) is a white genre, written for a white male adolescent audience. The assumption is understandable, to be sure, as the mainstream genre has historically contained relatively few people of color as meaningful characters and overlooked race as a significant part of the realities of speculative worlds. Like the speculative worlds created in their works, mainstream speculative fiction authors have typically been white and masculine. But authors of color have pushed back against the historical whiteness and maleness of the genre. The black gay author Samuel Delany, for example, once articulated that: “I am often spoken of as the first African-American science fiction writer. But I wear that originary label as uneasily as any writer has worn the label of science fiction itself” (par. 2). Delany’s unease, he explains, stems partially from the whitewashing of speculative fiction and its history. Authors like Delany represent part of a larger movement to affirm a richer genre of speculative fiction, a genre that encompasses African American, Latina/o, indigenous, and Asian American authors and that features characters of many races, sexualities, and genders.

My dissertation recognizes the richness of the genre and its multicultural history in the Cold War era. In the chapters that follow, I interweave texts by white male speculative fiction authors, like Ray Bradbury and Harry Harrison, with female authors and authors of color, like Judith Merril, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Octavia Butler. At the same time, I mean to challenge the dismissal of more mainstream white- and male-authored works as not relevant to analyses of race and gender. Isiah Lavender III notes that the way race is typically foregrounded in science fiction by black authors can give the impression that these are the

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<sup>25</sup> For more, see Esther L. Jones, “Speculative Fiction.”

only manifestations of race in the genre or “that race and racism *are* only discussed in the contexts of those writers” (10; emphasis in original). This is an inaccurate representation of the genre. Works by white authors and authors of color, male authors and female authors, I argue, all contributed to a discourse about reproduction that mobilized ideas about race, gender, and sexuality in order to mold American domestic life.

Even as I embrace the generic ambiguity afforded by the category speculative fiction within literary studies, I simultaneously seek to extend my analysis beyond the literary. By using the plural speculative *fictions* rather than the singular but more enclosed speculative *fiction*, I emphasize that speculative stories are not always self-contained narratives nor are they always written and published as literature. Speculative fictions can inhabit texts in less formal fragmentary forms. In one section of *The Population Bomb*, for example, Ehrlich speculates whether we could use interstellar travel to solve the soon-to-be population crisis.<sup>26</sup> Ehrlich spends just a few sentences raising and dismissing the possibility (however remote) that we could feasibly shuttle enough people off Earth to keep up with human fecundity. Due to its brevity and its tangential position, subordinate to Ehrlich’s larger scientific case about overpopulation, the aside about interstellar travel would not count as a discrete or complete work of speculative fiction. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to reject this bizarre moment as not performing important speculative work.

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<sup>26</sup> Over fifty years later, Ehrlich’s anticipation of this argument still resonates—as current movies, like Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014) and Ridley Scott’s *The Martian* (2015), reveal that space colonization remains a particularly alluring, if still infeasible, way to solve (or rather, flee from) the Earth’s problems. In *The Population Bomb*, even after presenting the mathematics that invalidate the space colonization option, Ehrlich cannot help but speculate on the effects this fictitious endeavor would have on human society: “Since the ships would take generations to reach most stars, the only people who could be transported would be those willing to exercise strict birth control. Population explosions on space ships [sic] would be disastrous. Thus we would have to export our responsible people, leaving the irresponsible at home on Earth to breed” (21). Ehrlich here goes beyond the strictly scientific into the realm of speculative storytelling.

Speculative fictions can emerge in unexpected places; they are not merely contained within the covers of science fiction novels or between the opening and closing credits of dystopian films. In this dissertation, I locate speculative fictions in civilian defense manuals, documents of nuclear strategy, and critical theory texts as well as published novels and short stories. My analysis treats these texts as historical artifacts; I am not interested in the specific biographies or intellectual evolutions of their authors.<sup>27</sup> The decoupling of these texts from the lives of their creators places the focus on their function within Cold War culture—how they fit within, support, or disrupt larger cultural discourses about reproduction. By removing my analysis from definitional debates in literary studies and severing a linkage between author and text, I argue for the importance of looking at the speculative as a mode of inquiry rather than a stable literary genre. While the term *speculative fiction* seeks definitional containment—that is, its placement within a delimited literary tradition—the term *speculative fictions* resists this conservative impulse. Rather than providing closure, speculative fictions are open-ended. An analysis of speculative fictions privileges not merely the texts themselves but their circulations amidst other texts and the contexts of these

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<sup>27</sup> Here my work draws on poststructuralism. Like Roland Barthes, I reject the move to situate a text's provenance in relation to an author: "The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book: the book and the author take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a before and an after: the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now" (4). The severance of author and text, however, does not invalidate the power mechanisms that attach to authorship itself; even if the Author is dead, the authority of the author-function is not. Like Foucault, then, I am cognizant of the discursive role of authorship—in whether authorship is made visible or invisible, the classification of an author (as poet, philosopher, novelist, or mere writer), and other ways authorship mobilizes power. Foucault summarizes this position when he argues: "We should suspend the typical questions: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse" ("What Is an Author?" 314).

circulations. Turning to speculative fictions, in effect, lays bare the tempestuous relationship between power, discourse, and text.

Throughout this project, I take speculative fictions to include any narrative with elements that project or predict the future based on current events.<sup>28</sup> This definition is similar to other classifications of speculative fiction, the most famous of which is offered by Darko Suvin as “the literature of cognitive estrangement” (par. 2). Like Suvin, I take speculative fictions as the “factual reporting of fictions,” which alienate us from our usual assumptions about reality (par. 6).<sup>29</sup> Unlike Suvin, though, my definition includes “nonliterature” and privileges a relationship between future and present rather than a relationship of alienation (i.e. the alienation between the self and one’s reality and the text’s strange otherworldly fantasy).<sup>30</sup> In speculative fictions, as I have defined the term, the future springs from the present—in that, these texts manifest certain aspects of the current society as a way of building a vision of the future. But the future imagined in speculative fictions also provides a way of reflecting back on the present.<sup>31</sup> To put it another way, speculative fictions relate the

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<sup>28</sup> By differentiating “project” from “predict,” I mean to highlight the ways speculative fictions attach themselves to institutional power. Some speculative fictions may only *project* a certain future as a creative exercise, while others may *predict* a future by turning to various predictive mechanisms deemed credible to the task (e.g. statistics, scenarios, computational modeling, etc.). More institutional weight bears on prediction than projection—as these predictions usually help to organize institutional actions in preparation for or anticipation of the future predicted.

<sup>29</sup> Due to the “cognitive” criterion, Suvin’s definition, like my own, excludes genres like myth, folklore, horror, magical realism, fantasy, and weird fiction. These genres are not based on the “factual reporting of fictions.” Each of these genres “fails to establish a superordinated maleficent world of its own, causing a grotesque tension between arbitrary supernatural phenomena and the empirical norms they infiltrate” (par. 11).

<sup>30</sup> Here I exclude the genre of alternate history since its preoccupation is more between the past and present, even if a story’s alternative timeline extends into our future.

<sup>31</sup> In many speculative stories, for instance, there are moments when characters speak about the reader’s present with a message—usually a warning meant to help the reader either ensure or avoid the character’s present future. Whether Saint John’s horror-filled prophesy in the *Book of Revelations* or Jacob Marley’s sorrowful retelling of his mortal greed in “A Christmas Carol,” speculative fictions forge a connection with the present with the intent of changing it. This criterion of my definition means to winnow out genres, like pure fantasy,

present to the future, while making the significance and parameters of that relationship an open question.

An exploration of speculative fictions during the Cold War period is appropriate given that the era witnessed a proliferation of speculative thought. The explosion of speculative fictions in the Cold War is especially owed to the period's changing material and ideological conditions. Matthew Connelly et al. make clear the increasing importance placed on speculation by the state in the decades following the Second World War (1432). The speed and destruction of a potential nuclear war, in particular, necessitated that "prevision" assume a greater role in US war-making strategies. As Connelly et al. put it, "struggles over the fate of the earth would be resolved in a land of make-believe," giving speculative fictions huge sway over US defense policies, diplomatic relations, and other political calculations (1432).<sup>32</sup> On a different track, Palmer Rampell notes the intervention of speculative fictions in competing ideas about the definition of the human during the Cold War. "Fictional aliens, android, and animals all served as tools for these [speculative fiction] authors to reflect on the notion of the person—and by extension, the fetus" (22). Rampell focuses on the engagement of speculative fictions with the US abortion debate specifically as conflicting ideas about the origin of life emerged between pro-choice and pro-life activists. From the War Room to the grassroots, speculative fictions permeated Cold War America and, as Patrick Sharp underscores, "reinforced the feeling that Americans were living in a science fiction world"

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that may deal with *a* present and *a* future but are not tied in any direct way to *our* present or *our* future (whatever that may be).

<sup>32</sup> With the perceived utility of speculation in the service of US *realpolitik*, literature itself gained importance among American policymakers and strategists. In Herman Kahn's *Thinking About the Unthinkable* from 1962, the RAND Corporation military strategist describes how "abstract models, 'scenarios,' war and peace games, historical examples, *and even novels* all can be used to increase the analyst's comprehension of the dangerous and unfamiliar terrain [i.e. nuclear warfare] which he is trying to map" (133; emphasis added).

(154). Like these scholars, my project holds that speculative fictions occupy an important place in Cold War American life, particularly in crafting ideas of the family, the nation, and the future.

In my dissertation, I argue that speculative fictions function in two ways to help shape American culture. Here my analysis draws from the anonymous authors of *Speculate This!*, who theorize the dual nature of speculative world-building. The first form of speculation, called firmative speculation, works repressively by seeking to “pin down, delimit, constrain, and enclose—to make things definitive, firm” (Uncertain Commons, ch. 1). According to the authors, it “enclose[s] us within a relatively secure horizon” that “metastasize[s] the present, keeping things more or less as they are” (ch. 1). The firmative speculative mode, in other words, articulates a future that has the effect of locking down the present and preserving the racial, gendered, and sexual status quo.

The firmative speculative mode can be seen in theories about reproduction like Lee Edelman’s *No Future*. Edelman presumes speculation as firmative while indicting the ideology of reproductive futurism, a mode of thought that holds to a “fantasy of a future” in which the heterosexist (and patriarchal and white supremacist) social order is preserved (11). According to Edelman, reproductive futurism defines “the future [as] mere repetition and just as lethal as the past” for queer subjects (31). Textual figures under reproductive futurism—from the waif of *Les Mis* to Little Orphan Annie—function to lock the future in the heterosexist chains of the present. For Edelman, speculative fictions, at their worst, create a future that leaves unchallenged the oppressions of the present, and, at their best, forsake the

future and reproduction altogether.<sup>33</sup> Rejection of the future and of the reproductive is the only way forward for queer life in *No Future*.<sup>34</sup> Yet Edelman's radical rejection of futurity misses the positive potential of the speculative—that is, its capacity to offer alternative (i.e. non-heterosexist) visions of the future.

*Speculate This!* describes the liberatory speculative mode as affirmative speculation. This form of speculation works “to produce futures while refusing the foreclosure of potentialities, to hold on to the spectrum of possibilities while remaining open to multiple futures whose context of actualization can never be fully anticipated” (Uncertain Commons, ch. 1). Affirmative speculation frees visions of the future to creative possibilities, imagining new ways of thinking and living. By leaving the future open to certain paths that are often severed by the rigidity of firmative speculation, affirmative speculation embraces uncertainty. This mode of speculation gives speculative fictions what Judith Butler deems their “critical promise.” According to Butler, “The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise” (*Undoing Gender* 29).<sup>35</sup> What Butler underscores as “the critical promise of fantasy” is precisely the emancipatory potential of speculative fictions.

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<sup>33</sup> Edelman does not call the cultural texts that perpetuate reproductive futurism “speculative” or “speculative fictions.” However, some of the texts he cites would fit under this definition, such as P.D. James's *The Children of Men*.

<sup>34</sup> In response to Edelman's support of the anti-social thesis in queer theory, José Esteban Muñoz lauds the potential of certain visions of the future as “potential blueprints of a world not quite here” rather than “a *then* and *there* that could be and indeed should be” (97). What Muñoz holds up as a “forward-dawning futurity” for queerness is found in the very cultural realms (including speculative fictions) that Edelman dismisses (9).

<sup>35</sup> Butler is not merely talking about the fantasy genre here but speculative modes of thought.

As another example, Esther L. Jones ascribes to the affirmative view of the speculative in her analysis in *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Jones argues that speculative fictions afford black women a means to contest the medical exploitation of their bodies and lives. For Jones, “these writers employ methods of extrapolation and cognitive estrangement in their use of the speculative to identify historical patterns, amplify contemporary social and political problems and envision futures in which alternative approaches to justice may be imagined” (*Medicine* 5). The speculative here is both deconstructive—exposing “social and political problems”—and regenerative—envisioning “alternative approaches to justice.” Yet Jones’s focus on the affirmative potential of speculation ignores that fictions can also promote injustice. Instead, Jones places the blame on science alone for the use and abuse of black women’s bodies:

Once we understand the ways in which persistent fictions, particularly when it comes to race, are perpetuated by science and its mythmaking, we begin to see how myths form the greater part of our reality. Speculative fiction can help renegotiate those mythic boundaries that ultimately shape real life. (38)

To Jones, the genre of speculative fiction emerges as the corrective to science’s mythmaking. What Jones misses is that the ability for speculative fiction to “renegotiate” cultural meanings and mythic boundaries affords it just as much power to set oppressive scripts as it does to reshape them into more egalitarian forms. Speculative fiction too can participate in the racist mythmaking that facilitates science’s oppression of black women.

Rather than endorse Cold War speculative fictions as inherently affirmative or firmative, I argue that both speculative modes inhabit American Cold War discourse. Speculative fictions, in other words, are not always only emancipatory or repressive. Oftentimes, the narratives I explore have the effect of justifying or leaving unexamined the structural inequalities of Cold War America. Such narratives frequently redirect the blame



for violence and marginalization onto the hurt and marginalized themselves. On the other hand, these same narratives often reveal possibilities for a world “otherwise.” This middle position allows me to both build upon and complicate the accounts offered by Edelman and Jones. With Edelman, I hold that the speculative engages in cultural work that has the effect of foreclosing certain ways of living and reproducing. However, speculative fictions also contain the capacity to resist reproductive futurism by offering alternative visions of the future unblemished by hegemonic notions of family, reproduction, and domesticity. Likewise, my project validates Jones’s claim that speculative fictions allow women of color the power to reclaim bodily autonomy and imagine more just worlds. At the same time, I maintain that speculative fictions contribute to the injustices that reduce black women’s freedom in the first place.

### **Reproduction in Cold War Discourse**

Among Ehrlich’s most radical ideas in *The Population Bomb* was his recommendation that overpopulation be combated by “the addition of temporary sterilants to water supplies or staple food” (135). Ehrlich’s suggestion expresses an appeal not unlike the Victorian demand for sexual repression—the stymying of carnal urges to prevent social (and moral) chaos.<sup>36</sup> However, as Michel Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis” holds, even such a seemingly repressive move can operate as one face of “a veritable discursive explosion” surrounding sex, sexuality, and reproduction (*History* 17). The counterculture of the 1960s

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<sup>36</sup> A similar “repressive hypothesis” holds for the immediate postwar period in America, which historian Ruth Rosen deems “the claustrophobic constraints of the fifties” (4). I argue that this era was not simply one of reproductive repression—this is only one form that power takes. Instead, the 1950s oversaw a proliferation of reproductive fears, desires, and questions manifested in speculative fictions. For more, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

perhaps most obviously embodies an explosion of the sexual into Cold War discourse. This is best expressed in its oft-quoted slogan “Make Love, Not War,” which sets sex and war on an equal plane. Yet, as my dissertation shows, this period was not an exception to the Cold War’s sexually repressive culture as much as a different face of a Cold War America always already obsessed with sexuality and reproduction.

Cold War culture was saturated with sex, sexuality, reproduction, and kinship. Even in the 1940s and 1950s, commonly interpreted as the most conservative period of the Cold War, domestic discourse swirled about marriage and, more implicitly, sex. Historian Beth Bailey finds that these decades witnessed an intense public fixation on heterosexual reproduction given the scarcity of marriageable men during the Second World War and the changed courtship dynamics as men returned afterwards. A new genre of advice literature about dating emerged, written by a new group of experts—psychologists, sociologists, statisticians—who “studied and interpreted ‘private’ acts with reference to national norms” (Bailey 4). These experts counseled young white women and men on the increasingly public affairs of courtship. During the same period, the rates of marriage increased and the ages of those getting married decreased. Popular culture, Bailey finds, “fed [this trend] and helped create and standardize a new ideal” (43). The ideal relationship in the post-war era was monogamous, heterosexual, and cemented in early marriage.

In later decades, even as *Loving v. Virginia* redefined the marital bedroom and feminists brought the reproductive into the political sphere, American concerns about sexuality and reproduction turned overseas. In this climate, Betsy Hartmann notes the reconfiguration of “birth control” as an individual right into a tool of top-down social planning or “population control” (98-106). By the 1960s, the US government made

population control a part of its international development policies. America's population control strategies in the developing world sought to "modernize" sexual life and boost postcolonial economies. At the same time, the population control movement blamed Third World economic inequality, poverty, and political instability on hyperfertility. This logic effectively absolved the West of responsibility for economic disparities and cast people in the Third World as ignorant or irrational for having "too many" children.

During the final decades of the Cold War, dubbed later as the Reagan Era, US policy debates frequently turned up new cultural images of unfit mothers and broken families. Accounts of "crack babies" and "the culture of poverty" peppered political rhetoric. These tropes sought to justify a conservative agenda that would cut social spending, scale back social safety nets, and lower taxes. Reagan himself helped to spin the outlandish story of a Chicagoan welfare fraudster into the infamous welfare queen.<sup>37</sup> In a campaign speech in 1976, Reagan defined the welfare queen as a figure of moral depravity and decadent excess. She was a contradiction, both artful and lazy, according to the future president:

In Chicago, they found a woman who holds the record. She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year. (Levin, par. 2)

Although nowhere named in Reagan's speech, the welfare queen quickly became a convenient shorthand in American politics for the indolent poor. The welfare queen was also implicitly coded as black and fecund. She was, as Dorothy Roberts explains, an unwed black mother "who deliberately breeds children at the expense of taxpayers to fatten the monthly

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<sup>37</sup> In 2013, Josh Levin of *Slate* explored the social construction of the "welfare queen," a figure manufactured largely from Reagan's claims about the American fraudster, Linda Reagan. Levin points out that Reagan used accounts of Taylors activities in his 1976 and 1980 presidential campaigns to support his criticism of American social programs. For more, see Levin's "The Welfare Queen."

check” (17). Images like the welfare queen had the effect of demonizing poor black women and touched off what Roberts calls “a legacy of disrespect for the privacy of welfare recipients” (226).

Simply put, Cold War Americans, like Foucault’s Victorians, were obsessed with sex and reproduction. Plainly, Ehrlich was not the first Cold War warrior to seek the management of reproduction and sexuality for the sake of national interests and global security.<sup>38</sup> Even his most radical views are comfortably situated within a pervasive cultural discourse that policed, surveilled, and ultimately shaped American reproductive ideas. Cultural historians have long appreciated the role of reproduction in US Cold War discourse; however, fewer have taken seriously the racialized nature of reproduction.

Elaine Tyler May’s groundbreaking history, *Homeward Bound*, underscores the important place of reproduction, sexuality, and family in Cold War American culture. May argues that the strategy of containing communism as a matter of foreign policy also found purchase in the domestic culture of the 1940s and 1950s. Domestic “containment” touted conservative values like marriage and family, while demonizing homosexuality, premarital sex, and nonnormative gender roles. Women especially were locked into traditional roles as supportive wives and caring mothers laden with the weight of an entire self-promoted American ideology. May’s feminist analysis was critical in elevating Cold War domestic discourse as a subject worthy of historical and cultural analysis. Her history also underscored that American domestic ideologies were unique from but intimately tied to Cold War foreign

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<sup>38</sup> American companies (e.g. Durex, Johnson and Johnson) had already begun testing contraceptive products on Puerto Rican women in the 1950s, more than a decade before *The Population Bomb* and Ehrlich’s championing of “sterilants” entered the scene. The first large-scale human trial of the hormonal birth control pill was carried out on Puerto Rican women in 1955 by the American doctors Gregory Pincus and John Rock. One way to justify these experiments was to link them to an emerging US strategy of Third World “development,” which purported to decrease poverty and, in so doing, make these areas less ripe for communist infiltration; another justification was preventing overpopulation. For more, see Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire*, chapter 4.

policy. The relationship between domestic containment and foreign containment broke down the artificial divide between the private and public realms. As a foundational text in the history of Cold War domesticity, *Homeward Bound* lays essential groundwork for my own project. Where I depart from May is on race.

Although May's subtitle claims to focus on "American Families in the Cold War Era," the book rarely deviates from discussing white American families. To construct her history, May relies on popular culture, including movies and newspapers as well as the Kelly Longitudinal Study. This study comprises a series of surveys conducted on about 600 white middle-class men and women who formed families from the late 1930s through the mid-1950s.<sup>39</sup> May's adoption of the Kelly Study presents a serious methodological blind spot by leaving her discussion of the American domestic ideology rooted in whiteness. May explains away this limitation by maintaining that "it was the values of the white middle class that shaped the dominant political and economic institutions that affected all Americans" (15). While this is undoubtedly true, May assumes that the values held by the white middle class were themselves shaped by ideals of whiteness. But the project of defining whiteness is always a simultaneous project of defining not-whiteness. As Toni Morrison puts it, "nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery" (38). American ideals of freedom and family, in other words, are steeped in a whiteness that is itself "backgrounded by savagery" (44).

One exception to the whitewashing in histories of American Cold War culture is Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture*. Unlike May's *Homeward Bound*, Nadel's history dedicates

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<sup>39</sup> In categorizing the racial backgrounds (or "Racial Stock" as the surveys put it) of the respondents, the Kelly Study includes European ethnicities almost exclusively. The categories listed are: American, English, Irish, German, Scotch, French, Scandinavian, Russian and Mid-European, Jewish, and Combination (May 232).

two chapters to African American cultural discourse by looking at the work of John Williams and Alice Walker respectively.<sup>40</sup> Nadel includes these authors to “distinguish [African American narratives] from the mainstream of American post-modern fiction” (7). I applaud Nadel’s attempt to “avoid...the tacit suggestion that American culture during the cold war—as is sometimes suggested by a 1950s revival mentality—was, for all *significant* purposes, white” (7). Nevertheless, I challenge his formulation of African American authors as somehow removed from or outside the dominant mainstream discourse. Both white authors and authors of color, I argue, worked within a racialized Cold War culture. The depictions of race that inhabit their texts necessarily grapple with the hegemonic white norm, whether to reinforce it or disrupt it.

The difficulty in joining race with reproduction in Cold War culture may stem from a colorblindness particular to American notions of domesticity. David L. Eng’s *The Feeling of Kinship* introduces the term “the racialization of intimacy” to describe “the collective ways by which race becomes occluded within the private domain of private family and kinship today” (10). Although Eng situates his discussion in the present, the racialization of intimacy impacts Cold War culture as it was lived and has been studied. While scholars like May and Nadel privilege whiteness as the dominant norm in Cold War domestic culture, they move attention away from the other racial categories that constructed this norm. In so doing, these scholars discount race itself as a meaningful focus of inquiry. But US Cold War culture, I argue, was not uniformly white, and examining race is important to understanding Cold War America. Attending to the racialization of intimacy, as Eng states, “brings critical focus on

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<sup>40</sup> Nadel’s choice to only include African American authors seems, at best, to presume that African Americanness can serve as an effective proxy for other racial identities in the Cold War and, at worst, to discount these other racial groups as irrelevant to American cultural discourse.

the processes by which race is exploited to consolidate idealized notions of family and kinship in the global North” (10). Similarly, by bringing race, and the intersections between race and gender, into my analysis of Cold War domestic discourse, “Nuclear Reproduction” explores the binds that wove the American family and the American nation together.

### **Intersectionality and Cold War Speculative Fictions**

By focusing on race and gender together, my project adopts an intersectional approach in discussing Cold War speculative fictions. Coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality holds that social categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality, are interconnected and map onto overlapping and interdependent systems of domination.<sup>41</sup> Intersectionality is more than simply looking at race and gender and sexuality together; it is an analytical tool that seeks to understand the interaction between these categories and how they gain meaning from the intersections of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Intersectionality theory continually underscores that oppression cannot be understood through single-category frameworks—ones that look only at racism or sexism individually. These reductive ways of analyzing power and oppression suspend other aspects of people’s identities or make assumptions about what those other aspects are. For example, in discussions about sexism perpetrated against black women, attention to gender alone would ignore how racial identities are also at play. Instead, intersectionality requires that scholars look at power as multifaceted and embedded within multiple systems simultaneously.

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<sup>41</sup> Although credited with coining the term, Crenshaw was not the first to employ an intersectional analysis. Ange-Marie Hancock notes that “intersectionality-like” thinking had “reciprocal roots in political activism” stretching back into the 1830s with the anti-violence work of the nineteenth-century orator, Maria Stewart (71).

Looking intersectionally at Cold War speculative fictions and across Cold War culture more broadly exposes new dimensions of American cultural life.

Intersectionality sheds light on aspects often overlooked in other analyses. In particular, by looking at race and gender together, my dissertation moves critical attention to women of color in Cold War speculative fictions. Even in other studies that have looked at race and Cold War culture, women of color typically do not feature prominently.<sup>42</sup> Such an oversight is understandable given that, in many Cold War speculative fictions, women of color are not actual characters but “absent presences.” The emotional appeal crafted in Ehrlich’s anecdote, for example, is superficially framed against the developing world—the nameless and genderless “people, people, people, people” he cites. Yet Ehrlich’s enemy is more specifically feminine and racialized. To Ehrlich and other overpopulation alarmists, brown women in the developing world (and in the West) were those warranting medical and political intervention. It was against the bodies of women of color that the population control establishment deployed new technologies and techniques in their effects to control “excess” reproduction. At once malicious threats to the global order and helpless victims to the sexual urges of brown men, women of color were defined in such a way that rationalized the imperialist intrusion into their lives as a military necessity and moral imperative.<sup>43</sup> Women

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<sup>42</sup> As an example, see Patrick Sharp’s *Savage Perils*, which—despite its extraordinary work highlighting the racial undertones of early Cold War culture—refers mainly to the presence of white women and the role of white womanhood in speculative fictions.

<sup>43</sup> In *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich notes the malicious cunning of women who subvert population control measures: “I have heard the disturbing rumor that in some areas of India women are removing the IUDs so that they can collect again the small payment for having it inserted” (86). In the same section, Ehrlich casts Indian men as the villainous keepers of female sexuality: “the most recent word I have seen on family planning in India is from a *Washington Post* story of March 7, 1968, by Bernard Nossiter. He give another very depressing report of the failure thus far of the birth control campaign in rural India... ‘... a Hindu father of three blurts out, “It is a sin to prevent children from being born.”’ ‘A grizzled farmer breaks in angrily and says, “You must practice self-control”’” (87). For more on the trope of the Third World woman, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse.”



(as opposed to men) and nonwhite women (as opposed to white women) were the targets of Ehrlich's new framework of reproductive control.

As "absent presences," women of color are simultaneously centered and marginalized in Cold War discourse. Speculative fictions, like Ehrlich's anecdote, frequently invoke women of color and construct strategies of containment around their sexual and reproductive excesses; at the same time, speculative fictions dismiss their needs, freedom, and survival as marginal to those of white men and women. Audre Lorde best articulates this contradiction—the simultaneous centering and marginalizing of women of color in discourse—when she writes:

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. ("Transformation" 42)

Karla Holloway too has pointed out the ways race and gender mediate the relative privacy or publicness of the body in discourse.<sup>44</sup> The very "right of privacy" that protects and respects the reproductive lives of white women, for example, does not extend to women of color, whose own lives and bodies are exposed to constant surveillance and public scrutiny.

When women of color do appear overtly in speculative fictions, their appearance is riddled with the contradictions manifest in racism and sexism. Carla L. Peterson uses the term "eccentric" to characterize the contradictory way women of color are fixed in discourse (xi). They are "both and"—hyper-sexual and sexless, hyper-visible and invisible, masculine and feminine. Such tensions yield crude caricatures. The subservient black domestic, the

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<sup>44</sup> In *Private Bodies, Public Texts*, Holloway argues that: "Privacy is presumed to be a fundamental right of personhood. Nevertheless, particularly for those who made late appearances into constitutional protection, that legal notice has become an assurance that some corporeal feature is always and already vulnerable to public attention as an identity that stands in the place of private personhood" (9).

unassimilated Asian migrant, the vile welfare queen—these are the dominant images that infiltrate Cold War speculative fictions. Yet, as Tracy Floreani states, “reading ethnic [or racial] representations in [literary] narratives must go beyond an assessment of how progressive or stereotypical a portrayal of a racialized or ethnic subject seems” (2). Such a narrow assessment would ignore the powerful discursive work racialized characters perform in maintaining racist systems. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, notes the importance of these “controlling images” in justifying racial and gendered hierarchies and rendering them as natural, normal, and inevitable (77). Controlling images of women of color during the Cold War, in particular, mark the outside of a cultural terrain premised on social conformity, compulsory heterosexuality, racial homogeneity, and domestic paternalism.

Even while my intersectional approach reveals the unstable and distorted presence of women of color in speculative fictions, I maintain a focus on dominant identities as well. Privilege often works to transmit the normative (whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality) as natural, unremarkable, and consequently invisible. Peggy McIntosh makes this point when she asserts that “whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege” (109). In speculative fictions too, the maleness and whiteness that suffuse characters, plots, and worlds often goes unmarked. In the growing scholarship on a branch of science fiction called “nuclear literature,” as one example, there are a dearth of studies that have looked at the role of race—especially whiteness—in defining external threats to the American way of life.<sup>45</sup> A notable exception is Paul Williams’s *Race, Ethnicity and Nuclear War*. Impressive in its scope, Williams explores “the ways nuclear representations in Anglophone literary, filmic and other cultural texts since 1945 have been

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<sup>45</sup> As an example, the important anthology *The Nightmare Considered: Critical Essays on Nuclear War Literature*, edited by Nancy Anisfield, contains no essays related to explicitly to race.

pivotal sites for the articulation of racial, ethnic, national, and civilizational identities” (1). Like Williams, I highlight the important relationship between race, text, and culture in the nuclear environment of the Cold War.

Throughout “Nuclear Reproduction,” I argue that speculative fictions help facilitate certain racial and gendered cultural meanings in Cold War America. Performing this analysis requires that I recognize the way speculative fictions are always already steeped in a racial and gendered meanings. As science fiction critic Isiah Lavender III argues: “science fiction often talks about race by not talking about race... [the genre] is actually transmitting assumptions of racism even in stories that are ostensibly envisioning a future where race has become irrelevant” (7, 20). To fully grapple with the racial and gendered dimensions of Cold War cultural life, the racial and gendered elements in speculative fictions must be exposed. Here I build upon the recent work by literary scholars to lay bare race, gender, sexuality, and other categories that permeate the genre of speculative fiction.<sup>46</sup> Yet the acknowledgement of the speculative as a mode pervaded by race, gender, and sexuality is not enough. Reproduction is the conceptual framework in which these categories are organized, that is, it is racialized and gendered notions of reproduction that frequently end up supporting or challenging the American cultural imaginary.

Given my endeavor to uncover the central, if misplaced, role of race (and gender) in Cold War domestic culture, I subscribe to Leerom Medovoi’s framing of the period as a

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<sup>46</sup> Jason Haslam’s *Gender, Race, and American Science Fiction* (2015) is an exemplar of this type of intersectional work. Although Haslam does not explicitly identify his work as intersectional, his analysis employs intersectional principles, especially in pronouncements like: “I argue that many of the works studied here present gender and race as inseparably intertwined categories, gesturing to the ways in which such social and cultural categories can function in hegemonic ways to reinforce the biased status quo...I argue that studying these identity categories together rather than separately can add a richer understanding of the social and cultural mechanisms involved in both” (21).

“race war without race” (165). Medovoi’s analysis of US Cold War biopolitics elaborates on the new era of race war:

[T]he Cold War itself became understood as a politico-cultural surrogate for race war, because the “enemy” represented an ideological and terror-driven movement, not itself human...Biological racism was repudiated, yet the idea of an enemy population inferior in its subhuman political organization was retained. With the global condemnation of racial ideology that accompanied the defeat of fascism and high imperialism, the new “war of the worlds” was to be exemplified not by differences in blood but...by struggles between systems, ideologies, or ways of life. (167)

What I like about Medovoi’s conception of the Cold War here is how it makes plain the ways in which racism seems to disappear (or rather is made to disappear) in US discourse. Given the awkward optics of America as both “the land of the free” (versus USSR communism) and a land of Jim Crow and persistent racial violence, the US strived to hide, downplay, and occasionally rectify its own racist attitudes and institutions.<sup>47</sup> Historians have shed light on the opportunities this quandary opened for people of color to demand their civil rights.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, racism as well as sexism were still present in US thought and experienced in the daily lives of the American people. Speculative fictions were a discursive site in which this tension simmered. My dissertation shows the role these fictions played in creating a Cold War America that offered a vision of “freedom and justice for all” for only some.

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<sup>47</sup> At the very beginning of the Cold War, the Truman administration appointed the board of the first federal Civil Rights Commission and desegregated the US military. The Cold War also saw the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, the liberalization of immigration policies, and the judicial invalidation of anti-miscegenation laws. Much of the push behind these efforts came from the US’s concerns about its perception on the international stage. As Mary Dudziak states: “During the Cold War years, when international perceptions of American democracy were thought to affect the nation’s ability to maintain its leadership role, and particularly to ensure that democracy would be appealing to newly independent nations in Asia and Africa, the diplomatic impact of race in America was especially stark” (6).

<sup>48</sup> See Gerald Horne’s *Black and Red* (1986); Mary Dudziak’s *Cold War Civil Rights* (2000); Thomas Borstelmann’s *The Cold War and the Color Line* (2001); Dayo F. Gore’s *Radicalism at the Crossroads* (2011); and Cindy I-Fen Cheng’s *Citizens of Asian America* (2013).

## Chapter Outline

Given that my dissertation covers a nearly fifty-year period, I do not attempt to trace an exhaustive history of the Cold War. The Cuban Missile Crisis, the space race, Henry Kissinger—none of these appear in the pages to follow. Instead, proceeding chronologically, my analysis fixes itself to various “sticking points” in Cold War discourse. These sticking points are what Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* calls the “targets and anchorage points for the ventures of knowledge” (105). While there are certainly others, my dissertation focuses on the following sticking points: the consolidation of the nuclear family in the 1950s, concerns about the racial makeup of the US with regards to overpopulation and immigration during the 1960s and 1970s, and the renewed anxieties about human extinction caused by nuclear annihilation during the Reagan Era. These historical fragments are illustrative of the main argument of my dissertation—that definitions of the American way of life were grounded in racialized and gendered reproductive forms. Speculative fictions in each of these cases played a significant role in perpetuating and critiquing these reproductive ideas.

Chapter 1 examines how, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, civil defense experts and science fiction authors brought renewed focus to the family as the core social unit. Reading science fiction, namely Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and Judith Merrill’s *Shadow on the Hearth* (1950), I assert that the new concept of the nuclear family worked to valorize white domesticity and childrearing, codifying domestic paradises as oases of racial patriarchy. A singular focus on the survival of the nuclear family in science fiction and in civil defense literature was motivated by a need to stress a renewed public/private divide and racial hierarchy that had been relaxed in order to fill wartime

production needs. At the same time, the family moved under the purview of state protection and intervention, becoming the driving force behind racial zoning laws and housing discrimination. Despite the nuclear family's consolidation materially and ideologically during this era, fractures plagued its façade of stability. In speculative fictions, threats to the white family by nuclear annihilation reflected deeper social concerns about the fragility of this idealized kinship structure, while highlighting the violence to communities of color that fostered its creation.

Chapter 2 turns to fears about the so-called “population explosion” during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this chapter, I analyze Paul Ehrlich's famous popular science tract *The Population Bomb* (1968) alongside Harry Harrison's science fiction novel *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966) to show how authors construed immigration and unregulated population growth as a reproductive threat to American democracy. In Ehrlich's and Harrison's works, the image of a population bomb conjured historical fears of animalistic yellow hordes invading the US; fears that were exacerbated by US conflicts in Southeast Asia and the 1965 Immigration Act. For these authors, a strategy of top-down population control by scientific officials was the only way to prevent annihilation from this proliferating racial threat. Other science fiction worlds, however, provided a basis from which to refute the overpopulation alarmists. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), as one example, exposed the racial scapegoating and neo-eugenic undertones at the heart of population control discourse. Le Guin's novel instead celebrates a positive, albeit stereotypical vision of Asian immigration.

Chapter 3 explores African American science fiction author Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989) during the uptick in nuclear anxieties surrounding Ronald

Reagan's presidency. I argue that Butler's trilogy positions itself against Reagan's conservative politics, which promoted a form of reproduction bent on the production of sameness and the reification of racial categories. Instead, Butler's fiction advocates a definition of reproductive survival for the nuclear age, one that emphasizes the dependency of different vitalities—human, animal, microbe. Such a move stretches notions of subjectivity to include nonhuman entities while simultaneously breaking apart the self-contained human subject. Butler's alt-human definition anticipates the paradigm shifting advances made in critical theory and science in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Butler's refusal to shore up the human and uncontested racial categories in a notion of reproduction-as-sameness expresses in a speculative register what Donna Kate Rushin's "The Bridge Poem" asserts in the poetic: "I will not be the bridge to your womanhood / Your manhood / Your human-ness" (xxii). Rather than evincing a fixation on human-driven reproduction, Butler's future champions the need for "vital alliances" premised upon trans-species mutuality. These alliances problematize conventional understandings of reproductive power and oppression, navigating the slippery edges between mutualism and parasitism, cooperation and exploitation.

My dissertation concludes with a brief coda. Here I revisit the prominent themes of Cold War reproductive discourse and speculate on the connection between reproduction and American identity in the post-Cold War world.

## CHAPTER 1: NUCLEAR FAMILIES: WHITE SUPREMACY, PATRIARCHY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A POSTWAR DOMESTIC FICTION

Every man who decides to protect himself and his family adds a stone to the rampart of our total defense and makes attack on this country less inviting.

—Pat Frank, *How to Survive the H-Bomb and Why*

In his literary history, *Under the Shadow*, David Seed underscores the exchanges between civil defense and science fiction during the early Cold War. Many science fiction authors used their craft to either promote or criticize American nuclear defensive measures. Robert Heinlein, for example, wrote his pro-military sci-fi manifesto, *Starship Troopers*, after learning that Eisenhower had decided to unilaterally cease nuclear testing in 1958. Another well-known author, Philip Wylie worked as a consultant for the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) and wrote the 1954 science fiction novel, *Tomorrow!*, to push back against government underfunding and public apathy about civil defense. Pat Frank too, the author of the nuclear science fiction novels, *Mr. Adam* and *Alas, Babylon*, composed the popular 1962 civil defense tract, *How to Survive the H-Bomb and Why*, in order to tout the importance of preparedness. Science fiction author James Blish, on the other hand, critiqued the nuclear fallout shelter as “a flimsy affair” and dismissed public hype about civil defense as “spasms of what was supposed to be preparedness” in his 1953 short story “First Strike” (88; 89). Regardless of their differing positions, these authors—all of them white and male—demonstrate that civil defense was not simply a matter for bureaucrats or policymakers. Civil defense circulated diffusely across the literary and cultural imaginary. As Patrick Sharp finds: “[f]rom late 1945, a host of military officers, urban planners, science



fiction writers, and other assorted commentators proposed their own ideas for how to survive in the face of an atomic Pearl Harbor” (184). Science fiction authors were important in crafting ways of surviving nuclear war; to many such authors, the nuclear family provided the surest defense.

In this chapter, I explore the interlocking forces that constructed the nuclear family materially and culturally in Cold War America. To do this, I situate the nuclear family as a historically specific racial, gendered, and class-based project. Using an intersectional approach, I contextualize the nuclear family as the discursive culmination of racist housing practices, a sexist division of labor, and a class-based consumerist culture. After tracing the social landscape of the immediate postwar, I move to a discussion of speculative fictions—media in which the nuclear family appears as the unequivocal bastion of American ideals. In the Cold War, these ideals were premised on maintaining a hegemonic racist, sexist, and heterosexist order. Postwar speculative fictions, in particular, valorized a domestic vision of whiteness and paternalism that undergirded definitions of the middle-class nuclear family. In essence, speculative fictions identified the American nuclear household as an oasis of racial patriarchy. Yet the oasis, to belabor the metaphor, proved an unstable mirage. The nuclear family became a symbol of American strength, freedom, and security as well as one uncomfortably burdened by the racism and sexism of its own construction. Speculative fictions magnified this contradiction in representing the white middle-class nuclear family as the all-American family, while exposing America vis-à-vis this family as deeply racist and sexist.

This chapter explores the decades immediately following World War II, which historian Daniel Cordle identifies as the “High Cold War,” lasting from 1949 to 1962 (*States*

*of Suspense* 13). It was a time of global insecurity contrasted by a US domestic imaginary of middle-class affluence, stability, and consensus. Nuclear deterrence guided American foreign policy, but the strategy of deterrence suffered from a logical contradiction. As Cordle points out, “[deterrence] necessitated both that the overwhelming destructive power of nuclear weaponry be emphasized, and that it be seen as relatively safe, survivable with a few basic domestic preparations” (13). Civil defense rose up in this era to persuade Americans to make these wishful domestic preparations.<sup>49</sup> For this reason, as Patrick Sharp maintains, “the American public was bombarded with visions of planning for the next war” (184). These visions cast the American nuclear family as central to the defense of the nation in a newly nuclear age. As the 1955 civil defense pamphlet *Six Steps to Survival* put it: “your family is the mainspring of civil defense” (par. 1). All families were not treated equally in this regard though. According to Sharp, “The priority of civil defense was not the protection of all Americans; white middle-class suburbanites were the most politically and socially important Americans to policymakers” (190). The white middle-class nuclear family as the paradigm of American domesticity became the social unit most ardently defended.

The main crux of this chapter turns to the nuclear families that appear in two important texts in postwar science fiction: Judith Merrill’s *Shadow on the Hearth* and Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*, both published in 1950.<sup>50</sup> The novels follow a common

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<sup>49</sup> Although civil defense became popular in this period and institutionalized in the form of the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA), actual civil defense preparations differed state to state and left much to the individual rather than the state to plan. As Cordle explains, “much of the public money available was spent on encouraging people to make their own preparations” (*States of Suspense* 89).

<sup>50</sup> Although Paul Briens maintains that Merrill’s novel has not been greatly influential, he admits that the novel was adapted and broadcast as a 50-minute episode “Atomic Attack” for the short-lived Motorola Television Hour in 1954 (157). My inclusion of Merrill, admittedly, is not representative of the post-nuclear-war genre given that women authored only about five percent of all nuclear war fiction; all of these authors, to my knowledge, were white (151).

narrative in which the nuclear family faces grave outside threats, the greatest being outright nuclear attack.<sup>51</sup> As will become clear, the dangers experienced by science fiction families served as a convenient stand-in for the more nebulous social forces that beleaguered American domestic life in the postwar period. Racial strife, class unrest, and Soviet communism threatened to topple the nuclear family along with the American way of life for which it stood. In speculative fiction, the dangerous circumstances in which American families find themselves speak to the inherent fragility of the nuclear family; however, they also allude to the very violence against communities of color that carved out this new kinship system. Discriminatory housing policies, the displacement of alternate kinship arrangements, and the demonization of nonwhite families assured that the nuclear family would be *the* dominant postwar social unit while simultaneously remaining a painful testament to the racism, sexism, and heterosexism of postwar institutions.

Merrill's *Shadow on the Hearth* won universal acclaim as a domestic science fiction novel that imagined a nuclear war from a white woman's perspective. In the novel, a nuclear war begins on American soil and is largely waged within the American home. Set mostly within the Westchester suburban household of the white middle-class Mitchell family, the novel follows protagonist housewife, Gladys, who struggles to keep her family safe while she awaits news of her missing husband. Throughout *Shadow*, Gladys clings to the conventional Cold War ideology of containment, seeking to isolate herself and her family in the security of their home. As *Shadow* unfolds, however, Gladys allows her nuclear family to take in others,

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<sup>51</sup> I look to Bradbury's and Merrill's texts heedless of the different political positions taken by their authors. Although dismissed by second-wave feminist science fiction writers and contemporaneous critics like Damon Knight for writing the "sweat-and-tears-and-baby-urine variety" of fiction, Merrill engaged in progressive politics (she was a Trotskyite in her young adult years) and brought an unabashedly political agenda to many of her stories, including *Shadow* (Newell and Lamont 62). Bradbury, on the other hand, was less outspokenly political. His description of *Chronicles* best reflects his political ambivalence: "Don't tell me what I am doing; I don't want to know!" (Bradbury, *Chronicles* xi; emphasis in original).

like their ethnic housekeeper Veda, their hysterical white neighbor Edie, and the pacifist and dissident schoolteacher Dr. Levy. These characters erode the ethnic purity, biological fixedness, and apolitical nature of the Mitchells' nuclear family. Yet even while simple survival forces the Mitchells to somewhat abandon the conservatism of the nuclear family model, the novel ends by restoring white paternal order with the return of Gladys's husband.

In contrast, Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* documents the exploration, settlement, and colonization of Mars in a series of interlinked stories.<sup>52</sup> While acknowledging Bradbury's novel as a jingoist sci-fi retelling of the history of American settler colonialism, I also read the novel in Bradbury's present. In so doing, I focus on the violence done to communities of color in the 1940s and 1950s as people of color were excluded from new housing opportunities by preferential, government-backed discrimination. In my reading of *Chronicles*, I emphasize the violence inherent in the project of constructing white suburbia and perpetuating white middle-class American values. Bradbury's novel, I argue, carries these racist and sexist effects to their inevitable self-destructive conclusion as Earth erupts in a nuclear war and the human colony on Mars crumbles. Yet in a similar move to Merrill's *Shadow*, Bradbury ends *Chronicles* by preserving the nuclear family, permitting a single rocket to escape the dying Earth for a future on the open frontier of Mars.

Across both Merrill's and Bradbury's science fiction novels, the ideal white American family appears vulnerable, subject to power imbalances, and unable to cope with Cold War realities. Still, both texts refuse to completely eschew this model for an alternative or to level

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<sup>52</sup> I refer to Bradbury's work as a "novel" throughout this chapter, although I recognize that scholars are divided as to whether *Chronicles* should be classified as a short story collection or a true novel. Jonathan Eller makes a compelling case for the latter, noting that Bradbury heavily revised the previously published stories and added material in order to create narrative cohesion and chronological consistency between the stories. For more, see Eller, "The Body Eclectic: Sources of Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*."

a decisive critique of the nuclear family. *Shadow* and *Chronicles* touch on the shortcomings of this new postwar kinship form, yet leave the nuclear family firmly entrenched as the central locus of American life. In fact, these texts shore up conceptions of the nuclear family as a natural and quintessentially American convention. Speculative fictions also help to establish a perpetual nostalgia, a longing for the domestic tranquility found in the nuclear family that can overcome nuclear attack and that guarantees America's future.<sup>53</sup> In order to do so, though, speculative fiction must navigate the thorny foundation of racism and sexism that grounds the nuclear family itself.

As a crucial bearer of American ideas about freedom and security, the white middle-class nuclear family performed several important functions in the American cultural imagination—two of which are relevant for the subsequent analysis. First, the family helped to quell the social disruption and anxiety caused in the wake of the Second World War. Second, the family became an important discursive site from which freedoms would be conferred or stripped away.

As to the first, Bradbury's and Merrill's novels construct the American nuclear family as distinctly white and male-dominated; more than that, though, they deploy whiteness and paternalism as a salve against the racial and gendered tensions that shook American culture following World War II. Part of these tensions sprang from the hypocrisy of the US's role in combating fascism in Europe while Jim Crow instilled a reign of terror on the American home front. As Mary Dudziak explains: "if the war was, at least in part, a battle against

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<sup>53</sup> For more on this, one need only look at the collective conservative nostalgia for this "model family" in our present moment. A new groundswell of support for the nuclear family erupted recently when *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks released an article in the March 2020 edition of *The Atlantic*, called "The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake," leading to numerous conservative responses and a symposium at the conservative-leaning think tank the Institute for Family Studies.

racism, then racial segregation and disenfranchisement seemed to belie the great sacrifices the war had wrought” (9). Tensions also arose around unstable gender roles in US work and homelife. The immediate postwar period oversaw the mass movement of American men back from the fronts in Europe and Asia and the subsequent removal of American women from wartime factories and production lines. Ruth Milkman describes how this shift created a “renewed upheaval in the sexual division of labor,” which would eventually revert to prewar patterns but leave “women’s relationship to work permanently changed” (99). Speculative fictions, like Merrill’s *Shadow* and Bradbury’s *Chronicles*, remediated the social ruptures caused by these shifts by containing them within the family.

As it helped to direct social antipathies away from the public realm and into the private, the nuclear family became an important discursive site upon which ideas of freedom would be meted out. Betty Friedan’s critique in *The Feminine Mystique* would spring from the constraints of “the new happy housewife,” while Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s eponymous report would blame “the breakdown of the Negro [sic] family” for African American poverty (44; 12). Under McCarthyism too, the protection of the American family would necessitate the drastic measures of censorship and blacklisting to contain the sexual perversions of homosexuals and the ideological corruption of communists.<sup>54</sup> The primacy of the family in Cold War discourse may have also contributed to the narrowing of demands by anti-racist advocates and feminists alike. Historians of black anti-racist activism have pointed out what scholar James Zeigler identifies during the Cold War as “a fearful atmosphere of repression that narrowed the scope of legitimate deliberations within institutions that influenced and authored government policy, including major civil rights organizations” (4). Scholars of the

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<sup>54</sup> Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to note that the postwar period was not the only time that the family was used to restrict rights from some and grant them to others.

second-wave women's movement too have traced the narrowing of the mainstream feminist reproductive agenda in the following decades.<sup>55</sup> These instances of discursive narrowing were facilitated through the conservative paradigm of the nuclear family.

### **The Nuclear Family, A History of White Supremacy and Patriarchy**

The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American woman and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world.

—Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

At the conclusion of World War II, with the return of G.I.s from the European and Asian theaters and the ejection of women from wartime factory work, massive social transformations took shape in the United States. Among these transformations, the nuclear family appeared on the scene, assuming a central role in dictating American family life and overwriting older forms of kinship in the national consciousness. As historian Stephanie Coontz explains, most people understood the 1950s nuclear family to be a new invention (26). Demographic shifts alone explain the shifting parameters of this new kinship structure. Elaine Tyler May notes that, from the 1940s to the early 1960s, Americans married at a higher rate and at a younger age than in previous years (3). Over the same period, divorce rates decreased after a postwar peak, meaning that these marriages were particularly stable (3). The fertility rate also spiked as the period of the 1950s oversaw a dramatic baby boom (4). As isolated blips along otherwise stable demographic trends, these data corroborate May's assertion that this era was an aberration. May explains:

Observers often point to the 1950s as the last gasp of time-honored family life before the sixties generation made a major break from the past...[but] it is the generation in between—with its strong domestic ideology, pervasive consensus politics, and peculiar demographic behavior—that stands out as different. (7-8)

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<sup>55</sup> For more on the narrowing of feminist reproductive demands, see Silliman et al.'s *Undivided Rights*.

Another transformation taking shape in American family life was the boost in homeownership during the immediate postwar period. Given the postwar construction boom as well as government-backed mortgages from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), homeownership became a reality for thousands of American families. So radical was the change that between 1946 and 1956, the increase in single-family homeownership outperformed the increase during the entire preceding century and a half (Coontz 24). In 1960, 62 percent of American families owned their own homes compared to just 43 percent twenty years earlier (24). Nevertheless, much of this homeownership was beyond the reach of nonwhite families. As Richard Rothstein notes, the FHA throughout the 1940s and 1950s engaged in pervasive “redlining,” whereby they refused to insure mortgages in and near African American neighborhoods citing them as financially risky. As a consequence, white families were able to purchase homes with government-backed mortgages, but African American families were denied this mode of entry into middle-class status.

The rapid attainment of homeownership for white Americans paralleled another component tied to the concept of the nuclear family: the construction of the suburbs.<sup>56</sup> According to Coontz, 85 percent of the new homes built and purchased by white families were located in the suburbs (24). During the postwar years social planners oversaw the design of planned communities, seeking to move families from crowded urban areas into mass-produced suburban enclaves. Levittowns, or planned housing developments, popped up

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<sup>56</sup> Catherine Jurca in *White Diaspora* notes that: “by the 1920s the suburban home emerged as a crucial symbol of consumer prosperity and fulfillment in popular periodical articles, modern advertising, and a national ‘Own Your Own Home’ campaign, sponsored by the government and business interests” (6). My intention is not to argue that the postwar period oversaw the “invention” of the suburb in America. Instead, I argue that the mass-produced housing developments that exploded across the US in the 1950s helped to propel an imaginary “suburbia” to the center of American domestic discourse.



across the US to house returning veterans and their families in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland. So ubiquitous were these developments that, as Chad Kimmel finds: “Between 1947 and 1964, they built 17,447 homes in New York, 17,311 homes in Pennsylvania, and 12,000 homes in New Jersey, naming them all Levittown” (37). These areas made the dream of homeownership a reality for thousands of predominantly white American families, creating a bustling middle class and the images and ethos that would come to define the nuclear family ideal.

The suburbs were available almost exclusively to white families due to the racial discrimination rife in the US housing market. Beginning after the First World War and strengthened during the Great Depression, the federal government intervened in significant ways in the US housing market. Most important was the passage of the National Housing Act (NHA) in 1934. According to David Freund, this legislation effectively put “the government’s stamp of approval on the long-term, low-interest, self-amortizing mortgage and creat[ed] an administrative and regulatory body, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), to insure lenders experimenting with these loans” (99-100). Unfortunately, the FHA and other federal agencies, conspired with developers, realtors, and lenders to categorically exclude nonwhites from homeownership, while promoting suburban homeownership for whites. As Freund asserts:

The new mortgage market was designed to promote the construction and purchase of detached, single-family homes. Federal programs insured suburban properties, yet denied insurance for most urban ones. And the appraisal guidelines that served as the linchpin of the new system required realtors and lenders to segregate residential neighborhoods by race *and* to deny loans to most racial minorities. (100; emphasis in original)

The growth of the suburbs in the postwar era, in other words, was not an organic or spontaneous event. Instead, specific and intentional collaboration took place between the

federal government and the private housing sector to encourage whites to settle in new modern developments, while barring the same for nonwhites. This was institutionalized racism systemically organized at the highest levels of power.

Another racist policy adopted by the FHA, which contributed to the whitening of the suburbs was the promotion and enforcement of clauses in house deeds called “restrictive covenants” that obligated the purchaser to never sell or rent to an African American.<sup>57</sup> In *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein includes an excerpt of a deed’s restrictive language from a 1950 covenant in California:

The real property above described, or any portion thereof, shall never be occupied, used or resided on by any person not of the white or Caucasian race, except in the capacity of a servant or domestic employed thereon as such by a white Caucasian owner, tenant or occupant. (78-9)

As covenants like these made clear, suburbs welcomed only white families. People of color within a suburban neighborhood were permitted only as low-paid domestic workers. Due to governmental policies surrounding racial zoning, mortgage lending practices, and restrictive covenants, the construction of the nuclear family was a distinctively racialized project of the postwar. Federal policies and zoning practices that sculpted the suburbs along racial lines in effect racialized the image of the suburban nuclear family.

Together with race, gender impacted the image of the nuclear family. Given its characteristic archetypes—the paternalistic male head, the doting wife and mother, and the

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<sup>57</sup> Cindy Cheng provides an important complication to this white/black focus on the suburbs. In particular, Cheng focuses on the Asian Americans who moved to the suburbs. These homeowners frequently found themselves and their racial identities scrutinized through racial covenants written to exclude specifically black homeowners. Federal housing authorities “downplayed the effects of structural racism, attributing the low number of blacks in the nation’s suburbs to their failure to adjust to the white middle-class lifestyle. Assimilation emerged in these state-sponsored studies as an important ideological construct that prevented racism from undermining the credibility of U.S. democracy” (18). Assimilation, to put it simply, was explained as the ultimate barrier to entry into the suburbs; this placed the blame on racial minorities rather than governmental policy.

two cherubic children, all of them unambiguously white—the nuclear family represented a distinctly gendered and racialized formula. Perhaps more than any other family member, the woman’s role as wife and mother assumed particular importance. As Betty Friedan expressed in *The Feminine Mystique*: “The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American woman and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world” (60). From interviews with housewives from the late 1950s to excerpts of women’s magazines, movies, and commercials, Friedan showed that this image—the white suburban housewife—was the figure *par excellence* of middle-class womanhood. During this time, the perfect woman, the wife and mother of the model nuclear family, was to be devoted totally to the management and efficiency of her household. Her life was spent in self-sacrifice to her husband and children and helped by various labor-saving appliances. Although invested with a heightened responsibility for household efficiency and family management, while employing the latest in modern consumer technologies, women were systematically displaced from positions of authority. Lisa Yaszek, for example, explains that while postwar women were expected to be well-versed in the most effective modes of childcare, “they were treated as amateurs who needed the guidance of psychological experts such as Sigmund Freud and Erik Erickson and medical authorities such as Benjamin Spock to rear their children properly” (*Galactic Suburbia* 12).

According to Friedan, the mystique surrounding the postwar suburban housewife induced women to believe that “the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity” (91). Yet femininity in this sense was inscribed within a larger framework of patriarchy. Friedan continues:

The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women’s troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own

nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. (92)

Instead, the “happy housewife heroine” of the postwar period stood apart from but still remained subservient to her husband. Sacrificing a career for household management and squandering college as a means to ensnare a man, the housewife of the suburban nuclear family was truly defined by and around her husband and children.

“In the fifteen years after World War II,” Friedan asserts, “this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” (61).<sup>58</sup> In placing the white suburban housewife at the core of postwar American culture, however, Friedan marginalizes the femininity of nonwhite women. Throughout the entirety of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan limits her investigation to white middle-class women, like her former Smith College classmates.<sup>59</sup> “The problem with no name” of female disempowerment and existential ennui that she traced in the lives of bored and unfulfilled suburbanites did not extend to nonwhite or working-class women. Instead, Friedan’s project captured a particular shade of white femininity that attached itself to the image of the nuclear family.

In television sitcoms, such as *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), and in magazines, such as the *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Life*, the image of the model nuclear family took shape. The suburban home and lifestyle, hemmed in by white

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<sup>58</sup> While Friedan herself maintained that the doldrums of suburban living first inspired her magnum opus, Daniel Horowitz demonstrates that Friedan’s union activities and organizing in college in the 1940s and early 1950s contributed also to her politics. For more, see Horowitz, “Rethinking Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*.”

<sup>59</sup> Ruth Rosen explains this limitation as a deliberate choice. “[I]n a country that had only recently passed through the violently anti-Communist convulsion known as ‘McCarthyism,’ Friedan feared her ideas would be discredited if she focused on the problems of working women or advocated government intervention in the affairs of women. So she settled on a safer strategy, that of addressing middle-class white housewives as a sister suburbanite” (5).

picket fences, became a beacon of American modernity and a projection of American freedom. So persuasive was this image that it carried American values abroad.

On July 24, 1959, then-Vice President Richard Nixon spoke with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow. During their conversation, dubbed the “kitchen debate,” the two leaders promoted their distinct visions of the ideal society—for Nixon, the capitalist American way of life and, for Khrushchev, Soviet communism. The two men talked while visiting the Exhibition, a model single-family home showcasing the latest in US consumer technologies, including a dishwasher, refrigerator, and range stove. “This house,” Nixon explained, “can be bought for \$14,000, and most American [veterans from World War II] can buy a home in the bracket of \$10,000 to \$15,000” (“Kitchen Debate”). Within this transplanted suburban home, Nixon praised American consumerism for its promotion of technological innovation, cheaper and more accessible products, and more efficient living. Later in the exchange, Nixon continued that: “There are some instances where you may be ahead of us—for example in the development of the thrust of your rockets for the investigation of outer space. There may be some instances, for example, color television, where we’re ahead of you” (“The Kitchen Debate”). Intended to show off the benefits of the American free market, the exhibit of mass-produced homes and color televisions counterbalanced Soviet strength in rocketry.<sup>60</sup> Remarkably, the modern American home and not American missile technology was framed as the appropriate counterweight to Soviet power.

Both discursively across popular media and materially in the realm of homeownership, the nuclear family in the 1940s and 1950s came to include only white

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<sup>60</sup> The Soviet Union had launched the world’s first satellite, *Sputnik I*, into orbit two years earlier.

middle-class suburbanites. This image, of course, represents only a small number of families in the postwar era, excluding racial minorities, people in the working class, extended family networks, and city-dwellers. Even still, the white middle-class nuclear family entered the popular consciousness as *the* American family. Historian Isabel Heinemann underscores the family's essential place in US culture:

This hegemonic nuclear family model was not only reproduced in countless commercials and iconic TV series and films, it also inspired presidential policies—welfare policies being the most notable example—as well as court decisions and controversial press coverage of issues such as divorce, abortion, same-sex marriage and women's work. (10)

The nuclear family model, in other words, performed important discursive work abroad and on the American home front. In the following sections, I will explore the particular role of the nuclear family in science fiction texts about nuclear war. These works, like other postwar cultural texts, celebrated the nuclear family, musing on its hypnotic promise of national security and domestic pleasure, while tiptoeing around its dark side steeped in racism and sexism.<sup>61</sup>

### **Defending and Disrupting the White Patriarchal Suburban Paradise in Judith Merrill's *Shadow on the Hearth***

“We repeat—we repeat, please don't leave your homes. If you are in a dangerous area you will receive orders for evacuation. Do not leave your homes. If you are near a bombed-out area you are safe only indoors. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR HOMES.”  
—Judith Merrill, *Shadow on the Hearth*

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<sup>61</sup> In postwar science fiction, I argue that nuclear family vis-à-vis the modern suburban development was a celebrated facet of American life. This appraisal contrasts with Catherine Jurca's contention that “the suburb of the mass middle class is to postwar sociology and literature what the slum was to the Chicago school between the world wars and to the proletarian fiction of the Depression” (135). While Jurca links the mass-production of the postwar suburb to “the deterioration of status and social privilege” (136), I find that the home as a bastion of whiteness against the racial heterogeneity of the city and as a defensive fortification against nuclear attack helped to raise its status in science fiction.

The message blares from the radio in the living room: “Do not leave your homes”—an urgent plea made by harried government leaders to a nervous populace. The advisory is succinct and, in the context of *Shadows*, sounds in response to a concerted nuclear attack. Outside the world of Merrill’s novel too, the message resonates in postwar America. During this time, the home, safely nestled in a sprawling racially homogenous middle-class suburbia, reflected an image of domestic security and national stability. In domestic fiction and in civil defense literature, the home was touted as a secure location, a sanctuary in which to weather the chaos outside. Elaine Tyler May explains the role of the home in a new security discourse of domestic containment: “the ‘sphere of influence’ was the home. Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, so they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired” (16). American domesticity became the bulwark against all Cold War threats. These threats did not simply include international nuclear disasters but internal problems as well. May continues:

Although strategists and foreign policy experts feared that the Soviet Union might gain the military might and territorial expansion to achieve world domination, many leaders, pundits, and observers worried that the real dangers to America were internal ones: racial strife, emancipated women, class conflict, and familial disruption. To alleviate these fears, Americans turned to the family as a bastion of safety in an insecure world. (9)

The vision of the American household under the containment ideology was similar to that envisioned for American society writ large. The home was meant to be free from political subversion, racially harmonious (à la white hegemony), and male dominated. Yet this domestic ideal was more fantasy than reality. According to May, “While the home seemed to offer the best hope for freedom, it also appeared to be a fragile institution, subject to forces beyond its control” (25).

This section uses Judith Merrill's domestic science fiction novel, *Shadow on the Hearth*, in order to trace one salient threat to the postwar home: nuclear attack. Merrill's story follows the model white American homemaker, Gladys Mitchell, as she struggles to keep her family safe and her home intact in the aftermath of a sudden nuclear strike that targets cities across the US. Not knowing whether her husband Jon is alive or dead, Gladys must care for her two daughters as they confront radiation sickness, the breakdown and uneven restoration of civil order, dwindling domestic amenities like running water and electricity, and the threat of rioting and looting.<sup>62</sup> By situating this idyllic family of five amidst such a post-nuclear-war setting, Merrill's story upholds the desirability of the middle-class nuclear family but also underscores its vulnerability.<sup>63</sup> While the narrative initially describes the Mitchell home as a self-contained domestic sanctuary, the illusory security of the home dissolves after the bombs begin to fall. Nevertheless, in the wake of the attack, Gladys proves stubbornly unwilling to give up on the fantasy of white middle-class stability through which she defines her life. Gladys clings to the nuclear household for protection, as dictated by the civil defense literature at the time, although this impulse soon proves inadequate. Instead, Gladys gradually finds that the model nuclear family image in which she fits her life must change, albeit temporarily, in order for her family to survive.

At the beginning of *Shadow*, the home stands as a domestic haven against the ills of the outside world. When Gladys's husband, Jon, reads the morning newspaper, he is struck by a violent and chaotic world at odds with the domestic scene around him: "The headlines

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<sup>62</sup> Susan Thistle explains that domestic conveniences were relatively new in the 1940s when one-third of all homes did not have running water and two-fifths did not have flush toilets. By contrast, in the 1950s, the numbers of homes with basic household appliances climbed sharply so that by the early 1960s well over 90 percent of all US household had hot and cold running water, refrigerators, and gas or electric stoves, and half had automatic washing machines, which were too expensive for common use immediately after the war (38).

<sup>63</sup> Gladys's son, Tom, is away at college and enrolled in the ROTC during the attack.



jumped at him, bearing threats of war and disaster; in the shaded room the warnings were ludicrous... The news the paper spoke of existed in another world, not in his home” (Merril, *Shadow* 5). For the Mitchells, the home acts as a placid refuge of middle-class values. One major value is placed on consumerism, so that the home becomes a site where modern conveniences regiment a static lifestyle against the hectic and haphazard nature of the surrounding world. Gladys’s day is ruled by consumer technologies, including the washing machine, vacuum, and refrigerator. These appliances and the other household objects dictate Gladys’s routine, locking her into a predictable pattern: “She sorted things out swiftly, stuffed the first washing of white things into the machine, and let it run while she went back upstairs to tear through the bedrooms, whirling sheets, blankets, duster, and broom in a tornado of determined energy” (9). Thus, the middle-class home becomes a place of American efficiency and order—just as Nixon would tout in Moscow nine years later.

The consumer goods that create a constant, albeit tedious, domestic stability for Gladys are also those that cement the Mitchells’ middle-class status. In another scene, Gladys stares at an ornate clock in her kitchen: “[Gladys] finished eating, but stayed in her chair an extra moment to watch the painted porcelain figures parade out of the Swiss chalet on the toy clock... Even in the bitterness of the solitary lunch the clock made her feel good” (10). Gladys finds pleasure in the decorative clock, delighted that she had been able to persuade Jon to buy it for her. Her affinity for the domestic knickknack goes beyond mere affection: Gladys actually identifies with the clock. The clock is refurbished: “just as the outside had been carefully worked over, all the bright colors restored and the chipped spots repaired, so the insides had been taken out bodily and replaced with a new electric mechanism” (11). Like the clock, Gladys has improved; her lot has been lifted and retrofitted with new appliances.

Gladys appreciates her elevated fortune when she reminisces on the family's former life in the city. Gladys "could never look out this way, across the clean green sweep of the broad back yards, hers and her neighbor's, without a sharp contrasting memory of crowded dim-lit flats and furnished rooms in the city" (7). The house and material goods represent success, the achievement of suburban security away from the disorder of the city. By defining herself through her home, Gladys can bury her memories of working-class life with the veneer of middle-class stability.

Although integral to her self-definition, Gladys's memories overlook the role of her whiteness in allowing her to achieve the middle-class dream. She credits her family's rising class status to her selection of a hardworking mate in Jon, who toiled as "a junior partner in a small struggling [law] firm" in the city (7). This explanation oversimplifies the other sources of support that the Mitchells likely received. While Gladys loads laundry, she notes that: "Jon's last remaining set of G.I. khakis, reserved for basement and garden work, were a humble contrast to the new field outfit that went in right afterward" (11). These army clothes suggest that part of the Mitchells' ascent into the middle class is owed to government assistance, like the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 or the G.I. Bill. This act granted several benefits to World War II veterans that improved their social mobility, including college tuition payments and living expenses, low-interest loans to start businesses, and low-interest, zero down payment home loans. Home loans, in particular, were important in allowing veterans to achieve the middle-class ideal of homeownership in the newly-constructed suburbs. Although not overtly discriminatory, the G.I. Bill's local

implementation often withheld benefits from minority service members.<sup>64</sup> Thus, while the suburban home represents the culmination of middle-class identity for Gladys and her white family—“the dreams that have since come true...this house among them” (7)—it is a dream unattainable for countless other Americans.<sup>65</sup>

After the news of the nuclear attack reaches her, Gladys stubbornly refuses to give up the dream of white middle-class domesticity. While the world crumbles outside, Gladys continues to perform her regular domestic tasks. On the evening after the attack, she cooks dinner as usual: “The steaks sputtering on the broiler and the children’s voices in the lamplit room brought life suddenly back to a familiar, livable plane” (37). Gladys does this partly for her own comfort and partly to comfort the children, as when she dubs it “a victory when Barbara so far forgot the world outside that she squabbled briefly with Ginny over the proper placement of the forks” (37). These mundane domestic matters restore order to the family and confirm Gladys’s purpose in the household. Soon, though, it will become apparent that Gladys’s striving for the familiar is no longer possible and the goal of forgetting the world outside is unsafe.

Gladys eventually takes on the role of household head to confront the dangers to her family and neighbors. Critics have frequently interpreted Gladys’s reluctant leadership during the crisis as evidence of an anti-patriarchal critique. Paul Brians calls *Shadow* “a

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<sup>64</sup> For particular accounts of the G.I. Bill’s discriminatory impacts, see David H. Onkst’s “First a Negro...Incidentally a Veteran”; Margot Canaday’s “Building a Straight State”; and Steven Rosales’s “Fighting the Peace at Home.”

<sup>65</sup> Given the Mitchells’ recent entrance into the middle class, it is unsurprising that Gladys fears slipping back into the working class more than the threat of nuclear war. When the bomb blast strikes in *Shadow*, Gladys is saved because she is in the basement loading the washing machine. As she does the laundry, she hears a sound: “A factory whistle screamed in the distance and broke into her thoughts...it couldn’t be a factory whistle; the sound had fitted perfectly into her memories, but it had no place in lower Westchester” (11). Gladys’s mind first links the sound to that of working-class drudgery, revealing her anxiety about losing her class status.

warning that women can no longer afford to leave technical matters to men, that in the atomic age science is everyone's business" (153). Lisa Yaszek more forcefully argues that "Gladys's engagement with different ways of knowing lead her (and, by extension, Merrill's readers) toward an increasingly critical conception of masculine authority as it informs the rhetoric and practice of civil defense" ("Stories" 85).<sup>66</sup> Yet these feminist or proto-feminist interpretations ignore that, for much of the ordeal, Gladys relies on the absent presence of her husband, Jon, for guidance and to ground her claims of authority.

Frequently, Gladys invokes Jon, hoping for his safe return—although her longing is not sentimental as much as pragmatic. Usually, she thinks of Jon because she wishes he could make the household decisions instead of her. As she muses:

If Jon were here... That was silly too. All the ifs were silly. Jon wasn't there... The other time, the other war, it was different. Then she wrote him cheerful, encouraging letters, telling him all the little troubles that came up each day, the little things he customarily solved, that she had to learn to cope with. But these were not little problems now, nor were they the kind that anyone customarily solved. What would Jon do? (Merril, *Shadow* 188)

Even as Gladys suppresses her irrational desire for Jon to make decisions for her ("If Jon were here..."), she still decides matters by imagining what Jon *would* do. Like the model postwar housewife, Gladys does not consider herself on equal footing with her husband. She defers to Jon on all household decisions, even "the little troubles that came up each day."

Despite Jon's absence for most of the novel, Gladys conjures a proxy in the form of his armchair, a central fixture in the household. Within the plot, the chair becomes more and more a character in its own right, a material stand-in for Jon's paternalistic masculinity.

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<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Richard Schwartz argues that: "*Shadow on the Heart*... focuses on the need for middle-class women to stop viewing themselves as inherently domestic individuals who can afford to be ignorant about world events because they can rely on the strength, knowledge, and competence of their husbands during emergencies" (417).

Overtaxed by the unfamiliar demands of leadership foisted upon her, Gladys seeks the armchair in the same way she would her husband:

Gladys turned the radio up a little louder and sat down in the big armchair where Jon listened to the baseball game, Saturday afternoons. Her fingers rubbed the worn upholstery, wandered of their own accord to the table that held his pipes and tobacco, riffled the pages of the big, bright-colored merchandising magazine in the rack underneath. (50)

Like Gladys, Jon is embodied by the consumer products that envelope his life. The armchair especially comforts Gladys: a symbol of the absent patriarch and a tangible vestige of her beloved husband. On another occasion, “she sank down in Jon’s big chair near the radio and tucked the blanket around her shoulders, and under her feet. Warmth flowed over her” (99). The warmth of the chair provides reassurance, lending Gladys the strength to carry on in Jon’s stead.

Besides comfort, the armchair seems to convey authority as a sort of domestic throne, loaning the reluctant Gladys the mantle of decision-maker and leader. While sitting in the chair, Gladys often finds the power to continue in her own role as steward of the house. The armchair transmits strength to Gladys specifically when she first confronts Dr. Levy, a political radical-turned-schoolteacher, in her home. As Merrill narrates:

“Go on,” he [Dr. Levy] repeated grimly, “you better sit down.” Gladys became conscious of her hand gripping the chair in front of her. With complete astonishment she stared at the whitened knuckles, as if they belonged to someone else, saw the fingernails biting into the rough fabric of the chair. “If *you* will,” she bargained. (73; emphasis in original)

In this scene, Jon’s armchair seems to transform Gladys into a new, more confident woman—a woman she does not even recognize. Drawing confidence from the chair, she finds the will to fire back at the man, commanding him to sit. The seemingly feminist connotations of this act, though, are quickly undermined by Gladys’s slavish connection to

the chair: “She was rooted to the chair, her legs and arms, like her throat, paralyzed with disaster” (74). Gladys does not so much claim authority in her own right as become a proxy for Jon’s displaced authority. The power derives from her husband, leading her to appeal silently to the missing patriarch: “*Oh, Jon, come and help me!*” (74; emphasis in original).

Gladys’s refusal to fully embody the household authority invested in Jon is evidence of Gladys’s larger reluctance to shake loose the patriarchal fantasy of domestic containment. Like any good housewife, Gladys initially listens to the advice carried by the family radio and unquestioningly follows the dictates of the security state. As one announcer broadcasts: “rioting and panic in some sectors...Stay indoors. Do not use the telephone unnecessarily. Assistance is coming to you” (43). Gladys obeys these reports at first, keeping her family isolated from outsiders and relying on state-fed information. Such actions and the government announcements that deem them necessary are premised on familiar fears for Cold War families—the fear of communism, sexual deviance, and nuclear war among them. For Gladys, the greatest concern involves “the age-old fear—of wild men lurking in the dark” (60). Here Gladys seeks domestic containment to escape the fear of unbridled male sexual violence, which domestic containment promised to domesticate and redirect as nonthreatening male sexual energy into the institution of marriage (Nadel, *Containment* 117). That Gladys looks to state-mandated domestic containment to mitigate her fears of male sexual violence proves ironic later in the novel when Gladys is introduced to Jim Turner. Even so, Gladys’s seemingly naïve decision to forsake outside aid and only look to her family and her home for protection is borne out as a key tenet of civil defense at the time.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Surprisingly, Merrill’s novel contains no references to civil defense manuals. At one point, Gladys skims through Jon’s *Camper’s Manual*, although she does this without purpose and only for the distraction it provides (Merrill, *Shadow* 168).

Merril's *Shadow* complicates the myopic vision of American domesticity and the supposed security it affords. Constantly in Merrill's novel, the safety of the white middle-class nuclear household is called into question. Gladys and her daughter Barbara listen, for example, as the governor addresses the population over the radio:

“There will be no more attacks. A screen of radar shields every inch of our borders, from below sea level to the far reaches of the stratosphere. Nothing can get through. We are living inside a great dome of safety, our whole nation protected by the radar sweep from bases prepared long ago.” (Merril, *Shadow* 25)

Like the middle-class home, the country is said to be protected, enveloped in a protective bubble.<sup>68</sup> Yet Gladys remains unsettled: “But they didn't work. It didn't work before” (25). The dubious effectiveness of the radar screen that protects the nation mirrors the dubious security offered by domestic containment.<sup>69</sup>

Increasingly in the novel, Gladys confronts the reality that the security provided by the nuclear family is a façade. In fact, *Shadow* reveals the greatest threats are actually the friends and neighbors that, before the nuclear attack, fit comfortably as part of the American domestic imaginary. Instead of the “wild men lurking in the dark” that she had feared earlier, Gladys faces escalating sexual harassment from her neighbor Jim Turner. A local civil defense leader, Turner wields considerable power after the nuclear attack; power that Turner directs against Gladys. During multiple encounters, Turner flirts inappropriately with Gladys heedless of her obvious discomfort.<sup>70</sup> Gladys is forced to tolerate Turner's unwanted

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<sup>68</sup> A hopeful image of America shielded from nuclear threats emerges again in the 1980s with Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative or “Star Wars” plan. Reagan proposed a system of space-based lasers that would detonate incoming nukes before reaching the United States. For more, see chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>69</sup> Gladys also realizes later on that the radio announcers never reveal negative information; they only share US successes in the ongoing nuclear war. This makes the radio's important updates about the war and status of the country mere propaganda (Merril, *Shadow* 162).

<sup>70</sup> Gladys's discomfort is clearly seen after Turner inspects the furnace that Gladys had repaired herself: “That was what she wanted, to get out of the cellar, up to where the other people were, to where she could breathe

attentions as he commands access to essential services like medical care, carries out evacuation plans and other directives, and provides a precious connection to the outside world. Turner's official position also provides him with opportunities to manipulate Gladys and paternalistically override her actions. Turner cancels the request Gladys puts out to house orphaned children, explaining: "you got to see I had to decide according to what was best for everybody concerned" (205). At this, Gladys grows cross that she is "treated like a spoiled baby," but she ultimately must submit to Turner's paternalism (205). Later in the novel, Turner tries to convince Gladys and her children to evacuate with him to a government camp in a series of aggressive overtures that she must constantly rebuff.

While it is a persistent element of *Shadow*, Turner's toxicity is glossed over by critics.<sup>71</sup> Robert Wood is a rare voice who acknowledges Turner's sexual harassment, relating it to the text's construction of competing visions of the domestic sphere. According to Wood, Turner and Dr. Levy, the high school science teacher, pacifist, and dissident, represent "possible alternative historical blocs and the possibility of playing the role of husband in an alternative family formation" (374-375). Wood's reading of Turner as indicative of an "alternative" family formation overlooks the fact that Turner's patriarchal authority is, in fact, the conventional nuclear family arrangement. Turner's allegiance to the security state, his patriotic support for US counterattack, and his paternalistic oversight of the Mitchell family are precisely the traits expected of the typical white male household head.

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again. When he reached out his hand to pat her shoulder reassuringly, she turned swiftly, before he could feel the shudder his touch evoked. She ran all the way upstairs" (153).

<sup>71</sup> To Jacqueline Foertsch, Turner is merely "aggressive and arrogant" (127); to Richard A. Schwartz, Turner is "bullying" (418). Lisa Yaszek, to her credit, identifies Turner's behavior as sexual coercion. However, Yaszek dismisses the role of gender in the coercion: "More than mere melodrama, Merrill here uses the trope of the sexually persecuted woman to underscore how *all citizens* might be objectified by the practices of civil defense" ("Stories" 88; emphasis added). Yaszek removes a gendered reading of Turner's sexual manipulation by universalizing the experience as an analogy for government power over a genderless public.



Turner does not so much represent an alternative vision of the household, in other words, as the purest instantiation of the white middle-class nuclear head. Turner's sexism is simply an extreme version of a conservative kinship model premised on sexual oppression.

Even as Gladys suffers unwanted male attention and the threat of domestic violence from Turner, the white woman's privileged race and class status insulates her from other forms of violation. On the other hand, the Mitchells' maid, Veda Klopak, occupies a more precarious position due to her ethnic and working-class background. Although Veda is Eastern European, Jacqueline Foertsch notes that she has more in common with black characters in science fiction due to her servant role, her residence in a dismal East Bronx tenement building, and her stereotypically African American dialect of speech (125-126).<sup>72</sup> Veda works tirelessly and selflessly for the Mitchells—even venturing out from her home in the irradiated city to reach the suburbanites. Gladys and her daughters, for their part, treat Veda as a member of the family. In the novel's beginning, Jon jokingly suggests firing Veda, but “he hid his smile behind the raised newspaper as three feminine voices answered immediately and firmly. He knew how they felt about Veda” (Merril, *Shadow* 4). Despite the women's strong protests, even the suggestion that Jon can fire Veda on a whim demonstrates that her familial status is illusory. Veda's relationship is encoded in a sentimentality that masks but does not erode the fact that her true relationship to the Mitchells is as an employee to employers.

The affection of the Mitchells does not guarantee Veda the security that they enjoy in the suburbs. Throughout the novel, Veda moves outside the Mitchell home, placing herself literally and figuratively outside the protection of the nuclear family. While she ventures

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<sup>72</sup> Veda's name is a Sanskrit word for “knowledge,” which further others her racially.

outside the home on these occasions to help the Mitchells, she is constantly scrutinized by the authorities who view her as a threat to families like theirs. When Veda first reaches the Mitchells, she is in the custody of two white men in protective suits. They inform Gladys that “we can’t let her go. She might be dangerous” (89). Because she survived the nuclear fallout in the city that killed many others, Veda is suspected as “a suspected saboteur” (90). More than this, Veda is suspicious due to her outsider status within the suburban world. The men rely on Gladys for validation of Veda’s identity, reinforcing the authority Gladys’s white middle-class identity carries. Gladys vouches for her maid without encountering any demands to corroborate her own identity—it seems enough that Gladys lives in the predominantly white middle-class community of Westchester.

Taken together, Veda’s and Gladys’s harsh treatment does not mark a failure of the security promised by the nuclear family; instead, the violence that greets these characters is a manifestation of the racist, classist, and sexist logics that underwrite domestic containment. The sexual harassment and potential sexual violence faced by Gladys and Veda demonstrates that the nuclear family’s fragility comes not only from outside threats but from the sexism and racism inherent in its construction. Without a male head of the household to protect her, Gladys is subject to Turner’s manipulations. Turner’s unasked for help, on the surface, appears chivalrous; however, chivalry is a pretext for coercion. Gladys increasingly suffers under Turner’s paternalism without an obvious escape.<sup>73</sup> Gladys’s problem is a private matter that prohibits a public recourse in postwar America.<sup>74</sup> Veda, meanwhile, is interpreted as a

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<sup>73</sup> Dr. Spinelli, who works with Turner, does offer help to Gladys. However, Spinelli’s ability to intervene is hindered by his youth and his ignorance of much of the ongoing harassment.

<sup>74</sup> Similarly, the novel hints that Turner’s wife Peggy encounters the man’s violence without recourse. Gladys implies that she has heard disquieting rumors about Turner. At one point, Veda too shares her concerns: “I don’t like that Mr. Turner...though I ain’t one to gossip, the way he treats that nice wife of his. I hear plenty” (Merril, *Shadow* 108).

threat to the nuclear family due to her marginalized ethnicity, gender, and class status. The scrutiny, detention, and violence meted out against her reveals the role of the state in defining and protecting the racial, gendered, and class makeup of the American nuclear family. Even as it purports to protect these women, the state-backed patriarchy and racism that pervades domestic containment precludes Gladys or Veda from protesting their mistreatment.

To claim that Merrill wrote *Shadow* as an intentional critique of the benevolent sexism and state-endorsed racism that organizes the nuclear family would grossly misread the novel. Turner shows up in the plot as more a minor nuisance to Gladys than an immediate threat, and she is capable of fending off his persistent advances suffering only temporary unease. Veda too provides comic relief rather than sparking feelings of sympathy about her detention. Even still, Turner's unwanted advances toward Gladys and the mistreatment of Veda by civil defense officials reveal the sexual and gendered violence that lurks beneath the nuclear family's secure façade.

Thus far, I have read *Shadow* against the grain as a speculative fiction exposing the racism and sexism at the heart of the ideal nuclear family model. In another contrarian vein, I resist the tendency to hold up the novel as offering viable alternatives to this model. Other scholars have read Merrill's *Shadow* in a more emancipatory light.<sup>75</sup> This argument is best expressed by Charlotte Amanda Hagood in her article, "Rethinking the Nuclear Family":

Through doors which once barred the Mitchell home against the incursions of the public world comes a stream of neighbors, workers, teachers, and friends who form a different household— one based on the interconnections, rather than the exclusions, between the Mitchell family and its environment. As the story draws to close, Gladys and her children renounce their "right" to board a train to a safe haven far outside the

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<sup>75</sup> Consider Patrick Sharp's *Savage Peril*, which reads *Shadow* as a socially subversive text: "Merril pointed to the problems of a family ideal and a social order driven by patriarchy: the military men and the fathers...created a world that was destroying itself. Only alternative arrangements generated by mothers and those devoted to peace could prevent this mad patriarchy from destroying the world" (183).

ruined city, preferring to make a living as they can among their makeshift family.  
(1008)

Hagood reads *Shadow* as a wholly feminist text. Merrill shatters the nuclear family's hegemonic status by introducing new relationships that stretch, distort, and ultimately replace the nuclear family model with a more egalitarian alternative. To bolster this interpretation, Hagood subscribes to Merrill's own belief in the power of the speculative to critique unequal power relations. She quotes Merrill's saying that science fiction is a "widely-read medium for protest and dissent in a witch-hunted country" (1010). This reading too quickly lends to speculative fiction the affirmative speculative mode discussed in my introduction. While enticing, Hagood's analysis ignores the racism and sexism that *Shadow* leaves uncriticized.

It is true that *Shadow* posits alternatives to the Mitchells' nuclear family, but these are only temporary flirtations. The unexpected arrival of Dr. Levy, the children's leftist science teacher, challenges the nuclear family's preoccupation with conservative values. Levy is a former nuclear scientist, forced out of his position and blacklisted for his pacifism. Gladys's daughter Barbara, a current student of Levy's, explains his background:

"He knows everything about atom bombs...He was at Oak Ridge and everything...only he got black-listed or something on account of refusing to do war work, and making a lot of speeches and being on committees, so he had to go be a teacher. It's supposed to be a secret." (Merril, *Shadow* 77)

Levy, as a Cold War dissident, disrupts the model nuclear family's patriotism and obedience to authority. In return, Levy teaches the Mitchells his extensive knowledge about nuclear radiation and shares specialized equipment for the testing of radiation exposure (227). That Levy is an unmarried man in the house sits at odds with the nuclear family model.<sup>76</sup> Yet Levy eventually fits into the paternalist mold crafted for him in the conventional nuclear family

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<sup>76</sup> Levy's surname also suggests that he is Jewish, further eroding the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) nuclear family.

model. This is most apparent when Levy fluidly steps into Jon's vacated duty of maintaining the home. Like a surrogate husband, Levy performs simple repairs, including mending a window, fixing a toy, and helping to diagnose a gas leak. By filling in for the absent husband, Levy props up the nuclear family as much as he challenges it.

Veda too destabilizes but ultimately shores up the nuclear family. Throughout *Shadow*, the housekeeper comes to embody more a family member than an employee. As one example, Veda and Gladys quickly become friends and confidantes in a relationship unimagined between bosses and subordinates. The women's egalitarianism is cemented when Veda speaks candidly and without sparing Gladys's feelings by demanding "'some plain talkin' around here. You keep tryin' to make out nothin's the matter, when we all know there's plenty that's the matter'" (132). Yet, at other times, Veda remains more a servant than an equal in the Mitchell household. In particular, her survival seems to be secondary to the survival of the Mitchell family. This is most apparent when Veda leaves the house repeatedly to get groceries or seek help, even though she is the character most at risk due to her ethnic, class, and gender status.

Even as Veda and Levy unsettle the nuclearism of the Mitchell family, the promise of a truly alternative family model is never achieved. Levy leaves the Mitchells before the novel's end, making space in the narrative for the return of the rightful patriarch. Jon's return, moreover, will place Veda back in the role of family housekeeper, over whom he has the authority to fire at will. Thus, the challenges that these characters pose for the nuclear family are superficial. Robert Wood takes this interpretation further and reads the ruptures in *Shadow* within Lauren Berlant's "culture of complaint" (381). Using Berlant is helpful here in locating the supposed critiques of the nuclear family as strategies actually intended to prop

it up. Put another way, such critiques constitute the very conventionality that they seek to subvert: “those blockages or surprises are usually *part* of the convention and not a transgression of it, or anything radical. They make its conventionality interesting and rich, even” (Berlant x; emphasis in original). The challenges to the family and the alternatives offered to contest its dominance actually bolster the claims that the white middle-class nuclear family is the only suitable option. The security afforded by the nuclear family, even as a security premised on sexism and racism, is the only way forward in the post-nuclear age.

In Hagood’s estimation, Gladys and her children’s refusal to board a train to a government-run refugee camp at the end of the novel is a feminist decision that ushers in a new mode of matriarchal kinship; however, the feminism conveyed in this act is undercut by the abrupt return to the postwar stability that began the novel. During the book’s last pages, the international nuclear war miraculously ends, removing the threat of attack from the suburban Westchester community (Merril, *Shadow* 275). Gladys remains unconvinced that this development means the return of their security: “‘But the war’s *over*,’ she said aloud. ‘Would anything ever be safe again?’” (275). Gladys’s existential concern is not seriously considered, though. The comment proves another fleeting moment of anxiety immediately resolved when a strange, delirious man is discovered outside the Mitchell home. After an assessment that the man is “in bad shape, but he can pull through with care,” the man is identified by Gladys as Jon, her missing husband (277). Although hurt and tested by the nuclear attack, the absent patriarch has come home. With Jon’s return, the promised paternal security of the nuclear family is restored.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> The nuclear family proves indelible even for Merrill. Originally, Merrill concluded her novel with Jon’s death by a security patrol close to his home, not with his return. Without consulting Merrill, the publisher changed the ending “to conform to the expectations of the Family Book Club” (Newell and Lamont 38). In the restored 1966 edition of the story, Merrill ends the novel with Gladys’s anxious query: “Isn’t anything safe?”

As a novel about nuclear warfare, *Shadow* is undoubtedly problematic. Paul Brians, among others, takes issue with the novel's unrealistic depiction of nuclear destruction: "Instead of focusing on the real dangers posed by nuclear war, our attention is distracted by family squabbles, an overly-attentive civil defense worker who lusts after the mother, and other, overly complicated plot threads" (153). What Brians dismisses as distractions, I claim, are central to postwar discourses about the American family.<sup>78</sup> Reading *Shadow* as a novel about the nuclear family illuminates the "family squabbles" and the actions of an "overly-attentive civil defense worker" as issues ripe for analysis. These are the sites where a dominant vision of postwar American domesticity took root. *Shadow* exposes the racist and sexist contours of this postwar vision, an image of domestic security fashioned from the subjugation of gender and sexual minorities. Yet this image, and the nuclear family that upholds it, is still dominant, even desired. The discourse of security provides security only for some, even as it claims cultural hegemony over all.

### **Exploring the Hidden Violence of the Suburbs in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles***

The house stood alone in a city of rubble and ashes. This was the one house left standing. At night the ruined city gave off a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles.

—Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*

Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" remains one of the most famous stories about American domesticity and nuclear war. In the story, a fully automated house

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<sup>78</sup> Brians's reading is unfair, given that Merrill's story utilized the most current information at the time. According to David Seed, Merrill "researched her subject thoroughly, poring over journals like *Collier's* and *Science Digest*, and reading John Hersey's *Hiroshima*" (*American Science Fiction* 57). Merrill also wrote to David Bradley, the doctor overseeing the Crossroads atomic tests in the Pacific, in order to check her medical details.

performs domestic tasks and blares singsong reminders for its residents long-dead in an unexplained nuclear attack:

*Seven-nine, breakfast time, seven-nine!* In the kitchen the breakfast stove gave a hissing sigh and ejected from its warm interior eight pieces of perfectly browned toast, eight eggs sunnyside up, sixteen slices of bacon, two coffees, and two cool glasses of milk. (Bradbury, *Chronicles* 248; emphasis in original)

The house's excessive productivity hyperbolizes the modern labor-saving appliances that were entering middle-class American households during the postwar period. Yet the mechanical management of the household also bespeaks the artificiality of the middle-class domestic life itself. The home is silent and empty, its efficiency and production masks a hollow interior. Without any living inhabitants to confer meaning, the house's performance of middle-class domestic rituals proves utterly absurd and vacuous. Like the bombs that have decimated the middle-class neighborhood, the story eviscerates the American middle-class lifestyle as a mechanical charade, a mere distraction in the face of the existential threat of nuclear war.

Desperately, Bradbury's home attempts to stave off the inevitable destruction of nuclear fallout: "It had shut up its windows and drawn shades in an old-maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia" (250). Yet this automated strategy of domestic containment seems ill-equipped for the task. The shuttered house has only an army of mechanical cleaners and automated features to defend itself from the conflagration of nuclear holocaust. Increasingly, the house's attempts appear more futile and more ridiculous:

In the kitchen, an instant before the rain of fire and timber, the stove could be seen making breakfasts at a psychopathic rate, ten dozen eggs, six loaves of toast, twenty dozen bacon strips, which, eaten by fire, started the stove working again, hysterically hissing! (255)



The critique of middle-class domesticity here becomes a more specific critique of the domestic containment championed by civil defense experts.

In civil defense literature, the middle-class home provided safety against nuclear threats. “Know your own home” urges one pamphlet to its readers, while recommending “close the house up tight to keep out fire sparks and radioactive dusts and to lessen chances of being cut by flying glass” (Milwaukee 7). The 1959 pamphlet, *The Family Fallout Shelter*, too praises the home: “A family dwelling without a basement provides some natural shielding from fallout radiation” (18). Still, most pamphlets advised readers to construct dedicated fallout shelters either connected to the main house, like in a basement, or underground on the property.<sup>79</sup> Civil defense manuals also used the folksy rhetoric of domesticity in talking about stocking fallout shelters. The 1956 pamphlet *Between You and Disaster* connects nuclear preparedness to grandmotherly virtue:

Remember Grandma’s Pantry, its shelves loaded with food ready for any emergency, whether it be unexpected company or roads blocked for days by a winter’s storm? Today, when we are vulnerable as always to the ravages of nature as well as the possibility of nuclear attack, every wise and thinking family will likewise prepare for the emergencies with the modern equivalent of Grandma’s Pantry. (par. 1)

Civil defense propaganda under the FCDA’s “grandma’s pantry” campaign was largely aimed at housewives and organized American domesticity to meet the threat of nuclear warfare.<sup>80</sup> Even as they celebrated conventional (i.e. white and middle-class) American domestic forms, these texts trivialized the risk of nuclear attack by equating it to a natural

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<sup>79</sup> Tellingly, those people depicted as seeking shelter in civil defense pamphlets are typically illustrated as well-manicured, sedate white middle-class nuclear family members.

<sup>80</sup> Patrick Sharp notes that this campaign was “coordinated with the National Grocer’s Association, several pharmaceutical houses, and the American National Dietetic Association” (204).

disaster and maintaining that it could be overcome with relatively simple preparations (R. Jacobs 66).

While the home was touted as crucial to nuclear survival, not all homes could guarantee safety. This is most dramatically shown in the public service announcement, *The House in the Middle*, sponsored by the National Paint, Varnish, and Lacquer Association in 1954.<sup>81</sup> The short film depicts the effects of a nuclear explosion on three miniature frame houses. Two houses contain trash and rotting wood that the disgusted narrator asserts “you’ve seen in too many alleys and backyards—in slum areas.” In contrast, the middle house is “in good condition, with a clean, uncluttered [sic] yard...[and] painted with ordinary good-quality paint.” After subjecting the houses to H-bomb blasts at the Nevada Proving Grounds, only the pristine white-painted suburban home survives. The film concludes by recommending the viewer to “keep your block cleaned up” and perform regular upkeep on the home, while also exhorting the viewer to “trim your shrubbery and trees, weed, and plant flowers.” By associating survival with the “white” middle-class home, the film makes nuclear warfare a matter suffused with race, class, and gender implications. While the “unpainted, rundown, neglected” homes are subject to evisceration, the white middle-class home is fit to survive.

In this context, Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains” critiques the civil defense idea that the white middle-class American domesticity can protect the family from nuclear war. Rather than a shelter to hunker down inside, the white-painted home in the story is a

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<sup>81</sup> The film was originally released by the Federal Civil Defense Administration in 1953 as a short black-and-white film. The film was adapted and colorized by the National Clean Up-Paint Up-Fix Up Bureau, a branch of the National Paint, Varnish, and Lacquer Association a year later. This public-private collaboration, a strategy employed at other times by the FCDA, sought to “sell” civil defense while selling house paint.

memorial and a tomb that bears the vaporized traces of its occupants. Bradbury describes the family's shadows incinerated on the outside walls:

Here the silhouette in paint of a man mowing a lawn. Here, as in a photograph, a woman bent to pick flowers. Still farther over, their images burned on wood in one titanic instant, a small boy, hands flung into the air; higher up, the image of a thrown ball, and opposite him a girl, hands raised to catch a ball which never came down. (*Chronicles* 249-50)

The iconic nuclear family remains burned forever on the house's white exterior. Although once humans, the figures on the walls are now mere abstractions, photographic negatives of an extinct white American middle class. Marked by the leisure-filled likenesses of its occupants, the house serves as a testament to an absurd kinship structure that professed to outlast nuclear oblivion. As Bradbury states: "The house was an altar with ten thousand attendants, big, small, servicing, attending, in choirs" (250).

The violence that Bradbury turns against white middle-class domesticity in "There Will Come Soft Rains" is only the end result of the violence that white middle-class domesticity itself entails. Simply put, white middle-class America's destruction is a form of self-destruction, the inevitable result of its long history of racial and gender subjugation. In this section, I set "There Will Come Soft Rains" within the larger fictional chronology depicted in Bradbury's *Chronicles*. Viewed in its entirety, the novel tracks the human exploration, colonization, and settlement of the planet Mars for white middle-class America.<sup>82</sup> Rather than a triumphal account of scientific progress, American cultural hegemony, and manifest destiny, Bradbury's novel is one of violence, expropriation, and

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<sup>82</sup> Bradbury frequently turned to Mars to speculate on the relationship between race, gender, and kinship during the postwar. Bradbury's story "The Other Foot" in his 1951 *The Illustrated Man*, for example, imagines the planet inhabited by African Americans, all of whom left the US to escape the racial persecution of Jim Crow segregation during the 1960s. After the remaining humans on Earth destroy the planet with nuclear weapons, the few white survivors beg the black Martians for admittance. Although the black Martians initially seek to enact an inverted segregation on whites, they eventually relent and agree to racial integration. The ending here is very different than Bradbury's *Chronicles*, in which all but one white family perishes.

cultural genocide.<sup>83</sup> At the center of this narrative is the nuclear family and a white middle-class suburban ideal of American life. Taken together, the stories in *Chronicles* highlight not only the 1950s nuclear family as an artificial creation but the violence that surrounded its birth.

*Chronicles* begins with the story “Rocket Summer” set in January 2030.<sup>84</sup> The scene opens upon a small Ohio town in the dead of winter. The rural town soon experiences an event of technological wonder as the cold Midwestern winter becomes a “rocket summer.” As Bradbury writes: “it seemed as if someone had left a bakery door open...the snow, falling from the cold sky upon the town, turned to a hot rain before it touched the ground” (1). The unexpected blast of heat causes a stir in the town as residents “leaned from their dripping porches and watched the reddening sky” (1). The source of the domestic disturbance is shown to be the exhaust of a great rocket, the likes of which will—in subsequent stories—set a course for Mars: “The rocket lay on the launching field, blowing out pink clouds of fire and oven heat. The rocket stood in the cold winter morning, making summer with every breath of its mighty exhausts” (2).

A superficial reading of this opening story may fixate on the rocket as an embodiment of the US’s technological proficiency and its profusion into American domestic life. In the story, Western rocket science spills into the tranquil town both literally and figuratively. The rocket’s exhausts warm the Ohioan homes, while the rocket itself stands as a (phallic) metaphor for American strength, ingenuity, and curiosity. An alternative reading of the story, however, would identify the doubleness of the Cold War rocket—as both a vehicle of space

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<sup>83</sup> The title of the revised British iteration of the novel, *The Silver Locusts*, underscores the dimension of exploitation more poignantly.

<sup>84</sup> In the original edition, the setting was 1999. Later editions of the novel advance all the dates by 31 years.

travel and a weapon of war. The rocket in “Rocket Summer” may not be destined for Mars at all; it could be developed as a part of the US nuclear arsenal. Such an interpretation magnifies the rocket’s potential for disruption—evidenced by the heat wave that alters the physical environment, disconcerts the Ohioans, and spreads outward like a nuclear blast.

The rocket-as-missile trope also appears in “The Watchers,” another *Chronicles* story that closely parallels “Rocket Summer.” Set six years after “Rocket Summer,” the story involves another small town witnessing the horrifying majesty of American rocketry. The story describes the human Mars colonists as they watch with dread as a nuclear war begins back on Earth. Like the Ohio denizens, the watchers in the story gaze transfixed from their porches:

They all came out and looked at the sky that night. They left their suppers or their washing up or their dressing for the show and they come out upon their now-not-quite-as-new porches and watched the green star of Earth there. (217)

Millions of miles away from the damage, the colonists can do nothing but watch as the planet “seemed to explode, catch fire, and burn” (218). The rockets are no longer objects of spectacle or escape as in “Rocket Summer,” but objects of terror, raining death down on the homes and families on Earth. After the initial conflagration on the Earth’s surface, the fires go out and messages begin to transmit from the planet, reading: “COME HOME. COME HOME. COME HOME” (219). Here again nuclear war is coupled with the notion of home. The nuclear attack prompts the colonists to renounce their lives away from their original home planet. Given the intimate connection between the colonists and their beleaguered planet, most of the Martian colonists will return to Earth, like those returning home at the death of a family member.

While “Rocket Summer” and “The Watchers” reveal a violent subtext about rockets and the danger they present to the entire human race, elsewhere in *Chronicles* violence is wrought on particular colonized peoples. The native Martians in the novel are described as “brown Martian people with gold coin eyes” (19). Bradbury’s language racializes the aliens, hewing closely to depictions of racial minorities. Like indigenous Americans in particular, the Martians are violently displaced and exterminated, casualties in the project of white settler colonialism. Scholar Sam Lundwall makes this claim when he characterizes *Chronicles* as “a telling example of the American agony of the Indian massacres” (122). David Ketterer too notes that *Chronicles* “talks about the colonization of Mars in terms of the colonization of America” (31). While acknowledging the persuasiveness of these analyses, I do not aim to paint *Chronicles* as a science fictionalized retelling of the American genocide against indigenous peoples. To do so would be to evacuate *Chronicles* of the racism and sexism particular to postwar America. Such a reading also decenters postwar domesticity by turning to a more remote and thus safer history of nineteenth-century US Western expansion. Instead, I aim to contextualize the violence against indigenous Martians as analogous to the violence and marginalization inflicted on racial minorities by dominant postwar American domesticity. In my reading, Mars in *Chronicles* is not a recreation of the American West but an extraterrestrial postwar suburbia, a space of white patriarchy that promotes tranquility and escape at the expense of nonwhite families.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> An obvious objection arises from the story “The Way in the Middle Air,” which appears in some editions of *Chronicles* and focuses on nonwhite communities. The story takes place on Earth and explains that all African Americans in the South have elected to travel to Mars to avoid racism. However, the success of the trip is not mentioned at any later point in the novel. It is unclear whether the rockets made it to Mars, whether the African Americans integrated into white-built towns, or whether the settlers returned to Earth at the outbreak of nuclear war. The absence of this black diasporic community in the remaining stories of *Chronicles* underscores that, even as the planet prompts the American dream of freedom for all, the realities on the ground only confer this freedom to whites.

As on the Earth, the suburbanization of Mars happens quickly. In only four years, from 2032 to 2036 according to Bradbury's fictional chronology, humans accomplish a complete transformation of the red planet. This occurs thanks to the mass production of homes and the top-down efficiency of planned communities.<sup>86</sup> As Bradbury writes:

They brought in fifteen thousand lumber feet of Oregon pine to build Tenth City, and seventy-nine thousand feet of California redwood and they hammered together a clean, neat little town by the edge of the stone canals. (*Chronicles* 144)

These towns, like the pre-planned Levittowns, arise seemingly overnight in the hinterlands of Mars: "It was as if...a whirlwind twister of Oz-like proportions had carried the entire town off to Mars to set it down without a bump" (144). In postwar America these housing developments would be set down in the areas surrounding busy metropolitan centers. On Bradbury's Mars, the suburban towns are constructed outside Martian cities.

The construction of a white Martian suburbia takes place against the indigenous Martian settlements that dot the landscape. Frequently, the native Martian presence is reflected in the tall skyscraper-like structures on the horizons of white settlements, as when a character peers out "at the white buildings in the moonlight" (110). These Martian towns and cities are home to nonwhite families, like the indigenous Martian couple in the story "Ylla," and working professionals as in "The Earth Men." In the latter story, when the second human expedition lands on Mars, the Earthlings find themselves at the mercy of Martian psychiatrists. The doctors diagnose the Earth men as mad Martians and throw them in an insane asylum. With such recognizable features as psychiatric clinics and asylums, the

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<sup>86</sup> The quick filling of these towns may also be attributed to government support as in the case of postwar American suburbanization. The story "The Settlers" notes that "a government finger pointed from four-color posters in many towns: THERE'S WORK FOR YOU IN THE SKY: SEE MARS!" (Bradbury, *Chronicles* 99). The government slogan harkens back to World War II recruitment posters, while offering economic opportunity and the chance for interplanetary tourism.

Martian towns are not unlike the postwar cities of Bradbury's time. As Bradbury himself explains in an interview: "Mars is a mirror, not a crystal," a reflection of the present, not a prediction of the future or a glimpse of the past (qtd. in Crossley 7).

The strangeness of the Martians is not due to their backwards civilization, as their towns and cities look nearly identical to our own, but in the supposedly inauthentic way that they inhabit American domesticity. The Earth captain in the story, "The Third Expedition," postulates that the Martians "wanted to destroy us as invaders, as unwanted ones, and they wanted to do it in a very clever way, so that we would be taken off guard" (Bradbury, *Chronicles* 62-63). The Martians convince the humans that the planet on which they have arrived *is* the Earthmen's home planet. By falling for the hospitality of the Martians, the third astronaut crew is killed off one-by-one by their duplicitous hosts. The Martians, in other words, only embrace American domesticity as a ruse and do not derive the same fulfillment or comfort from it as other characters, like Gladys Mitchell in *Shadow*. Martian domesticity is a crude approximation of the white middle-class domesticity on Earth and represents a threat to the white patriarchal domestic life that the Earthlings hope to impose. Removing and excluding the indigenous Martians, therefore, is crucial to achieve the vision of white suburbia that inspires the astronaut colonizers.

As the tragic conclusions of the stories "The Earth Men" and "The Third Expedition" underscore, Martian cities are dangerous. Earthlings suffer from their exposure to the cities occupied by the racialized Martians—driving the humans mad and often leading to their deaths. This negative image of the American city was exacerbated during the Cold War. As Paul Williams explains: "inner cities came to be perceived as the site of pathological family scenarios, interracial tension and criminality" (111). This image of the toxic city contributed



to white flight, in which white Americans sought a lifestyle away from the racial heterogeneity of urban centers. The city was similarly disconcerting to civil defense planners, who believed it to be the target of Soviet nuclear weapons (111). As a result, strategic planning usually consigned the racially heterogeneous city dwellers to their deaths. Patrick Sharp explains: “with large numbers of blacks and poor people likely to be wiped out in the initial blast, officials focused their planning and propaganda on the politically expedient imagery of the white suburban family” (207). Sharp also finds that, under its first head, the segregationist and former governor of Florida, Millard Caldwell, the FCDA enacted policies that largely abandoned the people of color living in major urban areas (197). The racist policies of civil defense, in other words, dismissed the racially heterogeneous city as expendable and, implicitly, as undesirable.

As *Chronicles* progresses, the once-thriving Martian cities become sterile and dead. The last astronaut expedition to scout out the planet before colonization finds the cities desolate: “it was like entering a vast open library or a mausoleum in which the wind lived and over which the stars shone” (Bradbury, *Chronicles* 77). In *Chronicles*, the deadened cities are blamed on chicken pox brought over by the early astronauts, but the roots of Martian destruction may be elsewhere. Another astronaut comments: ““That city there, Captain, is dead and has been dead a good many thousand years”” (68). These long-dead cities imply that Martian civilization seems to be decaying from the inside out. The social decay is coded as racial when another astronaut suggests that the Martians have “acceded to racial death” (75). Such descriptions mark Martian cities and Martian racial stock as the antithesis of American industry, exuberance, and adaptation—values that will emerge in the white American settlements. Instead, the Martian cities become troubling scenes of

degeneration and death. As the final expedition reports: “There were bodies there. It was like walking in a pile of autumn leaves” (69).

The scenes of dead or dying Martian cities resemble the after-images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that circulated in the late 1940s and early 1950s. John Hersey’s 1946 *Hiroshima* was the first public portrayal of the effects of the nuclear bomb. Based on first-hand experience, Hersey’s hugely popular account narrativized the power of the new US weapon by depicting, in graphic detail, the near-total annihilation of the Japanese city. Hersey’s descriptions of the destroyed Japanese city mirror the decrepitude of the extinct Martian cities: “range on range of collapsed city blocks...naked trees and canted telephone poles; the few standing, gutted buildings only accentuating the horizontality of everything else” (Hersey 67). Hersey’s gratuitous landscapes of death and destruction, like the dying Martian cities, embody a deeper postwar ambivalence about cities and race in the American imagination. During this time, the US experienced a mass exodus of whites from major metropolitan areas, fleeing vice, danger, and diversity—all of which supposedly stemmed from people of color. Following this white migration, the suburbs would become the new representative of quintessential American life and values.

Like American suburbs, human Martian settlements are advertised as places of escape. They attract Americans from the inner cities, “from the cabbage tenements and subways...after long years crushed in the tubes, tins, and boxes in New York” (Bradbury, *Chronicles* 119, 120). The cities, in this respect, are suffocating, but they are also immoral. The new Mars settlers are induced to uproot their lives and families to part from “bad wives or bad jobs or bad towns” (99). The type of refuge offered by the suburbs is expressed by a human luggage store proprietor: “we came up here to get away from things—politics, the

atom bomb, war, pressure groups, prejudice, laws” (201). The man’s list idealizes the escape promised in the American suburbs, away from nuclear war, race problems, and the chaos of the city. While the escape offered by Martian colonies and the American suburb seems passive (the simple escape from racial minorities), my reading of *Chronicles* reveals that the racial homogenization in the suburbs is an inherently violent, active process perpetrated against nonwhite peoples.

Bradbury describes this violence in “The Locusts,” writing: “[F]rom the rockets ran men with hammers in their hands to beat the strange world into a shape that was familiar to the eye, to bludgeon away all the strangeness” (107). Although the violent bludgeoning appears figurative, the violence directed at the strange, the different, the other manifests physically. The white enclaves established in Bradbury’s *Chronicles* demand conformity, meeting anyone unfamiliar with threats and violence. The story, “The Off Season,” marks one place where literal violence reinscribes Earth settlements as white. The story follows Sam Parkhill, a former astronaut from New York City. Five years after Parkhill’s first expedition to Mars, the man decides to move to the planet permanently with his wife. The land he has taken up to start his business is located near a dwindling Martian population center. Although Parkhill has had other encounters with Martians, he still reacts uneasily when one approaches him in the story: “I mean you harm!,” he shouts, “I don’t like strangers. I don’t like Martians. I never seen one before. It ain’t natural” (204). Parkhill stands his ground against the Martian as the alien talks genially to the man.<sup>87</sup> When the Martian pulls out a communication device, however, Parkhill shoots the creature dead:

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<sup>87</sup> My reference to “stand your ground” connects the racial policing of the suburbs in Bradbury’s time to that continued in our own. See Onwuachi-Willig’s “Policing the Boundaries of Whiteness” for a discussion of the historical convergences between the murder of Trayvon Martin and the murder of Emmett Till as one example.

A silver hand gestured. A bronze tube appeared in it. "Let me show you this." "A gun," cried Sam Parkhill. An instant later he had yanked his own gun from his hip holster and fired into the mist, the robe, the blue mask. (205)

Parkhill's excessive reaction reinforces that the suburban environment is one made for whites. Regardless of the fact that Parkhill has claimed land belonging to the indigenous Martians, Parkhill conceptualizes his violent act as one of self-defense in response to the Martian's encroachment. In this light, Parkhill's act is not merely an individual act of violence but a potent discursive move to preserve a racialized vision of American domestic life against racial threats.<sup>88</sup> The nonwhite Martian does not fit ("it ain't natural") within the artificial homogeneity that is violently imposed on the Martian surface. Under the perspective of the white colonizers, the alien-interloper deserves his death just as Parkhill deserves acquittal for carrying out his violent act of suburban preservation.

The final story of the novel, "The Million-Year Picnic" permits the nuclear family to escape the self-inflicted pain of its own destructive nature, finding a safe, albeit lonely, refuge on the twice-emptied Martian surface. The story describes a quintessential American family, a Dad, Mom, and three sons. The family's whiteness is subtly identified in that the boys are blond and freckled and the wife is "slender and soft" with "spun-gold hair" (259). As a former state governor, the father assumes the role of patriarch over his wife and children (267). This archetypal American nuclear family lands on Mars, escaping the nuclear war on Earth. Because his sons are too young to fully comprehend the trip's true purposes, the father tells them that the family is on a vacation. Slowly, however, the boys realize that they have come to live permanently on the planet; they will become the new Martians.

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<sup>88</sup> By "violence," I am not only including extralegal, vigilante violence. Institutional violence meted out by courts or by official agents of the state also policed the suburban borders of whiteness.

The family in “The Million-Year Picnic” escapes Earth just as it escapes humanity’s self-inflicted extinction. As the parents explain to their children, they plan to meet another fleeing family: “Bert Edwards and his wife and [four] daughters” (265). The story offers hope for both the reproduction of humanity and the continuation of the nuclear family. Optimism permeates the otherwise desolate landscape as in passages like: “The canal. Where tomorrow or the next day their future wives would come up in a boat, small laughing girls now, with their father and mother” (268). The future is uncertain for the American family but cautiously hopeful. Success rests on the rendezvous of these two families and their ability to survive in a desolate environment—a remote chance to be sure, even with the American traits of grit, adaptability, and determination. Yet this family seems robbed of the vigor and drive that characterized the earlier Martian settlement project. Unlike the frenzied suburban construction that displaced the crumbling Martian cities, the subdued movements of the nuclear family now paint a somber scene. Surrounded by the remnants of the vanquished Martians and their dead human conquerors, the last surviving family must live amongst the ruins of its violent past.

Patrick Sharp fits Bradbury’s *Chronicles* into what he dubs the “nuclear frontier story.” In this narrative, nuclear weapons usher in the collapse of American society. The savagery and decadence that follow are wrought by racial minorities and serve as a catalyst, reinvigorating whites to restore order and progress. As Sharp explains: “Surrounded by forces that threatened to destroy it, the white suburban family fought against the savagery of the city and the dangers of the nuclear age in its quest to uphold ‘traditional’ American

values” (176).<sup>89</sup> While I agree with Sharp’s assessment of the nuclear family here as a discursive tool to promote American values, I worry that the transposition of American domesticity to a science fiction “frontier” inadvertently removes it from its contemporaneous context. Deeming Bradbury’s *Chronicles* as a nuclear frontier story, moreover, takes the whiteness and male-domination of the postwar nuclear family for granted. Sharp’s analysis seems to assume that pre-existing white American families were always already waiting to be “reinvigorated” to take back American society. This has the unintended consequence of setting up the nuclear family as an ahistorical kinship form. Instead, I have argued in this section that the American family was actively constructed as white and male-dominated in the postwar period. Speculative fictions helped to constitute a racialized and gendered image of the nuclear family that would persist into the future.

## **Conclusion**

Merril’s *Shadow* and Bradbury’s *Chronicles* demonstrate the impact that the prospect of nuclear war had on American ideas about the family and kinship. In both novels, American families are tested, broken, but ultimately restored in the face of this new threat. My analysis bears out critic David Seed’s argument that the nuclear family was a central focus of postwar science fiction and that authors frequently strove to prove either its resiliency or its vulnerability to nuclear attack.<sup>90</sup> At times, science fiction supported the assertions of civil defense experts. In stories, like Bradbury’s “The Million-Year Picnic,” the

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<sup>89</sup> Admittedly, the postwar period also included speculative fictions with more racially integrated visions of the future. One good example is Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Liebowitz* from 1959 in which space colonization efforts, although initially racially segregated, are forced to integrate in order to survive.

<sup>90</sup> See David Seed, “The Debate over Nuclear Refuge” in *Under the Shadow*, pages 42-61.

nuclear family proves a social unit (indeed, the only social unit) capable of surviving the horror of nuclear war. Other fictions, like parts of Merrill's *Shadow*, critique the idea that the nuclear family, unchanged and unaided, can ensure nuclear survival.<sup>91</sup> The back-and-forth of this debate, however, removes the nuclear family from the intersections of race, gender, and class, even as these factors were key to the family's fitness for survival.

Cold War speculative fictions helped to consolidate the nuclear family and a pervasive image of American domestic life as steadfastly white, middle-class, and male-dominated. Even as nuclear weapons threaten the total breakdown of American society, the nuclear family dominates the spaces of Merrill's and Bradbury's worlds. As Robert Wood underscores, the action of *Shadow* is limited to only a few rooms, "the living room, kitchen, and a dangerous foray into the basement" (365). This narrow scope claustrophobically fixes the story on the Mitchell family alone. In *Chronicles*, the action is more diffuse—spanning an entire planet—but, even so, the stories parade out a procession of cookie-cutter nuclear families as from an assembly line.

My reading of postwar speculative fictions, like Bradbury's *Chronicles* and Merrill's *Shadow*, exposes the racism, sexism, and classism that underpin American notions of freedom and security. The security desired by Gladys and the freedom sought by human settlers on Martian soil are rooted in white male violence. Alan Nadel describes the violence manifest in containment culture. Through a reading of Disney's 1955 *Lady and the Tramp*, Nadel argues that race, gender, and class helped to differentiate between American and un-American activity:

The "American" activity, in the final analysis, is to look after the baby, to protect the domestic setting from, on the one hand, the unassimilated underclass who weaken it,

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<sup>91</sup> In an interview, Merrill states that *Shadow* was "directly designed to be propaganda" addressed to a female readership (Weiss, par. 52).

and, on the other, from the subversive aliens who threaten it: the Siamese and the rat [in the film]. (*Containment* 124)

My own analysis bears out Nadel's claim. The nuclear family as the linchpin of American domesticity is premised on marginalization and oppression meted out along race, gender, and class lines. *Shadows* and *Chronicles* reveal the hidden dimensions of power in the innocuous American household. Nevertheless, neither Merrill's nor Bradbury's works fully denounce the nuclear family, even as they grapple with its violent and oppressive nature. Instead, the return of Jon in *Shadow* and the survival of the family in "The Million-Year Picnic" rekindle the desire to carry the nuclear family into the future. These speculative fictions worked discursively just as government policies, civil defense strategy, and housing development projects worked materially to fulfill this happy ending.

While the nuclear family appeared in the American homes featured in many science fiction novels, civil defense manuals, and other cultural texts, it only nominally dwelt in the domestic realm. During the Cold War, notions of American domesticity would sweep into the public sphere and perform important cultural work. Nancy Cott notes the similar role that marriage plays in the public order, explaining: "At the same time that any marriage represents personal love and commitment, it participates in the public order...Radiating outward, the structure of marriage organizes community life and facilitates the government's grasp on the populace" (1). Like marriage, the private nuclear family organized the public American imagination. American domesticity shored up the image of American freedom against Soviet communism in foreign policy and offered security to the home front amidst a US strategy of nuclear deterrence.



As I conclude this chapter, I want to make clear that my analysis of the nuclear family is not to be taken as a categorical rejection of the family.<sup>92</sup> My discussion is limited to the postwar context and the dominant discursive form of the family—as white, middle-class, and male-dominated. As such, my analysis focuses specifically on the nuclear family as a discursive creation and tool of systemic racism and sexism that usurps and devalues other kinship arrangements. The nuclear family as a matter of discourse rather than lived reality shapes understandings of American culture and nation much as Jacqueline Stevens finds that “the overlaying patterns of familial and political membership rules are the ones crucial to the reproduction of the nation” (9). Yet I differ from Stevens in that I do not see the postwar American family as tied solely to the maintenance of the nation-state nor as the product of the state. As I maintain, the white middle-class nuclear family in the postwar period was lauded as the paradigm of American freedom and security writ small and, as such, helped to define American freedom, American security, and Americanness itself. Moreover, the nuclear family arose from racist housing policies, capitalist building ventures, and sexist domestic mores; it proliferated in popular science fiction novels and government-backed civil defense manuals. Through these channels—both material and discursive—the nuclear family became an invented tradition, a hegemonic vision of American domestic life.<sup>93</sup> Its construction occurred at the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality, manifesting in a

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<sup>92</sup> Here I am especially sensitive to feminists who organize a politics around nonnormative families—black families, single-parent families, queer families, etc. These activists attempt to re-appropriate the category of the family from conservative “family values” campaigns, which use normative domesticity to chip away at causes like gay adoption, abortion rights, and family welfare policies.

<sup>93</sup> Defined by Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger, the term invented tradition refers to the strategic use of the past to authenticate a novel set of practices that lack historical antecedents. Although seemingly a timeless, natural social unit, the nuclear family was created in the postwar period against a backdrop of *de facto* and *de jure* segregation and benevolent sexism. For more on this concept, see Hobsbawm and Ranger’s edited collection, *The Invention of Tradition*.

white, middle-class, male-dominated, and heterosexual form. With striking rapidity, this domestic vision dominated the postwar Cold War imaginary until soon the white middle-class nuclear family became *the* American family.

## CHAPTER 2: OVERPOPULATION AND ORIENTALISM: POPULATION BOMBS, ASIAN IMMIGRATION, AND GLOBAL SECURITY IN SPECULATIVE FICTIONS OF THE 1960S AND 1970S

We concluded that nothing less than a Utopia would do [for *A Torrent of Faces*]. We realize that Utopias are out of fashion lately; on the other hand, the picture of the future as a universal Asiatic despotism atop the starving masses has been painted to death by all the modern dystopians from [Aldous] Huxley on...  
—James Blish and Norman L. Knight, *A Torrent of Faces*

Published in the context of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the novel *A Torrent of Faces* maps anti-Asian Orientalism onto anxieties unique from those of its literary forebearers—a postwar reality marred by nuclear weapons, changing migration patterns, overpopulation threats, and communist contagion.<sup>94</sup> As white authors in a genre historically steeped in problematic racial depictions, *Torrent*'s Blish and Knight are right to point out, as they do in this chapter's epigraph, the insidious anti-Asian Orientalism that appears in canonical dystopian fiction.<sup>95</sup> Yet they overlook the lingering specter of Orientalism that haunts science fiction in their present—even in their own self-proclaimed utopian novel. The world government of *A Torrent of Faces* is headed by Chen U, a man with “delicately

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<sup>94</sup> Theorized by Edward Said, Orientalism defines an “imaginative geography” that separates the world into the West and the Orient or the East (55). Beyond establishing a binary, Orientalism affixes each term with distinctive traits. In contrast to Western civilization, modernity, and rationality, the East represents the primitive, the degenerate, and the backward. Such traits position the West over the Orient, claiming Western superiority and Eastern inferiority as inherent fixtures. This ontological hierarchy is animated by a fierce antagonism: the Orient stands as an encroaching threat to Western stability. The “Asiatic despotism” identified by Blish and Knight is one manifestation of the Orient's imminent danger—the looming menace of the Asian continent.

<sup>95</sup> For more on the anti-Asian racism in early science fiction, see the collection *Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representations of Asia in Science Fiction*, especially Amy J. Ransom's “Yellow Perils: M.P. Shiel, Race, and the Far East Menace” and Timothy J. Yamamura's “Fictions of Science, American Orientalism, and the Alien/Asian of Percival Lowell.”

molded Mongolian features” (Blish and Knight 103). As the president of the World Resources Corporation, Chen U controls life-or-death matters of population management, like the amount and nutritional content of the universal rations that sustain the overpopulated planet. Pressured by the ever-increasing population and the implicit drive for profit, Chen U exercises power callously. Within the novel’s first pages, he orders the already meager ration reduced for the planet’s one trillion humans.<sup>96</sup> This cruel act by Blish and Knight’s own “Asiatic despot” continues a legacy of Orientalism in science fiction—a legacy stemming from nineteenth-century fears of a yellow peril from East Asia.<sup>97</sup>

In his history of the Cold War, Daniel Cordle deems the period from roughly 1963 to 1979 as one of nuclear détente. Developments such as the Test-Ban Treaty of 1963, which ceased all but subterranean nuclear tests, and the quagmire of the Vietnam War, which saturated much of the political discourse, drove fears of nuclear weapons underground (Cordle, *States of Suspense* 14). As overt worries about Soviet nukes became sublimated in the American consciousness, concerns about “population bombs” in the developing world arose.<sup>98</sup> Sociologist Ruth Dixon-Mueller underscores that during this time neo-Malthusian fears of overpopulation spurred the US to a new war against excessive population growth. This era oversaw the “U.S. government’s new enthusiasm for family planning as an anti-

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<sup>96</sup> Worse than reducing the physical amount of the rations, Chen U proceeds to reduce their nutritional value by removing two amino acids that he claims humans naturally produce. The morally questionable nature of this move is apparent in the governing committee’s close vote against changing the rations.

<sup>97</sup> The presentation of yellow peril in speculative fictions appears in M.P. Shiel’s *The Yellow Danger* (1898) and Edward Pendray’s *The Earth-Tube* (1929) and in more current forms in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) and William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984).

<sup>98</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use the terms “developing world” and “Third World” interchangeably. I do this for the sake of historical consistency—as both terms were in use during the period of this study. For this reason, I do not use “Global South,” a more recent term. Admittedly, these terms are imprecise and imperfect (note, for example, that China could also be classified a part of the “Second World”). For more on this, see B.R. Tomlinson’s “What was the Third World?”

poverty measure at home and abroad, backed by a strong contingent of ‘population controllers’ in the family planning organizations, foundations, academia, and federal and state legislatures” (Dixon-Mueller 44). Prompting a massive US investment in population control was the perception of a worldwide demographic crisis, especially in the developing world. Such fears found potent expression in American speculative fictions that featured the Asian continent and other so-called under-developed regions as desperate lands overflowing with primitive peoples. The developing world and, more significantly, its migration into the developed world racialized the reproductive problem and crafted nonwhite bodies as dangers to the US. The equation of national security with reproduction provided a new role for science and speculative fictions to imagine the means of controlling this growing threat.

In science fiction and other speculative fictions during the 1960s and 1970s, I argue, the fear of the yellow peril from decades past found purchase in growing concerns about the human population explosion. Anti-Asian xenophobia, as part of a wider anxiety about the proliferation of nonwhite bodies, gave license to the top-down management of women of color’s reproduction.<sup>99</sup> Overpopulation scientists, like Paul Ehrlich, and science fiction authors, like Harry Harrison, propagated texts steeped in anti-Asian Orientalism to construct a racialized imaginary of America’s overpopulated future. This imaginary identified Asians

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<sup>99</sup> By focusing on the Third World, I am complicating the argument made in Terrence Holt’s “The Bomb and the Baby Boom.” For Holt, “[a]s the population of the United States took the most dramatic upward turn in its history, the postwar period seized this figure [the baby boom] to speak of its rising birthrate as imminent explosion, as population bomb. This imaginative coupling, in which babies and bombs seem to function interchangeably, persists because...it articulates an imaginary pattern of cause and effect in which the potential victims of nuclear weapons, the babies of the boom, are made to seem responsible for their plight” (206-7). Although concerns about overpopulation did target those in the developed world, the rhetoric of a population bomb, I argue, was mobilized in a different (racialized) way to conceptualize the developing world. While Holt points out that the population bomb blamed white baby boomers for an inevitable nuclear disaster, I argue that the developing world was equally (if not more) blamed for nuclear destruction (and rendered a specific threat to American security). This racial disparity explains why white women were not being sterilized involuntarily or at the same rates as nonwhite women in the US or abroad.

and Asian Americans as some of the most pressing threats to American security.<sup>100</sup> Subsequently, overpopulation narratives framed the scientific management of Asian and other nonwhite reproduction as the only logical, if paradoxical, means to guarantee the perpetuation of the United States as the land of the free. These narratives rationalized that preserving the American way of life warranted an intrusion onto the bodies of those in the developing world and on the nonwhite bodies in the West. Such a reading bucks the dominant view of American culture during the 1960s and 1970s as more racially tolerant—typically evidenced in the opening of US borders to nonwhite immigrants and the legislative achievements of the civil rights movement. It also complicates a more celebratory history about the proliferation of reproductive freedom in this era found in the gains of mainstream white feminism. Instead, contemporaneous speculative fictions suggest an unacknowledged ambivalence to mass migration from the developing world and the formal expansion of civil rights. These fictions contributed to the retrenchment of American self-image as a distinctly white nation and American modernity as white-defined. In the cultural imaginary fashioned from speculative fictions, controlling the reproduction of women of color became the means of preserving the American ideal of freedom—a freedom reserved only for whites.

Overpopulation was not a new concern during the mid-twentieth century, although the 1960s and 1970s breathed new life into the issue.<sup>101</sup> Driven by fears that the planet was reaching its human carrying capacity, overpopulation alarm gained momentum in the United

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<sup>100</sup> As Cindy I-Fen Cheng notes, “The belief that Asian Americans were direct extensions of people in Asia, regardless of place of birth or length of stay in the United States, allowed the political shifts that occurred between the United States and Asia to generate conflicting articulations over their place in Cold War America” (4).

<sup>101</sup> Although this chapter overlooks a roughly one-hundred-and-fifty-year span from 1800 to 1950, population concerns were indeed present at this time. For more on this longer history, see Derek S. Hoff’s *The State and the Stork*.

States and Europe. Advocates of strict population control measures organized grassroots groups, such as Zero Population Growth (ZPG), and lobbied existing groups, like the Rockefeller-founded Population Council, to curb human population growth. These groups allied themselves with the ideologies of the burgeoning environmental and feminist movements.<sup>102</sup> Many in the scientific community supported the population control movement, with scientists taking leadership positions in ZPG and other organizations. Perhaps more than any other scientist, Paul Ehrlich acted as an important spokesperson for the growing threat of human overpopulation. Appearing multiple times on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* and publishing the bestselling book, *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich helped to remake overpopulation from a demographic curiosity into a national emergency and turned population control into a laudable goal of US foreign policy. To do this, Ehrlich and other overpopulation zealots spliced scientific rationality together with racially-coded alarmism drawn from speculative fictions.

During the 1960s and 1970s, speculative fictions played an important role in translating demographic shifts, birth rate fluctuations, and urban sprawl into compelling portraits of the future.<sup>103</sup> The genre of science fiction was particularly well-equipped to channel the specter of overpopulation into haunting narrative forms. In fact, throughout the

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<sup>102</sup> The reception by feminists and environmentalists to the overpopulation movement was more tepid. Feminists condemned the harsh tactics outlined by Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, which advocated using coercion to prevent births and withholding international aid to countries with high birth rates. For more, see Betsy Hartmann's *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*.

<sup>103</sup> The relationship between science and speculative fictions is not necessarily intentionally forged. As Donna Haraway argues, science and science fiction are always already intersecting conduits that negotiate cultural meaning. Haraway defines science itself as "a kind of story-telling practice—a rule-governed, constrained, historically changing craft of narrating the history of nature" (*Primate Visions* 4). For Haraway, science *is* story. This definition allows Haraway to trace the role of seemingly unrelated actors and texts in the creation of scientific knowledges. For Haraway, scientists, government officials, research assistants, science fiction writers, even animal test subjects, all contribute to the story-telling practice of science, "where possible worlds are constantly reinvented in the contest for very real, present world" (5).

1960s and 1970s, many science fiction authors (most of them white men) sought to give the overcrowded future a place in print. Prominent writers like Philip K. Dick, Harry Harrison, Kurt Vonnegut, Joanna Russ, J. G. Ballard, and Robert Silverberg produced works that featured overpopulation as an important element in their sci-fi worlds.<sup>104</sup> Many of these worlds presented scenes of teeming human populations clustered in congested cities with dwindling resources and crumbling infrastructure. Others imagined totalitarian police states or bureaucratic global governments desperately seeking to curtail or manage further population growth with new drugs, assisted suicide, and the construction of self-contained skyscraper dwellings. To this day, the best example of overpopulation fiction remains the 1973 film *Soylent Green*. From its first showing, this cult classic horrified audiences with a near-future in which a planet overtaxed by humans incited cannibalism, environmental degradation, and totalitarian governance. Speculative fictions, like *Soylent Green*, provided compelling narratives about the imminent threat posed by human overpopulation.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, speculative fictions played into a racialized imaginary of overpopulation stoked by growing concerns about immigration from the developing world and the changing demographic makeup of the US. The geography, culture, and people of Asia occupied a large part of this imaginary along with those from sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.<sup>105</sup> I focus on anti-Asian racism specifically in this chapter not to minimize the important role of these other places and peoples in shaping overpopulation

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<sup>104</sup> For examples, see Philip K. Dick's *The Crack in Space* (1966), Harry Harrison's "Roommates" (1971), Kurt Vonnegut's "Welcome to the Monkey House" (1968), Joanna Russ's *And Chaos Died* (1970), J. G. Ballard's "Billennium" (1962), and Robert Silverberg's *The World Inside* (1971).

<sup>105</sup> Other scholars have reflected on the overpopulation anxieties associated with other regions of the developing world. For instance, Elena Gutiérrez's *Fertile Matters* notes that in the 1960s and 1970s with a declining US birthrate, "population control experts identified a new adversary: the Mexican immigrant" (73).



discourse but as a way of unraveling one facet of the Orientalism that influenced Western ideas of the developing world.

I begin with the changing immigration policies of the 1960s that opened the country to mass immigration from Asia. During the 1960s, US immigration shifted from a policy of exclusion to a more racially inclusive program—focusing on reuniting families, recruiting skilled workers, and providing asylum for refugees of communist regimes. But this new policy also catalyzed fears of mass immigration from developing countries. In the imaginary of overpopulation, fears of the racialized Other frequently took on the forms of an encroaching Asian culture and the unassimilable Asian immigrant, leading to worries that the US would soon become burdened by the proliferation of brown bodies from China, India, and Southeast Asia among other developing locales.<sup>106</sup> In Harry Harrison’s *Make Room! Make Room!*, the subject of my next section, the overpopulation imaginary galvanized anti-Asian sentiment and older stereotypes of the invading yellow peril to shape public apprehension about overpopulation. Vital to this imaginary was the fear that Asian immigrants and Asian culture would flood the US, setting the country back economically and socially to a developing-nation status. Asian migrants in Harrison’s text become the updated yellow peril that threaten to capsize American democracy and security by eroding white civilization. Next, I consider how scientists and speculative fiction authors sought to contain the yellow peril threat by promoting large-scale government policies that placed power in the hands of regulators and scientific experts over and against women of color. Far from

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<sup>106</sup> Lisa Lowe emphasizes the intimate connections between Asian and Asian American identity and immigration in her work *Immigrant Acts*. As Lowe explains: “[Focusing on Asian immigration] is not to draw attention away from the fact that most Asian Americans are now currently naturalized or native-born citizens...It is rather to observe that the life conditions, choices, and expressions of Asian Americans have been significantly determined by the U.S state through the apparatus of immigration laws and policies, through the enfranchisements denied or extended to immigrant individuals and communities, and through the processes of naturalization and citizenship” (7).

reaching a consensus on this approach, speculative fictions wrestled with the question of how and whether to intervene in human reproduction in large-scale ways. More than offering a clear position on overpopulation, these texts expose the tensions between the position of the “population controllers” and an anti-racist critique against top-down reproductive control. In particular, I highlight Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven* as the most potent denunciation of the anti-Asian racism espoused by Harrison. Yet *Lathe* too suffers from Orientalist shortcomings. In place of the older Asian stereotype of the yellow peril, the novel features an equally narrow Asian migrant subjectivity in the model minority archetype—a docile, assimilable, and foreign subject, neither completely American nor alien. Like the problem minorities of overpopulation zealots, Le Guin’s alien model minority leaves unchallenged the notion of the US as a nation propagated by white people for white people.

### **Asian Immigration and Asian “Americanness”**

From its beginnings, US immigration policy has been largely guided by racism, intended to limit the admission of nonwhites into the United States by drastically curtailing the immigration of peoples from areas outside of Northern and Western Europe. As Ian Haney López states, “Federal law restricted immigration to this country on the basis of race for nearly one hundred years, roughly from the Chinese exclusion laws of the 1880s until the end of the national origin quotas in 1965” (27). Throughout this period, the admission of immigrants from Asia was particularly curtailed. The first restrictive federal immigration law was passed in order to limit Asian immigration into the US. The Page Law of 1875 explicitly prohibited entry into the US “of women for the purposes of prostitution” from China or “any Oriental country” (Cong. Rec. 3 Mar. 1875 477). In effect, the law banned the entry of most

Asian women. By excluding Asian women, the law reinforced both a gendered and racialized stereotype of Asian women as sexually deviant, prone to prostitution, and harboring venereal diseases (Espiritu, *Asian American* 22).<sup>107</sup> Intentionally, the law did not target Asian men who were still an important source of labor for the construction of railroads and mining on the West Coast. As a consequence, the law created extreme disparities between male and female Asian migrants—about 1,340 Chinese women migrated to the US between 1875 and 1882 compared to more than 100,000 men between 1876 and 1882 (22). The Page Law also made it difficult for male Asian migrants to start families and build intergenerational communities within the US, contributing to their marginalized status at the fringes of American society.

Due to a rise in anti-Asian sentiment and economic depression, more restrictive legislation further transformed US immigration policies towards Asian countries at the turn of the century. The most prominent law was the Chinese Exclusion Act. First passed in 1882, this act banned the immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of ten years, although the act was renewed and eventually became permanent. Because the law also denied the right of naturalization to Asians living within the United States, the act made Asian residents permanent aliens and excluded them from US citizenship and associated civil liberties. Subsequent laws and modification went further to curtail immigration from Asia, creating an “Asiatic Barred Zone” that excluded entry from anyone born in Asia.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> At this time, many Chinese women were lured to the US with the promise of work only to be forced into sexual slavery, thus creating the idea that Chinese women were synonymous with prostitutes in the public imaginary.

<sup>108</sup> Exceptions to this “Asiatic Barred Zone” were Filipinos, who had unique privileges as the Philippines was a US colony at the time, and Japanese and Korean immigrants, who were subject to the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement, which terminated all labor immigration from Japan but allowed the entry of wives and children of Japanese residents into the United States. The Immigration Act of 1924 would later entirely bar the entry of “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” which was coded language for Japanese immigrants.

By the 1950s and 1960s, US immigration policies were organized around a national quota system. While these policies relaxed the earlier provisions that effectively prohibited entry from most Asian countries, they still gave preference to those migrating from Northern and Western Europe.<sup>109</sup> For example, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 revised the formula of national quotas to a rate of one-sixth of one percent of each nationality's population in the US in 1920. As a revision to the Immigration Act of 1924, the 1952 law was a marked improvement, although 85% of the 154,277 visas available annually were allotted to individuals of Northern and Western European lineage.

Under such racially restrictive policies, the image of Asians as “forever foreigners” crystallized (Tuan 37). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Asians endured constant scrutiny about their Americanness and their loyalty to the US—a pervasive suspicion epitomized by the internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during the Second World War. And even as Asian Americans fought to claim their identities as US citizens and exercise the rights entitled to them, they frequently failed in formal legal settings. In the Supreme Court cases *US v. Ozawa* (1922) and *US v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), plaintiffs in both cases failed to overturn the widespread conviction that peoples of Asian-descent were excluded from the category of whiteness and, hence, American citizenship.

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<sup>109</sup> The process for eliminating restrictions on Asian immigrants began earlier. In 1943, Congress permitted China a minimum quota and allowed Chinese aliens to naturalize. In 1946, Congress awarded Filipinos and Indians the same stipulations. In 1952, the McCarran-Walter Act granted these rights to all Asian nationalities, although most nations were given the hundred-per-year minimum quota. As Gabriel J. Chin finds, these measures were not indicative of a wider change in the attitude of the US towards Asian immigrants: “rather than representing a decision by Congress about the desirability or acceptability of significant numbers of Asian immigrants, most authorities agree that the reforms were essentially ad hoc responses to particular emergencies or political circumstances” (283). Moreover, these nations were subject to special restrictions as part of the Asia-Pacific Triangle, allowing the total immigration from the Triangle to be limited to 2,000 persons.

Given this long history of anti-Asian immigration policy and wider anti-Asian racism, the changes brought about in the mid-1960s were indeed radical. More than any other action, the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (or the Hart-Celler Act) transformed US immigration policy and—with it—the ethnic makeup of the United States. The legislation represented a drastic change in US policy on immigration as the country sought to project an image of democracy in the face of Soviet communism. President Lyndon B. Johnson declared in his remarks about the Hart-Celler Act that: “For over four decades the immigration policy of the United States has been twisted and has been distorted by the harsh injustice of the national origins quota system...violat[ing] the basic principle of American democracy” (Johnson, par. 12, 16). Passed in the face of public disapproval, the 1965 Immigration Act abolished the national quota system, giving every nation outside the Western Hemisphere an equal quota of 20,000 immigrants per year, up to a total ceiling of 170,000.<sup>110</sup> The law gave preference to immigrants with US family relationships, to those with professional skills, and to refugees from Communist countries.

Interestingly, many politicians supporting the new immigration policy promised that the new bill would not change the ethnic or racial makeup of the country.<sup>111</sup> As Senator Edward Kennedy said at the time: “Under the proposed bill, the present level of immigration remains substantially the same” (Kennedy 2). Such claims were meant to assuage

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<sup>110</sup> According to public opinion polling in 1965, most respondents favored immigration to be kept at its present level (39%) or decreased (33%); only 7% favored increasing immigration levels. In addition, respondents of a Harris poll made clear that the immigrants least desired by Americans were Russians (26%), Asians (15%), and Middle Easterners (14%) (“Huddled Masses”).

<sup>111</sup> Gabriel J. Chin offers a counter view of the debate behind the 1965 Immigration Act. Chin contends that: “a close reading of the legislative history of the 1965 Act shows some support for what is clearly the standard view that Congress did not anticipate a change in the racial demographics of the immigration stream. Nevertheless, the more probable conclusion is that Congress intended to create real equal opportunity for groups whose opportunity to immigrate had been restricted in the past” (278).

conservative lawmakers, like Francis Walter, who warned that hordes of Asians could overrun the US (Ngai 246). Against these critics, Kennedy assured his colleagues that “our cities will not be flooded with a million immigrants” and that the bill “will not inundate America with immigrants from one country or area, or the most populated and economically deprived nations of Africa and Asia” (Kennedy 2, 3). Pro-reform politicians like Kennedy argued that opening immigration channels, even in Asia, would not result in a significant increase in migrants from those regions. In actuality, the Immigration Act of 1965 dramatically changed the racial landscape of the US. As a result of the new law, the major source of immigrants shifted from Europe to Asia and Latin America (Violet 17). In fact, the Asian-identified population grew substantially from 1 million in 1960 to 16 million in 2009 (Hsu, par. 2). These demographic shifts also meant that by 1980 a greater share of the Asian American community was foreign-born (Hing 81).

Amidst these significant demographic shifts, long-held prejudices remained. Asian immigrants continued to fuel white fears of the yellow peril. This threat channeled anti-Asian xenophobia into the form of an inchoate horde of barbarity, depravity, and filthiness from the Orient. The yellow peril was a threat both martial and sexual in nature. As Yen Le Espiritu notes, “between 1850 and 1940, US popular media consistently portrayed Asian men as a military threat to the security and welfare of the United States *and* as a sexual danger to innocent white women” (*Asian American* 100; emphasis in original). Underlying these fears was the belief that Asian peoples would overtake and conquer the Western world. The most overt anxieties of the yellow peril influenced eugenic thinking during the early twentieth century—as in Lothrop Stoddard’s alarmist book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* in 1920. For such thinkers, humanity was locked in geopolitical

competition among various racial groups, each struggling to gain the upper hand. While particularly vehement during the early twentieth century, yellow peril racist thinking did not simply evaporate in the liberalism of the 1960s.<sup>112</sup>

Anti-Asian sentiment became more complicated during the Cold War as the US's strategy of containment, stopping the spread of communism, created a patchwork of alliances and enemies. For example, the US maintained strong diplomatic ties with Japan, integrating Japan into the Western political and economic system, yet for China, the circumstances were more complex. While the US had worked with China as an ally during the Second World War, in the 1960s the US worked to destabilize China's communist government. As Mae M. Ngai states: "in a few short years the dominant image of Chinese lurched from despised Oriental 'other' to wartime ally to dangerous Communist threat" (203). The US's anticommunist interventions in Southeast Asia caused increased migration flows into the country that enflamed anti-Asian public responses. As Madeline Hsu notes:

America's bitter loss of the deeply divisive Vietnam conflict attached particularly complicated and powerful layers of guilt, obligation, ambivalence, hostility, and amnesia to the influx of almost 1 million refugees who arrived in several waves propelled by continuing upheaval and violence in homelands whose turmoil had been exacerbated by American interference. (par. 13)

These complex feelings towards a growing Asian migrant population in the US gave rise to the "model minority myth."

The term "model minority" is credited to sociologist William Petersen in a 1966 *New York Times* magazine article, called "Success Story: Japanese American Style." As the article's title suggests, the term solidified Japanese Americans and eventually all Asians as industrious, rule-abiding, and successful. According to the article, Japanese Americans have

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<sup>112</sup> Such race thinking continues today as well. American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's 1996 *The Clash of Civilizations* stands as a modern reinvention of the theory of global racial competition.

been “subjected to the most discrimination and the worst injustices,” although this group has achieved economic success, stable communities, and “good citizenship...by their own almost totally unaided effort” (20-21). The new concept of the model minority pointed to the ability of some peoples to rise above their marginalization to achieve success. Far from a flattering portrayal of Asian Americans, though, the model minority myth had three particularly damaging consequences. First, the image of the model minority homogenized the Asian American community and overshadowed its ongoing struggle against US racism with a narrative of triumph. The model minority also vilified other racial groups (especially African Americans) for not achieving success, ignoring the complicated dynamics of American racism. If Asian Americans could gain economic stability from their hard work and determination alone then surely so could all other minority groups. Finally, the model minority myth reinforced Asian Americans as foreign by the very fact of their perpetual “minority” status. As Petersen notes: “The Japanese...could climb over the highest barriers our racists were able to fashion in part because of their meaningful links with an alien culture” (42). No matter how successful these people became, to Petersen and others, they would always retain markers of their alienness.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the American public became increasingly unsettled by the prospect of mass immigration into the developed world as the population of developing nations grew. University of Michigan political science professors Katherine Organski and Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organski in their 1961 book *Population and World Power* sought to quell such concerns, writing that:

Despite the fears of Westerners that crowded Asian land may someday flood the West with migrants, such a likelihood is slight...The overpopulation nations of today place their hopes in economic development and birth control. They do not look to solve their problems by exporting such a valuable commodity as population. (101)



Despite the assurances of academics, American politicians and the general public continued to debate the significant influx of Asian immigrants during the 1960s and 1970s. Lon Kurashige argues that these debates continued in the post-Hart-Celler world amidst a spirit of egalitarianism—a period of time in which yellow peril rhetoric was overcome by calls for racial inclusion. Kurashige asserts that the 1965 Immigration Act “obviated fears of an uncontrollable flood from abroad because the numbers could always be decreased” (209). Yet images of an uncontrollable Asian-immigrant flood stubbornly persisted and found new fervor in the threat of overpopulation.

For overpopulation scientists, like Paul Ehrlich and others, Asian nations represented a grave threat to US security and global stability, a threat both old and new. In the 1960s, the yellow peril became cloaked in the guise of the population bomb. For these scientists and science fiction writers, America and the entire world, was in danger of collapse from Asian hordes. Brian Ireland points to the work of Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin, who argue that “the trend toward overpopulation novels in the postwar years was caused at least in part by the American experience of the Korean War, which ‘made the West palpably aware of the sheer mass of the Asian population’” (155). Under the swelling demographics of the Asian population, critics feared the US would capsize. Anti-Asian anxieties in the 1960s were cultivated not by an image of a strong and powerful Asia, but of a filthy, hungry, and helpless land. Asia and the entire developing world became an imminent emergency, its population a “dirty” bomb that could push the US to the edge of racial and existential oblivion.

## **A Dirty Bomb of “Decay, Dirt, and Unwashed Humanity”: The Threat of the Developing World Comes to the US**

The developing world was frequently a source of consternation in the Cold War American imagination. In *Race, Ethnicity, and Nuclear War*, Paul Williams argues that nuclear fiction during the period was filled with the anxiety that the instability of the developing world could trigger a nuclear war, such that “Third-World War is separated from a Third World War by a slender hyphen” (225). For many Cold War strategists, the Third World War would begin either due to the developing world’s incompetence in maintaining a nuclear arsenal or due to the treacherous use of nuclear weapons by Third-World people (225). In particular, Williams finds that “[t]he late 1960s and early 1970s saw nuclear anxieties focus on an aggressive, unpredictable China, latecomer to the Nuclear Club” (238). The postwar rise of a communist China and the 1966 Cultural Revolution further stoked anti-Chinese hostility.

In overpopulation speculative fictions too, the danger of the developing world loomed large, with no threat greater to the US than China and Southeast Asia.<sup>113</sup> In Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*, China wields an exaggerated power in global affairs. During one section of Ehrlich’s polemic, he posits several “scenarios” in order to speculate about the effect massive famines and social unrest would have on the geopolitical stage. Herman Kahn,

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<sup>113</sup> The equation of overpopulation with the developing world is evident in the 1967 Disney film *Family Planning*, commissioned by the Population Council. The film stars Donald Duck and asserts that “the family of man [sic] is increasing at an astonishing rate.” Although it purports to be concerned about the reproductive propensities of all people, the cartoon directs its attention to those in the developing world. The film states that “all men are the same” and decides to “put them together into one and let that one stand for all. He’s a common man, just like you and me.” However, this “common man” is depicted with non-Western features, attire, and mannerisms. He is brown-skinned, wears sandals, sports a Fu Manchu moustache, and speaks in an indeterminate accent. Rather than speak for herself, the man’s wife relays the questions she has in his ear. Thus, while the film ends by proclaiming that “all of us have a responsibility towards the family of man. Including you,” the subtext of the film—and its distribution—imply that the responsibility is disproportionately on those in the developing world.

a systems theorist with the RAND Corporation, developed scenarios as a strategic tool to plan for nuclear war, popularizing the concept in his 1962 book *Thinking About the Unthinkable*.<sup>114</sup> By adopting Kahn's technique, Ehrlich fits the overpopulation problem into a national security framework. Unregulated population growth is mapped onto a grid of intelligibility designed for nuclear weapons, elevating overpopulation as a problem of nuclear proportions.<sup>115</sup>

In *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich describes a scenario in which "China has had catastrophic floods, a breakdown of communications and massive famines" (72).<sup>116</sup> Consequently, the country is driven to start a war in Southeast Asia in order "to distract her starving population with foreign adventures" (73). This move threatens American interests in the region, and Ehrlich speculates that this would lead the US to deploy its nuclear arsenal. Predictably, the situation escalates:

After an unheeded warning, tactical nuclear weapons are used in strikes on selected Chinese air bases, supply complexes, and staging areas in North Vietnam, Thailand, and southern China. With the connivance of the Russians a preemptive strike is also launched against China's nuclear facilities. Unfortunately, our defenses are not

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<sup>114</sup> Kahn defines a scenario as "an attempt to describe in more or less detail some hypothetical sequence of events. . . . By the use of a relatively extensive scenario, the analyst may be able to get a feel for events and the branching points dependent upon critical choices" (143). Ehrlich's own definition in *The Population Bomb* hews closely to Kahn's. According to Ehrlich: "The possibilities [of the future] are infinite; the single course of events that will be realized is unguessable. We can, however, look at a few possibilities as an aid to our thinking, using a device known as a 'Scenario.' Scenarios are hypothetical sequences of events used as an aid in thinking about the future, especially in identifying possible decision points" (72).

<sup>115</sup> The categorization of overpopulation as a national security threat was also replicated by US policymakers. As Ruth Dixon-Mueller notes: "In 1959, the President's Committee to Study the U.S. Military Assistance Program (also known as the Draper Committee) issued a report that addressed the 'population question' by recommending that 'in order to meet more effectively the problem of economic development, the United States [should] assist. . . countries. . . on request in the formulation of. . . plans designed to deal with the problem of rapid population growth'. As the first advisory body to address the problem in detail and to recommend specific action, the committee was also concerned with possible threats to U.S. national security posed by widening income disparities between rich and poor nations" (60-61).

<sup>116</sup> There are two other scenarios that Ehrlich includes in *The Population Bomb*. One in which communism infiltrates the entirety of the developing world. In this scenario, a China-Russia alliance launches nuclear weapons in fear of US preemptive action and the world ends in nuclear winter. The final scenario is Ehrlich's hoped for future in which the US institutes population control measures that stem widespread global starvation.

sufficient to prevent five “dirty” Chinese thermonuclear devices, transported in submarines, from being detonated in the sea off our West Coast. Fall out results in more than 100 million American deaths. (73-74)

The scenario underscores the connection, albeit farfetched, between overpopulation and nuclear warfare. Steeped in sensationalism, the scenario aims to show that unregulated population growth can have far-reaching consequences. The scenario also gives a villainous face to the monster of overpopulation: Asia and the rest of the developing world. Notably, the usual Cold War enemy of the Soviet Union is largely removed from this geopolitical portrait.<sup>117</sup> Instead, Ehrlich realigns Cold War antagonisms to convert the Third World into a “dirty bomb” composed of China and smaller satellite nations. While other overpopulation texts do not make such a drastic argument about overpopulation and nuclear war, many still operate with Ehrlich’s basic premise: the developing world endangers American security interests at home and overseas.

Like Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*, Harrison’s *Make Room! Make Room!* captured the cultural zeitgeist around overpopulation. The novel was touted by Ehrlich and other overpopulation zealots for its important message. In an early introduction to the novel, Ehrlich lauded *Make Room* for providing what statistical modelling and mathematical projections alone could not: “We must leave these [speculations] to our imaginations—or better yet to the talented imaginations of writers like Harry Harrison” (“Introduction,” par. 3). The affinity between Ehrlich’s and Harrison’s projects is reflected not only in the dire consequences speculated upon in both works but in the way they demonize the developing world to buttress their alarmist claims. In Ehrlich’s account, China is an external threat, deploying dirty bombs outside the US to inflict fallout damage. By contrast in *Make Room*,

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<sup>117</sup> The perceived whiteness of the USSR could be one explanation for this strange alliance between the US and USSR against a common enemy in the Third World.

the dirtiness of the developing world becomes a figurative bomb, transported into the US in order to explode America's modern, civilized, and white-dominated culture.

In Harrison's story, like the film, New York City's population in the year 1999 swells to 35 million people, forcing the inhabitants to share cramped apartment spaces, resign themselves to substandard utilities, and eschew a world outside plagued by severe heatwaves and excessive sun exposure. In such conditions, sweat, dirt, disease, and grime proliferate. Not merely superficial, the novel's many references to filth create a clear dichotomy between the cleanliness, wealth, and stability of the US's hegemonic white culture and the encroachment of the unkempt, racialized developing world. As anthropologist Mary Douglas claims in *Purity and Danger*: "Dirt is essentially disorder" (2). Dirt, she continues, is that which society defines as out of place or not fitting within a given culture; it erects a boundary between the ordered inside and a disordered, threatening outside. Yet the border is fragile. As theorist William A. Cohen notes: "By the time one has encountered and repudiated filth, it is too late—the subject is already besmirched by it" (x). The presence of dirt and grime in *Make Room* marks the violation of psycho-social-national borders, the eugenic threat of an invading outside presence.

In *Make Room*, the future is dirty, crowded, and unsafe.<sup>118</sup> Andrew "Andy" Rusch, a white police officer and the book's protagonist, lives in a partitioned apartment. While the

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<sup>118</sup> As the site of riots, looting, and murder, Harrison's image of an overcrowded New York relates to fears of urban violence during the 1960s and 1970s. The five years between 1965 and 1970, in particular, were marked by numerous large-scale urban riots in cities like Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Newark, and Washington D.C. The year 1967 alone experienced 164 instances of urban riots in 128 cities across the country (H. Thompson 109). According to the 11-member Kerner Commission appointed by then-President Lyndon B. Johnson to study the violence, the urban riots spoke to the nation's simmering racial issues. The Kerner Commission concluded that: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal" (*Report 1*). Moreover, the Commission report found that "white racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II" (5). In other words, the rioting was prompted by racial discrimination as carried out in segregation policy in

man's white skin and "impressive Welsh nose" locate Rusch as a white European-descended American, the circumstances of Rusch's cramped and impoverished existence call to mind *The Population Bomb's* images of the overpopulated developing world (Harrison 16). Like Ehrlich's "stinking hot night" in Delhi, Harrison's New York City emits "a stifling miasma compounded of decay, dirt and unwashed humanity" (20). The city's overtaxed infrastructure and dwindling resources lead to health conditions endemic to more impoverished areas. One of Rusch's neighbors, Mrs. Miles, has a young son who suffers from a condition called "kwash," short for Kwashiorkor. As one character relates: "[Kwash] comes from not eating enough protein. They used to have it only in Africa but now they got it right across the whole US" (192). In the 1960s, as today, the condition existed mainly in regions of food scarcity, like sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, and Southeast Asia ("What is Kwashiorkor?"). The prevalence of malnutrition in *Make Room* underscores the decline of the once-healthy United States into a land suffering from the scourges of browner developing nations.

Like the other characters in the novel, Andy Rusch lacks the necessary calories to sustain himself. Staring into his cracked mirror, Rusch reflects on his own crumbling physique:

No one should ever look at himself in the morning, naked and revealed, he decided with distaste, frowning at the dead white of his skin and the slight bow to his legs that was usually concealed by his pants. And how did he manage to have ribs that stuck out like those of a starved horse, as well as a growing potbelly—both at the same time? (Harrison 16)

Rusch's body evidences the plummeting US standard of living vis-à-vis the blackening of the archetypal white American. With bowed legs, distended stomach, and protruding ribs, Rusch's starved physique more closely resembles that of a malnourished person living in

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housing and education. In overpopulation fiction, on the other hand, urban violence was frequently interpreted as being caused by overpopulation, not racial inequality.

Africa or Asia. Rusch's white American status is now "dead" as his skin sallows literally and figuratively into the jaundiced yellow or pale brown skin of the Third World. Standing naked to the world, Rusch's body marks the affluent white US's devolution into the squalor of the brown-skinned developing world.<sup>119</sup>

The darkening of white America vis-à-vis Andy Rusch's "dead white" skin harkens back to older fears associated with America's history of eugenics. The eugenicist Madison Grant's classic 1916 tract, *The Passing of the Great Race*, as one famous example, bemoans the swamping of the more advanced Nordic civilizations in the US and Europe with "inferior races" from abroad (214). Saving western democracy, according to eugenicists like Grant, hinged on curtailing the reproduction of inferior hordes abroad (i.e. negative eugenics), while promoting the reproduction of the supposedly pure white races (i.e. positive eugenics): "Man has the choice of two methods of race improvement. He can breed from the best or he can eliminate the worst by segregation or sterilization" (51-52). At stake, for eugenicist thinkers, were the stable institutions of western governance. The naturalist Henry Fairfield Osborn, Sr., makes this clear in a 1917 preface to Grant's text:

For the world's future the destruction of wealth is a small matter compared with the destruction of the best human strains, for wealth can be renewed while these strains of the real human aristocracy once lost are lost forever. In the new world that we are working and fighting for, the world of liberty, of justice and of humanity, we shall save democracy only when democracy discovers its own [white] aristocracy as in the days when our Republic was founded. (xiii)

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<sup>119</sup> The novel frames the initial darkening of the US's white hegemony within a scene of disorientation. In a lowly abode, Rusch awakens: "He rubbed at his gummed-shut eyelids, then lay there, staring up at the cracked and stained plaster of the ceiling, only half awake and experiencing a feeling of dislocation, not knowing in those first waking moments just where he was, although he had lived in this room for over seven years" (15). Rusch's "feeling of dislocation" mirrors the transposition of white America as it finds itself suddenly (dis)located in the developing world.

Osborn here finds no contradiction in the belief that a white aristocracy is responsible for upholding Western democratic society. White races, according to Grant and Osborn, needed to claim their naturally superior place above lower “strains” in order to ensure the fruits of civilization: liberty, justice, and democracy. For many eugenicists, protecting modernity required stemming the tide of “undesirables” that threatened to swamp US institutions.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the overpopulation movement bolstered earlier eugenic arguments against unfit populations abroad with fervent anti-immigration messages.<sup>120</sup>

Historian John Hultgren notes that during this time prior eugenic ideologies were recast in Cold War logics resulting in a more muted racism and nativism:

Neo-Malthusianism, popularized by the writings of William Vogt and Henry Fairfield Osborne Jr., played a central role in these efforts, functioning as an epistemological bridge through which the “teeming” populations “out there” could be connected to the ideological threats of communism. (par. 23)

Overpopulation discourse, steeped in anti-communism, became a viable means for rechanneling eugenic thought. For this reason, anti-immigration campaigns tapped into the racial alarmism stoked by population control advocates.<sup>121</sup> Scholars Sebastian Normandin and Sean A. Valles even argue that “today’s immigration restrictionist network was built and led by—and in some cases is still led by—a network of conservationists and population control activists” (103-104). Normandin and Valles document the former president of ZPG, John Tanton, as one such figure whose racist beliefs aligned with the overpopulation and anti-immigration movements. Paul Ehrlich too supported the cause of anti-immigration and

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<sup>120</sup> Eric Ross argues that the Second World War did not end US eugenic thinking but required eugenics to be expressed in more subtle ways: “As eugenic concerns were muted in the shadow of the Third Reich, environmental catastrophism became the principle vehicle for Malthusian fears” (qtd. in Hultgren, par. 22).

<sup>121</sup> Priscilla Huang notes the persistent eugenic double-standard in anti-immigrant campaigns that demand the containment of nonwhite immigrant women’s pregnancies (so-called “anchor babies”), which are deemed burdensome to the planet, while embracing white reproduction (“Anchor Babies” 386).



Tanton's conservative Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR).

Overpopulation zealots like Ehrlich and Tanton frequently based their calls for population control in eugenic language. The 1979 anti-immigrant publication, *The Golden Door*, co-authored by Paul Ehrlich et al., bluntly asserts that “we are being invaded by a horde of illegal immigrants” and asks “[i]f we are limiting our family sizes so that our children can inherit a better nation, why should we throw open our doors to over-reproducers?” (vii).

Just as Ehrlich and other overpopulation alarmists stoked fears of the infiltration of nonwhite people in the West, Harrison's images of emaciation, sickness, and filth revive eugenics worries about the looming shadow of the developing world darkening US democracy and white civilization. As Matthew Connelly points out: “Americans were asked to imagine themselves as part of a poor, overcrowded society – indeed, imagine the US as overpopulated with underdeveloped people” (“To Inherit the Earth” 317). In *Make Room*, cleanliness is linked to whiteness, civilization, and democracy, while dirt becomes a racialized symbol of destitution and criminality. For this reason, filth and grime feature frequently in the novel, creating scenes of impoverishment and degeneration antithetical to the modernity of America's post-war era.<sup>122</sup> The next section reveals how this image of the invading developing world serves as part of a larger anti-Asian critique in *Make Room* that, like the corruption of Rusch's sickly body, moves the threat into the American nation.

### **Rickshaws and Ruin: Anti-Asian Racism in Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!***

Although set thirty-years in America's future, Harrison's portrait of New York more closely resembles that of *The Population Bomb*'s congested Delhi quoted at length in my

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<sup>122</sup> The terms “dirt,” “filth,” “decay,” and “dust” and their derivations appear in the novel over forty-five times.

dissertation's introduction. Ehrlich's text begins with a city "alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping.... People, people, people, people" (15). Similarly,

Harrison's exposition introduces New York as a living mass of bodies:

Unable to expand outward, Manhattan has writhed upward, feeding on its own flesh as it tears down the old buildings to replace them with the new, rising higher and still higher—yet never high enough, for there seems to be no limit to the people crowding here. They press in from the outside and raise their families, and their children and their children's children raise families, until this city is populated as no other city has ever been in the history of the world. (Harrison 11)

Harrison's repeated words "families" and "children" semantically reproduce the mass population that plagues New York just as Ehrlich's India overflows with "people, people, people, people." Like the words themselves, New York's citizens become redundant, wasteful. They weigh on the city like a metastatic cancer, leaving the afflicted city to writhe and feed on its own flesh.

The parallels between Ehrlich's image of a congested Delhi and Harrison's imagined New York are not merely superficial. In fact, Harrison noted in an interview that the germination of his novel came from an Indian acquaintance. According to Harrison:

The idea [for *Make Room*] came from an Indian I met after the war, in 1946. He told me, "Overpopulation is the big problem coming up in the world" (nobody had ever heard of it in those days) and he said "Want to make a lot of money, Harry? You have to import rubber contraceptives to India." I didn't mind making money, but I didn't want to be the rubber king of India! But I started reading a bit about overpopulation, and got the idea for the book. ("Harry Harrison")

Given Harrison's Indian interlocutor, it becomes less surprising that the New York City of *Make Room* resembles the choked streets of Delhi or Mumbai.<sup>123</sup> More than coincidental, this

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<sup>123</sup> Interestingly, David Nally notes that Paul Ehrlich also was first inspired to write about overpopulation by an Indian citizen. For Ehrlich, this was after hearing the Indian statesman Chidambaram Subramaniam speak at Stanford on the promises of the Green Revolution for India (Nally 209).

linkage underscores an important source of connection between overpopulation narratives and anxieties tied to the US perception of Asia.

This section elaborates on the subtle yet significant presence of anti-Asian Orientalism in Harry Harrison's 1966 *Make Room*.<sup>124</sup> In the novel, the US is overrun by overpopulation, manifesting as Asian cultural practices and the mass migration of Asian people. Rickshaws, seaweed crackers, and Chinatowns embody a new yellow peril that endangers the security and democracy of the US. More fundamentally, the proliferation of Asia within the US threatens to usurp the presumed whiteness of the US and slip the nation backwards into a developing-world status. Thus, the population crisis is simultaneously a race crisis, a discursive emergency mapped onto Asian and Asian American bodies.

In Harrison's future New York, people congest streets so that the use of cars is impossible. Instead, one of the most convenient modes of travel is by rickshaw. These devices appear ubiquitously in the novel. In one scene, Rusch notes the "heavy pedicab and tugtruck traffic" (Harrison 23) on the crosstown expressway as he ambles to the police station. Invented in Japan during the 1860s, the rickshaw quickly spread throughout Asia, becoming a mode of transport largely associated with the continent. Historian M. William Steele explains that, in the developed countries of Europe and North America, the rickshaw was perceived derisively as "a thing of the past, a demeaning machine in which the rich were pulled by the poor" (88). Unsurprisingly, the pedicab—a type of cycle rickshaw—and other

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<sup>124</sup> Other anti-Asian examples in 1960s and 1970s science fiction include the rebel android character of Roy Baty in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), described with "flat, Mongolian features which gave him a brutal look" (153), and the *Star Trek* villain Khan Noonien Singh, first introduced in the 1967 episode "Space Seed." Khan is described in the episode as a tyrant ruling over more than a quarter of the Earth "from Asia through the Middle East." Contemporary science fiction continues its uncomfortable relationship with Asian cultures in films like Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997), in TV shows like *Firefly* (2002), and in novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984).

types of human-powered transport systems appear within the overpopulated and underdeveloped New York of Harrison's *Make Room*.

These rickshaws dehumanize the citizens of New York. "In the center of the crowded street," narrates Harrison, "the tugtruck traffic moved at a snail's pace, the human draught animals leaning exhaustedly into their traces, mouths gaping [sic] for air" (129). By comparing rickshaw drivers to "human draught animals," the novel highlights that these machines transform people into beasts. The carts, an Asian import, speak to the limited ways that overpopulated citizens eke out a living. Like those in the developing world, New York's denizens turn to low paying and humiliating manual labor. The work is hard and unforgiving. Two men pulling a tugtruck are "bent almost double and aware of nothing" (118). Their bodies are deformed by the labor: "Andy could see how the traces cut into their necks, gouging into the permanent ulcers on their shoulders that stained their shirts wet with pus" (118). Like the city itself, these men are scarred and injured by the insufferable weight of the population. Given that human labor is so plentiful, the cab fares are cheap and the carts are dilapidated (58). As markers of a backwards Eastern culture, the rickshaws underscore both the conversion of New York into a crowded Asian-like metropolis and the horror of this transformation.

Besides transportation, New York's developing world status is also reinforced through its changing foodways. Throughout the novel, references are made to "seaweed crackers"—a major source of nutrition in the malnourished city—and other sea-based food sources. The white character Shirl, Rusch's love interest, notes her preference for green crackers: "the color came from the kind of seaweed the crackers were made from and the

green always tasted better to her, less of the iodine flavor than the others had” (60).<sup>125</sup> The consumption of seaweed—not a typical part of the US diet in the 1960s and 1970s—calls to mind Asian food practices. The fact that this foreign fare is a staple food in *Make Room* emphasizes the strong Asian presence in Harrison’s dystopic future. Anita Mannur notes the ways that food becomes “a metonymic index for apprehending Asianness, and, by extension, how Asians cannot be seen as American” (2). The strangeness of the seaweed crackers invokes the strangeness of Asian culture and its unexpected and unwanted presence in the United States. Shirl’s clear dislike for the crackers signals a deeper distaste for Asian culture and its inability to assimilate into the white American palate. The green crackers indicate not merely that US foodways have shifted to more Asian tastes but that these tastes are a debasement of authentic (read: white) American cuisine. Rusch’s elderly roommate Soloman Kahn complains: “Tastes fishy. I’ll take mine dry so I don’t grow no [sic] fins” (Harrison 18).<sup>126</sup> Harrison’s future tolerates but resents the encroaching Asian presence in American life as the country slips from the pinnacle of modernization to a degraded Asian-like approximation.

Later in the novel as Shirl shops for groceries, she confronts another Asian culinary feature: a tank of live freshwater fish typical of large Asian markets.<sup>127</sup> Harrison narrates how “Shirl stood on tiptoe and saw the shoals of tilapia stirring uneasily in the obscured depths. ‘Fresh Island ‘lapia,’” the fish woman said. ‘Come in last night from Lake Ronkonkoma’”

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<sup>125</sup> Shirl’s whiteness is alluded to earlier in the novel as Billy Chung ogles her through an open door: “She lay with her back turned, unclothed, red hair sweeping across the pillow, her skin a whitish pink with a scattering of brown freckles across the shoulders” (51).

<sup>126</sup> For more on Sol’s race, see Jesse Olszynko-Gryn and Patrick Ellis’s “Malthus at the Movies.” Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis identify Sol as a “conspicuously Jewish character” (60), attesting to his own ethnic ambiguity.

<sup>127</sup> For more on this common feature of Asian marketplaces, see Alice L. McLean, *Asian American Food Culture*, especially page 56.

(61). Fish is another Asian staple; its presence in the novel is another concession to Asian living that America must make in order to accommodate the country's swelling numbers. The "fish woman's" broken English too may stand in for her Asian ethnicity, buttressing the connection between Asianness and low culture. In such a case, her guttural attempt at bartering marks the woman as not-American and not properly assimilated into US culture. Like the "lapia" she proffers from New York's Lake Ronkonkoma, the "fish woman" is an intruder to the US, an invasive outsider living within the borders of the country.<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps the most distasteful representation of Asian culinary practices occurs when Shirl ventures out to purchase meat. Here the text refers to the common Western stereotype of Asians as dog eaters.<sup>129</sup> In an underground shop, Shirl is enticed by a butcher's stock: "Good leg of dog, nicely hung, good and fat too.' It did look good, but it was not for [Shirl] so there was just no point in looking. 'It's very nice, but you know Mr. O'Brien likes beef'" (63). The anxiety of the scene is caused by Shirl's seeming indifference, even praise, of the dog meat. Her comment that it "did look good" would shock and disgust mainstream American readers. As Frank H. Wu notes: "Reducing the inhabitants of the Asian continent to dog eaters...often forms the basis for believing that Asians are inferior: the dogs are cute; the people are despicable" (43). Through the dog-eating stereotype, Asian culture is made primitive and repulsive. The United States adopts this "backwards" Asian trait in its desperation to feed the hungry masses. By eating iodine-tasting seaweed, purchasing dog

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<sup>128</sup> Although now a common fish in the American diet, even "in the mid-1980s, the average American had never heard of this firm-fleshed North African native" (Nicholls, par. 6). In fact, significant worldwide distribution of tilapia only began in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in Asian countries. In the United States, tilapia were only introduced in 1974 (Rakocy). Even today, most tilapia in the US is imported from China, while most of the US farm-raised tilapia is sold live at Asian markets in this country (Nicholls, par. 10, 12).

<sup>129</sup> The eating of dogs is practiced in parts of Asia, although not to the extent that appears in anti-Asian racist depictions of Asia. Penny Van Esterik notes in *Food Culture in Southeast Asia* that dog is considered a delicacy among Hmong and some Vietnamese ethnic groups (32).

meat, and hauling rickshaws, Americans assimilate to Asian culture rather than inducing Asian immigrants to give up these foul practices. The suffering that the US endures from overpopulation takes the form of such distinct (yet everyday) features of Asian life.

Besides embracing Asian cultural practices, the US also approximates the Third World in its very demographics. Harrison's fictive New York is particularly choked with Asian immigrants. In *Make Room*, these immigrants congregate in a particular section of the city, a racial ghetto called Shiptown. The location of Shiptown is the now-congested East River, invisible beneath "the rows of ancient Victory and Liberty ships [that] made up an alien and rusty landscape of odd-shaped superstructures, laundry-hung rigging, supports, pipes, aerials, and chimneys" (Harrison 41). Shiptown, complete with rust and decay, represents a microcosm of near-future America. Lacking modern conveniences, the community is "alien" in a way that speaks to the Asians' marginalization and the unfamiliar presence of the Third World within the First.

Taiwanese refugees live in the decrepit ships that carried them to the US—their identities forever glued to their migratory status. The refugees have fled the ravages of communism abroad, escaping mainland China first and then the fall of Taiwan (44). In Harrison's future US, these migrants, antiquatedly dubbed the "Formosa" have found temporary sanctuary, constructing a makeshift Chinatown from their ships.<sup>130</sup> As Harrison narrates:

The other Formosa refugees had settled into these temporary quarters, hastily constructed on the ships that had been rotting, unwanted, at their mooring up the river at Stony Point ever since the Second World War. There had been no other place to house the flood of newcomers and the ships had seemed brilliant inspiration at the time. (41)

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<sup>130</sup> Harrison's use of "Formosa" here also hearkens to the politics of a colonial period as this is the name given to Taiwan by the Portuguese colonizers.

The impoverished, isolated community is described as alien and temporary, underscoring the tenuous presence of these Asian “squatters.” Arriving as a “flood,” the displaced people have overwhelmed the capacity of the city to accommodate them.<sup>131</sup> Like their ships, the migrants sit idle, “rotting, unwanted,” after being begrudgingly admitted into the country.

New York’s Shiptown is home to the family of Billy Chung, the novel’s central antagonist.<sup>132</sup> Destitute, complacent, and unassimilated, Billy’s family represents a loathsome vision of alien Asian migrant culture. Without a father figure, the family is headed by Billy’s mother. The female-headed Chung household anticipates the shift from male- to female-dominated immigration flows after the 1965 Immigration Act (Espiritu, “Gender,” ch. 5). However, because the novel was published before these demographic trends, *Make Room*’s female-headed migrant family traffics more in fantasy than reality. The Chung family, led by a nonwhite woman, disrupts the revered white nuclear family model touted in postwar American culture.

As the matriarch of the Chung family, Billy’s mother embodies the worst traits of Harrison’s new and frightening America. Raising four children without a husband, Chung appears as the canonical “unfit” mother. Even more damning is that Chung refuses to acclimate to life in America:

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<sup>131</sup> The notion of a “flood” of immigrants took form in the 1970s as mass rescues from American wars in Southeast Asia brought many refugees into the US’s borders. As journalist John Seabrook notes, increased international adoptions followed “the Korean War, in 1953, the Bay of Pigs debacle, in 1961, and the Vietnam War, in 1975. These ‘babylifts’ were, in part, political, fueled by a new superpower’s desire both to demonstrate its good will to the rest of the world and to rescue children from Communism, but the press covered them uncritically, as humanitarian mercy missions” (Seabrook, par. 5). The 1955 Refugee Relief Act also might have contributed to the view of Asians streaming into the US. The Act aimed to help refugees from communist countries, especially China.

<sup>132</sup> Billy’s Americanized first name speaks to his status as a second-generation Asian American, trapped between American (Billy) and Asian (Chung) subject positions. That he goes by the diminutive form of “William” also underscores the emasculating effects of racism in US culture—where Asian American men are belittled as “boys.”



Her voice was thin and high-pitched with a rasping whine made more obvious because she spoke an intonated Cantonese. She had never bothered to learn more than a few words of English and the family never spoke it at home. (Harrison 42)<sup>133</sup>

In contrast to her son, Chung has learned little English and never ventures outside Shiptown. The narration makes clear that Chung's inability to speak English stems from her laziness and apathy ("she had never bothered"), traits that set her at odds with the stereotype of American industriousness. Even working the hand generator that keeps the TV set playing proves too strenuous, as she barks at Billy: "You will squeeze this, my hand is tired" (45). Like her voice, a "thin and high-pitched...rasping whine," Chung's lifestyle is intended to grate on the reader. She is antisocial and bad-tempered. Without a job, she spends her days eating and watching television, resisting integration into American public life.

The perfect foil to conservative US family values and the American capitalist bootstrap theory, Billy's mother refuses the scripts of the hardworking immigrant or the self-sacrificing first-generation mother. Rather than enduring hardship to provide her children with a better future or maintaining a loving and safe home, Chung lives as a parasite on the goodwill of her family and her adopted country.<sup>134</sup> While she claims that "I would never take food from my children's mouths," Chung quickly contradicts herself. When Billy declares himself not hungry, she promptly eats his dinner and her earlier words:

"Here, give it to me. I'll have just a bite myself first, I give most of my food to the children." She put a cracker to her mouth and began to chew it with quick, rodentlike motions. There was little chance that the twins would see any of it since she was a specialist in consuming crumbs, leftover scraps, odds and ends; the pudgy roundness of her figure showed that. She took a second cracker from the dish without moving her eyes from the [television] screen. (42-3)

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<sup>133</sup> Harrison confuses his Asian nations in this quote. A typical migrant from Taiwan would have either spoken Mandarin or Taiwanese. Chung may have spoken Cantonese as a refugee from Hong Kong, although this rationale, if true, is not remarked upon in the novel. Thank you to Jennifer Ho for pointing this out to me.

<sup>134</sup> Billy's mother is the compelling caricature of what would later emerge as the "welfare queen" several years later.

Here Chung takes on the rodentlike mannerisms often found in racist depictions of Asian people.<sup>135</sup> As “a specialist in consuming crumbs, leftover scraps, odds and ends,” she behaves in a way that erodes her humanity. Chung’s acts of wickedness here seem to justify the oppression that shapes her impoverished and pitiful life.

In the novel, Chung becomes what Patricia Hill Collins calls a “controlling image” of nonwhite femininity. Chung’s race, gender, and sexuality together speak to a pervasive cultural image of the “bad nonwhite mother,” a nonwhite woman who is fertile but not maternal.<sup>136</sup> Chung is a reproductive monster, stealing resources from her children and dominating her household with cruelty and neglect. While she lacks loving maternal traits, Chung is exceptionally fecund. She has produced at least four children: Billy, his older sister Anna, and two young twin boys. Billy’s sister, Anna, takes care of the young twins, a familial responsibility that has left her with no future prospects: “She was only thirty-seven yet her hair was almost gray, her back bent into a permanent stoop, her hope of leaving the family and Shiptown was long since gone” (42). Filling in for her worthless mother, Anna sacrifices herself to care for the others. Billy too must find work to support his family. Despite their help, Chung does not appreciate the efforts her children make to keep the

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<sup>135</sup> Depictions in visual media include bucked teeth and long whisker-like moustaches.

<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, for feminist science fiction author Joanna Russ, overpopulation could damage women by re-imposing stereotypical gender roles as much as unraveling them. In her 1970 experimental novel, *And Chaos Died*, Russ introduces a married man and woman, who live on a future overpopulated Earth “in an underground tunnel, who put lead in their walls and who drank distilled water” (152). Although their race is indeterminate, they both wear sarongs (154, 156) and enact outdated twentieth-century domestic tasks. Says the man: “I practice my marksmanship and she her cooking and cleaning” (156). They do these things because, he explains: “It’s possible to live thoughtlessly or sloppily now; everyone has all his time free since the Great Work Change of a century and a half ago, and people’s lives are entirely what they make of them. The stupid and the slovenly disintegrate. We don’t” (155). While Harrison’s Chung family clearly disintegrates amidst their overcrowded future, Russ’s couple instead cling to traditional gender roles to prevent cultural decadence.

family afloat. To Billy, his mother is a harsh and emasculating woman: “‘You will do what I say,’ she shrilled. ‘You will obey me. A boy must obey his mother’” (45).

Raised by this unsupportive mother, Billy descends quickly into a life of crime. Although he begins the novel stealing soylent steaks during a riot at a food distribution center, Billy soon turns to home burglary. His first attempt is bungled, however, when he breaks into the apartment of Michael O’Brien, a wealthy businessman to whom Billy had previously delivered a telegram. While Billy attempts to rob the empty apartment, O’Brien steps unexpectedly out of the shower. Billy reacts impulsively and, “lashing out wildly,” he hits O’Brien with a tire iron (71). The man is killed instantly. Interestingly, critics like Brian Ireland absolve Chung of his criminality: “The boy is a criminal only because society has criminalized him” (156). Overpopulation and overconsumption are the true culprits. With fewer people and more resources, Billy would not have turned to crime, according to Ireland. Yet, even suspending the question of his culpability, Billy’s identity as a second-generation poor Taiwanese refugee racializes the overpopulation problem; the novel makes the Asian migrant the face of urban crime. The threat that Billy poses to New York is unintentional perhaps but no less real. As a risk to US security, Billy embodies a racialized danger that extends to the entire developing world.

Harrison’s *Make Room* sets up the population problem as a problem of immigration, particularly the threat of immigration from Asia. Overpopulation is rooted in the developing world and has migrated to the US through the Asian residents of Shiptown. In the novel, American cultural habits are transformed into crude racist stereotypes of a primitive and undemocratic Asian continent. Such formulations racialize overpopulation and cast the liberalization of immigration policies not as fulfilling America’s democratic promise but

threatening the white national body. Works like Harry Harrison's *Make Room* and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* decried the erosion of the American way of life by turning to horrific caricatures of "undeveloped" Asian cultures. These texts featured future visions of the US mired in problems salient to the 1960s, such as urban violence, starvation, and moral decay.

The specters of Asia and the Third World that permeated the overpopulated futures in speculative fictions also gave rise to particular strategies of containment—ways to quell the threat of the population bomb via population control. For various scientists and science fiction authors, combatting overpopulation required rational planning, scientific research, and top-down government administration. These methods managed populations by removing reproductive freedom from individuals. The means of preserving American democracy and freedom, therefore, necessitated measures antithetical to the very ideals of democracy and freedom. To reconcile this contradiction, overpopulation alarmists supported birth reduction measures organized by eugenic assumptions about the inferior reproductive value of people of color. Under the pretext of combatting overpopulation worldwide, then, population control served the more nefarious goal of controlling people of color and subduing the Third World.

### **Sterilants, Stasis, and Spacesuits: Containing Nonwhite Reproduction**

Population control gained significant American institutional power on both the domestic and international scene during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>137</sup> In President Lyndon B.

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<sup>137</sup> Dixon-Mueller notes that the birth control movement changed in the 1940s and 1950s as Margaret Sanger's own fiery brand of activism, holding that birth control would liberate women, began to temper. Instead, the once-radical movement became one of social reform and relied on the authority of medical experts. The move from "birth control" to the more conservative "family planning" laid the foundation for a top-down, scientifically managed population control policies enacted in the Third World in subsequent decades.

Johnson's 1965 State of the Union, he stressed that the US would "seek new ways to use our knowledge to help deal with the explosion in world population and the growing scarcity in world resources" (qtd. in Dixon-Mueller 62). Just a year earlier, Johnson had declared a War on Poverty, which among other measures subsidized family planning in the United States. Soon after, Johnson would announce a "war on hunger" to curb population growth in developing countries through investment in family planning programs (62). The US commitment to population control measures overseas ballooned in the 1970s as the Office of Population of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) launched an "'inundation strategy' to make contraceptives and sterilization available to all couples who wanted them (and some who did not) in developing countries" (Dixon-Mueller 51). The magnitude of this strategy is evidenced by the USAID's total assistance to population programs, which grew exponentially from \$2.1 million in 1965 to \$125.6 million in 1973 (68). The fervor to tamp down excessive population growth even crossed partisan lines throughout the 1960s and 1970s. After succeeding Johnson, President Richard Nixon told Congress in 1969 that "[population growth] is one of the most serious challenges to human destiny in the last third of this century" (qtd. in Robertson 1). Population control measures surged under his Republican administration and continued under the Ford and Carter presidencies.<sup>138</sup>

Mobilized by this sweeping government support, a burgeoning "population establishment" came together from US federal agencies, like the USAID; international bodies, like the UN Population Fund, the World Bank, and the International Planned

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<sup>138</sup> The Reagan administration oversaw a significant decline in federal support for population control measures as the Christian Right, a central pillar of President Reagan's support, cast birth control measures as immoral. For more on this shift, see Dixon-Mueller, pages 70-78.

Parenthood Federation; American-based foundations, like the Rockefeller-founded Population Council; US-based corporations; and grassroots organizations, like Ehrlich's ZPG.<sup>139</sup> The American-led "population establishment" targeted Asia as a central area of intervention.<sup>140</sup> An early conference among population control advocates in Williamsburg, Virginia demonstrates these concerns. During the proceedings, economist Isador Lubin asserted:

At luncheon today I raised the question as to why it was that almost everybody who spoke this morning talked about India. What is there about India that makes this situation so acute? And I think unconsciously we are scared, and I think we have a right to be. In other words, that is where the ferment is taking place. That is where the pressure is greatest. (Nally 223)

The concern about India and the Asian continent more generally were frequently enmeshed in Cold War anxieties about the spread of communism. Nally, for example, notes that John D. Rockefeller, like other Americans had watched communists take North Korea and China, invade South Korea and foment insurrections in Burma (now Myanmar), French Indo-China (present-day Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam), Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. It was against this background that Rockefeller launched a campaign and enlisted US government support against excessive populations in the developing world. Even still, the fear of the developing world connected to long-held eugenic thoughts about nonwhite reproduction

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<sup>139</sup> The term "population establishment" is Betsy Hartmann's from *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*. Hartmann clarifies that: "The population establishment is by no means a monolith—it is made up of a wide spectrum of organizations and individuals, pursuing different and sometimes conflicting activities and goals. Yet they are loosely joined together by a common sense of purpose, and often more tightly by a common source of funds" (111).

<sup>140</sup> Fears of the Asian developing world helped stoke the US government's international policies. Matthew Connelly notes, for example, that Indra Gandhi tapped into these anti-Asian anxieties when she proclaimed to President Johnson that: "'Asia is in an explosive state'...because the poor would not put up with deprivation indefinitely" (*Fatal Misconception* 255). Moreover, William H. Draper and Rockefeller met with President Johnson and prepared charts predicting widespread famines in China, India, and Pakistan by the early 1970s (Nally 229).

worldwide. As Matthew Connelly explains in his comprehensive history of the population control movement:

What was contemplated [by population controllers] was not, therefore, just targeting poor countries, but rather the sterilization of poor people worldwide, including in the United States. And for some, in India as much as America, the reason was differential fertility and its eugenic consequences, not just population growth per se. (208)

Domestically, overpopulation zealots like Ehrlich urged drastic measures that targeted women of color. Ehrlich in *The Population Bomb* rails that: “We must have population control at home, hopefully through a system of incentives and penalties, but by compulsion if voluntary methods fail” (11). Coincidentally, when Ehrlich penned these words in the late 1960s, the US teemed with coercive sterilization campaigns that sought to tamp down nonwhite reproduction and that adopted techniques developed by American population controllers in places like Punjab and Taiwan.<sup>141</sup> Dorothy Roberts’s *Killing the Black Body* identifies the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, as a revival in the sterilization of black women after a backlash against overt eugenic sterilization following the Second World War. During this time, doctors subsidized by federal and state governments tricked or pressured women into consenting to permanent sterilization procedures—either by refusing treatment or by spreading misinformation. These doctors operated under the belief that such radical moves were necessary to reduce the growth of the poor.

Film critic Justin Sully has connected the appeals to stem population growth in the US as part of a racialized discourse of the “urban problem,” revived after the publication of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s infamous 1965 *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (93). The Moynihan Report, as it would come to be called, scapegoated African American families and blamed the black community’s high fertility rates for producing a “culture of

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<sup>141</sup> For more on this, see Matthew Connelly’s *Fatal Misconception*, pages 251-254.

poverty.” Connelly notes the importance of the report in “help[ing] white people, racist or not, see African Americans not as individuals, nor as families—since fatherless households were ‘disorganized’ by definition—but as a ‘population,’ a population that, according to Moynihan, had a lower IQ, committed most violent crimes, and was growing ever larger by reproducing itself in the most unnatural fashion” (*Fatal Misconception* 250). Racist thinking, like that found in the Moynihan Report, undergirded sterilization approaches throughout the US, especially in states like California and North Carolina. As Angela Davis points out during the period, “the domestic population policy of the U.S. government has an undeniably racist edge” with Native American, Chicana, Puerto Rican, and black women sterilized in disproportionately higher numbers than white women (219).<sup>142</sup>

Against the threats of unbridled nonwhite reproduction within the US and abroad, overpopulation alarmists much preferred the top-down “machine model” solutions of population control over women-centered birth control strategies.<sup>143</sup> Rather than empower women to control their reproduction congruent with their own personal needs and desires, population control empowers bureaucrats and public health experts to meet national demographic targets and employ invasive and long-lasting methods (e.g. IUDs, injectables,

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<sup>142</sup> Laura Briggs notes the complicated politics of sterilization within the Puerto Rican context. During the 1960s and 1970s, feminists critiqued Puerto Rico’s sterilization policies to contest US imperialism, aligning themselves with the pro-natalist nationalists and marginalizing the Puerto Rican birth control movement. In so doing, “US feminists erased the history of Puerto Rican feminist support for birth control and sterilization and insisted on the authority of US feminist and Puerto Rican nationalist claims of wanting to ‘save’ working-class Puerto Rican women” (159).

<sup>143</sup> The shift from individual-focused birth control to top-down strategies of population control aligns with Adele Clarke’s account in her history of the reproductive sciences. To Clarke, “A key story of the disciplining of reproduction in modernity relates how, between roughly 1915 and 1945, the very nature of what *modern* contraception would be was negotiated between reproductive scientists and several varieties of birth control advocates—lay feminists, physicians, eugenicists, and neo-Malthusians....Reproductive scientists ultimately captured definitional authority as physicians, eugenicists, and neo-Malthusians conservatized the birth control movement into one for family planning and population control” (263; emphasis in original). By the postwar period, scientists and not activists or lay persons controlled the management of reproduction and the production and dissemination of reproductive technologies.



sterilization) that women cannot easily stop or switch on their own (Dixon-Mueller 52). This population control approach can be seen in Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, which features solutions bordering on the totalitarian. Among the book's more radical ideas, Ehrlich proposes "the addition of temporary sterilants to water supplies or staple food" (135). While Ehrlich later dismisses it as impractical, the recommendation exemplifies population scientists' deeply held commitment to top-down population control measures.

The push for science and government together to manage growing human populations reverberated within science fiction as well. Several texts portray a vision of the future in which human society inhabits massive high-rise structures. Robert Silverberg's 1971 *The World Inside* depicts a world in which humans are confined to massive thousand-floor skyscrapers called Urban Monads (or Urbmons). The remaining habitable land on the planet is taken up for agricultural purposes to support these towering behemoths. In a 2009 preface, Silverberg credits the inspiration for the Urbmons to architect Paolo Soleri's concept of "arcologies," colossal self-sustaining apartment buildings that can house thousands of occupants. According to Silverberg: "I was fascinated by the elaborate architectural blueprints he had drawn for these fantastic buildings, and saw both an upside and a downside to the scheme, an ambivalence which is reflected in the portrayal of the Urban Monad culture that I invented for my story" (10). James Blish and Norman Knight's *A Torrent of Faces*, mentioned already in this chapter's introduction, describe a similar future in which the population of the world reaches one trillion. To accommodate these absurd numbers, human society is housed in 100,000 giant self-contained cities, pyramidal in shape with 10 million people each (viii). With perfect rationality, the world is managed by an oligarchy of five

corporations that oversee world resources, communications, transportation, submarine products, and disaster preparations.

In speculative fictions, even these overpopulation solutions are imperfect. Says one character in *Torrent*, “The human race is slowly dying of dry rot” without space to move, grow, or serve the society productively (109). “Everybody sits in apartments watching 3-V, talking to friends on the vidphone, making love, eating Food Corporation meals out of the autoservers, and doing the prescribed daily exercises” (109). Citizens in this future contribute nothing to their cities, except more children. Government administrators too regret that concerted action was not taken earlier to curb human fertility. Another character in *Torrent* comments wistfully that: “[I]f there was ever any hope of solving the population problem, it should have been tackled no later than the twenty-first century—even if it had to involve something mildly oppressive, like compulsory sterilization injections” (268). Like *Torrent*, many overpopulation texts adopt this fatalist tone. *Make Room*, for example, includes a long diatribe by Andy Rusch’s roommate in which he claims: “There should have been free discussion, tons of money for fertility research, world-wide family planning, educational programs on the importance of population control...But there never was, and now it is 1999 and the end of the century. Some century!” (244). In these works, humanity has already missed its chance to stabilize population levels. Now rational governments merely struggle to manage a problem out-of-control. As visions of the future, these speculative fictions predict dire consequences as the penalty for inaction in the present.

While many science fiction novels turn to governmental management and top-down planning strategies to contain the overpopulation problem, others still recognize the potentially racist effects of these policies. Philip K. Dick’s 1966 *The Crack in Space*

imagines massive government warehouses filled with people or “bibs” locked in suspended animation. The warehouses are touted as a temporary solution to mass-unemployment and shrinking resources. While they are seemingly open to all citizens, the warehouses are said to hold more “Cols” or people of color than whites. As one character reflects: “he had put to sleep thousands of people, almost all of them, like this couple, young. And – dark” (6). Under the auspices of alleviating economic problems, the warehouses contain the world’s sprawling race problem.<sup>144</sup> These warehouses, it becomes apparent, are frequently the only option for society’s most oppressed, its people of color. As the white campaign manager, Sal Heim, explains to his candidate, the future first-black president, Jim Briskin: “Your appeal...is to the dark kid and his wife scared to death their only prospect is winding up bibs in some gov warehouse” (9). Heim makes clear the de facto utility of the warehouses as places to sequester jobless people of color.<sup>145</sup> Dick’s fiction reveals the extent to which even rational governance can exacerbate racial inequality in its singular determination to solve the overpopulation crisis.

*The Crack in Space* was not alone in contesting the top-down measures necessary to address overpopulation. Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1971 classic novel *The Lathe of Heaven* critiques overpopulation hysteria as the greater threat to human existence. The plot of *Lathe* follows a Portland draftsman, George Orr, who suffers from a peculiar condition, dubbed “effective dreaming.” Orr’s dreams change reality so that, upon waking, his world is altered undetected by anyone else. At the beginning of the novel, a severely sleep-deprived and

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<sup>144</sup> That the warehouses are intended to house people of color specifically is reinforced during another conversation. In the scene, two white men discuss mass unemployment when one comments that: “If you hadn’t gotten this job with me, even you might [become a bib]” (8). To which the other man exclaims: “But I’m white” (8).

<sup>145</sup> The idea of constructing government warehouses to contain people of color resonates with Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*; Alexander argues that American prisons serve a similar purpose.

terrified Orr reports to the sleep psychiatrist Dr. William Haber for therapy. Once Haber discovers the truth behind Orr's claims, he begins to exert more and more control over Orr. Haber creates a device called the Augmentor that manipulates Orr's sleep waves. With the Augmentor, Haber can intentionally command Orr's dreams. Although Haber's changes start out small—a better office and a view of Mount Hood—Haber's exploitation of Orr grows as does his power over reality.

By casting the well-educated and authoritative scientist in a villainous role, *Lathe* upends the unquestioned faith placed in Western science that is typical of many overpopulation texts. Haber channels the Nietzschean “will to power,” foregoing any other pursuit, including the wellbeing of his patients.<sup>146</sup> He is condescending and domineering, uninterested in empowering the patients under his care. Instead, Haber revels in the authority he commands. In this way, Haber's personal quest for power and his meteoric rise stands in for the unchecked rise of scientific rationalism after the Second World War. He exudes both the skill and hubris of scientific thinking done, supposedly, in the service of humanity.

Haber's first major intervention forces Orr to dream of a plague that kills six billion people (65). Haber declares the new reality a triumph: ““There is no overpopulation now. Was there any other solution, besides nuclear war?”” (68). Haber's support for the plague echoes the perspective of callous overpopulation planners, who viewed medical and quality-of-life improvements in the developing world with trepidation. Victories over tropical

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<sup>146</sup> Haber's willingness to suspend medical ethics for research advances aligns with Cold War medical experimentation as documented in *Against Their Will* by Hornblum et al. These authors note that Cold War security interests often dictated that experimentation on “feeble-minded” populations was warranted given the medical arms race against the USSR: “As one Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) physician informed a classroom of recruits in the 1960s, ‘Our guiding light is not the Hippocratic oath, but the victory of freedom’” (Hornblum et al. 74). George Orr is similarly defined as feebleminded by Haber, justifying Haber's use of Orr's supposedly wasted potential. As Haber explains: ““Every step forward that I force you to take, you cancel, you cripple with the deviousness or stupidity of the means your dream takes to realize it. You try, each time, to take a step backward”” (Le Guin 147).

diseases like malaria and smallpox significantly dropped death rates in these regions thanks to the intervention of Western medicine. Yet in the affected areas, mass starvation, malnutrition, and social unrest increased as the population numbers climbed. Thus, Ehrlich and others looked at disease control measures and Western development aid to the developing world with deep concern. To Ehrlich and others, vast regions of the Earth (all of them in the developing world) were unfixable. The best hope was a draconian system of triage that was first proposed by the scientist brothers, William and Paul Paddock.

In their 1967 book *Famine—1975!*, the Paddocks maintain that “we [in the United States] do indeed have great power, but the hungry maw outside our borders is beyond the ability of even our abundance to satisfy” (x). They propose instead the system of triage from military medicine, asserting that population planners treat the developing world as a sick patient in a time of crisis. The triage framework as applied by the Paddocks would evaluate countries based on their favorability to US needs in terms of raw materials and military value as well as their current population control efforts and prospects for stable self-government. The results of these calculations would classify winners and losers, portioning out food aid to countries like Pakistan, Tunisia, Panama, and Libya, while deeming that others, like Haiti, Egypt, and India, “can’t-be-saved.” The arrangement would sever previous aid commitments to these latter “irresponsible” or “unlucky” countries and consign their inhabitants to death.

While the plague in *Lathe* is not aimed at particular nations, Haber seems to express the elation of overpopulation zealotry rather than moral repulsion at this mass extinction event. Haber’s tone is defensive and celebratory:

“There is now no perpetual famine in South America, Africa, or Asia. When transport channels are fully restored, there won’t be even the pockets of hunger that are still left. They say a third of humanity still goes to bed hungry at night; but in 1980 it was ninety-two percent. There are no floods now in the Ganges caused by the piling up of

corpses of people dead of starvation. There's no protein deprivation and rickets among the working-class children of Portland, Oregon. As there was—before the Crash.” (68)

Like the overpopulation alarmists, Haber believes that mass die-offs are inevitable and that the dead are casualties of overpopulation. Rather than blame starvation on the maldistribution of resources, Haber and overpopulation scientists blame the sheer amount of people to feed. Betsy Hartmann critiques this form of thinking by noting that the world produces enough food today to feed everyone: “the problem is not one of absolute scarcity, but one of distribution” (16). Haber and overpopulation scientists ignore this reality and so favor “death rate” solutions.

Like Ehrlich and other overpopulation scientists, Haber champions a reduction in the birth rate as well as the elevation of the world's death rate. For these thinkers, sentencing millions of people to starve to death is not enough to prevent excessive population growth in the future. Through Orr's effective dreaming, Haber constructs a government apparatus to bring his vision of total scientific management to fruition:

[Haber] was an important man... the Director of HURAD [Human Utility: Research and Development], the vital center of the World Planning Center, the place where the great decisions were made. He had always wanted power to do good. Now he had it. (131)

Here the novel reveals Haber's ultimate objective—the synthesis of governmental power and scientific method. HURAD is the embodiment of government-driven social progress.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Like Haber, Ehrlich proposed his own scientifically-managed bureaucracy to meet his population control goals. Ehrlich dubbed his agency, the Department of Population and the Environment. As Ehrlich explains: “A federal Department of Population and Environment (DPE) should be set up with the power to take whatever steps are necessary to establish a reasonable population size in the United States and to put an end to the steady deterioration of our environment” (138). Throughout *The Population Bomb*, the fictive DPE gains enormous latitude over government policy and research, setting a nationwide sexual education curriculum (139), restricting industrial pesticide use (153), enacting robust recycling campaigns (155), and evaluating the national energy budget (155).

While Haber only views the successes of HURAD's efforts, Orr witnesses the eugenic forms that these results take.

As Haber's power consolidates, his vision is exposed as eugenic fantasy. Near the end of the novel, Orr watches in horror as a man undergoes a citizen's arrest for genetic crimes against humanity. The accuser announces the man's violation to the nervous crowd: "This man, Harvey T. Gonno, is ill with an incurable malignant abdominal cancer but has concealed his whereabouts from the authorities and continues to live with his wife" (135). Gonno is branded "a danger to the Race" and so must perish to preserve genetic purity (135). Orr shuffles awkwardly past the scene before he witnesses the accuser euthanize Gonno with the hypodermic gun that all adult citizens carry in this strange new world.

Here *Lathe* offers a counter-reading to the scientific utopia imagined in other works by removing the veneer of scientific benevolence. Haber's HURAD policies are laid bare as eugenically motivated and involve an unprecedented amount of governmental control over people's lives. As Haber explains to Orr:

"You haven't yet fully accepted the use of controlled violence for the good of the community.... We need health. We simply have no room for the incurables, the gene-damaged who degrade the species; we have no time for wasted, useless suffering."  
(141)

While purporting to temper social strife, Haber's scientific regulations actually stoke social conflict by defining undesirables to be eradicated. Haber has achieved the successes hoped for by population scientists through careful societal planning, but at the cost of individual freedom. For Haber, this is a paltry price for progress. "Progress, George!" the frenzied Haber cries, "We've made more progress in six weeks than humanity made in six hundred thousand years!" (147). Haber's crazed drive for societal perfection, wrapped up in his personal quest for power, eventually ends up ruining the world he sought to improve. In the

book's final pages, Haber modifies the Augmentor so he can finally produce effective dreams without Orr. Predictably, this results in a reality-shattering cataclysm called "the Break," which effectively ends Haber's control over Orr and his grip on sanity.

What makes *Lathe* particularly radical is its critique of Asia as the racial bogeyman. Unlike overpopulation alarmists that exploited Asian culture as a metaphor for the West's uncivilized, overcrowded future, Le Guin's novel embraces elements of Asian culture in order to undermine the mythic savior of Western reproductive control. Betsy Huang notes that science fiction authors like Le Guin drew upon a "nostalgic Asian premodernity that apotheosizes rather than vilifies the Orient through idealized characterizations of ancient Eastern philosophies and texts" ("Premodern" 24). In Le Guin's *Lathe*, the philosophy of Daoism works in the service of critiquing the scientific management of population controllers. As a foil to Haber, George Orr embodies an Eastern mindset. The text describes Orr as "a sort of natural Buddhist" (Le Guin 82). While Haber trusts in empirical evidence, scientific objectivity, and utilitarian reasoning, Orr's own mantra is that: "things don't have purposes...What's the function of a galaxy? I don't know if our life has a purpose and I don't see that it matters" (82).

Orr is aided in his ideological battle against Haber by extraterrestrial aliens, called the Aldebarans. The creatures were dreamed into existence to serve as a common human enemy in order to unite the warring nations of Earth. Although the aliens resemble nine-foot, greenish, sea turtles, Betsy Huang interprets them as Orientalist caricatures of Asian culture: "Reminiscent of the trope of the supportive Oriental sage who nurtures a young Western hero's quest for truth and self-identify...the aliens impart proverbial 'fortune-cookie' wisdom to Orr" (30). In one scene, a bowing alien tells Orr after they bump into one another that:



“Speech is silver, silence is gold. Self is universe. Please forgive interruption, crossing in mist” (Le Guin 142). Unlike the destitute Formosa refugees in *Make Room! Make Room!*, the aliens represent a “model” migrant people and are permitted to stay in Haber’s eugenic dystopian world: “They seemed to intend to stay, if allowed; some of them had already settled won to running small businesses, for they seemed to be good at salesmanship and organization” (133). These aliens—like the Asian “model minority”—prove themselves to be “industrious, peaceable, and law-abiding citizens of Earth” (133). Through their hard work and passive natures, the creatures dispel “rumors of ‘Alien takeovers’ and ‘nonhuman infiltration’” (133).

Although a seemingly pro-immigrant and pro-Asian text about overpopulation, *Lathe* still projects an image of Asia as another world. The Aldebarans are not reproductive threats only because they are completely asexual beings. Confined “to wear their outlandish turtle-like suits perpetually on Earth or the Moon,” the aliens are sexless and incapable of reproduction (133). The suits effectively castrate the aliens, as they cannot live or reproduce among humans without their own atmosphere. While they acclimate to American society, the Aldebarans can never fully integrate into US culture.<sup>148</sup> *Lathe* is a story about inclusion, although to a limited degree. Lisa Lowe explains that such a move is typical in cultural narratives of integration:

Narratives of immigrant inclusion... may in turn attempt to produce cultural integration and its symbolization on the national political terrain. Yet these same narratives are driven by the repetition and return of episodes in which the Asian American, even as a citizen, continues to be located outside the cultural and racial boundaries of the nation. (6)

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<sup>148</sup> In the world of the novel, black and white racial tensions are sutured in the character of Heather LeLache, a biracial attorney hired by Orr to look into medical abuse by Haber. As LeLache explains: “My father was black and my mother was white. It’s kind of interesting. He was a real militant Black Power type, back in the seventies, you know, and she was a hippie” (Le Guin 103). Black and white intermarriage paints the US as an American racial melting pot; however, it is not a melting pot into which Asians are able to meld.

Le Guin's Asian-like aliens are simultaneously model minorities and perpetual foreigners, a tension that perpetuates their outsider status. The US is still perceived as a white nation—at least a nation in which whites reproduce families and can live as the cultural and demographic majority. The Aldebarans as Asian proxies can access some modicum of American democratic capitalism—providing essential economic services and filling in market needs—but are otherwise restricted from full citizenship. Their alienness, both in its species and racialized contours, denies the Aldebarans' full incorporation into the national body.

Much like the policymakers and other stakeholders in the “population establishment,” speculative fictions struggled to address the overpopulation problem. For some authors and overpopulation zealots, the future required drastic, top-down changes—a social and technological revolution only capable with the research of scientists and the management of bureaucratic administrators. On the other hand, Le Guin depicts a world in which science fails in its success. *Lathe* underscores the tradeoffs incumbent on replacing individual choice, democratic decision-making, and civil liberties for a planned society of scientific bureaucrats and eugenic agendas. At the same time, Le Guin's text rebuffs the anti-Asian racism used by overpopulation zealots to stoke public anxieties about unregulated population growth. Instead, Le Guin's novel holds up Asian culture as an important counterweight to science's sway and celebrates Asian-like characters as “model” citizens rather than animalistic invaders. Asia continues to shape the overpopulation debate in *Lathe* but no longer as a looming yellow peril. In the novel, Asia serves as a place of emulation for the West. Yet as a corrective for the anti-Asianness of overpopulation alarmists, *Lathe* skirts the line between celebration and tokenization. For while Asian-like characters are presented in a better light in

*Lathe*, they remain reductive literary devices, superficial ambassadors of the developing world and never fully American.

## **Conclusion**

Overpopulation was a frequent subject of US Cold War speculative fictions, not only providing a commentary on human population growth but shaping attitudes towards nonwhite reproduction and the place of the developing world in the American mind. In their visions of the future, speculative texts frequently mobilized Orientalist beliefs about the developing world—namely, that the inferior peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America would swamp the democratic civilizations of the West. What would remain unchallenged in overpopulation fiction was the assumption of nonwhite races as foreign threats to America’s white hegemony. Asian immigrants, in particular, represented one of the most pressing dangers to the US. Here I build upon Lisa Lowe’s insights on the connection between Asian immigrants and white American citizens. Lowe notes that “in the last century and a half, the American *citizen* has been defined over against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically, and culturally” (4; emphasis in original). During the 1960s and 1970s, Asian migrants appear in overpopulation discourses as, at best, poor approximations of the industrious, civilized, and pure white race and, at worst, corrosive elements of squalor, sloth, and vice. These racist depictions of Asian and other nonwhite people were not new, although they began to enter new conversations amidst US policymakers, scientists, and fiction writers.

The 1960s and 1970s experienced a series of dramatic shifts that changed the way reproduction, race, and the US national body were conceived. The US birth control movement aimed at women’s liberation gave way to state-supported population control

against overpopulation nationally and internationally; racially motivated national quotas were replaced by more liberal and inclusive immigration policies; and eugenic ideas about the yellow peril and swarming racial hordes took on more muted forms in the image of an impoverished developing world and the model Asian minority. Amidst these changes, speculative fictions provided an important cultural site in which to define the threat of overpopulation as a distinctly racialized threat and to justify the control of nonwhite reproduction. Speculative fictions created by overpopulation alarmists—including novelists and scientists—frequently portrayed the developing world as reproductively irresponsible and a danger to America’s white society and democratic institutions. These fictions rationalized the massive allocation of US resources to manage nonwhite women’s reproduction in the developing world and at home. The stakes of this reproductive war were nothing less than American democracy itself. Yet other speculative fictions sought to uphold the US’s outspoken commitment to diversity and justice. Le Guin’s *Lathe* is one such text, critiquing a definition of American freedom premised on the micromanagement of its population. Such top-down control contradicted America’s preferred, although perhaps illusory, self-concept as a land of inclusion and racial harmony.

Before I end, I want to acknowledge the limitations of the cultural history I have traced. Focusing only on overpopulation discourse—a discourse dominated by white male scientists and authors—my analysis takes Asianness and Asian Americans themselves as passive objects rather than acting subjects. Asian American communities and Asian immigrants are not afforded the agency real Asian and Asian American people exercised during the period. I have also neglected to include the anti-racist activism that characterized the 1960s and 1970s, activism in which Asian Americans played a major role along with

African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinx. Rather than focus on the 1960s and 1970s as a time of collective action and demands for racial equity and inclusion, the success of which culminated in liberal reforms of the era, my chapter focuses on the narratives typically forgotten in the reductive histories of America's gradual march towards equality. My chapter highlights the alternate stories of America's future—narratives of the future in which millions starve, cities crumble, and American freedom wanes. These narratives redefined the nation and its relationship to the rest of the world in less flattering ways. In these narratives, Asians and Asian Americans had a central role as symbols of danger and devolution but rarely found legitimacy as actors or authors.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Frank Chin's *Aiiieeeee!* anthology, released in 1976, revealed the important contributions of Asian American authors, even prior to the 1960s. However, Chin and the collection's other editors were also severely anti-immigrant in what they considered "authentic" Asian Americanness.

### CHAPTER 3: VITAL ALLIANCES: INTERSPECIES SURVIVAL IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *XENOGENESIS* TRILOGY

I was at a college not too long ago where I talked about Ronald Reagan and the idea of 'Beware of a nuclear war,' and all that. And a young woman told me that stuff was not real. In a way, isn't it lovely that people have forgotten? But on the other hand, isn't it scary that they've forgotten?

—Octavia Butler, *Strange Matings*

Addressing an audience at the 2004 “Black to the Future Conference,” Octavia Butler reflected on her literary career and the driving force behind her fiction. Asked about her stint of “world saving” books from the 1980s and 1990s, namely the *Xenogenesis* and *Parable* series, the first African American female science fiction author attempted to explain what exactly she had been saving the world from. Butler’s answer in the epigraph reveals that her work responded in part to the unique American landscape of the 1980s, a context infused with Reagan conservatism and rekindled nuclear fears. Beginning with President Ronald Reagan’s sweeping election in 1980, the decade marks a poignant conservative turn in American social life with concerns about a breakdown of the nuclear family, a reinvigorated nuclear standoff, and the erosion of “traditional” American values at the forefront of the US imagination. Read against this backdrop, Butler’s speculative fictions offer a vision of America’s future that resists conservative preoccupations with tradition, the family, and national defense. This vision is no clearer than in her trilogy *Xenogenesis*.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> The novels were collected into a single volume called *Lilith's Brood* in 2000. However, I retain the earlier series name *Xenogenesis* in this chapter for the sake of continuity with the historical sources I use.

The three novels that comprise the trilogy, *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, take place after a nuclear war leaves humanity on the brink of extinction. The first book begins after Lilith Iyapo, an African American woman, awakens from suspended animation several centuries later. Along with the few other human survivors, Lilith has been taken aboard the living spaceship of an alien race. These aliens, the Oankali, are “genetic traders,” combining their own genes with those of other species to carry out a form of genetic engineering. The Oankali wish to interbreed with humans in order to diversify and combine the advantages of both species. Among the benefits promised by the Oankali is the elimination of humanity’s inherent contradiction, the incompatibility between their intelligence and hierarchical natures. The series follows Lilith and her “brood” of Oankali-human hybrids or “constructs” as they learn to adapt to life with the Oankali and eventually resettle Earth. Not all humans accept a future with the Oankali, however. Some humans resist interbreeding and react with violence against the aliens and the human collaborators. To the Oankali, this resistance is an outgrowth of the human contradiction and the self-destructive impulse that caused humanity’s near extinction in the first place.

Published in 1987, 1988 and 1989, the books of Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy lodge a powerful critique of Reagan conservatism on reproductive grounds. With the support of the new Christian Right, Reagan resuscitated a static image of the nuclear family from the 1950s and cast himself as the defender of traditional family values against liberals within the US and, more potently, against the “evil empire” of the USSR. Such antagonisms stirred previously simmering Cold War tensions that many, including Butler, feared would lead to existential disaster. In *Xenogenesis*, Butler exposes the dangers of conservative reproductive ideologies premised on division. Instead, her novels advocate that surviving the nuclear

1980s requires renouncing allegiances to the nuclear family, to the nation, and even to the human. In a post-nuclear world, survival stems from the cross-race and cross-species relationships that sustain life. These relationships, what I have dubbed “vital alliances,” oppose containment thinking by breaking down categorical boundaries. By revealing vital alliances that split apart the human family, Butler’s fiction offers a means of redefining humanness itself and reconnecting humans to their environment, other organisms, and each other. The culmination of these efforts will be a wholly new form of humanity, one unthinkable in Reagan’s pronouncement that “[as] the family goes, so goes our civilization” (“Address...1985,” par. 7).

The election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 ushered a sweeping tide of political conservatism, neoliberal economics, and hardline military posturing into American domestic and foreign policy. None of these trends originated with Reagan’s candidacy, but they gained traction under his campaign and presidency. Throughout the 1980s, Reagan’s administration promoted family values and hawkish defense spending as it battled “big government” and sought to cut social welfare programs. Domestically, Reagan’s New Right coalition mythologized the 1950s discourse of the nuclear family, promising to promote a return to traditional American values. A radio address by Reagan in 1986 captures his alarmist claims that the nuclear family was in danger. These fears would be crucial in stoking anti-communist and anti-liberal sentiments:

[I]n recent decades the American family has come under virtual attack. It has lost authority to government rule writers. It has seen its central role in the education of young people narrowed and distorted. And it’s been forced to turn over to big government too many of its own resources in the form of taxation. (qtd. in Cordle, *Late Cold War* 81)



To Reagan, the family was under threat by forces both inside and outside the nation and it became a convenient victim, justifying his conservative reforms. Reagan frequently invoked the family in speeches eviscerating big government and social safety programs intended to combat poverty. In his 1986 State of the Union address, for example, Reagan bemoaned that “the breakdown of the family, the most basic support system, has reached crisis proportions – in female and child poverty, child abandonment, horrible crimes and deteriorating schools” (“Address...1986,” par. 19). Such framing would buttress Reagan’s proposals to reduce eligibility, benefit levels, and funding of safety nets for impoverished families. The paradox between Reagan’s championing of the family in his rhetoric as he worked to reduce government support for many American families in practice underscores the unevenness with which he applied the term.

Besides promoting conservative values to defend the family against the waste and ineptitude of big government, Reagan supported a return to conservative values as necessary to save the US from its primary ideological enemy, the Soviet Union. In a long-stagnant Cold War climate, Reagan’s bellicose attitude against the USSR heightened once-quiet fears of a nuclear war. Preeminent Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis has identified the first two years of Reagan’s administration as “the most dangerous [time] in Soviet-American relations since the Cuban missile crisis” (357). In his speeches, Reagan stoked anti-Soviet feeling by dubbing the USSR a malicious state responsible for the nuclear standoff and ultimately antithetical to core American values. The administration’s commitment to strategic nuclear defense further disrupted the tenuous nuclear balance by displacing long-held ideas about mutually assured destruction. Instead, Reagan favored the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which sought to develop technologies that could defend the country against nuclear attack.

The swift changes prompted by Reagan's New Right coalition in domestic and international policy alarmed authors like Octavia Butler. As Gerry Canavan argues, Butler was particularly contemptuous of Reagan's nuclear policies in the early 1980s. In a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, Butler fumed that: "Anything that promotes a false sense of security with regard to nuclear weapons should be handled carefully" (qtd. in Canavan 109). Butler's concern about the looming threat of nuclear annihilation, associated with Reagan's saber-rattling, found an outlet in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy. In fact, Butler credits Reagan with the series' creation. In a 1988 interview, Butler explains the germination of her project:

I tell people that Ronald Reagan inspired *Xenogenesis*—and that it was the only thing he inspired in me that I actually approve of. When his first term was beginning, his people were talking about a "winnable" nuclear war, a "limited" nuclear war, the idea that more and more nuclear "weapons" would make us safer. That's when I began to think about human beings having the two conflicting characteristics of intelligence and a tendency toward hierarchical behavior—and that hierarchical behavior is too much in charge, too self-sustaining. (qtd. in Francis 23)

Like other speculative fictions in this dissertation, *Dawn* and the other *Xenogenesis* novels came together during a time of heightened nuclear fears, providing an opportunity to reflect on the merits of twentieth-century American society, the real consequences of nuclear war, and the capabilities of humans to survive. In the 1980s, Reagan's absurd nuclear strategy of a "winnable" nuclear war inspired Butler to consider, not only the heightened likelihood of a nuclear apocalypse and what devastating consequences this would entail on human civilization but the internal contradiction within humanity as a species that predestines our self-destruction.

In this chapter, I argue that the human contradiction in *Xenogenesis* is not so much a biological imperative as a manifestation of Reagan ideology.<sup>151</sup> Specifically, I read the series

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<sup>151</sup> Butler herself suggests this connection during an interview with Nibir K. Ghosh from 2004: "[*Dawn*] was inspired by some very foolish things that Ronald Reagan and some of his supporters were advocating back in

as a reaction to staid notions of reproduction that find corollaries in the traditional family values espoused by Reagan conservatives. The novel *Adulthood Rites*, in my first section, follows the human resisters who cling to traditional familial arrangements and the conservative American lifestyle of the 1980s. The resisters construct a village, called Phoenix, in a futile attempt to reproduce what humanity destroyed. Like Reagan's New Right coalition, the resisters consider themselves saving an endangered idea, the American way of life vis-à-vis the American nuclear family. Donna Haraway explains the resistance project as a form of reproduction-as-sameness or "the reproduction of the sacred image of the same, of the one true copy, mediated by the luminous technologies of compulsory heterosexuality and masculinist self-birthing" ("Promises" 299). The reproduction-as-sameness that Phoenix breeds is revealed to be an ultimately abortive reproductive project—one in which sexual and racist violence, slavery, and environmental destruction are the natural outgrowths.

In the remaining portion of the chapter, I consider Butler's trilogy more abstractly—not solely as a work of literature or as a historical artifact but as a work of theory, intervening in debates about reproduction, humanness, and survival as relevant now as in the 1980s. In the second section, I read Butler's novel *Dawn* as a blueprint in crossing racial and species boundaries, which is necessary to overcome humanity's self-destructive tendencies. My analysis of *Dawn* rewrites theories of alterity that are steeped in racial hierarchy. Rather than fixing a presumably white self against a nonwhite Other, Butler's fiction organizes a concept of alterity-as-self—a new subjectivity rooted in the writings of Frantz Fanon. The concept of alterity-as-self disrupts not only the paradigm of white/black but also of human/nonhuman, underscoring the connection between these binaries. My third section considers the

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the early 1980s...I decided that if so many people were buying into this nonsense, there must be something wrong with us—something basic" (qtd. in Canavan 110).

conceptual breakdown of the category human that occurs in Butler's final book *Imago*. Here the category of the human is deconstructed to reveal forms of reproduction, mutuality, and futurity that promise survival. Taken together, I interpret *Imago* and the entire trilogy as an alt-humanist manifesto centered on a form of reproduction that requires interspecies alliance.<sup>152</sup> Survival in *Xenogenesis* necessitates recognizing the "vital alliances"—the trans-species dependencies—that encompass humanity. Butler's fiction undergirds a reproductive politics that unsettles essentialist categories, advocates the need to think beyond the human and beyond reproduction-as-sameness, and works to stave off destruction.

Reading *Xenogenesis* in the context of the 1980s differs from how the trilogy has been historically situated.<sup>153</sup> Gregory Jerome Hampton, for instance, has argued that "the Oankali aesthetic found in *Dawn* is analogous on several levels to that of the Yoruba aesthetic" (74). In addition, many scholars have argued that *Xenogenesis* is primarily a series about slavery. In a review of the trilogy from 1990, Frances Bonner explains that: "Concerned as she is with the specificity of the Afro-American experience, it is unsurprising that Butler again and again explores the phenomenon of slavery, in particular the initial stage in which the self—body, soul, and subjectivity—is stolen and declared an item of exchange" (53). More recently, Isiah Lavender III reads the trilogy as a meta-slavery narrative "that is clearly linked to the history of slavery through its alien colonization theme" (74). Yet these interpretations contradict Butler's own insistences to the contrary.

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<sup>152</sup> My terminology "alt-human" versus "post-human" is intentional. Post-humanism, defined by theorists like N. Katherine Hayles, represents a higher form of humanity—humans capable of escaping their bodies or enhancing their bodies into super-human form through emerging biotechnologies. Alt-human, on the other hand, disrupts the fundamental conceptions of humanity by deconstructing the artificial boundaries separating species from species, subject from object, and self from environment. For more on the historical understanding of post-human, see Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, page 3.

<sup>153</sup> One notable exception is Lisa Dowdall, who embeds *Xenogenesis* "in the context of rapid changes to the life science industries and the neoliberal economy during the 1980s in the United States" (512).

In a 1996 interview, Butler maintained that: “The only place I am writing about slavery is where I actually say so” (qtd. in Francis 66). At other times, Butler was less dogmatic. She stated in a 1988 interview that: “I know some people think that [my books explore slavery], but I don’t agree, although this may depend on what we mean by ‘slavery’” (qtd. in Francis 12). In this chapter, I want to take seriously Butler’s claim that the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is not about or at least not solely about slavery. Instead, I argue, Butler’s trilogy performs important work in the 1980s by refashioning a unique politics of reproduction that contests an American ideology premised on tradition, homogeneity, national defense, and the nuclear family.

### **Sterility, Self-Destruction, and Reproduction-as-Sameness in *Adulthood Rites***

She found herself thinking of Sam and Ayre, her husband and son, both taken from her before the Oankali, before the war, before she realized how easily her life—any human life—could be destroyed.

—Octavia Butler, *Dawn*

After several weeks living with the Oankali, Lilith remembers her small family, her husband and son, before the nuclear war that decimated the planet and before her rescue aboard the alien’s living ship. While Lilith looks at her past with tender thoughts, her memories are filled with discord and death. Lilith recalls how Sam and Ayre perished in a traffic accident. Her husband, Sam, had taken three months to die after becoming severely brain damaged: “his eyes empty of recognition, empty of him” (Butler, *Dawn* 76). Rather than longing for a return to her life before the Oankali, Lilith’s memories reveal the fragility and pain associated with her old life. It is perhaps for this reason that Lilith has an easier time than the other survivors embracing the radical change proposed by the Oankali—a new

cross-species kinship arrangement in which a human female and male will interbreed with an Oankali male, female, and ooloi.<sup>154</sup> As Lilith's break from her previous life signals, conventional family structures are outmoded in the strange new world of the Oankali. A mode of reproduction based on the nuclear family is untenable in Butler's future.

This section turns to *Adulthood Rites*, Butler's second novel, in order to demonstrate the sharp critique of reproduction-as-sameness circulating in *Xenogenesis*. Published during Reagan's last year in office, *Rites* simultaneously speaks to the conservative values espoused during his administration. In *Xenogenesis*, Butler's Reaganite foils are the human resisters. These humans steadfastly reject the genetic trade and eschew the Oankali-human settlements on the Earth. Stripped by the Oankali of their ability to reproduce, these humans choose hollow lives in isolation, removed from the conveniences and futurity offered by a shared existence with the advanced aliens. Thomas Foster interprets the human resistance as a "form of captivity—confinement within the familiar, the human" (151). This resistance, in other words, is really a form of self-imposed oppression, a perverse and obstinate adherence to reproduction-as-sameness. The resisters' slavish devotion to a world that no longer exists and their stubborn desire for "pure" human children renders them sterile, violent, and hierarchical. Consigned to the fringes of Butler's world, these humans attempt to reconstruct what was lost by the nuclear war. The life that the resisters attempt to recreate for themselves is merely the blueprint for humanity's own destruction.

In *Rites*, humans and Oankali have begun to resettle the Earth, although, due to the radioactive fallout and the gene splicing of the Oankali, the planet is radically changed with new plant and animal life. By this time, Lilith has left the Oankali ship that saved her and

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<sup>154</sup> The ooloi are a third sex among the Oankali, playing a crucial role in the hybrid reproductive process.

reaches the planet surface. She resides with other Oankali and human collaborators on the living settlement called Lo. While *Dawn* focuses on Lilith, the story in *Rites* follows Lilith's construct son, the first human-Oankali hybrid male named Akin. Early on in the novel, Akin is kidnapped by resisters—the first humans who have been allowed to leave the Oankali ship after refusing to integrate into Oankali culture. Sterile and recalcitrant, the resisters live in small, makeshift settlements and desperately desire biologically pure human children. As their appellation “resisters” signifies, these characters are defined by their resistance to the Oankali and to change itself.

The conservative ideology of the human resisters resonates with conservative appeals made under Reaganism. The resister communities desire sameness—a pureness of humanity untainted by the Oankali enemy and a return to the 1980s society they left behind. A similar desire for sameness is found in Reagan's 1983 “Evil Empire” speech, so called because in it, Reagan deemed the Soviet Union an “evil empire” and “the focus of evil in the modern world” (“Ronald Reagan,” par. 48, 45). The speech was delivered to the National Association of Evangelicals and outlined Reagan's domestic and international principles. In particular, Reagan sought “a great spiritual awakening in America...a renewal of the traditional values that have been the bedrock of America's goodness and greatness” (par. 29). Reagan here desires a return to tradition, a return to the past, just as the resisters seek a return to the past they lost. At the same time, Reagan revives the old Cold War antagonism by rejecting that the US and USSR are equally responsible for the nuclear arms race. Instead, Reagan frames the conflict as “the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil” (par. 48). Reagan's uncompromising attitude to America's enemies and his belief in the moral clarity of the past

mirrors the human resisters' own animosity and dogged persistence in their attempts to recreate a destroyed society in a time before the Oankali.

In the "Evil Empire" speech, Reagan exhorts his fellow Americans: "Only through your work and prayers and those of millions of others can we hope to survive this perilous century" (par. 11). Hard work and religion, in other words, are central to cultivating goodness in America and keeping the nation safe. Seeming to adopt Reagan's logic, the resisters work doggedly to construct a town and, with it, an American lifestyle of consumerism and religion that typifies conservative ideology. As an ex-resister Tino states:

"We made a town... We built like crazy. If you were really busy, you didn't have to think that maybe you were doing it all for nothing. Maybe all we were going to do was sit in our handsome houses and pray in our nice church and watch everybody not getting old." (Butler, *Rites* 31)

Tino's discussion of the resister community exposes the artifice at the core of these conservative thoughts. The resister lifestyle is premised upon consumption ("sit in our handsome houses") and religiosity ("pray in our nice church"). In recreating this life, the resisters are reproducing the same conservative American society that they inhabited before the nuclear war—one that enfolds capitalism and Christianity. Yet in the novel, these actions are ultimately devoid of lasting significance. Tino reaches this conclusion when he muses that: "If you were really busy, you didn't have to think that maybe you were doing it all for nothing" (31). The lifestyle of the resisters, like the resisters themselves, is sterile and vacuous. Many resisters even recognize the futility of their project. As Tino explains: "in one week, two guys and a woman hung themselves. Four others just disappeared. It would hit us like that—like a disease that one person caught and spread" (31). The resisters' choice to live with capitalism in place of mutualism and churches instead of constructs proves ultimately self-destructive.



Besides being existentially hollow, the human resisters' traditionalist lifestyle is also ruled by racist violence.<sup>155</sup> The resisters' violence is a consequence of their fear of the Oankali and the threat of hybridization. In *Dawn*, Lilith encountered this violence when Curt and other humans react aggressively against her Asian Canadian human partner, Joseph Shing. Joseph is beheaded by the rebelling humans when his genetically-altered body begins to heal. As the Oankali Nikanj explains: “Curt saw the flesh healing. He believed Joe wasn't human” (Butler, *Dawn* 223). Enraged, Curt chops off Joe's head with an ax. The resisters' violence against Joseph is racially encoded as earlier in the novel Nikanj reveals that the human resisters “decided he's something called a faggot and the other dislikes the shape of his eyes” (159). Curt's actions, therefore, police the purity of racial categories. While Reaganism did not overtly condone racial violence, President Reagan was what Michael C. Dawson and Lawrence D. Bobo call “a racial polarizer” during his political career (209). His support for the South African apartheid government in 1986, his veto of the 1988 extension of the Civil Rights Act, and his promotion of the racially coded “welfare queen” persona during his 1980 campaign certainly highlight at least a marked ambivalence to racial justice in Reagan's administration.

While Joe Shing becomes the first casualty of the resisters, most of the human resisters' violence is directed at their own community. Throughout the trilogy, the resisters are said to traffic in women, produce firearms, and fight with other resister groups. As Lilith learns from her ooloi partner: “Some of the southern resister groups are already making guns...So far, none of them have shot us. A few have shot one another” (Butler, *Rites* 42).

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<sup>155</sup> Such racism and sexism stand in contrast to the life enacted by Lilith. As Gregory Jerome Hampton explains: “Like the character from Hebrew mythology with the same name, it is Lilith's role to reject the rules of patriarchy/mankind by choosing to survive outside the boundaries of purity and homogeneity” (73).

The resisters even kidnap construct children, as the two resisters kidnap Akin, in order to approximate their families from before the war. Far from an isolated act, the kidnapping of children is revealed to be a flourishing trade within the resister communities. The men who capture Akin discuss the systemic nature of child trafficking in a particularly dehumanizing conversation:

“So what do you think we can get for the kid?” a new voice asked. “Whatever we want. A boy, almost perfect? Whatever they’ve got. He’s so valuable I wonder if we shouldn’t keep him.” “Metal tools, glass, good cloth, a woman or two.” (71)

As this exchange demonstrates, kidnapped construct children serve as valuable commodities in an illicit marketplace. The resisters’ conflicting impulses—their desire for human children and their animosity to Oankali-human reproduction—lead them to enact a form of reproductive self-destruction. By seeking human children (or at least construct children, who appear human), the resisters harm to the only children available. Although the self-proclaimed defenders of an unadulterated humanness, the resisters paradoxically practice dehumanization as a central feature of their society.

Such dehumanization will reach its limit in Butler’s final novel, *Imago*, when the resisters turn to rape and incest in order to reproduce apart from the Oankali. In the book, the humans discover that a fifteen-year-old girl called “First Mother” becomes pregnant after a horrific gang rape. The young woman’s pregnancy is simultaneously an act of resistance against the Oankali, an unlikely instantiation of reproduction-as-sameness, and a brutal act of human wickedness.<sup>156</sup> The resister community’s desire for biologically pure human progeny

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<sup>156</sup> Taken another way, the girl’s rape may speak to the so-called “pro-life” movement that advocates supporting the right to life of the fetus, even in cases of rape and incest, while marginalizing the reproductive rights of the mother. Although tenuous, the connection to Reagan conservatism remains in that, throughout his presidency, Reagan advocated strict anti-abortion views and acted to curtail reproductive freedoms by establishing the Mexico City Policy, using abortion as a litmus test for appointing federal judges, and reducing federal family planning funding.

only becomes more perverse, as one of the members recounts: ““When the time came...they were able to put mother and son together. By then, both had been taught their duty...The Mother bore three daughters eventually. She died with the birth of her second son”” (Butler, *Imago* 138). While Oankali-human reproduction throughout the trilogy is characterized by pleasure, resister reproduction is marked by pain and death. Even for the offspring, human-bred-humans are filled with psychological distress and the physical suffering culminating from generations of inbreeding.<sup>157</sup>

In reproducing pure humanness, a species sameness, resister reproduction manifests as a hollow ritual, premised only on hatred for the Oankali and a desperation for the unattainable. The resisters’ reproductive attempts are typically abortive or else marred by deformity:

““The Mother had twenty-three grandchildren...Fifteen survived. Among these were several who were deformed or who grew deformed. They were fertile, and not all of their children had the deformities. The deformed ones could not be spared.”” (139)

The resisters’ procreation is not resulting in the sameness they desire. Instead of continuing the lineage of pure humanity, the human resisters are demonstrating the futility of their own ideals, the ethereal nature of humanness, and the self-destruction inherent in reproduction-as-sameness.

The resisters’ self-destructive nature is also directed against the planet, the home that sustains them and that they already once destroyed. After his kidnapping, Akin is brought by his captors to a human settlement, called Hillmann. As the group approaches the village, Akin notes the economical, albeit destructive, use of agricultural land, emerging ““through fields of bananas, papaya trees, pineapple plants, and corn. The fields looked well kept [sic]

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<sup>157</sup> Two of the resister children in the novel are afflicted with neurofibromatosis, a condition characterized by benign tumors covering the body.

and fruitful” (Butler, *Rites* 87). However, the superficial appearance of order and productivity proves misleading. Akin comments that: ““Hillmann must have lost a great deal of top soil to the rain in all those long, neat rows. How long could they farm this way before the land was ruined and they had to move? How much land had they already ruined?”” (88). By contrast, in the human-Oankali settlement of Lo, food is collected in a sustainable way unmolested by human hands. Given the ecological damage at Hillman, it is perhaps unsurprising that Akin finds the village abandoned. The villagers have relented and decided to join the Oankali. A message left by the former resisters explains: “Part of what we are will continue... That seems better than sitting here, rotting alive or dying and leaving nothing” (90). The Hillmann inhabitants have finally recognized that their lifestyle is corrosive and that survival and reproduction (“to continue”) will require different relationships with the environment, with the Oankali, and with themselves.

The resisters’ violent tendencies—against minorities, against children, and against the planet—represent echoes of the extreme violence that begins the trilogy, the nuclear war. Even after destroying the planet once, humanity continues to exercise its penchant for self-destruction. In *Xenogenesis*, this violence stems from a conservative impulse, a desire to restore the old ways and eschew change. Reaganism of the 1980s spoke to this desire in its appeal for the so-called traditional values of faith, work, and family. Butler’s trilogy fashions these values into the resister ideology of reproduction-as-sameness, deconstructing the errors inherent in such thinking. Reproduction-as-sameness, in particular, repeats the mistakes of the past and is organized by antagonisms, hierarchies, and hate that lead to violence.

After visiting the abandoned settlement at Hillman, Akin learns that some of the resisters there did not join the Oankali. One of Akin’s captors explains: ““I think one group

went to join the Oankali and another went to kill the Oankali. God knows what happened” (90-91). The opposing stances reached by the Hillmann resisters mirror the two options available to humanity towards the Oankali writ large: accommodation or warfare. Either the humans must succumb to their inherently violent natures or else submit to “the trade.” One option will destroy humanity, the other will change it.

### **Embracing the Other in the Self in *Dawn***

Call me  
your deepest urge  
toward survival  
call me  
and my brothers and sisters  
in the sharp smell of your refusal  
call me  
roach and presumptuous  
nightmare on your white pillow  
your itch to destroy  
the indestructible part of yourself.

—Audre Lorde, “The Brown Menace, or Poem to  
the Survival of Roaches”

Published in 1974, Audre Lorde’s poem “The Brown Menace” outlines a novel political agenda. Even her title is telling. Lorde seeks to elucidate here a notion of “survival,” not a quest for equality or civil rights premised in humanist notions of a liberal subject. Lorde’s goal is merely, as she writes, “to survive” in a violent world, a world set against the non-white subject, a world in which non-white peoples are rendered as objects and sometimes as insects. Lorde’s poem frames its political message using a notion of blackness as Other—in fact, the ultimate Other, the inhuman and vile “roach.” Rather than working to overcome this definition of blackness, however, Lorde roots her politics within it. Lorde mobilizes alterity, embraces the otherness, and identifies as the nonhuman. “Call me /and my

brothers and sisters... / roach” commands the speaker, signifying a strategy of survival tough enough—like the cockroach—to outlast even a nuclear blast. Surviving requires movement and change, though, and Lorde states later on: “I alter...to survive” (149). What she alters is a theory of subjectivity grounded in the distinction between self and not-self. Lorde’s poem seeks to muddle this divide—something she accomplishes through her use of the imperative. “Call me,” “call me,” “call me,” she urges her reader, although each time the “me” that is the speaker is reconstituted as the reader, as in “Call *me your own* determination” or “Call *me your* deepest urge” (149; emphasis added). Lorde’s structure underscores her desire to blur the lines of self and other, subject and object, poet and reader.

The dichotomy—self and other—is mediated by race. Note, for example, the “brown menace” that is the poem’s speaker against the “white pillow” of the reader. Blurring the self with the other requires unsettling the racial binary of white and nonwhite. Hence the roach atop the pillow or, later in the poem, the roach “scuttling through the painted cracks...into your kitchens” (149). These moments of overlap, of intrusion, of contact—between black speaker and the “white” reader—is acknowledged to spark fear, anxiety, an impulse towards violence, an “itch to destroy.” However, Lorde also notes that this dichotomy—violently maintained—is false. Lorde notes that blackness so detested is indelibly wedded to the whiteness that seeks its excision. Blackness and otherness, in fact, are “the indestructible part of yourself.” So says Lorde: “I am you” (149).

Even as Lorde theorizes a new theory of subjectivity—one that exposes the artificial racial divide between the self and the other—she repeats throughout her primary goal: “to survive.” Redefining subjectivity is a political move for Lorde, not a mere academic exercise; it is tied to her very survival. Surviving, her poem suggests, requires a new way of

identifying oneself and a new way of identifying with others. In this section, I turn to Octavia Butler as a queer black author who, like Audre Lorde, seeks to unravel the dehumanizing racial stigma of blackness by calling for an alt-human politics of survival.<sup>158</sup> To do this, I draw upon Frantz Fanon's theories of coloniality and race to theorize a politics of alterity, a politics in which survival demands uniting with the Other by crossing racial and species boundaries.

Although his writings predate Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy by over two decades, Fanon's corpus maintains a similar preoccupation on matters of race, species, and subjectivity. Unlike the black nationalists during Fanon's time who sought to define and defend an essential, pure blackness and black culture, the Martinican psychiatrist conceptualized race as a social construction mobilized by colonial power structures.<sup>159</sup> For Fanon, racial categories operate in tandem with species categories to establish the hierarchy between colonized and colonizer.<sup>160</sup>

According to Fanon's 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth*, the colonized world is a "compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, is inhabited by different species" (5). Fanon's use of "species" here to refer to the colonized and the colonizer is more than simple rhetorical ornamentation. On the contrary, Fanon's treatise signals the unique relationship

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<sup>158</sup> Butler never remarked publicly on her sexuality, although the public ambiguity surrounding her orientation marks her as queer.

<sup>159</sup> For more on the connection between Butler's fiction and black nationalist ideologies of racial and sexual purity, see Thomas Foster's "We Get to Live," pages 154-156.

<sup>160</sup> Butler's trilogy constitutes a sort of re-imposition of historical coloniality in reverse—set in the Amazon basin in a world in which humans are dominated by alien Others. The Amazonian setting suggests another element of Butler's postcolonial antinuclear politics, considering that this region is designated as a "nuclear-weapon-free zone." The Amazon region's antinuclearism stems from postcolonial concerns about being the victims of Cold War antagonisms. Fanon as the postcolonial subject explains this position: "It is our duty, however, to tell and explain to the capitalist countries that they are wrong to think the fundamental issue of our time is the war between the socialist regime and them. An end must be put to this cold war that gets us nowhere, the nuclear arms race must be stopped" (61).

between species and racial borders. Both are rendered as key categories against which binary sides are constituted. Says Fanon: “it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to” (5). Species becomes a proxy for race, setting up a dynamic in which “the ruling species is first and foremost the outsider from elsewhere, different from the indigenous population, ‘the others’” (5). Racial difference is mobilized by appeals to species borders—marking the colonizer as human and the colonized as beast:

[The colonized] is reduced to the state of an animal. . . Allusion is made to the slithery movements of the yellow race, the odors from the “native” quarters, to the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething, and the gesticulations. (7)

The juxtaposition between the colonizer’s humanity and the colonized’s animality serves to foreclose any possibility of collaboration or mixture between the two, whether as black and white, self and other, animal and colonizer, or human and Oankali.

While alterity functions to keep colonized and colonizer separated, Fanon also identifies how the breakdown of this alterity mobilizes fear in order to preserve the binary division:

Life goes on and the colonized subject draws on the terrifying myths that are so prolific in underdeveloped societies as inhibitions for his aggressiveness: malevolent spirits who emerge every time you put one foot wrong, leopard men, snake men, six-legged dogs, zombies, a whole never-ending gamut of animalcules or giants that encircle the colonized with a realm of taboos, barriers, and inhibitions far more terrifying than the colonist world. (18)

Hybridity here breeds fear, which is itself paralyzing. The distressing prospect of crossing species barriers—between human and nonhuman—serves as a powerful deterrent, a visceral defense mechanism in order to conserve the definitions of alterity.

In *Xenogenesis*, Lilith feels this paralyzing fear when initially faced with the Oankali. Upon meeting the ooloi, Jdahya, for the first time, Lilith finds herself unable to move: “She



took a step closer to him, then stopped. He scared her somehow. She could not make herself approach him” (Butler, *Dawn* 10). Her fear is rooted in Jdahya’s strangeness, “his alienness, his difference, his literal unearthliness” (11). Even after spending several days with Jdahya, Lilith cannot imagine acclimating to the Oankali:

She tried to imagine herself surrounded by beings like him and was almost overwhelmed by panic. As though she had suddenly developed a phobia—something she had never before experienced. But what she felt was like what she had heard others describe. A true xenophobia—and apparently she was not alone in it. (21-22)

Lilith recognizes this xenophobic impulse at once and resolves that “it was something to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible” (22). Lilith’s reaction underscores that her instinctual xenophobia can be identified and overcome, albeit with great difficulty. Overcoming her fear of the Other will require Lilith to become the Other.

Fanon too recognizes that the task of overcoming the binaries rooted in colonialism requires theorizing a new definition for humanity. Like Lorde and Butler, Fanon seeks to reinvent a subjectivity beyond the self-destruction of racist ideologies. Dismissing Europe and other colonial powers as “teetering between atomic destruction and spiritual disintegration,” Fanon assigns to recently decolonized peoples the task of inventing new categories of the self and the human (235). Fanon impels: “For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man” (239). Creating a “new man,” however, requires doing away with old Western definitions of humanity:

[Humans must] reexamine the question of cerebral reality, the brain mass of humanity in its entirety whose affinities must be increased, whose connections must be diversified and whose communications must be humanized again. (237-238)

Fanon seeks change, in other words, in diversification—not a simple revision of European principles of sovereignty, of citizenship, of humanity. In fact, Fanon says emphatically, “let

us leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world” (235). Just as Fanon rejects European frameworks, he discards a return to indigenous “values and configurations” (178). According to Fanon, there is no fundamental indigenous subjectivity to restore:

[T]his struggle, which aims at fundamental redistribution of relations between men, cannot leave intact either the form or substance of the people’s [indigenous] culture. After the struggle is over, there is not only the demise of colonialism, but also the demise of the colonized. (178)

By rejecting both an assimilation to the colonizer’s categories as well as retrenchment in the pre-colonized self, Fanon demands a wholly new definition of humanity.<sup>161</sup> Truly revolutionary subjectivity calls for “the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind [sic] by another” (1).

*Dawn* takes up Fanon’s call in the register of the reproductive. Like *Wretched*, the novel follows two species: the Oankali as colonizer and the humans as colonized. The novel’s literal breakdown of the species boundary through sexual intercourse and the reproduction of constructs parallels the figurative deconstruction of the self and the other in *Wretched*. In the moments of interspecies intercourse, species and racial boundaries collapse:

[Lilith] tore off her jacket and seized the ugly, ugly elephant’s trunk of an organ, letting it coil around her as she climbed onto the bed. She sandwiched Nikanj’s body between her own and Joseph’s, placing it for the first time in the ooloi position between two humans. (Butler, *Dawn* 161)

Reflecting Fanon, the destruction of species categories here simultaneously signifies the rupture of racial categories—as the Oankali-human pairing comprises also an Asian Canadian man, Joseph, and Lilith, an African American woman. The experience between

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<sup>161</sup> This reading of Fanon is supported by Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* in which he argues that “the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilling prophecy... The demand of identification – that is, to be *for* an Other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness” (45; emphasis in original).

Lilith, Joseph Shing, and Nikanj is rendered as repulsive and yet seductive—a depiction of racial and species miscegenation that allures and repels. The act is also reproductive, as Lilith observes: “This was the way she might someday be made pregnant with an other-than-human child” (161-162). It is only in the novel’s last pages that Lilith is informed that she was made pregnant as a result of this union with Nikanj’s implantation of Joseph’s sperm. The construct child—as a mixed race black-Asian Oankali-human hybrid—embodies the new subject that Fanon declares is the ultimate goal of decolonization, a new subjectivity premised on otherness. Lilith’s progeny serves as Fanon’s “new man,” “an other-than-human” created by the Other.<sup>162</sup>

Through interspecies and interracial mixing, Butler transforms the old, static categories—humanity and the self—in the literal reproduction of Lilith’s brood. Important in this decolonizing act of subject-formation is that humanity and Oankali are reciprocally changed in “the trade.” As Lilith explains in *Rites*: ““they change us and we change them”” (33). Therefore, even as the use of genetic manipulation renders the Oankali humanlike—including bipedism and tentacles resembling hair—it also grants the humans with Oankali abilities—like accelerated healing, increased strength, and prolonged lifespans. Also, the more that humans change, the more sameness itself becomes repellant. After interspecies sex, all humans have difficulty even touching their human mates. Their revulsion signals the intense cost human transformation requires; unable to find solace in their own kind, the humans prefer the physical touch of the ooloi. This demonstrates the irreversibility of the

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<sup>162</sup> Interestingly, Lilith will learn after they have interspecies sex that Nikanj arranged for Lilith and Joseph to be together. Says Nikanj: “I offered you to one another. The two of you did your own choosing” (165). This arrangement by the Oankali seems to amplify the seemingly prescriptive and male-centered way that Fanon imagines the creation of a new *man*. Fanon’s formula seems to marginalize the role of gender—and particularly of femininity—in constituting a new self-as-other.

arrangement. Once the Other becomes the self, the “new man” in Fanon’s words or a “construct” in Butler’s, there is no going back.

### **Moving Beyond the Human in *Imago***

Organisms are *biological* embodiments; as natural-technical entities, they are not pre-existing plants, animals, protistes, etc., with boundaries already established and awaiting the right kind of instrument to note them correctly. Organisms emerge from a discursive process.

—Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters”

As Donna Haraway makes clear in her essay, “The Promises of Monsters,” it is culture, not nature, that defines organisms. “Organisms emerge from a discursive process” that sets them into categories, emphasizes certain attributes, and fixes them in relationships with other species (Haraway, “Promises” 298). The last section explored how species categories can shore up the borders of the self as well as reify racial binaries. Yet species boundaries are also permeable. Haraway explains that organisms “are not pre-existing... with boundaries already established” (298). Instead, these boundaries are subject to change and revision. This section proposes a reading of *Xenogenesis* that expands the borders of the human, moving the category to include vitalities harbored within and surrounding its borders. In so doing, Butler’s fiction opens humans up to new relationships with nonhumans. Rather than a futurity based on human-centered collaborations, Butler’s fiction exposes what I call “vital alliances” that break down hierarchies of life (i.e. the systems of value that privilege human over nonhuman lifeforms), reveal unfamiliar modes of reproduction, and uncover new avenues for interspecies survival. My analysis examines two ways that *Xenogenesis* unravels humanness into the vital alliances that contribute to our survival. In the first instance, *Xenogenesis* deconstructs the human from within, anticipating the modern revolution in

biological thought rooted in the human microbiome.<sup>163</sup> In the second, Butler's series extends vitality to the ecology that envelopes humans by focusing on nonhuman animals and the lived environment.

As an alt-human manifesto, the title of Butler's third *Xenogenesis* novel is fitting. An "imago," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to "the final or adult stage in the development of an insect, during which it is sexually mature" ("imago, n."). Like Audre Lorde's "brown menace," the reference to insect metamorphosis underscores the work Butler's series performs in imagining a new conception of the self, one founded in nonhuman alterity and the rejection of reproduction-as-sameness. Butler's nod to insect maturation also speaks to Haraway's notion that "the generation of novel forms—need not be imagined in the stodgy bipolar terms of hominids" ("Promises" 299). *Imago* the novel begins with the generation of novel forms—not with the birth of its protagonist, but with its mutation.<sup>164</sup> Unlike *Dawn*, whose first section is called "Womb," *Imago* begins with the section "Metamorphosis." Rather than gestation, a process of larval transformation begets humanity into its "mature" form.

In *Imago*, the human survivors finally breed out their essential humanness by creating the first construct ooloi named Jodahs.<sup>165</sup> Unlike Lilith's other progeny, Jodahs is a member of the third sex of Oankali, capable of manipulating genetics through touch and responsible

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<sup>163</sup> As Nonia Pariente explains in a recent *Nature Microbiology* article, while scientific research on microbiota emerged as early as Antonie van Leeuwenhoek's initial observations with his newly developed microscopes in the seventeenth century, "the field only took off in earnest once methods to cultural anaerobic organisms were discovered in the 1940s and 1950s" with many important research milestones reached in the 1990s and 2000s (54).

<sup>164</sup> By contrast, *Rites* begins with the human-centered birth of Akin. As it progresses, the series moves further away from reproduction-as-sameness.

<sup>165</sup> Because Jodahs is outside the male/female binary, I use the pronouns "it" and "its." Butler also employs these pronouns in *Imago*.

for the act of fertilization in sex. Jodahs can also shapeshift, changing its features to appear more masculine or feminine. These powers make Jodahs the ultimate arbiter of alterity; Jodahs lives as the Other by becoming change itself. Yet this change is always in service to survival; Jodahs's abilities function primarily to foster new generations of human-Oankali hybrids through interspecies reproduction. For this reason, when Jodahs first shapeshifts, it seduces the rescued human, Marina, eventually leading her to reproduce. Jodahs's adaptability is not only a mark of its alterity but also a survival tactic—one that promotes the reproduction of more hybrids.

Jodahs's story—like the character of Jodahs itself—is the most alien and yet the most intimate of the trilogy. Unlike *Dawn* or *Rites*, *Imago* is narrated in the first-person. This narrative perspective allows Jodahs to discuss the Oankali as an insider, accessing knowledge previously unconfirmed by the other characters. It possesses knowledge about which even Lilith herself, the most loyal human collaborator, remains ignorant.<sup>166</sup> Jodahs, for example, reveals that ooloi do eat humans—a minor but pervasive fear in the trilogy:

I had once heard my mother say to Nikanj, “It’s a good thing your people don’t eat meat. If you did, the way you talk about us, our flavors and your hunger and your need to taste us, I think you would eat us instead of fiddling with our genes.”  
...Nikanj had not said a word. It might have been feeding on her even then—sharing bits of her most recent meal, taking in dead or malformed cells from her flesh, even harvesting a ripe egg before it could begin its journey down her fallopian tubes to her uterus. It stored some of the eggs and consumed the rest. (Butler, *Imago* 155-156)

Although the very prospect that the ooloi would consume humans unsettles the survivors, Jodahs discloses the fact without alarm. Jodahs understands that the consumption that so disturbs the humans is actually a form of symbiosis. Unlike the human survivors, Jodahs can

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<sup>166</sup> In another passage, Jodahs understands what the Oankali, Ahajas, means when she says “Lelka” (Butler, *Imago* 138). The human to whom this term is applied does not know the word’s meaning (mated child) nor does Jodahs tell her, lest she panic that she has inadvertently mated for life with Jodahs.

fathom alternatives to reproduction-as-sameness; in fact, it cultivates biological life actively—sloughing off dead cells, storing biological material, and fertilizing eggs. As a human-ooloi construct, Jodahs experiences “the trade” intimately as a reproductive mode at the level of the cell.

While Jodahs embodies the alterity at the heart of *Imago*, the Oankali-human constructs across the series represent alterity as an outgrowth of reproduction—a future wrought in the intermixing of species. Rather than holding onto one particular mode of reproduction or valuing exclusively one form of life, the Oankali-human constructs demonstrate that life and reproduction are myriad. Even as new possibilities emerge after every change, survival is all that matters. The female Oankali, Ahajas, explains:

“If I died on a lifeless world, a world that could sustain some form of life if it were tenacious enough, organelles within each cell of my body would survive and evolve. In perhaps a thousand million years, that world would be as full of life as this one.” (138)

Any single mode of reproduction is not important here; Ahajas even imagines her own death as a mechanism for creating new life. The Oankali value change over sameness and fluctuation over permanence. Thus, Ahajas is content even in death to merely “sustain some form of life.” Simple survival—the persistence and spreading of life to new worlds—lies at the core of the Oankali exchange. The stakes of survival, however, will transform humanness from the inside out.

### ***Exploding Humanness from the Inside***

There are many other approaches within biology which, I think, are much more progressive and holistic... We need to focus on whole systems and how they work within other systems.

—Lynda Birke, “Biology is a Feminist Issue”

After being long derided as merely “nature,” feminine,” or “passive,” and thus not worthy of study, feminist scholars of the 1970s and 1980s sought to reclaim the body. These feminists, according to Lynda Birke, were only partially successful. Birke calls out what she dubbed a pervasive “somatophobia” in feminist scholarship, a reluctance to take seriously the body’s interiority. Birke asserts that feminist analyses have long neglected the body’s inner workings, leaving them “black-boxed.” Instead, feminist theorists treat the body as a surface or a mere container for the social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. Birke protests this treatment: “our bodies’ insides seem so often to be stuck in a language of certain facts – here is a Fallopian tube, there an ovary” (*Feminism* 3). By holding social construction as only skin-deep, Birke warns that “we run the risk of perpetuating the story of the biological body as fixed and prosocial... forever outside culture, fixed into a ‘biology’ forever doomed to separation from society” (21). The inner body should not be conceptualized as an unchanging, hermetically-sealed space but as a whole organism which can transform. Birke herself demands “alternative narratives” that can do the conceptual work of defining this more dynamic body.

Butler’s *Xenogenesis* functions as one such alternative narrative, a text that breaks down the static construction of the body’s interiority. In a literal sense, the Oankali possess the ability to modify the genetic structures of their own bodies and those of the human survivors. This process opens the interiority of the body to change premised on social dictates. In *Xenogenesis* the body is disciplined at the level of chromosomes. The ooloi, the Oankali genetic engineers, determine which genetic traits to adopt, like Lilith’s cancer cells, and which traits to reject. Like race, gender, and sexuality, the body here is socially



constructed, albeit in a more direct way, as it is mediated by the ooloi manipulator's preferences.

During the process of genetic modification, the body is sundered, revealing new relationships between human and nonhuman things. Under the ooloi's gaze, the biological body appears as an assembly of smaller components. In *Imago*, the ooloi-human Jodahs learns his connection to a single living cell. This organelle constitutes Jodahs as Oankali:

The organelle had divided within each of my cells as the cells divided. It had become an essential part of my body. We were what we were because of that organelle. It made us collectors and traders of life, always learning, always changing in every way but one—that one organelle. Ooloi said we *were* that organelle—that the original Oankali had evolved through that organelle's invasion, acquisition, duplication, and symbiosis. (Butler, *Imago* 23; emphasis in original)

Jodahs here identifies *as* the organelle, deriving its being *from* this microscopic vitality. The organelle is the blueprint of the Oankali's genetically-imprinted philosophy and their method of survival—"invasion, acquisition, duplication, and symbiosis," a series of actions that define the Oankali. The organelle undergirds Jodahs entire definition of self as "an essential part of my body." The essence of the Oankali, in other words, does not operate at the skin or species level but at the level of genetics.

By identifying as the organelle, Jodahs advances a unique definition of the self where "the self" is constituted by a collection of lesser vitalities. The human body too is susceptible to this view. In *Rites*, Akin deconstructs Lilith, displacing her subjectivity in a swirl of microparticles:

Now he perceived, through the tendril of flesh he had extended into Lilith, expanses of living cells. He focused on a few cells, on a single cell, on the parts of that cell, on its nucleus, on chromosomes within the nucleus, on genes along the chromosomes. He investigated the DNA that made up the genes, the nucleotides of the DNA. (Butler, *Rites* 8)

As the human body breaks down, Akin brings Lilith's base elements into focus—from a few cells to a single cell to its nucleus to its chromosomes to its genes. Akin here is utilizing what anthropologist Sarah Franklin deems “the genetic imaginary” (198). The genetic imaginary involves a certain perception in which life materializes not as a species-bound unit but as a nebulous collection of biological and genetic data. This way of seeing, according to Franklin, organizes life as something instrumentalizable and reprogrammable (189-190). Life is optimizable and subject to refinement. While the genetic imaginary would seem to render genetic material as inanimate matter, as mere objects to manipulate, Butler's genetic imaginary operates differently.

In *Xenogenesis*, humanity's constituent parts (i.e. the smaller vitalities) are figured as discrete actors. Granted access to the genetic imaginary, the ooloi imbue all aspects of the human (including facets not directly controlled by human cognition) with agentic potential:

The ooloi perceived all that a living being said—all words, all gestures, and vast array of other internal and external bodily responses. Ooloi absorbed everything and acted according to whatever consensus they discovered. Thus ooloi treated individuals as they treated groups of beings. They sought a consensus. (Butler, *Imago* 32)

The ooloi here bestow decision-making power to “the human” as a collection of fragmentary parts. In this framework, the notion of a unified subject or single, self-conscious “human” making decisions is reductive.<sup>167</sup> To the ooloi, humans function as collections of various actors with competing preferences and desires that must be considered in concert. What *Imago* defines here is a form of biological consensus-building that requires communicating and collaborating with various interconnected vitalities. This genetic imaginary is seen elsewhere in *Imago*, as when Jodahs describes the Oankali's accelerated healing as a matter

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<sup>167</sup> Even the act of thinking requires many millions of individual neurons firing together in an appropriate sequence.

of persuasion and collective action: “[Nikanj] used what it learned from these [cancer cells] to *encourage* its own cells to grow and reattach the complex structures of the arm” (30; emphasis added). In Jodahs’s description, ooloi figure not so much as genetic engineers, using cells as tools to perform an action, as genetic translators or genetic conductors, coaxing cells into action. The ooloi practice a radical form of alt-humanist work, rejecting a hierarchy in which human cognition is given primacy and in which certain human-centric actions (e.g.: nodding a head, raising a hand) are given priority over others (e.g.: neurons firing, fluids secreting, cells growing).

This alt-humanist interpretation complicates American studies scholar Florian Bast’s reading of *Xenogenesis* as “the starkest and least hopeful portrayal of the struggle for agency” (97). Bast continues to deride the series for “show[ing] that biologism and genetic determinism pose grave definitory and epistemic threats to agency and leave few if any agential acts for oppressed individuals” (97). Like other critics, Bast cannot reconcile the biological determinism that permeates *Xenogenesis* with an account of agency. Yet Bast’s interpretation is premised on a reductive power binary between oppressed and oppressor, the stable subjects of the humans and the Oankali. Instead, I argue that Butler’s fiction exposes unique agential potentialities within and between the categories through which Bast’s critique operates. Like Naomi Jacobs, I take *Xenogenesis* as “the critique of the individual as a rationally self-determining, self-defining being, and of individual identity as the source of agency” (91).

Butler’s fiction mobilizes a novel form of collaboration—through what I call “vital alliances”—that requires penetrating the body’s surface layers to incorporate nonhuman

vitalities as important actants.<sup>168</sup> In a similar vein, *Xenogenesis* parallels the growing attention in the scientific community to the concept of “the human microbiome.” The underlying insight behind the human microbiome is the fact that the majority of cells that constitute the human body are not actually human cells. Although estimates vary, scientists estimate that the ratio of nonhuman to human cells in the human body is about 10 to 1 (Frank et al. 30). According to Frank et al., “The term *human microbiome* refers to the population of microorganisms (pathogenic, commensal, and mutualistic), bacteria, viruses, fungi, and protozoans and their genetic material that live on and inside the human organism” (30; emphasis in original). Basically, the human microbiome defines the human body as a number of lifeforms, “a collection of diverse ecological communities that interact with each other, the host, and the environment” (31). These micro-communities are essential for life-sustaining processes, like fighting off disease, immunizing newborns, and digesting food. Attention to the human microbiome, like the genetic imaginary practiced by Jodahs, reveals the vital alliances forged between gut bacteria, immune cells, and intestinal flora among other intra-human entities that promote survival through symbiosis.

The queer theorist Tim Dean has also written about the collaborative capacities of microorganisms. In *Unlimited Intimacy*, Dean investigates a unique phenomenon among barebacking gay men—those who practice unprotected anal sex:

[G]ay men have discovered that, on the basis of viral transmission [of HIV], they can form relations and networks understood in terms of kinship—networks that represent an alternative to, even as they often resemble, normative heterosexual kinship. (ix-x)

Dean finds that gay men exchange HIV in a way that works to cement social ties of non-reproductive kinship, a “bug brotherhood” of infected individuals. This queer kinship system

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<sup>168</sup> Here I rely on the work of scholars of Actor Network Theory, like Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, who have theorized conceptual models to attribute agency to nonhuman things.

is fixed in biology—in the incubation of HIV—but in a way unassociated with the normative model of reproduction, which culminates in the fertilization of an egg. The transmission of a virus here collaborates in the social work of creating kinship ties.

In *Xenogenesis*, other nonnormative forms of reproduction and kinship occur between the Oankali and humans. One example is the genetic “trading” that occurs on a subcutaneous level—an exchange of genetic information without transfer through sperm and egg. At other moments, Butler’s fiction describes new interspecies human-Oankali family structures. These hybrid families contort normative reproductive frameworks by including interspecies relationships that involve female and male Oankali mates, female and male human mates, and an ooloi. Lilith’s family is described in the following way:

“Ahajas and Dichaan were brother and sister, like most Oankali male and female mates. Joseph was unrelated, like Nikanj—but although Nikanj was Oankali, it was also ooloi, not male or female. Ooloi were supposed to be unrelated to their male and female mates so they could focus their attention on their mates’ genetic differences and construct children without making dangerous mistakes of overfamiliarity and overconfidence.” (Butler, *Rites* 8)

The kinship system here is non-normative in the sense that it combines more than two partners as well as sibling pairings, interspecies mixing, and a third gender. Through such families, according to Esther Jones, Butler’s fiction “forges an alternative ethics of ‘relationality’ that refuses to marginalize and mistreat others in the way they have been treated” (*Medicine* 4). While Jones prioritizes the egalitarian ethics of the relationships in Butler’s fiction, my reading emphasizes that these alternative modes of relationality are forged specifically for the purposes of survival.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> The question of whether human-Oankali families are truly egalitarian or hierarchical is moot in discussions of base survival. Instead, it may help to think in terms of parasitism vs. mutualism, which displaces a liberal human subjectivity and focuses on vitality rather than rights or freedom.

Reproduction-as-survival in human-Oankali kin groups requires the further erosion of human boundaries. The ooloi-led process of “reproducing” takes place outside of the human (or Oankali) body and does not follow the conventional biological process of fertilization.

Jodahs describes the process that the ooloi use to create new life:

Every construct had some version of [the organ]. Males and females used it to store and keep viable the cells of unfamiliar living things that they sought out and brought home to their ooloi mate or parent. In ooloi, the organ was larger and more complex. Within it, ooloi manipulated molecules of DNA more deftly than human women manipulated the bits of thread they used to sew their cloth. I had been constructed inside such an organ, assembled from the genetic contributions of my two mothers and my two fathers. (Butler, *Imago* 23)

The mechanisms performed by the ooloi organ are tactile and intentional, a process of construction that requires multiple actors—both the viable cells and the ooloi organ. That this gestation occurs as the weaving of genetic threads outside the human body and within an ooloi organ moves it beyond the normative form of human reproduction.

In her essay, “Interspecies Reproduction,” Susan Squier identifies the array of nonhuman reproductive modes:

[S]exual reproduction is only one, and arguably not even the predominant, kind of reproduction that is found in nature; bacterial budding, rhizomic replication, spore production, viral infection, symbiosis, bacterial recombination – such reproductive models challenge not only our *humanness*, but also (and perhaps more profoundly) our *animalness*. (374; emphasis in original)

Human-Oankali reproduction in *Xenogenesis* hews more closely to these other types of replication, generation, and creation that exist. By depicting alternative reproductive modes, Butler’s trilogy destabilizes humanness and opens reproduction (including human reproduction) to other actants—sperm, eggs, viruses. Rather than premising survival on modes of reproduction that make invisible these other vitalities and relationships, Butler

seeks new understandings of reproduction that mobilize certain vital alliances and foment an alt-humanist politics of survival.

### ***Extending Humanness Outwards***

Man seeks to control the re-productive processes of cow and woman to exercise “quality control” over the products we produce.

—Gena Corea, *The Mother Machine*

Throughout the 1980s as Butler was writing *Xenogenesis*, various social critics fretted about the ascent of new reproductive technologies, including *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) and gamete intrafallopian tube transfer (GIFT). Such concerns stemmed from the 1978 delivery of the world’s first “test-tube baby,” Louise Brown, by British medical scientists. One year after Brown’s birth, one American newspaper would report that: “religious leaders, scientists and many others are split over whether the technique that brought Louise into the world is a miracle or the start of a nightmare” (“After a year” A7). More concerning than artificially inseminated human embryos was the prospect of human-animal chimeras.

Revelations about hamster-egg fertilization in the 1980s, for example, made the public deeply uncomfortable about the new limits of reproductive science. The new method of diagnosing male infertility required the incubation of human sperm with several hamster eggs, often resulting in fertilization. The technique was made licensable in the UK by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act of 1990. In the US, public unease led the National Institutes of Health to form a Human Embryo Research Panel in order to evaluate the new interspecies reproductive technique. In the committee’s final report, the authors found the procedure acceptable, although emphatically rejected the “development of human-nonhuman and human-human chimeras with or without transfer” (qtd. in Squier 363). This decision,

Susan Squier notes, more reflects a deep discomfort with interspecies hybridity than an objective consideration of scientific merit, “a concern that is less scientific than cultural” (363).

Prominent feminists, like the public at large, also debated the repercussions of new reproductive technologies.<sup>170</sup> In these debates, some decried the meddling of medical scientists and mobilized fears of chimeras as part of a wider critique against the medicalization of reproduction. While the appeal to a pure or natural humanity unfettered by medical tampering or interspecies contact proved an effective way to frame women’s reproductive oppression at the hands of doctors and capitalists, it foreclosed important “vital alliances” between the human and the nonhuman. The alt-humanist understanding of reproduction in Butler’s *Xenogenesis*, on the contrary, extends the definitions of life, agency, and accountability to new actors in order to uncover the important relationships that construct survival as a cooperative rather than combative exercise.

In 1985 the feminist author Gena Corea published a literary assault on new reproductive technologies. Her book, *The Mother Machine*, dismisses many techniques outright, deeming them part of the mainstream techno-patriarchal medical regime. According to Corea, medical practice “is not just a healing art but is also an institution of social control” (123). She bemoans that women have become increasingly incarcerated within new medical technologies under the auspices of helping women reproduce. Corea draws on the feminist

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<sup>170</sup> One example is the 1987 “Baby M” case under consideration by the Supreme Court of New Jersey. In the case, Mary Beth Whitehead bore a baby girl, Baby M, under a contract agreement with Dr. Elizabeth Stern and her husband William Stern. After her delivery, Whitehead decided to keep the child. Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Phyllis Chesler, and Marilyn French filed an amicus curiae brief in the case supporting Whitehead’s custody. For more information, see Elizabeth Mehren’s *Los Angeles Times* article, “Feminists Fight...”



thinker Mary O'Brien to argue that male doctors engage in a medical "will to power" over their female patients due to their misgivings about women's role in biological reproduction:

Envyng women her genetic continuity and her connection to the human species, men of different times and cultures have tried to make her reproductive experience their own through a variety of means...increasingly creating a continuous reproductive experience for himself and a discontinuous one for women. (9)

Central to Corea's discussion here is the definition of reproduction as a natural process rooted in women's bodies. Steeped in essentialist notions of humanness and nature, Corea's analysis holds that reproduction creates for women a "genetic continuity and...connection to the human species."

The encroachment of male medical authorities over reproduction, Corea fears, entails more than an infringement of women's bodily autonomy but of their very status as human.

By losing their reproductive power, Corea worries, women are becoming less human:

[New reproductive technology] makes a certain scenario possible: the application of animal husbandry to human beings in processes that will reduce women to breeders and offer a centralized group of white men control over who is born into the world. (123)<sup>171</sup>

To Corea, the adoption of reproductive techniques derived from animal husbandry causes an ontological slippage from human to animal.<sup>172</sup> Corea underscores this slippage throughout *The Mother Machine* in her frequent juxtaposing of women with cattle, as when she writes that: "man seeks to control the re-productive processes of cow and woman to exercise 'quality control' over the products we produce" (16).

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<sup>171</sup> Corea's reference to animal husbandry in this passage alludes to the historical exchanges between human reproductive science and agricultural science. For more on this history, see Clarke's *Disciplining Reproduction*, chapter 3.

<sup>172</sup> In *Dawn*, Lilith also compares herself to an experimental lab animal. "She was intended to live and reproduce, not to die. Experimental animal, parent to domestic animals? Or...nearly extinct animal, part of a captive breeding program?" (Butler, *Dawn* 58). Butler abandons these metaphors after the first novel, once Lilith embraces her life among the Oankali.

The pairing of women and cattle in *The Mother Machine* is more rhetorical than coalitional; Corea does not aim to connect the forces that devalue women with those imposed over livestock.<sup>173</sup> Corea uses animals simply as referents, comparisons against which women's abuses are magnified.<sup>174</sup> Nowhere does she consider the mistreatment of animals on its own terms, like to critique factory farming techniques or call attention to flagrant animal abuses. Corea does not take issue with human's treatment of animals, in other words, only that humans would treat other humans *as* animals. Given this oversight, Corea misses an opportunity to foster trans-species alliance.

Because Corea's argument is undergirded by binary thinking—the superior human vs. the lowly animal, natural childbirth vs. artificial reproduction, feminine power vs. male repression—her preferred solution to the encroachment of new reproductive technologies is prohibition. This is a solution that rectifies the blurring of binaries without removing the binaries completely.<sup>175</sup> To Corea, reproductive advancements must be scaled back, allowing women to reclaim their “sacred character” and preserve their natural “connection with the next generation in the labor through which she births that generation” (311, 287). In her conclusion, Corea makes a more modest call for increased regulation. Both prohibition and

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<sup>173</sup> This technique of referring to women as animals to protest their treatment or highlight power oppressions is not unique to Corea's feminist polemic, see Carol J. Adams's *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990). Unlike Corea's text, Adams critically traces the connection between gender oppression and species oppression, leaving open the possibility of “vital alliances.”

<sup>174</sup> This is done most explicitly in chapter 4 (pages 62-68) when Corea provides a graphic description of embryo transfer into a cow. The passage is prefaced by a historical overview of the deification of cows, ending with the contention that: “The breeding of animals...suggested to men the idea of controlling women's reproductive capacities” (62). This narrative framing signals that it is not the plight of the once-revered cow that the reader should be concerned about but the plight of the soon-to-be-dethroned woman.

<sup>175</sup> Admittedly, Corea does not outright support banning new reproductive technologies, although her support for them—even in a regulated capacity—as tepid at best: “There may be some limited good to the bio-technologies, just as there may be certain good uses of hazardous substances. Rachel Carson recognized that there might be minor and beneficial uses of pesticides when used carefully” (323n2).

regulation, however, fail to account for the nonhuman dimension of new reproductive technologies. To ban reproductive technologies leaves the category of human unchallenged, occluding the very relationships between humans and animals that her polemic identifies. On the other hand, regulation moves the question into the realms of law and governmentality, which are based on the granting of “rights” to liberal human subjects.

In contrast to Corea’s *The Mother Machine*, Butler’s *Xenogenesis* series, released two years later, provides a unique way of mobilizing beyond the human against systemic power imbalances. Corea proclaims that women are not just matter, such as nonhuman animals, that can be manipulated, monetized, and discarded. On the other hand, Butler’s fiction advocates that all matter matters. Here I draw from Jane Bennett’s work in *Vibrant Matter*, in which she posits a “vital materiality” that links humans and nonhumans in “the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies” (4). Analyses of power, according to Bennett, must look beyond species boundaries to recognize the “active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life” (2; emphasis in original). Mel Chen too discusses the way that systems of oppression divide things considered animate and inanimate. Chen identifies an “animacy hierarchy” that casts doubt on the animacy of racialized, queer, or non-human subjects. This hierarchy “conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority” (Chen 13). Both Chen and Bennett appreciate the political nature of “things”—that the nonhuman, like the human, is embedded within discourses of gender, sexuality, race, and species. Although often overlooked, the nonhuman helps to police borders of difference and offers unique opportunities to resist or complicate dominant hierarchies.

As a trilogy teeming with nonhuman matter, *Xenogenesis* abounds with what Bennett dubs “thing-power,” or that “not-quite-human force that addled and altered human and other bodies” (2). The Oankali’s living spaceship, Chkahichdahk, is one such example. The ship operates with a limited agency; it reacts to Oankali control, recognizing and responding to their touch. More importantly, the ship has a distinct identity and communicates with the other characters. In *Rites*, for instance, Akin recognizes the ship’s aliveness after connecting with it on a psychic and biological level. In a conversation with the Oankali, Dichaan, after the encounter, Akin learns about the symbiotic relationship between the Oankali and the ship:

“It feels as it feels. Its feelings would hurt you, perhaps injure or kill you if you took them directly. Your reactions would confuse it and throw it off course... We never trade away our abilities to work with the ships.” (Butler, *Rites* 197)

Dichaan makes clear that the Oankali ships are living creatures. More than that, working and living onboard the ships requires a collaborative relationship as in a partnership between two equal parties rather than a mechanical relationship as a user to a tool. Throughout *Xenogenesis*, the ship Chkahichdahk synthesizes nutritious food for its occupants, restructures itself to cordon off living spaces, generates breathable air, recycles waste products, and helps the occupants survive the deadly vacuum of space. The Oankali, for their part, sustain the ship both biologically with their waste and emotionally. The Oankali and the ships must work in sync and feel in harmony, lest they perish together. Chkahichdahk’s feelings and its way of being may not be completely accessible to Oankali—“its feelings would hurt you, perhaps injure or kill you”—but the two beings still cooperate in the basic goal of survival. Consciousness is not a prerequisite to fostering vital alliances.

Like Chkahichdahk, the Oankali-human settlement of Lo is a young Oankali ship. As Lilith explains: “It’s an Oankali construct. Actually, it’s a kind of larval version of the ship.

A neotenic larva... What you see of it appears to be houses, grasses, shrubs, nearby trees, and, to some extent, riverbank” (34). Growing on the surface of Earth until fully matured and ready to sail into the stars, Lo supports the Oankali-human settlers. And while it seems primitive to the human settlers, Lo fulfills important functions and operates with perfect efficiency, much like the Earth itself (31). Similar to the fully matured Chkahichdahk, Lo takes on an identity and becomes an additional character in the series. As Jodahs states: “Lo was parent, sibling, home... woven into its genetic structure and my own was the unmistakable Lo kin group signature” (33). Like the other characters of the series, Lo matures, learning its role amidst the humans, Oankali, and constructs. At the end of *Imago*, Lo grows fully, becoming a ship capable of carrying the constructs to new worlds. In this way, the title *Imago* may have as much to do with the ship as with Jodahs or the other Oankali-human hybrids.

In *Imago*, Jodahs accidentally harms Lo in the process of metamorphosizing into an ooloi:

“Every day, at least, Nikanj had to correct some harm that I had done to Lo—to the living platform on which I lay. Lo’s natural color was gray-brown. Beneath me, it turned yellow. It developed swellings. Rough, diseased patches appeared on it. Its odor changed, became foul. Parts of it sloughed off. Sometimes it developed deep, open sores.” (Butler, *Imago* 33)

Jodahs must learn to live peaceably with Lo as any injury to the young ship also harms the community’s wellbeing. Until Jodahs can control his ooloi powers, it must go into exile. This ecological relationship speaks to Stacy Alaimo’s concept of “trans-corporeality.” According to Alaimo, trans-corporeality is the notion that “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (2). In the context of the novel, trans-corporeality makes clear that, in order for the Oankali-human hybrids to survive, they must look beyond themselves to their

connections with the environment. The survival of the human-Oankali settlers depends on the sustainability of their community practices and the respect they confer upon the external world.

The need for sustainability makes Lo incompatible with the humans' society before the nuclear war. Manufactured products, for instance, damage Lo just as they damage the Earth. Finding a plastic picture frame, Akin tastes the strange object cautiously. Immediately, the ooloi throws it down in disgust. Reflecting on the experience, Akin explains: "It was...more poison packed tight together in one place than I've ever known" (Butler, *Rites* 143). Though poisonous to humans and the Earth, plastics proliferated in life before the Oankali. As one character relates:

"Plastics used to kill people back before the war...They were used in furniture, clothing, containers, appliances, just about everything. Sometimes the poisons leached into food or water and caused cancer, and sometimes there was a fire and plastics burned and gassed people to death." (143)

Understandably, Akin cannot understand why humans produced such materials—from a survival standpoint it is unconscionable.<sup>176</sup> Alaimo's trans-corporeality concept reframes plastic from cheap commodity to fatal poison. In harming the planet, pre-nuclear-war human society harmed itself, another example of human's proclivity towards self-destruction. Survival in a post-nuclear world will require perceiving beyond the human to the wider dependencies and environments that cradle human life.

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<sup>176</sup> That "poisons leached into food or water" resonates in the years following the Flint water crisis. This human-led disaster exposed the "vital alliances" between majority minority populations and local water supplies (uncontaminated by lead). Unfortunately, even five years out, research shows that residents exposed to lead in the Flint water supply resulted in decreased fertility rates and a decrease in overall health at birth (Grossman and Slusky 2005). Here the association between reproduction and environmental racism is clear—destruction is wrought on the environment and those deemed less than human, crippling the vitality of both.

*Xenogenesis* ends with a new beginning. Rather than permitted to leave with the first generation of humans, Oankali, and constructs, Jodahs is instructed to “plant the town that you and your mates and children will leave this world in” (Butler, *Imago* 218). Jodahs mission to sow a new ship demonstrates that the project of survival is never complete; it will continue in future generations of human-Oankali hybrids. To survive, these future generations must look beyond the human and work in collaboration with the vital alliances that interweave the fates of different lifeforms. Set against the turbulence of the 1980s, the trilogy carries a message to humanity to discard the hierarchies of species and race that promote violence and oppression, to embrace the alterity found outside the human, and to relate to other humans, organisms, and environments in bold and ever-changing ways.

In *Xenogenesis*, survival is an inherently reproductive exercise—the production of something new. It is also an exercise in producing new forms of reproduction, unfettered by futile attachments to sameness. Such a reproductive project is disruptive and threatening, especially to those reluctant to forfeit the power they derive under reproduction-as-sameness. Lilith tells Nikanj: “I know most prewar men don’t like you [the Oankali]. They feel you’re displacing them and forcing them to do something perverted” (Butler, *Rites* 9). The displacement felt by the men is triggered by the loss of their reproductive control over others. In an alt-humanist conception of reproduction, men are no longer the instigators, the actors, or the subjects of reproduction. The process of unlearning normative reproduction is difficult. Reproduction-as-sameness is a script that teaches a vision of biology in which aggressive sperm penetrate passive eggs; it is a script that assumes men are the initiators of heterosexual encounters; it is a script that dehumanizes women as potential sexual conquests and objectifies pregnant women, treating their laboring bodies like machines. These

understandings rely on and reinforce social definitions of masculinity as powerful, commanding, and decisive. Unsurprisingly, then, the male humans in *Xenogenesis* struggle against a new reproductive order in which they must cede power.

In *Dawn*, one of the awakened survivors, a white man named Peter, reacts violently to the strange sexual and procreative practices of the Oankali.<sup>177</sup>

Under [the ooloi-produced drugs] influence, he accepted union and pleasure. When that influence was allowed to wane and Peter began to think, he apparently decided he had been humiliated and enslaved. The drug seemed to him to be not a less painful way of getting used to frightening nonhumans, but a way of turning him against himself, causing him to demean himself in alien perversions. His humanity was profaned. His manhood was taken away. (Butler, *Dawn* 192-3)

The associations between power and sex here are clear. Peter denigrates the Oankali-human sexual pairings as “alien perversions.” Lacking the authority and agency typically found in reproduction-as-sameness, Peter views his new sexual position as subordinate to the ooloi. Without total control, Peter’s masculinity and dominance is called into question, leaving him feeling “humiliated and enslaved.” Peter’s hatred towards himself (as weak) and towards the Oankali (as perverse) stems from his feelings of insecurity about his manhood, an identity premised on rigid gender, sexual, and species binaries. The loss of normative reproduction is, for Peter, a concern interwoven with the loss of essentialist categories (his socially constructed humanness, whiteness, and manliness at once). As a way to restore his power, therefore, Peter works to overthrow the Oankali and Lilith. Violence becomes the only way of restoring both his humanity and his manhood.

Although the series acknowledges the difficulty in sweeping away the old hierarchies of race, gender, and species, the normative mode of reproduction-as-sameness, and the power

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<sup>177</sup> Although Peter’s race is unstated, his Dutch last name “Van Weerden” hints at his probable European descent.



afforded by them, Butler's trilogy concludes on an optimistic note. Rather than travel to the human resister settlement on Mars, a final town of human resisters in *Imago* is persuaded by Jodahs to join the Oankali and human survivors. Jodahs recounts the happy scene: "everyone came to us. Even the most stubborn elders forgot how much they hated us" (211). The resisters renounce self-destruction and embrace the futurity that Jodahs's new settlement will bring. With this ending, the novel remains hopeful about the capacity for humans to embrace change and imagine a peaceful, life-affirming future.

## Conclusion

For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america [sic], we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson – that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings.

—Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"

"It's morning again in America," soothes the famous political ad, "Morning in America," from Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign. The commercial's message is one of renewal. To upbeat music and scenes of white people going to work, moving into a house, and getting married, the narrator intones messages, like "nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years" and "this afternoon 6,500 young men and women will be married...they can look forward with confidence to the future" ("Morning in America"). The commercial epitomizes the reproductive premises of Reagan conservatism: the propagation of white nuclear families in a flourishing economy unburdened by big government. Reagan would continue the theme of rebirth into his second term, claiming to preside over an American renaissance thanks to his conservative defense of family values. "Despite the pressures of our modern world," he would affirm in his 1986

State of the Union address, “family and community remain the moral core of our society, guardians of our values and hopes for the future. Family and community are the co-stars of this great American comeback” (Reagan, “Address...1986,” par. 5). Published shortly after Reagan’s proclamation of this “great American comeback,” the *Xenogenesis* trilogy represents a different narrative of renewal. Rather than seeking to preserve the status quo, to laud the traditional pillars of the family and the community, and to fight for the preservation of American freedom and security, Butler’s fiction jettisons such sentiments as foolhardy and even dangerous during an era in which global nuclear stockpiles reached their largest numbers. Read in the context of the 1980s, *Xenogenesis* exposes the conservative impulse to emulate the past as misguided and to incite cold warrior warmongering as self-destructive. In the midst of a potential nuclear war, alterity and change, not the conservative desire for sameness and tradition, is the only way to survive.

Audre Lorde, in this section’s epigraph, notes that people of color “were never meant to survive” in American society. While her qualification, “[a]t least not as humans,” refers to the dehumanization experienced by those in marginalized groups, reading Lorde alongside Butler’s *Xenogenesis* offers an alternative interpretation. In Butler’s fiction and Lorde’s essay, survival is antithetical to humanness—it is about renouncing a claim to humanity rather than staking out one. Survival eschews all allegiances to species, race, and self, while seeking alliances within and between these categories. By renouncing categorical thinking, *Xenogenesis* mirrors the sentiments of Donna Rushin’s iconic “The Bridge Poem,” in which she declares: “I will not be the bridge to your womanhood / Your manhood / Your humanness” (xxii). Selected to introduce the canonical feminist anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, the poem speaks to the losing situation of women of color—that to conform to gender,

race, and species categories is simply to enmesh oneself in a series of intersecting hierarchies all of which relegate nonwhiteness and womanhood to the very bottom. Women of color—whether Lilith Iyapo, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, or Donna Rushin—have nothing to lose and everything to gain away from these oppressive structures of thought. Instead of suffering dehumanization, then, *Xenogenesis* advocates un-humanization, that is, the forsaking of humanness altogether rather than being interpellated into a system that erodes one's humanity.<sup>178</sup> Under un-humanization, survival becomes a project of bridge-building—rather than the dehumanizing bridge-becoming in Rushin's poem—not merely between Cold War enemies but across larger categorical divides. Beyond human and nonhuman, man and woman, whiteness and blackness, self and other, and agent and environment dwell the vital alliances on which futurity hinges.

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<sup>178</sup> While dehumanization presumes a humanity deferred, stolen, or lost, un-humanization (as I define it) rejects any prior or future claims to humanness—much as a virus or a car cannot be “dehumanized” but is “unhuman.”

## CODA

“I finally got to see her! It’s all true, what they say about new babies and the face that only a mother could love – but it’s all there, darling, eyes, ears, and noses – no, only one! – all in the right places. We’re so *lucky*, Hank!”

—Judith Merrill, “That Only a Mother”

In her well-known 1948 short story “That Only a Mother,” the white female science fiction author and editor Judith Merrill speculated on childbirth in the atomic age. Most of “That Only a Mother” takes the form of a series of letters written between Margaret Marvell and her husband Hank. The Marvells are expecting their first baby while Hank is away, deployed as a technical lieutenant in an ongoing nuclear war. Published three years after the Second World War, Merrill’s story about the couple’s situation would be familiar to many readers. Yet the Marvells are not any American family; they are the idyllic white middle-class household that would come to dominate postwar images of American domesticity.<sup>179</sup> Like many white middle-class women during World War II, Margaret’s life is touched by the war when she enters the workforce. Joining the war effort by taking up the jobs vacated by enlisted men was deemed an act of patriotism and enshrined in the federal government’s advertisements of Rosie the Riveter. Enthusiastically, Margaret leaves the confines of the domestic sphere to become a computer in a government agency. As she explains: “you didn’t just stop working these days [due to pregnancy]. Everyone who could do anything at all was needed” (Merrill, “Mother” 145). Margaret owes her office position to her racial and class

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<sup>179</sup> The race of the family is not marked in the text itself, but this process of leaving race unmarked by a white author effectively fashions the characters as white. For more on the presumed whiteness of racially unmarked literary characters, see Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*.

privilege, although this isn't mentioned in the story.<sup>180</sup> To Margaret, her job is a source of fulfillment not drudgery. She enjoys walking into the office each morning, and although placed in a less strenuous job due to her pregnancy, Margaret finds that “the work was absorbing, if not as exciting as the old job” (145). Once Margaret delivers her baby, however, she must abandon her job to stay at home permanently. Like many white middle-class women in the postwar period, who were pushed out of the jobs they held during the war, Margaret must content herself exclusively as a housewife and mother, an icon of domestic stability at the heart of the nuclear family.

In Margaret's letters to Hank, the perfect nuclear household that she describes seems increasingly contrived. While the Marvells' society is plagued by cases of babies born with various birth defects caused by nuclear radiation, Margaret is adamant that their newborn is physically well.<sup>181</sup> “We're so *lucky*, Hank,” she asserts in this chapter's epigraph, even as her accounts of the baby grow more and more bizarre (147; emphasis in original). According to Margaret, the infant learns to speak in adult sentences after a mere five months and begins to sing at seven months. Yet the child's verbal development stands in contrast to other

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<sup>180</sup> Historian Karen Tucker Anderson finds that: “In the traditional female fields of clerical and sales, the gains of black women were negligible—their share of female clerical jobs rose from 0.7 percent to 1.6 percent while their proportion in the female sales force declined from 1.2 percent to 1.1 percent” (85). To put this into a wider context, Anderson explains that although black women moved out of domestic work and agricultural labor in large numbers thanks to World War II, their gains in new wartime industries were stymied by a hierarchy of preference—a hierarchy of which they were on the bottom. This meant that black women were hired at comparatively lower rates than black men or white women in certain positions. As black men were preferred for certain heavy industry jobs over white women and white women were preferred over black men for clerical positions, black women were doubly discriminated against due to their race and gender.

<sup>181</sup> Margaret's anxieties about radiation exposure were particularly salient to Merrill's readership, given American accounts of Japan at the end of the war. The most famous example of this genre is John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946), mentioned in chapter 1 of this dissertation. The work, published just months after the US bombing of the Japanese city, recounted the bomb's effects on the survivors in chilling detail. Among these: “the reproductive processes were affected for a time; men became sterile, women had miscarriages, menstruation stopped” (100). As additional medical and news reports emerged about birth defects in the wake of the atomic bomb blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the public became increasingly concerned about radiation's effects on reproduction.

shortfalls. Margaret scolds the child before the arrival of her husband, saying: “I cannot understand... why a child of your intelligence can’t learn to keep a diaper on the way other babies do” (149). In another letter, Margaret describes the baby oddly: “[She] looks like a snow-white potato sack with that beautiful, beautiful flower-face blooming on top” (148). The baby here is at once thing and person—a disconcerting hybrid of human and nonhuman.

Given these red flags, it is unsurprising when the reader learns that the vision of domestic perfection conveyed in Margaret’s letters is a fabrication.<sup>182</sup> After Hank finally returns home from the front, he discovers that the child is not as Margaret has described. He removes the infant’s swaddle to find that she has no limbs at all; the baby suffers from a form of amelia caused by radioactivity.<sup>183</sup> The baby’s deformity, in turn, reveals that Margaret herself has had a psychological break. As a white middle-class wife and mother, Margaret is responsible for the perpetuation of the ideal American household, an ideal that proves impossible to realize. In this light, Margaret’s letters are not celebrations of maternal life but mere fictions in which the child’s physical disabilities are reimagined as superhuman mental abilities. Margaret’s endeavor to artificially tether her reality to the domestic fiction of the perfect nuclear family proves both futile and enfeebling. Her mind splits, unable to reconcile the desired ideal with her reality. Even more disturbing, however, is Hank’s reaction to the

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<sup>182</sup> Because it appears in a work of speculative fiction, the baby in “That Only a Mother” may actually have supernatural verbal skills. Given the baby’s silence during the final scene, however, this seems unlikely. In any event, it is the child’s physical differences, not her verbal acuity, that precipitate the domestic breakdown.

<sup>183</sup> Coincidentally, Merrill’s story also foreshadows the pharmacological effects of the drug thalidomide during the late 1950s. At this time, the drug was marketed to pregnant women as a way of relieving morning sickness. The drug was used for years before finally being linked to teratogenic deformities in more than 10,000 children. Fortunately, due to the fortitude of the young FDA official, Dr. Frances Kelsey, the drug’s effects in the US were significantly reduced and only produced 17 children with thalidomide-related deformities. Kelsey, in her first drug review assignment, rejected Chemie Grunenthal’s application six times due to her concerns about the drug’s safety. Even still, the Richardson-Merrell Company distributed a large number of pills for investigational purposes to pregnant women in the US. For more, see Hornblum et al., *Against Their Will*, pages 204-206.

news. “That Only a Mother” makes repeated references to infanticide committed by other fathers with physically disabled babies and Merrill’s narrative suggests that Hank will do the same. The story ends with Hank’s slow realization of his wife’s pathological denial of the baby’s condition as “his fingers tightened on his child” (152). Hank, it seems, is driven to violence just as Margaret is driven to insanity.

In stark terms, “That Only a Mother” underscores the fragile fantasy of the nuclear family, an icon of middle-class stability and domestic pleasure. Built atop sexist, racist, heterosexist, and ableist foundations, the nuclear family is not an organic biological arrangement but an exacting social construction. “Nuclear Reproduction” demonstrates the weight that this and other Cold War reproductive fictions carried in the American imagination well beyond the 1940s and 1950s. The white nuclear family, the hyper-fertile woman of color, the lazy immigrant mother, and other reproductive images suffused American Cold War culture. In these forms, reproduction, race, and gender together became the means by which unique notions of American nationhood, kinship, and freedom were maintained. To be sure, scholars Elaine Tyler May and Alan Nadel have already explored how the nuclear family “contained” dominant American values that would gird the US against the threats of nuclear attack, Soviet communism, and cultural erosion. But May and Nadel locate domestic containment in the postwar period, whereas my inclusion of the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s reveals that US culture throughout the Cold War relied on normative reproductive ideals to support the dominant narrative of America as a land of democracy, modernity, and conservative morality.

As much as the white, heterosexual, and patriarchal nuclear family model stood in for the American ideals of social harmony, national security, and democratic superiority, the

image of nonwhite reproduction represented the reverse. The bad black mother, the unassimilable Asian migrant, sterile and disappearing Indigenous people, these marked the antithesis of American cultural life. In turn, these figures in speculative fictions helped to shore up ideas about the white and male-dominated American family, national body, and imagined future. As chapter one revealed, the nuclear family was threatened by nuclear weapons as well as social entities that seemed just as destructive, including racial and ethnic minorities, political dissidents, and displaced patriarchs. Speculative fictions translated these wider cultural threats into a form that valorized the family as an institution capable of fending off all social ills—from communists to racial agitators to nuclear bombs. Chapter two showed how popular overpopulation literature and science fiction texts reacted to the so-called threat of Asian immigration. In these works, unmanaged populations and liberalizing immigration policies endangered the US. America's self-conception as a developed nation and a bastion of white-led democracy required tamping down immigration and excessive nonwhite reproduction, even in decidedly ruthless and undemocratic ways. In chapter three, conservative politics founded American futurity and stability on the revival of a white patriarchal order, a call to address Ronald Reagan's alarm about "the breakdown of the family" ("Address...1986" par. 19). At the same time, Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy underscored that human resisters, like ardent Reaganites, touted reproduction-as-sameness, reasserting racial and species divides.

The proliferation of reproductive ideas in the American imagination coincided with material transformations taking place in the US. These transformations changed where families lived, who could legally make up a family, and the perceived safety of all US families. As chapter one showed, the nuclear family marked out the gendered and racial



landscape of the newly erected suburbs, justifying the barriers put up against anyone not white, heterosexual, and middle-class. In the decades following, traced in chapter two, neo-eugenic ideas about the degradation of the US as white nation by mongrel hordes bolstered population control policies in the developing world. The deployment of certain contraceptive measures and the use of coercive sterilization strategies amidst the panic of the so-called “population bomb” hinged on the West’s Orientalist vision of the Third World. Finally, in the 1980s, conservative ideologies and nuclear saber-rattling promoted an image of American strength and family rooted in the white-washed past of the 1950s. Reaganism’s push for postwar traditionalism would find its match, however, in new scientific understandings of the body and the natural world and the development of new reproductive technologies; these advancements exploded not only traditional family values but the fundamental concept of the human. As these chapters show, ideas about reproduction circulating within speculative fictions dovetailed with widespread material and ideological shifts taking place in American social life.

Beyond showing that American Cold War speculative fictions worked within the normative racial and gendered social order, “Nuclear Reproduction” demonstrates that these fictions disrupted the ideals projected about the American family, nation, and future. Alan Nadel has similarly shown that Cold War was full of “dualities, contradictions, and diversities that the rigid social conformity and the political and sexual repression of the late 1940s and 1950s never succeeded in suppressing fully” (Nadel, “Empire” 134). While my dissertation corroborates this finding in the first chapter, it also expands on Nadel’s study. Indeed, the narratives that sought to define America as a white, homogenous, heterosexual, and middle-class nation continued to circulate well into the 1960s through to the 1980s but

also broke down in specific ways. In chapter one, speculative fictions touted domestic containment as a means of protecting the nuclear family from violence and outside threats. At the same time, speculative fictions revealed containment as a flimsy defense, one that operated through potent racist and sexist violence itself. In chapter two, the racialized alarm stoked by overpopulation fictions bolstered the urgency of the US to intervene in nonwhite reproduction at home and abroad and justified the need for top-down population control at the expense of individual reproductive rights. Yet other fictions challenged these drastic measures as a pretext for neo-eugenic and neo-colonial projects against nonwhite subjects. In chapter three, Octavia Butler's fiction proves instrumental in positing an alternative framework for conceptualizing reproduction and the future. In *Xenogenesis*, reproduction eschewed the conservative premises of a stable human subject, an insular family unit, and a strong nation-state. As an alt-human project, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy rejected reproduction-as-sameness for the life-sustaining relationships that cross race and species divides. Rather than an antagonistic us-versus-them thinking, Butler's literary project supports an understanding of "vital alliances"—a disruptive subjectivity and coalition of vitalities that break down the category of the human and support survival. Across these three chapters, speculative fictions use reproduction to define American freedom, the American subject, and the American promise of justice for all, but they also reveal that freedom, subjectivity, and justice were often applied unevenly in the Cold War. By shoring up what it meant to be a free and equal American, these speculative fictions also revealed that America was neither at all times nor for all peoples free or equal.

My dissertation does not privilege a narrow literary genre in analyzing the cultural impacts of reproductive ideas on the American imagination. My project points instead to civil

defense manuals, overpopulation manifestos, and science fiction novels, among other cultural texts. I have limited my analysis to what I call speculative fictions—those texts rooted in the problems of the present that map potential futures. Admittedly, my definition here is vague—for what text does *not* somehow facilitate a relationship between present and future? Yet the term works as a loose way of collecting texts—across literary and non-literary registers—that imagine otherwise. This is not to say that non-speculative texts, like biographies, historical fiction, even family genealogies, do not link reproduction with American values and identity. Speculative fictions, however, are unique in that they do not purport to describe what *is* but to project what *may be*. In this interpretative ambiguity, speculative fictions expose simmering anxieties and subtle transformations taking place in the present moment.

On December 25, 1991, CNN broadcasted live the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet Premier. The speech formally marked the dissolution of the USSR and followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ousting of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe to effectively end the Cold War. Together, these events altered the paradigm of global security that had defined the previous five decades in the span of only a few years. Yet the end of a global geopolitical stalemate and the ascendancy of an international hegemony of American capitalism at the turn of the twenty-first century did not erase the reproductive discourses that had emerged during the Cold War. To put it another way, my dissertation does not end with a clean break in the early 1990s. Reproductive discourses would continue to shape the American imagination and Cold War reproductive figures would continue to circulate in post-Cold War America. One of the most potent and recent examples is in President Trump’s 2018 State of the Union address, in which he touted how his plans for immigration reform “protects the nuclear family by ending chain migration... [in which] a

single immigrant can bring in unlimited numbers of distant relatives” (Trump, par. 70).

Overlooking his muddled understanding of US immigration law, Trump defends a punitive immigration policy by simultaneously valorizing the presumed white nuclear family and demonizing as excessive and threatening immigrant families.<sup>184</sup> As such, Trump’s use of race, gender, and reproduction is more consistent with historical practice than it is an aberration. Clearly, reproduction still matters in American discourse.

While not an anomaly, the Cold War period does mark a unique context in which reproductive ideas shaped definitions of American freedom, the ideal American family, the makeup of the nation, and the prospects for the future. Although these definitions would continue to change throughout the Cold War and in the decades succeeding it, the concepts of freedom, family, nation, and future themselves remain stable fixtures of the American cultural landscape.

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<sup>184</sup> Far from allowing immigrants to bring in “unlimited numbers of distant relatives,” the current family reunification immigration system allows green card holders or legal residents to bring over their spouses and their minor children. After achieving citizenship, these petitioners can apply to bring over parents, married children, and adult siblings. While the current system does not set limits on how many spouses and minor children of parents a legal immigrant can bring in, it sets caps on married children and adult siblings. (Burnett).

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