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HISTORY AND ITS OTHERS IN AFROFUTURISM

The first words we hear in the 1973 film *Space Is the Place*, starring avant-garde jazz musician Sun Ra, who is nowadays considered a major forerunner of the type of Afro-American speculative fiction and artistry called Afrofuturism, are: “It’s after the end of the world! Don’t you know that yet?” In the scene that immediately follows, as Sun Ra ruminates on founding a colony for black people in outer space, he announces that “Equation-wise, the first thing to do is consider time as officially ended.” The sense of estrangement from official history evident here is endemic to Afrofuturist fiction, which responds to the position of an enslaved, silenced, subaltern Other within the history of the US by constructing various strategic discontinuities with historical time. The project of naming and identifying Afrofuturism had to do in its founding moment with claiming a place in the cultural present for a group whose history has been systematically distorted or erased and whose future has been scripted predominantly in terms of the disappearance of their specific cultural identity into that of the dominant, white society. During one of the interviews conducted by Mark Dery that established Afrofuturism as a critical term, science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany argues that Afro-Americans have been

impoverished in terms of future images (...) because, until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past. I have no idea where, in Africa, my black ancestors came from because, when they reached the markets of New Orleans, records of such things were systematically destroyed. If they spoke their own languages, they were beaten or killed. (...) [E]very effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of what might endure as African social consciousness. When, indeed, we say that this country was founded on slavery, we must remember that we mean, specifically, that it was founded on the systematic, conscientious, and massive destruction of African cultural remnants. (Dery 747)

If Afrofuturism operates, as Sun Ra proclaims, within a post-apocalyptic present, it is because of the process of obliteration described by Delany.¹

In *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra lands a music-powered spaceship in Oakland, California, parodying scenes of extraterrestrial invasion in 1950s SF films and echoing the benevolent but failed invasion of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Zuberi 87). In Oakland he recruits passengers who wish to embark with him upon an “alter

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¹ This essay incorporates with minor revision substantial portions of the following by John Rieder: “Science Fiction, Colonialism, and the Plot of Invasion,” *Extrapolation*, 46.3 (2005): 373-394; “Sun Ra’s Otherworldliness,” *Africa SF*, edited by Mark Bould, *Paradoxa* No. 25 (2013): 235-52; “Science Fiction, Colonialism, and Postcolonialism,” *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, edited by Rob Latham, Oxford UP, 2014: 486-97; and *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press, 2017. The final pages of the essay present observations on speculative fiction and social justice that develop from Cristina Bacchilega’s experience of the symposium “Creating Futures Rooted in Wonder” and her thoughts on wonder genres in *Fairy Tales Transformed? 21st-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (2013).



destiny”—by which Sun Ra means to exit history as heretofore written, to plunge into the abyss opened up by embracing his wildly syncretic, neo-Egyptian version of myth in favor of what passes for reality on “planet Earth” (aka America). Several of Ra’s best critics have noted the similarities between Ra’s use of outer space in his poetry and lyrics and the figures of otherworldly destination found in the Baptist sermon tradition and in spirituals like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” or “This World is Not My Home” (Lock 26-32, Szwed 260-61). The film *Space Is the Place* works out the implications of the outer space destination at length. Ra’s music-powered space vehicle stands for the power of the music to transport its listeners into another world, an ambition announced at the beginning of the film as the establishment of an extraterrestrial colony where black people will be able to “see what they can do on a planet all their own, without any white people there.” The opening chant announces, then, that it is time to let go of the catastrophic history that, according to Sun Ra, determines the African American present as a realm of non-identity and non-reality. Thus Sun Ra attempts to systematically reverse the historical meaning of “transportation” as abduction into slavery.

Space Is the Place does not elaborate the contradictions of hegemonic American ideology but rather explores the contradictions and the internal struggle of the Black community. Unlike most science fiction invasion narratives, there is nothing imaginary in this film about being colonized, subjugated, and alienated. The dilemma acted out in the contest the film stages between Sun Ra (played by himself) and the worldly wise, cynical black hustler and pimp named the Overseer (Ray Johnson) concerns whether to accept the degraded status and limited possibilities offered by the dominant culture, or to reject them, and this boils down in good measure to the question of whether such a choice is even available. The film works on this question by appropriating and recoding the optimistic ideologies of progress associated with SF’s boundless frontier of outer space, trashing those ideologies’ linear temporality in favor of an extravagant marriage of mythic past and SF future. The figure of transportation in the film is finally about exiting from a version of business as usual that denies the possibility of dignity and hope for black Americans. Working from the exclusions and constrictions America imposes upon its internal subaltern communities, *Space Is the Place* tries to galvanize hope in opposition not simply to the dominant white society but, even more insistently, to the despair and cynicism the history of race relations in the US bequeaths to its heirs.

Bringing a post-nuclear-holocaust humanity back from the dead, while simultaneously obliterating its past and imposing upon it a radically new identity, is the plot of Octavia Butler’s great *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-89; renamed *Lilith’s Brood* in 2000). In it alien settlers who plausibly see themselves as mankind’s saviors present a doomed indigenous humankind with the stark alternative of giving up human identity or simply becoming extinct, and the planet itself is not only occupied but literally consumed and reconstructed in the mold of the aliens’ civilizing but genocidal mission—so that the planet Earth itself is either redeemed from humanity’s self-destructive folly by their assimilation to a higher civilization, or turned into the ultimate mining site, depending on how you look at it. Butler’s point of departure is close to Sun Ra’s—the self-destruction of the human world by its own inherent contradictions. In a disturbingly authoritative kind of scientific racism, Butler’s Oankali invaders insist that these contradictions are genetically determined, maintaining that human intelligence is intrinsically self-destructive because of its fatal evolutionary bond with hierarchical behavior. But this Oankali dogma is suspiciously convenient for a race that has its own designs premised on the status of human genetic structure as a kind of exploitable, and extremely valuable, natural resource.

One must resist identifying the aliens’ self-serving sociobiology with Butler’s authorial position, then. Cathy Peppers argues that *Lilith’s Brood* constitutes a “‘cyborg’ origin story” (Peppers 47) that sets up a dialogue among several quite different discourses about origins: the Biblical creation myth, the discourses of sociobiology and paleoanthropology, and the narrative of the African slave trade and diaspora. The net effect is to corrode the authority of the Biblical and scientific discourses by bringing it into contact with holocaustal colonial history. Instead of following the Oankali’s deterministic reading of the “human contradiction,” then, Peppers’ reading suggests Butler’s genetics are part of a *genealogical* strategy in the sense articulated by Foucault—a critical use of history to assault belief in unitary origins or essentialist, non-permeable identities. The contradiction between hierarchy and intelligence might then suggest a social and historical contradiction like the one within capitalism between the competitive, quantifying, reifying drive of the imperative for profit and the socializing, cooperative tendencies of commerce and the division of labor. Perhaps more to the



point, however, that undermining of fundamental binary oppositions between humans and animals and between organisms and machines that first led Donna Haraway to connect Butler's work with "cyborg" identity (Haraway 179) is inseparable, in *Lilith's Brood*, from its sustained references to the history of slavery, a practice that rests on stripping away from certain individuals those privileged categories of the human and the organism in relation to the animal and the machine. A genealogical reading of the post-apocalyptic setting of *Lilith's Brood* directs us not to "nature" as a theoretical *tabula rasa* or as an essentialist physical framework but rather to the invasion of Africa by the capitalist slave trade and to the construction of a New World on its basis.

Butler's most intimate and extended treatment of American slavery comes in the novel *Kindred* (1979). Here the sense of living in a post-apocalyptic present is not explicitly announced. Instead the plot centers upon an African-American woman, Dana Franklin, who finds herself detached from linear time, inexplicably ripped out of her present-day world and thrust into a radically strange one, an antebellum Maryland slave-owning plantation. Like many other extraordinary voyages, Dana's journey drives toward the traveler's discovery of a true self, but the entire affective and conceptual thrust of the narrative moves, not toward the heroic status often enjoyed by science fictional adventurers and explorers, but rather toward dramatizing the black female subject's agonizing confrontation with the brute realities of her inhuman past. *Kindred* loads every rift of Dana Franklin's nightmarish "contact zone" with the task of realizing—and rendering intimate—the affective and ideological difficulty of coming to grips with America's racial history. The unwilling time traveler Dana Franklin finds herself forced to live as a slave alongside her own ancestors, to endure the unsanitary conditions and horrifying medical practices of the early-nineteenth-century American South, to confront the reality that she has no control over her own life, to recognize that arbitrary violence can be visited upon her by any white person without justification, and finally to kill her white slave-owning great-great-great-grandfather in order to prevent him from raping her. She pays for this last act by finding that, upon her return to the present, the very arm that freed her from her ancestral tormentor is embedded in the wall of her house, and she can only achieve some degree of separation from the familial and racial legacies of violence and objectification that form the infrastructure of her present by literally ripping herself free of her history's grasp, nearly killing herself in the process. Perhaps Butler is suggesting how agonizing a price the contemporary Afro-American woman must be willing to pay in order to attain the "detachment" of a subject of knowledge, and so put herself in the position of being able to speak for and about her history rather than allowing it to dictate the status conventionally granted her.

One of the most remarkable Afrofuturist narratives of recent years, Andrea Hairston's premier novel, *Mindscape* (2006), is set in a world that is decisively separated from its past by the invasion of a mysterious extraterrestrial entity called the Barrier. The Barrier, "a blood red cloud of unknown material overwhelming Earth," erupts "out of nothing, out of nowhere (. . .) breaking apart land and sea, night and day, yesterday and every other tomorrow" (4). It divides the earth into three "inhabited Zones" that have severely limited contact with one another—acting like a "prison wall," according to some, but like "a blessing for the chosen and a curse for the damned," according to others (4). The question Hairston's narrative premise sets up, then, is whether the world is to be "consumed, rearranged, and forgotten in the pattern of some other being" or whether "this phenomenon will defy humanity to create a new language, a new syntax of life" (5). In short, Hairston's Barrier invasion constitutes the imposition of a new frontier, a new disposition of space and boundaries dividing what was from what is and can be, and forcing those in its "zones" to redefine themselves in relation both to one another and to their lost pasts and possible futures.

The way that Hairston carries through on this narrative premise has much to do with her success at situating her narrative at the juncture of the traumatic Afro-American and Native American histories of colonial encounter with Europe. The three Zones in *Mindscape* turn out to correspond roughly to the three points of the triangular slave trade route between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. In each case Hairston invests that historical location with a significance based upon its contemporary relationship to the traumatic past. Paradigm is the neo-European zone that is identified, in the words of its Prime Minister, with the co-dependence and practical equivalency of "Civilization, democracy, free market, science" (190). New Ougadougou is a neo-African Zone inhabited by a society that calls itself Healers, promoting social welfare



and spiritual traditions in opposition to the corporate profit motives and militaristic state policies of Paradigma. The third and most bizarre Zone is Los Santos, a neo-Hollywood in which the entertainment industry has become a form of organized crime.

Most of the story has to do with the protagonists' battling against a conspiracy among leaders of all three Zones to undermine a recent Treaty reached among the three Zones—a conspiracy that Paradigma's leaders see as a way to take over the world for capitalism and democracy, Los Santos's leaders as a way to get back to business as usual, and New Ougadougou's as a way to isolate themselves from the moral and social contamination they see spreading from the "warrior Zones" to their own. At the heart of this struggle lies the issue of cultural power over the narratives that lay the basis for national, ethnic, and personal identities in the ability to connect the past to the future. A speech laying out the rationale for the New Ougadougian isolationist opposition to the interzonal treaty sets the stakes:

To bring an alien culture to its knees, you steal the natives' stories and fill them with lies. You desecrate sacred symbols and replace ancestral wisdom with your story of the world. You obsess the benighted natives with being like you, until finally they forget themselves and become like you. Why waste bullets when a cultural bomb will do? Stealing the future is an old story, a universal cliché. (213)

Even though this character's fear of cultural contamination ultimately turns out to be misguided, and she herself becomes the principal actor in using the Barrier as a means of unifying rather than separating the Zones and their inhabitants, her analysis of the power of culture to orient desire is right on the mark.

The climax of the story comes at Wounded Knee, where various rebel groups perform a re-enactment of the nineteenth century American Indian uprising known as the Ghost Dance. Their efforts produce a veritable resurrection of the dead that radically reconfigures both the Barrier and the relation of the present to the past and the future. Here is how one character describes this momentous event:

Right before the new corridors opened, all these people (...) people we carry around in our heads, showed up like a waking dream, ghosting across the Barrier, talking up a storm. Nobody could understand what they were saying, it was like in code. I thought the dead would have big things to tell us. But they just got bigger and bigger 'til you couldn't make them out, scattering off in every direction, and the Barrier broke open. Corridors to everywhere, everyone welcome. (435, ellipsis in text)

Thus the Barrier does finally become a familiar type of science fictional frontier, "corridors to everywhere, everyone welcome." But Hairston's "final frontier" is not an empty space waiting to be conquered; it is instead "an invitation to the future" (430) issued by undoing the repression of the traumatic past. Her rising of the dead is not a Day of Judgment, calling all the past's sinners to account, but rather a release of the past from its pathological concealment, allowing its former ghostliness and incomprehensibility to dissipate into a transparent atmosphere of new possibilities. The portent of revelation—"I thought the dead would have big things to tell us"—gives way to the simple freedom to choose one's path. Thus Hairston, like many of the best science fiction writers before her, knows that in any borderland or contact zone, there are always two sides to any story, and exploring the radical differences between those two sides is the heart of the adventure.

But the present is still dominated by institutionalized violence against Blacks in the United States, and the 2015 anthology *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* co-edited by Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha has made a more direct if not closer connection between science fiction and political activism. When asked "Why science fiction?" one of the co-editors of *Octavia's Brood*, Black writer, educator, and spoken word artist Imarisha, answered:



Science fiction (...) not only allows you to disregard everything that we're taught is realistic and practical, but actually demands that you do. So it allows us to move beyond the bounds of what is realistic and what is real, into the realm of the imagination. That is actually something that organizers do every single day. All organizing is science fiction. When organizers imagine a world without poverty, without war, without borders or prisons—that's science fiction. They're moving beyond the boundaries of what is possible or realistic, into the realm of what we are told is impossible. Being able to collectively dream those new worlds means that we can begin to create those new worlds here. (Williams)

Rather than characterizing science fiction as simply utopian or dystopian, Imarisha and her Detroit-based co-editor, Black SF writer and scholar Adrienne Maree Brown focus on the genre as *visionary* and, seeking to honor Octavia Butler's legacy, identify science fiction as fundamentally welcoming to the perspective of people of color and at its core as terrifyingly realistic and yet hopeful. In the final part of this paper, we want to briefly identify two aspects of the work of *Octavia's Brood* that speak to the current practice and the promise of Afrofuturism as visionary.

First, the call for writing the stories to be included in *Octavia's Brood* was directed at political organizers and activists of color who “root themselves in the idea of building new worlds” and see the complexities of this building through their experiences “on the ground, organizing, (...) go[ing] to protests, (...) fac[ing] down the police, (...) hold[ing] the family members of people who have experienced police violence” (Williams). The collection includes established professional writers such as Tananarive Due, but for the most part it features social justice activists and organizers who are, as the editors see it, already writers of science fiction because “whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in an exercise of speculative fiction” (Imarisha, “Introduction” 3). When choosing the qualifiers “speculative” and “visionary” fiction to identify narratives that critique social injustice and invite us to “make the impossible possible” as Afro-Caribbean-Canadian speculative fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson put it, Imarisha also acknowledges that—based on what is included in *Octavia's Brood*—this activist and creative space extends to all genres of the fantastic, urging that not only science fiction, but also genres like horror, wonder tales, and magic realism can be deployed to decolonize the imagination.

Second, the publication of the book has been an occasion for organizing workshops across the USA that bring together organizing and writing strategies: these are visionary-justice writing workshops where people, especially young people, are encouraged to collectively envision new worlds by thinking not through a single issue of oppression, but intersectionally—new worlds where justice at all levels would be a reality for people of color and the colonized more generally. We both participated in such workshops run by Walidah Imarisha and also by Hawaiian scholar and activist Noelani Goodyear-Ka'opua during a symposium held in Hawai'i last September (“Creating Futures Rooted in Wonder”²), and we experienced firsthand how this futuristic thinking is based on returning to history as a “visionary past.” Writing about her and Brown's experience, Imarisha asserts:

we know that we are living science fiction. We are the dreams of enslaved Black folks, who were told it was ‘unrealistic’ to imagine a day when they were not called property. Those Black people refused to confine their dreams to realism, and instead they dreamed us up. Then they bent reality, reshaped the world, to create us. (“Rewriting the Future”)

² This library archive (<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/39998>) site hosts video clips of individual talks/presentation, clips from the creative writing performance night, as well as a number of handouts from the symposium workshops, including: Visionary Fiction Writing Activity, Decolonial Futures Activity, and Sustainable Futures Scenarios. Scholarship that was briefly introduced at the symposium has appeared in the “Rooted in Wonder: Tales of Indigenous Activism and Community Organizing” special issue of *Marvels and Tales* (30.1), 2016 (<http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/marvels/>) and in the special issue of *Extrapolation* (57.1-2), 2016, Indigenous Futurisms (<http://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/toc/extr/57/1-2>).



In the workshops, facilitators and participants turned back to the knowledges that Black, and/or Hawaiian, ancestors brought to interacting with family, land, crime, and state power in order to imagine future social arrangements and solutions to current problems, solutions that are not available in the context of heteropatriarchal white capitalism and the politics of assimilation. This process of co-creation makes workshop participants of color and other marginalized groups into writers of the future and agents of history in the making. It also helps to imagine and sustain new alliances that allow settlers like us to learn from and with those whom mainstream US culture and media continue to see as disposable or in need of assimilation.

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