

Black Cyborgs: Blackness Narratives in Technology, Speculative Fiction, and Digital
Cultures

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother: Dr. Rhonda Naomi Simpson, Black nerd
extraordinaire, 1956-2018

Abstract

This project draws from the deep well of Black science fiction, original interviews with Black science fiction authors, and popular media case studies and analysis to generate new discourses about Black people and technology. Exploring the ways Black people have taken up both science fiction and technology, I argue that Black feminist thinkers can use both as blueprints for survival, joy, and community-building. Seeking to find strategies for effective communication within our shared political and technosocial lives, this project advances speculative fiction and cyborg theory as dynamic tools which we must utilize to build the future of feminist studies, Black studies, and digital political organizing. Beginning with Donna Haraway's essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," and expanding to recent explorations of the cyborg from women of color theorists like Joy James and Jasbir Puar, I situate Black feminist cyborgs in the current field of feminist cyborg theory. I offer a "part-time" Black feminist cyborg theory, a practical aesthetic which aids Black people's movement and theorizing in digital spaces, chronicled by hashtags and characterized by the fast-paced nature of digital communication. To illustrate the possibilities of such an aesthetic, I engage Chicana philosopher Maria Lugones' theory of traveling to the metaphorical "worlds" of other women. I extend her work, envisioning a part-time Black feminist cyborg optimized for travel to and through the digital worlds of social media like Facebook and Twitter, asking how Black people arrive in these worlds and what they experience once there. Illuminating a tradition of technological engagement by Black communities and calling attention to dreams of futures free of oppression, my

interdisciplinary project shapes the future directions of Black feminist theory, digital organizing, and political resistance to entrenched and renewed white supremacy.

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Introduction: Blueprints for Black Futures

My father is a retired architectural engineer. I grew up watching him design and execute



Figure 1: Gunn-Simpson Family Home, Corvallis, OR (before)



Figure 2: Gunn-Simpson Family Home, Corvallis, OR (after)

different projects, from furniture to complex buildings. The materials varied: pre-cast concrete bridges peppered throughout the Pacific Northwest, cherry wood Shaker-style end tables for my first apartment, salvaged tile and stone throughout my childhood home. Sketching by hand or on design software downloaded onto thick, heavy laptops, he could see elegance in all of the math and calculations long before that elegance revealed itself to other people. Once, my mother and I returned home to our fireplace completely destroyed, crumbled brick covering the floor. His face was a mixture of chagrin and determination as he insisted that we would understand once he rebuilt it, because he had a plan, he had a vision, it would be worth it, not to worry.

As with most of his plans, he was redeemed. Dad was meticulous and detailed. He never lost sight of the idea that the things he designed would be materialized, trusted to

be both safe and beautiful. Before I was able to step into the houses or travel across the bridges he designed, he had a plan for them. Blueprints, plotted carefully and pored over, translated what was in his mind and provided instructions for bringing it into the world.

With his planning and forethought bound up with creativity and vision, it is no wonder that my father is also an avid speculative fiction and science fiction fan. Often, the terms “science fiction” and “speculative fiction” are used interchangeably. However, the implications and histories of the label for each genre are different. Hugo Gernsback, the pioneer of the original science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories*, proposed “scientifiction” before landing on the more streamlined “science fiction.”¹ This genre covers all things in the scientific imaginary, from space and time travel, aliens on distant planets, parallel universes ranging from the mundane to the unrecognizable. In the 1978 preface to Black, queer science fiction author Samuel Delany’s book of essays *The Jewel Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, Delany describes “speculative fiction” as a term largely active between 1964 and 1972.² The term has since come back into fashion to describe both the writing and practice of speculating about other worlds, futures, and ways of being. In this project, I use it as an umbrella term for the literary genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and magical realism, and as an accurate description of what we do within those genres: speculate. The blueprints that covered my father’s office floor were not unlike the books on his shelves: classic science fiction writers like Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein (though he would like any readers to be

¹ For more details of this term’s emergence and other ways Gernsback’s legacy has shaped the science fiction genre, see: Gary Westfahl, *Hugo Gernsback and the Century of Science Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007)

² Samuel R. Delany, *The Jewel Hinged Jaw* p. ix (London: Gateway, 2013)

aware that he is not a fan of Heinlein's most famous work, *Stranger in a Strange Land*), and H.G. Wells. Their exploratory early works solidified them as some of the most prolific names in the science fiction canon.

Though Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* is often cited as the first great work in the science fiction genre³, the books on my father's shelf were more representative of what is considered the "Golden Age of Science Fiction": the period from the early 1930s extending to about 1950.⁴ These works, usually published in stages in magazines like *Astounding Stories of Super-Science* under the editorial guidance of John W. Campbell, as well as the aforementioned Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, are characterized by narratives which depict and often exalt scientific and technological advancement. While I have deep respect for these works which so often introduce and draw fans to the science fiction genre, the attitudes with which they were written come under much scrutiny in this project. Glossy, nostalgic depictions of science fiction's "Golden Age" do not reflect the modern reputation of speculative fiction, particularly science fiction, as a whole.

A basic tenet of speculative fiction is to create alternative futures; yet despite this goal, the genre is dominated by white and masculine ideas about the future and technology, visions that often involve dominance over nature and worlds and which

³ Brian Stableford, "Frankenstein and the Origins of Science Fiction" From *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and its Precursors*, ed. David Seed (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 46-57.

⁴ Michael Ashley's *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine* book series extensively chronicles the history of science fiction's "Golden Age" in both the UK and the United States. For detailed information about the explosive period between 1946-1955, see Michael Ashley "From Bomb to Boom" in *The History of the Science Fiction Magazine*. Vol. 3. Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1977. pp. 13-109.

maintain existing structures of patriarchy, colonialism, and racism.⁵ These narratives filter into popular culture, producing broader cultural fictions that limit our imagination of possible futures and the technological innovations producing those futures, crafting them in line with the interests and investments of white men. This generic dominance erases women and people of color except to employ them as tools, and it specifically occludes Black people's stories and experiences with technology, ejecting them from imagined futures entirely.

The technical, science-driven stories from authors like Asimov, Heinlein, and Dick tend to be framed as intellectually superior to the "soft" science fiction frequently written by women and/or people of color, which presents a different set of priorities and a people-forward approach.⁶ The feminist science fiction movement, whose "Golden Age" I attribute to the period between 1969 and 1980, saw critical contributions from prominent authors like Ursula LeGuin, Joanna Russ, Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delany. This movement produced a flurry of fiction engaging with topics deemed frivolous and distracting by white supremacy and patriarchy: culture, conflict without the dominance of technological warfare, gender, sexuality, race, and social oppression.⁷ This project works to undermine those assumptions and re-characterize Black feminist speculative fiction as

⁵ For an assessment of the alienation of Black people from science fiction and its negative effect on the genre, see: Charles R. Saunders "Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction" in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. p. 398. Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition.

⁶ For more on the limitless nature of science fiction in tension with the limits imposed on Black writers by racism in the genre, see: Walter Mosely, "Black to the Future" in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (p. 406). Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition.

⁷ For more on the emergence and content of the feminist science fiction movement, see: Helen Merrick, "Birth of a Sub-Genre: Feminist SF and its Criticism" in *The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2009)

a generative, culturally-informed social justice tool with the ability to challenge and drive out the dominating ego-driven tales of war and whiteness in science fiction. Stories and essays from pioneers Butler and Delany, alongside words from the authors I have interviewed for this project, are woven throughout the chapters and applied as models to elucidate the workings of the tool of Black speculative fiction.

While understanding these literary traditions is fundamental for understanding the motivations, history, and development of the genre, the entry point for many— maybe even most—fans is through visual mediums. Film and television have reproduced science fiction texts for broader audiences and produced some of the most important and recognizable stories of our generation. This dissertation explores many of these, from *Star Trek*, to HBO's series *Westworld* and proposed series *Confederate* and Janelle Monae's long-form music video *Dirty Computer*. These examples from the genre provide vital space for imagining and planning the futures we want, sketches of our anxieties and desires as people.

Interviews: When Lab Rats Do the Writing

Speculative thought and writing are generative playgrounds for resistance. Crafting imagined worlds that seem like impossible dreams of liberation, Black speculative fiction authors make connections between distant, hopeful possibilities and sociopolitical realities, shaping our understanding of race and technology and how they re-create and reinforce one another. The concepts of experimentation and practice were stressed repeatedly in my interviews with Black speculative fiction authors: Walidah Imarisha calls speculative fiction a “laboratory” in which Black people can experiment with

different methods and modes of resistance without the potentially deadly consequences of failed experimentation in the real world. LaShawn Wanak comments on writing speculative fiction as a means to work through political traumas and resist the silencing nature of oppression. adrienne maree brown reminded me that writing is a light that pulls herself and others forward when she must contend with “deep species-level depression and fear.” Perhaps the interview which most struck at the heart of the suffocating whiteness of the science fiction genre was my conversation with Jennifer Cross, where we worked together to articulate the power of Black employment of the speculative as a tool:

Jennifer Cross: So, specifically from popular fiction, I think unfortunately popular [science] fiction still has this idea that Black bodies are lab rats.

Caitlin: Lab rats?

Jennifer Cross: For technological advances. And Western history is pervasive with this: we have Sarah Baartman, we have the Tuskegee experiments, we have Henrietta Lacks, I mean *fuck* that HBO movie for centering that movie around a white woman?!

Caitlin: What the hell? The least interesting aspect of the story and we had to—okay.

Jennifer Cross: Renée Elise Goldsberry deserved better. I mean, she deserved better than that fuck-ass script. Henrietta Lacks so much deserved better. And that’s how I feel that popular culture sees Black people in real life and in the media. Which is why I have—so I took the Tempest Challenge⁸ in 2016 and the Tempest Challenge is simply try to go a full

⁸ The “Tempest Challenge” refers to Tempest Bradford, speculative fiction author and technology journalist who is a long time attendee and organizer at WisCon. An interview passage will further explicate

year without reading a cis-het white male author⁹. It is now 2017. I still have not read a cis het white male author. Because frankly, I'm getting tired of us through their lens. I wanna see more of us through our own lenses. And I feel like when we see more of us through our own lenses, we get a more realistic portrayal of our relationship with technology. And society, as far as technology is not only used, but how technology has advanced society.

Caitlin: Yeah, one of the notes I just scribbled down when you were talking is, “what happens when the lab rats do the writing?”

“What happens when the lab rats do the writing?” is a guiding question of this project, which posits that there is a necessary and radical perspective shift required to view Black speculative fiction as resistance. This recognition credits the people who do this work and building a citational practice that honors Black feminist thinkers. In this political landscape that can cast Black liberation as a doomed pursuit, radical speculation from the Black imagination urgently amplifies the availability and effectiveness of this tool and supports its regular and ongoing use in Black life and liberation struggles.

Finding experts in radical speculation was the catalyst to bringing my research agenda forward. My interview participants are Black women, often queer Black women, whose writing and wisdoms are extremely valuable. Their participation in this work is an example of generosity within this particular community. Without exception, they all took time out of their lives to sit down with, Skype with, or instant message with a stranger so

the nature and origins of the “Tempest Challenge.”

⁹ “Cis” refers to cisgender, an identity marker that signals that one’s gender presentation, gender identity, and biological sex markers are aligned as male or female. This term is used to delineate from trans, nonbinary, genderqueer or genderfluid individuals.

that I could record and analyze their words. This labor was completely unpaid. Not only were they willing to sacrifice time, they were willing to trust me to represent them authentically and ethically. Their trust is particularly meaningful given that I come from inside academia, which has routinely stolen from, profited from, discredited, and undermined the work of Black women writers and artists. However, in bringing powerful Black feminist voices in speculative fiction together in conversation about Blackness, technology, and the political power of speculative thought and language, I bridge not only the divide I have identified between Black speculative fiction and digital Blackness studies, but also the tendency to marginalize non-academic writers and thinkers, particularly those invested in genre fiction.

Participant Biographical Information

Each author with whom I spoke had written stories or books that push the boundaries of our understanding of technology. Defining and re-defining technology was a critical theme in their interview responses. Some authors critiqued the pervasive white and Western notions of technology that have historically excluded and minimized the contributions and innovation of Black people. Many of them eagerly shared details of their projects, both completed and in progress, which feature technology in some capacity. Topics ranged from bio-hacking in the midst of a resurgence of Black slavery in the United States (Imarisha), Black women challenging and capitulating to narratives of Black death by selling years of their lives in exchange for technology enabling communication with loved ones who have died (Bradford), Black, code-savvy girls hacking their way into the universe as we know it, (Cross), futures wherein “technology

is invisible or inside of us, cyborgish, enhancements” (brown), young adult novels in which Black people have a virtual reality Wakandan-inspired refuge from the harsh realities of a white supremacist world (Morris), and futures where we can move our entire lived experiences into digital space without relinquishing our identities (Wanak). These creative, timely, and involved projects reveal how Black feminist science fiction writers repeatedly engage with the most currently and politically pressing topics related to technology. Below, their biographical information is presented to help contextualize their interviews with me and to provide background for readers, particularly readers from Black feminist studies who are less familiar or comfortable with speculative fiction.

Jennifer Cross

I interviewed Jennifer Cross at WisCon 41 in 2017 after she moderated and spoke on a popular panel called “#StopWhiteFeminismTM.” Cross is a queer Black feminist science fiction writer and a regular, vocal force at WisCon. In her primary role, Cross leads and organizes Just Write Chicago, an inclusive writing group—the largest of its kind in the city. Her work engages primarily with cyberpunk dystopian fiction and commentary on race and representation in writing. Her work can be found in *Invisible 3: Poems and Personal Essays about Representation in Science Fiction and Fantasy* where her essay “The Zeroth Law of Sex in Science Fiction” is featured, and the *Queers Destroy Science Fiction!* Special Issue 61 of *Lightspeed Magazine* where her short story “We’ve Made it to... Magrathea?” is published.

An introduction from a former professor, Darrah Chavey, resulted in my interview with Cross—the first I conducted for this project. With the two of us nestled in chairs on a

quiet floor of the Madison Concourse Hotel, our conversation was fun, fast-paced, and exploratory, fed by my eagerness to begin my project and her rush of energy from her panel on white feminism.

K. Tempest Bradford

Tempest is a queer Black writer known for her fiction and her work in technology journalism. When I sat down to interview her at WisCon 42 in 2018, she was returning from a trip to Egypt to research her upcoming steampunk novel.

I deliberately sought Bradford for an interview after other participants noted their adoption of her “Tempest Challenge.” In 2015, K. Tempest wrote an article for *xoJane*, imploring readers to read fiction from authors who identify as something other than straight, white, cisgender men. The challenge was met with a dynamic response, which she described to me and will be included in a later chapter.

adrienne maree brown

adrienne maree brown is co-editor of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015). I introduced brown when she came to the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities as part of the Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies colloquium series in February of 2017. She guided students and faculty through a speculative fiction direct action planning workshop, designed to teach us how to implement lessons from speculative fiction into our activist efforts by positioning ourselves as marginalized groups advocating for change within popular fictional stories.

Her work spans across discipline and mode: she is a doula, artist, activist, singer, and speculative fiction writer and scholar. She and her sister, Autumn Brown, host a popular

podcast called “How to Survive the End of the World.” Her newest book, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, was released in March of 2019. I draw heavily from her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017) in this project, as it works through the application of speculative language and concepts to revolutionary activism and Black feminist politics. *Emergent Strategy* provides a method for identifying and utilizing patterns in our social justice communities and efforts, from the smallest interactions to large-scale movements. brown granted an interview in the form of written responses to my questions in October 2017.

LaShawn M. Wanak

LaShawn M. Wanak is, in my estimation, an up-and-coming author in Black speculative writing. I interviewed her during WisCon 41 in 2017. Her fiction appears in *Uncanny* magazine, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*.

Wanak writes from a rich place of resisting monolith, prioritizing the wealth and variety of Black stories and experiences. She says of Black speculative fiction authors: “We’re writing works that tell stories that have always been told, to show that Black Lives truly do Matter, that we are more than one-notes with just a single story. That we are deep and complex and diverse.”¹⁰

I was particularly interested in her short story “She’s All Light,” published in *Daybreak Magazine* in 2010. Her story features two Black women responding to a decision one of them has made to abandon her biological form and upload her consciousness into a digital avatar. I explore the story and its implications for this

¹⁰ LaShawn Wanak, “Learning to Turn Your Lips Sideways,” *Uncanny Magazine*, 2017, <https://uncannymagazine.com/article/learning-turn-lips-sideways/>

dissertation's focus on how Black bodies encounter technology in more detail in the beginning of chapter 4.

Brittney M. Morris

Brittney Morris is, along with adrienne maree brown, the only other participant in my project I did not meet through WisCon. I met Morris when we were children, growing up in a small, very white town in Western Oregon. Bonded by this experience, we have stayed in touch long after we both moved away from the area.

Morris has always been an avid writer, and her debut young adult science fiction novel, *SLAY*, was released in September of 2019 to positive reviews from readers and critics, from *People Magazine* to *Refinery29*. According to *Entertainment Weekly*, “There are a few things we can tell you about this debut: *Slay* was acquired in a heated auction that featured interest from each of the ‘big five’ publishers, and already, more than 20 queries from TV and movie studios have come in for screen rights.”¹¹ The book follows the story of Kiera, a Black high school student who has secretly designed and coded a massive multiplayer online game for Black people. The world of Wakanda from Marvel’s *Black Panther* inspired the game’s setting, where players work to best their opponents in a dueling activity in which elements of Black culture are used in tandem with physical motions translated through virtual reality equipment. Kiera’s game is threatened when shortly after a game-related shooting takes the existence of *SLAY* public, white intruders

¹¹David Canfield, “Preview ‘Slay,’ the YA Debut We’re Most Excited for This Year,” *EW.com* (Entertainment Weekly, March 6, 2019), <https://ew.com/books/2019/03/06/slay-brittney-morris-book-cover-excerpt/>

attempt to take the game from Kiera and undermine the intent of creating a safe, virtual world for Black people.

I read the novel's synopsis and connected Morris' work to the themes of this project: the nature of Blackness and Black identity in intangible digital spaces, Black digital discourse, and the often-minimized technological ingenuity of Black people. *SLAY*'s emphasis on technology and Black virtual communities, as well as my desire to include an author of young adult fiction in this project, led me to inquire about an interview through Morris' agent. We spoke via video chat in December of 2018. Though her book had not yet been released, I was able to have a thorough, inspirational conversation with Morris, who has positive energy in spades. This energy is ideal for channeling into YA novels on critical and controversial topics: *SLAY* never feels bleak or despairing about Black life or death, even as her characters struggle to understand and better the world around them.

Of particular interest was her description of the process of pitching *SLAY*, which was initiated as part of a recurring Twitter competition to connect authors with agents and publishers.

Walidah Imarisha

When I met Walidah Imarisha at WisCon 40 in 2016, I spent much of my energy trying not to appear the overzealous fan. Her 2015 "visionary fiction" anthology, *Octavia's Brood*, co-edited with adrienne maree brown, launched her to the top of the list of noteworthy Black speculative fiction authors and theorists. Apart from her extensive work in speculative fiction and her expertise on the life and writing of author Octavia

Butler, she is a well-respected speaker and prison abolition activist in Oregon, where I grew up. Imarisha was scheduled to speak on several panels related to Octavia Butler over the course of the weekend, but she also made time to attend the panel on Afrofuturism and feminism where I presented work on cyborg theory and its potential gifts to Black feminism. In addition to her work on *Octavia's Brood*, Imarisha is also the editor of the anthology *Another World is Possible: Conversations in a Time of Terror* (2002), the author of a non-fiction book *Angels with Dirty Faces: Three Stories of Crime, Prison, and Redemption* (2016), and a poetry collection, *Scars/Stars* (2013). I stayed connected with Imarisha after WisCon and interviewed her in August of 2017 via video chat. I was treated to one of the most engaging, in-depth, and theoretically rich conversations in this project.

White Science Fiction, Black Speculative Fiction: Developing Black Cyborgs

This project draws from the deep well of Black and feminist science fiction and science fiction criticism to generate new discourses about Black people and technology. As feminist scholar Naomi Scheman once told me, tools change in the hands of those who were never meant to hold them, and I explore the ways Black people have taken up both science fiction and technological tools and used them for survival, joy, and community-building and maintenance. As a fellow writing lab rat, I attempt to carve out space for untraditional theories and methods in women's studies and academia at large by centering the voices of Black women writing science fiction and Black people writing

about technology, and by recognizing that the life-or-death stakes of speculative thinking resonate deeply and differently with Black writers, readers, and fans.

Our current political climate exposes intense racial division in the United States, fueling public debate about the quality and experience of Black people's lives. Many of these debates are hosted on social media platforms, chronicled by hashtags and characterized by the fast-paced nature of digital communication. In light of changes in cultural communication, this project seeks to analyze and find tools for effective communication within our shared political and technosocial lives. My scholarship advances speculative fiction and cyborg theory as dynamic tools which we must utilize to build the future of feminist studies, Black studies, and digital political communication and organizing. In this dissertation, I challenge the assumption that technology is the providence of white ingenuity and intelligence and that this is a white man's world careening toward white men's futures. In illuminating a tradition of technological engagement by Black communities and calling attention to different dreams and futures free of oppression, my interdisciplinary project will shape the future directions of Black feminist theory, Black people's digital organizing, and political resistance to entrenched and renewed white supremacy.

andre c. carrington addresses a divide in the way Black and white audiences and authors use fiction and technology to do different kinds of work with speculative fiction in his book *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016). He makes a claim that is central to the way I conceptualize Black futurism: that white science fiction and Black speculative fiction are unique enough in content and

perspective that different terminology is generative for understanding what Blackness can teach us about science fiction and what science fiction can teach us about white supremacy.¹² In the tradition of Audre Lorde's notion that "Black feminism is not white feminism in Blackface,"¹³ there are characteristics unique to Black speculative fiction beyond the centrality of Black characters. In *Speculative Blackness*, carrington names four of these qualities: Afrofuturism, surrealism, Otherhood, and haunting.¹⁴ These genre-bending qualities, explored in more depth in chapter three, result in some of science fiction's most dynamic media. They also often result in the further marginalization of Black and other marginalized writers whose work doesn't neatly square with the "over-represented whiteness" of the genre, which prioritizes exacting scientific details, colonization of new worlds and new people, and capitalist machinations over the crooked-room realities and revolutionary futures seen in the writings of people of color.¹⁵ Afrofuturism is a foundational pillar of this project. I define Afrofuturism loosely: a Black cultural lens, aesthetic, and framework for work that explores the relationship between Blackness, technology, futurism, and time. The term "Afrofuturism" is generally attributed to cultural critic Mark Dery, who first used it in his essay "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose" (1994). The essay argues

¹² andré m. carrington, "Introduction" *Speculative Blackness: the Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

¹³ Audre Lorde, in "Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2016) P.60

¹⁴ andré m. carrington, "Introduction" *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* p. 22

¹⁵ "Crooked room" used here in reference to Melissa Harris-Perry's crooked room theory wherein Black women are made to stand straight in a room made crooked by stereotypes, shame, and limitations. Detailed in: Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014)

for coping with the conditions and oppressions related to the descendants of the African diaspora through science fiction and through re-imagining the landscape of time. In that exploration, which he describes as “a first, faltering step into this territory,”¹⁶ he calls upon the minds of Samuel R. Delany, fellow cultural critic George Tate, and Tricia Rose, whose work in Africana and Black studies spans from hip hop to Black feminism. Their interviews frame the first formal, published conversation about Afrofuturism.

Alondra Nelson arguably enabled modern Afrofuturism to flourish in the academy when she began a collaborative listserv in the fall of 1998 to build community around the ideas of Blackness, technology, and potential futures. What she originally described as a place to convene around themes of “African diasporic digital culture” grew into a conference and then into a special issue of *Social Text* (2002), which contained poetry, art, and scholarly projects on the theme of Afrofuturism. This introduction of Afrofuturism to the academy was instrumental in broadening both the scope of Afrofuturism and its implementation as a theoretical tool. It can be used to critique, expand, and understand Black imaginings of technology and the future in multiple fields.¹⁷

¹⁶ Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose”. p. 187 <https://thenewBlack5324.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/mark-dery-Black-to-the-future.pdf>.

¹⁷ While there was no outright hostility to the concept of Afrofuturism among the participants I interviewed, I would characterize most responses as significantly less enamored with the framework than I have seen in academia, particularly within women’s studies and Black studies. I was challenged to think outside of the Afrofuturist framework and critique its usefulness through the statements of my participants. Some authors responded with ambivalence to the idea of using the term as a label. My interview with Walidah Imarisha provided especially concrete details about the work the term does and does not do for writers and fans outside of the academy. Her words on the topic close the introduction.

Chapter Overview

This dissertation contains four chapters, each designed to introduce and apply the Black feminist “part-time” cyborg theory I have developed. They are bracketed by passages from the interviews which call attention to the critical arguments of the chapter. This is to center their voices and contributions, to work with them as conversational partners and intellectual interlocutors. It is my Black feminist way of working to frame my engagement with this community through highlighting their voices and thoughts, giving them primacy among mine. The authors get the first and last word of every chapter; my format is an experiment from my laboratory of speculative play in which the lab rats most certainly do the writing. With the expert commentary of science fiction authors, these passages provide insight into the ways this project was guided thematically by their words.

Chapter One: Toward Black Cyborgs: Black Futurity and World Traveling

Influenced by Eric King Watts’ notion of a pragmatic aesthetic, in chapter one I theorize a Black feminist “part-time” cyborg. This cyborg figure operates as both an orientation to the world and a practical aesthetic which, as Watts, articulates, can “stimulate one’s senses toward one’s environment, provoking new forms of understanding one’s relations with others,” and which, as an aesthetic experience, “may also inspire novel aesthetic practices—conceived as communicative that alert persons to the character of their shared interests...”¹⁸ In developing my own concept of a “part-time” Black feminist cyborg, I argue that feminist cyborg theory, Black feminist theory, and

¹⁸ Eric King Watts, “Pragmatist Publicity: W.E.B. Du Bois and the New Negro Movement” in Daniel C. Brouwer and Robert Asen, *Public Modalities: Rhetoric, Culture, Media, and the Shape of Public Life* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010) p. 35

science fiction must be utilized concentrically to capture experiences with technology that both augment and threaten Black lives.

Starting with Donna Haraway's foundational essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," and expanding to recent explorations of the cyborg from women of color theorists like Joy James and Jasbir Puar, I situate my "part-time" cyborgs in the current field of feminist cyborg theory. To help illustrate the possibilities of such an aesthetic, I engage Chicana philosopher Maria Lugones' theory of traveling to and experiencing the metaphorical "worlds" of other women. I extend her work, envisioning a part-time Black feminist cyborg optimized for travel to and through the digital worlds of social media like Facebook and Twitter, asking how Black people arrive in these worlds and what they experience once there.

In her essay "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," Lugones provides not only a way to travel worlds, but a full picture of how the orientation of a "world traveler" influences our ability to connect and understand others. Grounded in Marilyn Frye's 1983 essay in "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love,"¹⁹ Lugones argues that the way we perceive women is critical for the possibilities of loving, playing, and empathizing with them. "Arrogant perception," which is the ingrained position of white, Western patriarchy, is upheld to the benefit of current systems of domination and power: colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Where arrogant perception leaves us with a failure of love, loving perception enables individuals to travel

¹⁹ Marilyn Frye. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. 1983. Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press.

through worlds without the urge to dominate, conquer, or impose paradigms on others. It is a receptive mode in which one can fully relate to others, be playful, and reciprocate knowledge. It is the way a part-time Black feminist cyborg, a new way of being in the world, must operate. The call for a new genre of humanity for Black people attempting both survival under white supremacy and liberation from it, explored by theorists Sylvia Wynter and Ashleigh Greene Wade, is echoed in this project. The chapter ends with K. Tempest Bradford's commentary on androids, race, and allegory from my interview with her, concretizing some of the tendency of mainstream science fiction to take conflicts from marginalized communities and whitewash them through allegory, particularly when creating fictional androids and cyborgs.

Chapter Two: Cyborgs and Other Dirty Computers: Untangling the Dreamer and the Dream

Continuing the thread of loving perception from chapter one's discussion of Lugones and Frye, chapter two provides examples of Black cyborgs operating from loving perception and Black "world-traveling" expressed through science fiction. Given the influence of the *Star Trek* franchise on the world of science fiction and the project's interview participants (the chapter begins with many of their comments on their introduction to science fiction through *Trek*), I review an episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, introducing the idea of the "dreamer and the dream." The "Far Beyond the Stars" episode features a story reminiscent of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, revolving around a 24th-century Black space commander hurtling unexpectedly back through time to the end of science fiction's golden age and the brink of the Civil Rights Movement in the

1950s. There, he experiences life as a Black science fiction writer in Harlem, attempting to write and publish work in science fiction magazines. Alienated by his white colleagues and supervisors, he is confronted with the reality that science fiction, steeped in white supremacy, could not tolerate a Black futurist vision containing anything beyond pain and servitude. The 1998 episode, which I argue is written and directed from an oppositional standpoint of loving perception, helped disrupt the silence surrounding racism in mainstream science fiction. In so doing, “Far Beyond the Stars” invites us to imagine not a post-racial future which does not contend with racial identity and history—a preferred mode for many white writers and fans of science fiction—but instead a future which meaningfully engages Black perspectives. Providing a blueprint for white writers seeking to participate in or support a project of Black futurity, “Far Beyond the Stars” asks that we consider who within science fiction can situate themselves as dreamers, and how Black people are actualized dreams. This concept of the “dreamer and the dream” helps propel discussion of Black people’s relationship with technology and the methods that propel Black cyborgs’ world traveling.

Assessed from an understanding of loving perception as explored in the previous chapter, I apply the concepts of loving perception and the “dreamer and the dream” to “Far Beyond the Stars,” and musical artist Janelle Monáe’s long-form “emotion picture” music video for her album *Dirty Computer*. *Dirty Computer* is a testimony of Black, queer, loving perception told through cyborgs and androids as allegorical tools. When operating from an oppositional position of loving perception, as highlighted in these examples, we are able to access Black cultural lessons, resources, and warnings for Black

feminist world-travel with an eye toward technological engagement and cultural memory. The chapter ends with a passage from my conversation with Walidah Imarisha on the nature of technology and its future directions, including cyborgs and bio-hacking.

Chapter Three: How to Treat Your Host: HBO's Westworld and Arrogant Perception

The third chapter begins with Imarisha's words again, on the subject of self and community care, and authority figures. A science fiction show navigating the nature of authority set against debates on technology, humanity, and personhood, HBO's *Westworld*²⁰ is rife with commentary on the nature of memory, agency, and self-determination. The themes explored therein are not at all dissimilar to those explored in the examples of "Far Beyond the Stars" and *Dirty Computer*: namely self-determination and cultural and individual memory. However, *Westworld*'s writing reifies white supremacy into near and alternate futures, providing several examples which counter an orientation toward Black world-traveling and loving perception. Chapter three explores the outcome of housing Black cyborgs in white worlds dominated by arrogant perception, as exemplified in the stories of Bernard Lowe and Maeve Millay, Black characters from *Westworld* who are unable to travel worlds, unable to operate part-time, and are relegated to their status as enslaved experimental subjects. Unlike the "lab rats" writing and speaking from the margins, *Westworld*'s real and imagined "post-racial" world disables agency, restricts mobility and punishes empathy. Chapter three concludes with a call for continued critique of white science fiction's arrogant perception of Blackness and

²⁰ The series is based on Michael Crichton's 1973 film, *Westworld*.

technology, before transitioning to the words of K. Tempest Bradford on labor and grief on personal levels and within Black speculative fiction.

Chapter Four: Navigating Digital and Speculative Worlds

an account of successful part-time Twitter hustling from Brittney Morris, the fourth chapter applies the Black feminist part-time cyborg aesthetic to the way Black women use digital publics, like Black Twitter, to resist the arrogant perception of white supremacy. In “She’s All Light,” a short story by my participant LaShawn Wanak, the Black women characters debate the risks of living fully in digital space, providing a template for thinking through how Black women operate as part-time cyborgs. As Wanak does in her story, I emphasize Black women’s awareness of the personal and political stakes of engagement in online public spaces and the ways they use their platforms to create communal theory and political resistance in community. Drawing from bell hooks’ work on the nature and impact of Black feminist theory, I position Black Twitter as a place where the part-time Black feminist cyborgs can “come to voice” and shapeshift via code switching between academic and everyday speech, connect with other Black women, and be strategic in addressing both their own communities and mainstream audiences.

To illustrate the impact of online community theorizing, I provide case studies of coming to voice through the sharing of collective pain on Twitter: the hashtag conversation #McKinney, a reference to an incident of police brutality against a young Black girl at a pool party in McKinney, Texas in 2015, and the digital protest found in the hashtag #NoConfederate. Examining how a part-time Black feminist cyborg might

operate in a space like Twitter, I argue that Black women effectively strategize against the white speculative imagination from fiction to reality. The arrogant perception which underpins white supremacy results in racial violence as exhibited in the #McKinney incident, and also in the creation of a show like the proposed series from HBO, *Confederate*. *Confederate* depicts an alternate timeline in which the American South is still a slaveholding confederacy in the present day. Critiquing the premise and creators of the show, #NoConfederate was an initiative by Black women to call attention to the realities of our modern white supremacist existence, closing imagined gaps between our lived reality and *Confederate*'s vision of American confederacy. I position this critique in the tradition of radical Black speculative fiction, recalling Octavia Butler's novels *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*, which implore us to take seriously both the trauma of slavery and the reality of modern white supremacy. In the case of these examples from both established and proposed speculative fiction efforts, we learn that Black women need to "travel" in new ways to move toward liberation. The chapter closes with K. Tempest Bradford discussing the "Tempest Challenge," emphasizing the benefits for readers engaging with authors from marginalized backgrounds and centering their voices.

Black Cyborgs Traveling Forward

When the "lab rats" do the writing, they can craft not only their own narratives and blueprints for their futures, but new and vital perspectives on the world around them. While comparisons between Black or other marginalized people and animals are not usually compelling to me, this metaphor holds several useful components at once for us to consider: perspective, power, and insight. Those utilizing lab rats do not think about

their autonomy or inner lives, often assuming they have none. When lab rats display ingenuity, it is viewed either as a success of the researcher or as a resource for the researcher's continued success. This perspective says more about the orientation of the researcher and the mode of perception that is required in the white supremacist imagination: viewing humans as tools to build white futures and white safety, and to feed white arrogance. Without the *power* necessary to subjugate others, there would be no laboratory of white supremacy, no actionable way to inflict fantasies on other beings.

With a perspective of oppressive, white supremacist imagination allied with the power of actualized white supremacy, marginalization is an outcome that Black people have come to anticipate. As with most experiences of Blackness, attempts to marginalize also bring opportunities for resources, tools, and understandings: insight into the white supremacist imagination *and* radical Black speculative potential. This was a lesson my father repeated over and over during my childhood: Black people must understand and be able to navigate white culture, white ways of thinking and being, in order to anticipate spiritual and physical violence and survive. Black people must have more insight into both themselves and the whiteness of the world around them. This is no simple feat, and were it not for the power held in radical speculative thought, pathways to liberation would seem impossible to travel.

This dissertation is an invitation into questioning notions of perspective and identity, mediated through technology. Tackling lab rats, cyborgs, programming geniuses, explorers trekking across the stars, or feminist scholars, the thrust of the Black speculative lies in its transformative power and its ability to shape the world around us.

The interviews with Black feminist speculative fiction authors lay the foundation for this dissertation's engagement with Blackness and technology through a lens of speculative fiction. In coming chapters, I return to the words and insights gleaned in these conversations as I explore different fictional and real-world clashes and collaborations between Blackness and technology.

adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha on Black Futurism

Caitlin: What would you consider the most dominant messages about Black people, bodies, and technology that come from popular culture or mainstream speculative fiction?

adrienne maree brown: the most dominant message is that Black people are expendable sidekicks, or no longer exist in the future.

Caitlin: Do you see speculative fiction playing a political role for Black people? If so, how?

adrienne maree brown: absolutely. that dominant message i just spoke of - that generates the reality we live in. because Black people range from threatening to expendable in the white imagination, we end up living in that dangerous perception. i believe Black people must imagine futures that assert our reality, that uplift and celebrate our humanity. and our imagining must be compelling - to us, to others.

+++

Caitlin: So, do you consider yourself an Afrofuturist? And what does that label signify to you?

Walidah Imarisha: I think, as you know, there's a lot of conversation about the term "Afrofuturism." I mean, for me it's more about the content, and so terms are important if they help clarify the conversation about values and vision. If they *complicate* conversations about values and vision, then I say throw the term out. Or, put it to the side. So, I don't object to the term Afrofuturism—if it helps to convey some of the information that I want. But I'm not attached to that term either. You know, I do like the term "Black futurism" a little bit more, just because I like that term "Black" and the history of-- the sociopolitical history around using Black. And it is often a radical and rebellious space when the word Black is used.

Caitlin: Yeah.

Walidah Imarisha: You know what, I do like... many people don't like the term Afrofuturism. Gabriel Teodros, who is an Ethiopian brother who's an emcee who was in *Octavia's Brood*, said "this is just Blackness." It's like, needing a different word for what? It's Black. You know? Being the ancient future is Blackness. And I think that framing is powerful. So if Afrofuturism can help us get to people understanding that, then I'm for it. If it kind of moves us away from understanding that, and if it means that it gets siloed off on this other sideline, or we spend all our time debating it, I don't think it's useful.

Caitlin: So, we've sort of covered this a little bit. But since you've coined the term "visionary fiction," I know you see this genre playing a deeply political role for Black people. But what do you think are its political functions specifically, and how would you suggest it's employed to our best advantage?

Walidah Imarisha: I mean I think at its best, it's a liberated laboratory for us to experiment and dream and think about futures that we want and how to build them without the real-world costs and ramifications of doing that work. I think especially for folks who are doing organizing work, folks are often hesitant to try new tactics for a number of reasons, [and] some of them are not great reasons. But I think that many folks are hesitant for a very good reason, which is that these are life and death issues. Folks don't want to be like "oh, well, let's just *experiment* and see whether or not you get health care." Like, "who knows!" Right? Rather than saying, "well, we've seen wins happen with these specific things, so we are going to just keep doing these specific things even if they only get us so far." Or even if they only stop the rollback so much, at least they achieve something rather than us experiment and we lose everything.

So I think that it can be... My co-editor adrienne [maree brown] calls it an experimentation ground to really have that space to explore actual outcomes. And I think to have really important conversations that also don't necessarily have real-world ramifications. I think in organizing, and I think especially amongst like Black folks, we often make political assumptions. "Well, I believe this," "We're talking about freedom!" "We're talking about justice," "We're talking about, you know, we say Black lives matter. Obviously we all mean the same thing!" Right? And I think that the '60s and the '70s taught us that these terms are very powerful. Like "Black Power." And they can be defined in many different ways, including the way that the state works to fund and support is to define Black power by Black capitalism. So you have the Panthers saying

“Black power,” which, you know, they meant the creation of a communist, *global* communist, socialist revolution where oppressed communities have a right to self-determine. And then you have other organizations saying “Black power,” and meaning “give us money so that we can participate in this oppressive capitalist system. Get us money so we can be the people who take your money!”

So. I think it’s important to have those conversations. And most of the time those conversations come up in the middle of really intense situations where everyone has everything invested, on the line. It is incredibly difficult to work through complexities in that space. So I think science fiction allows us a great place to do that. And one workshop was developed by Morgan Philips who is an amazing trainer/organizer, who is in *Octavia’s Brood* as well, and she created a site for direct action organizing training where it takes existing worlds, existing franchises. Basically, you embody the oppressed peoples and then you develop an organizing goal and build strategies and tactics. And so it’s amazing, folks are like: “we’re the Oompa Loompas, and we want fair wages and vacation days, and we will shut this motherfucker down, Willy Wonka!” The Oompa Loompas go on strike every single time, I love it!

Caitlin: I’ve done that workshop with adrienne maree brown when she came out to University of Minnesota, and it does work like that! That’s brilliant. Okay.

Chapter One: Toward Black Cyborgs: Black Futurity and World Traveling

Yes, this is far too much reality.

No wonder we need aliens.

No wonder we're so good at creating aliens.

No wonder we so often project alienness onto one another.

- Octavia Butler

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to root two key speculative fiction concepts in an explicitly Black feminist theoretical framework: (1) living beings using future technologies/abilities to travel between or within worlds, transcending time and space; and (2) human fusions with technology, as with cyborgs. I use feminist cyborg theories from scholars Donna Haraway, Jasbir Puar, and Joy James; Black feminist theories about new ways of existing and moving as humans from Ashleigh Greene Wade and Sylvia Wynter; and theories dedicated to the way we perceive the world and people around us from Maria Lugones and Marilyn Frye, in order to enter into a conversation about the Black speculative and Black cyborgs. Chicana and Black feminist theories are my base as I analyze speculative fiction, and I use feminist theory to expand knowledge production

in the fields of Black cyberfeminist theory, feminist cyborg theory, and Black futurism.

Rather than a work of fiction, literary critique, or summary of a movement, this chapter is a work of Black feminist theory that engages with the Black speculative imagination, taking both literary and theoretical approaches.

Surprisingly, there is relatively little precedent for this Black feminist approach on such well-trod theoretical ground. There are many examples of deep dives into the Black speculative and Afrofuturist genres that can be classified as “feminist”: Ytasha Womack’s *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Fantasy and Sci-Fi Culture* (2013) comes to mind, as she highlights Black women’s intellectual contributions to the Afrofuturist tradition with particular care. Scholars of literary studies and criticism implement Black feminist frameworks to analyze speculative fiction, seeking a deeper understanding of the texts being examined. An example of this kind of work is andre c. carrington’s *Speculative Blackness*, an expansion of Black speculative theorizing in literary and fan studies, with close readings of texts and cultural phenomena through a Black feminist lens. These kinds of analyses are useful for exploring and expanding the boundaries of their fields, as well as for emphasizing the profound but often understated impact of speculative fiction on the Black feminist canon.

With my work I seek to create a Black feminist cyborg figure which serves Black women as both an orientation and a liberatory tool for maneuvering digital environments and other new terrain. This Black feminist part-time cyborg orientation positions us to rethink Black women's speculative work and creates space for recognition of the way speculative play serves Black communities. In order to build such a cyborg, I turn to speculative fiction written by Black women with an explicitly political and racial awareness. The largest pool of literature I draw from is works of speculative fiction that operate within justice-oriented, anti-colonial frameworks toward feminist aims. The list of these is long, but most recently includes projects like adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha's visionary fiction anthology *Octavia's Brood* (2015), the groundbreaking collection of Afrofuturist short stories *Dark Matters: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), edited by Sheree Renee Thomas, Nalo Hopkinson's *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and N.K. Jemisin's collection of short stories *How Long Till Black Future Month?* (2018).

In this chapter, I will begin with a discussion of Chicana feminist philosopher Maria Lugones' concepts of world traveling, arrogant perception, and loving perception found in her essay "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception." I will

extend her work and repurpose it for the speculative imagination, describing how world-traveling and loving perception can be applied to works of Black feminist speculative fiction. From this understanding of world traveling, I will then outline the ways it can provide a framework for speculative ontologies like a Black feminist cyborg.

My theory of a Black feminist cyborg ontology begins with the intellectual roots of feminist cyborg theory in the 1980s. In this chapter, I trace the ways people of color have taken up the cyborg as a metaphor for our experience in popular culture, media, and academic theory. The second half of the chapter is devoted to theorizing a Black feminist cyborg practical aesthetic through Maria Lugones' "world-traveling" theory, an ontology which I argue may provide benefits to Black feminists as we move throughout physical and virtual worlds. I will suggest the techno-social landscape as another "world" we are able to travel, where a Black feminist cyborg positionality may have distinct benefits. In that discussion, I address the possibilities, but also the limitations and critiques of the cyborg as a metaphor for experiences of oppression.

World Traveling and Speculative Play

Chicana feminist philosopher Maria Lugones describes her essay "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," as a "weaving" of aspects of her life. Within, she provides survival strategies for "outsiders." Flexibility, she argues, is a necessity for

the marginalized, particularly for women of color (a coalition which she later troubles). The flexibility to shift between the mainstream and various margins is what she calls the “resistant exercise” of world-traveling, moving from world to world and being a different creature in each. This kind of traveling, which women of color in particular must perform, can be “skillful, creative, rich, enriching,” and “a loving way of being and living.” It can also be a source of trauma when traveling to hostile worlds of white supremacy and patriarchy is mandatory. Lugones urges her readers not to neglect the more powerful and beneficial rewards of world-traveling in recognizing the trauma it can also inflict.

Lugones describes the kinds of perception required for different modes of travel, particularly delineating between an arrogant perception and a loving perception. Rooted in an understanding of Marilyn Frye’s 1983 discussion in “In and Out of Harm’s Way: Arrogance and Love,” the way we perceive women is instrumental to our ability to love and empathize with them. An “arrogant perception,” the default position of white, Western patriarchy, is taught and practiced to maintain current systems of domination and power: colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Where Frye was largely concerned with the damage inflicted upon women by men who perceive them arrogantly, Lugones expands Frye’s theory to the way women perceive one another. When

“traveling” as arrogant perceivers, we impose our worldviews and ways of being on all we encounter. Arrogant perceivers seek to assimilate new worlds and people into the dominating paradigms to which they subscribe. A separation occurs when one perceives another arrogantly; not only is a door left open for abuse, dehumanization, and rejection of another’s subjectivity, but there is no opportunity for love or coalition. As women of color at the intersection of different class-based and racial identities, we can be both the objects of and performers of arrogant perception. The separation required for arrogant perception means people cannot travel to each other’s worlds with any hope of learning from and loving other women.

Where arrogant perception leaves us with a failure of love, loving perception enables individuals to travel through worlds without the urge to dominate, conquer, or impose paradigms on others. It is a receptive mode in which one can fully relate to others and reciprocate knowledge. Traveling to other women’s worlds with loving perception allows Lugones a way out of her personal dilemma about her own sense of playfulness. She expresses anxiety about having the fun “constructed out of her,” her sense of play and joy surrendered to a terminally serious nature. This line of thinking is relevant to women of color feminists, and particularly Black feminist thinkers, armed only with the rhetoric of social death and Afropessimism amid the rise of 2017’s dystopic conditions.

Accessing a “playful” world-traveling ability requires recognizing the role of perception. World traveling means that Lugones’ ability to be and feel playful, joyful, or at ease shifts along with the condition of whatever world she occupies. In more oppressive worlds, worlds in which she perceived with the arrogant gaze of white supremacy, her sense of playfulness is diminished.

As with any other powerful way of being and thinking, playfulness can be violent. When used by Western white men and women and/or those perceiving others arrogantly, the results are what Lugones calls an “agonistic” sense of play. Characteristic of arrogant perceivers, this playfulness rests in concepts of winning, triumph, domination, competition and ultimately, weaponized assimilation. While this violence is a method of “play” to an arrogant perceiver, people in the margins feel the violence of this assimilation in lethal history, bones, and blood. This kind of pain can serve as a reminder of the consequences of an arrogant worldview. Instead, our playfulness needs to be, as Lugones describes, a “loving playfulness” which allows for surprise, delight, joy, and discovery. With this loving playfulness, we can build on ourselves and our worlds, within which “there are no rules that are to us sacred,” unlike in arrogant play, which strives with desperation to uphold the rules and regulations of oppressive institutions.

As mentioned, Lugones describes the “failure of love” of white women toward women of color. She explains this failure as a result of being raised in the United States, and part of upholding systemic racism. White women are both perceived arrogantly, and perpetuate arrogant perception. She decries this condition:

I am particularly interested here in those many cases in which White/Anglo women do one or more of the following to women of color: they ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us, interpret us as crazy. All of this while we are in their midst. The more independent I am, the more independent I am left to be. Their world and their integrity do not require me at all. There is no sense of self-loss in them for my own lack of solidity. But they rob me of my solidity through indifference, an indifference they can afford and which seems sometimes studied.

To complicate this phenomenon further, the arrogant perception women can exercise on one another can masquerade as love. Lugones highlights her relationship with her mother and her experience growing up as an example of arrogant perception misunderstood as love. She believed that what she calls “abusing” her mother was part of loving her: taking her for granted, making demands of her without consideration for her feelings, time, or spirit. She also thought that loving her mother also meant seeing herself in her mother.

This left her vulnerable to a trap of her own making: to abuse her mother and also to identify with her meant that she must learn to see herself as the potential subject of abuse. She was unwilling to participate in the second part of the false “love” equation, refusing to see herself as servile or submissive. Frye and Lugones note this tendency to confuse servitude with love, particularly for women. This breakdown in what it means to love is critical for understanding how to perceive others. In Lugones’ argument, this failure of love when weaponized by white women against women of color leads to their dismissal, abandonment, and mockery. The “worlds” of white women who perceive arrogantly do not “require” women of color as anything more than tools or props.

The idea of traveling worlds with arrogant or loving perception holds particular meaning as I look at fiction that speculates about the future. Science fiction authors who have been trained to move through life as arrogant perceivers spread ideas about the future through their writing which can dismiss, abandon, erase, or mock Black people—particularly Black women. Many Black science fiction authors and fans have written about the impact of white arrogant perception on themselves and the genre of science fiction as a whole, largely gesturing to the absence or subordination of Black people in mainstream science fiction. N.K. Jemisin reflects on the way racism in the genre

impacted her chances of success as an early-career Black speculative fiction author in the introduction to *How Long 'Till Black Future Month?*:

In 2002, I knew that as a Black woman drawn to science fiction and fantasy, I had almost no chance of getting my work published, noticed by reviewers, or accepted by a readership that seemed to want nothing more than endless variations on medieval Europe and American colonization. And while I could've sharted out my own variation on medieval Europe or American colonization—and probably should have, if I wanted to pay off my loans faster—that just didn't interest me.

Other writers express similar distain for the constraints and whiteness of the genre.

Edward Austin Hall, co-editor of the speculative fiction anthology *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond*, provides a self-described rant on the topic:

Science fiction often implies that racism will be dead in the future. At least, they never really address it so we can only assume it will be. We can also assume that it's dead because a melanin-devouring plague (Schuylerosis ?) either killed all people of color or that same plague killed all the melanin on the planet, leaving only a handful of affable sidekicks in its wake. Because, if racism were truly dead, roughly 6 out of every 7 cast members would be people of color as opposed to, say, 2 out of every 15.

Ytasha Womak, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Fantasy and Sci Fi Culture* (2013), comments on the impact of the erasure of Black people from the future in speculative fiction, contrasting it with the way erasure in history is addressed:

It's one thing when Black people aren't discussed in world history. Fortunately, teams of dedicated historians and culture advocates have chipped

away at the propaganda often functioning as history for the world's students to eradicate that glaring error. But when, even in the imaginary future—a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, and time machines—people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down.

Black women exist at an intersection of multiple identities that are perceived arrogantly or erased entirely. Perhaps most dangerous are the arrogant speculations about the future which fall into the trap Lugones and Frye warn about: confusing servitude with love. In a historical context of chattel slavery, the perception of Black labor for white people and white society has often confused the boundaries of love, intimacy, and abuse.

White people have long imagined a mythical Black subject who enjoys subjugation: from happy slave depictions, to mammy characters who care for and comfort white children and families, to magical negroes who come swiftly to the aid of white people in narrative need of folksy advice and inspiration. As I describe in chapter 3 in my analysis of HBO's television series *Westworld*, Black cyborgs cobbled together by arrogant perceivers often follow the "happy slave" archetype, defined by their utility for white people toward white goals. Within mainstream science fiction like *Westworld*, Black characters are often confined to roles that highlight their ability to be "useful" to white counterparts as something between companions and tools. The consequences for arrogant perception in mainstream science fiction are the reinforcement of racist ideas

about Black people's limited and servile position in speculative fiction, and the reification of those same concepts culturally.

What's in a World?

With great care, Lugones untangles the concept of a "world" to which and in which we might travel. The limitations she outlines for a world are few: it can contain many people or few, a society or a subgroup within a society, complete or incomplete. Resisting escapist narratives, Lugones takes time to emphasize that a world is not a utopian, fictional place. She rejects the categorization of imagined utopias as worlds because she deliberately wishes to construct worlds as things that are possible. Neither is a world reducible to a worldview or a point of reference. A world is a much sturdier thing than that, despite its nature which resists permanence. However, here I wish to expand Lugones' definition of a world, which for her requires that there must be "some flesh and blood people." Not only does that foreclose speculative possibilities, but narrows the scope of who or what counts as an inhabitant of a world—especially if one seeks to consider digital specters, cyborgs, and avatars alike. This, I believe, reaches toward her aim of describing a world as "something that is true to experience even if it is ontologically problematic." In other words, digital spaces are worlds we experience as other than our own, and they require similar attention to whether we are bringing to bear

arrogant or loving perception as we interact with others online. My interviews with Black feminist speculative writers suggest that their work in imagining other worlds, worlds where ethics of care and joy reign, is at least in part an act of loving perception.

Traveling and Playing Through/Within Worlds: Time, Space and Ether

This concept of “world traveling” is a metaphor made literal in Black science fiction. In Afrofuturist works, particularly Black feminist works of Afrofuturist literature, we see both literal world traveling and the perception-shifting world traveling that Lugones describes. What I am calling a “speculative playfulness” is an exercise in strengthening our own sense of cooperative play and joy, and a useful tool in unlearning arrogant perception and teaching others about loving play. Speculative playfulness means thoroughly and rigorously working to imagine worlds we may never visit and the possibilities they may hold. adrienne maree brown makes this connection between science fiction, futurity, and perception with her own term: “I would call our work to change the world ‘science fictional behavior’—being concerned with the way our actions and beliefs now, today, will shape the future, tomorrow, the next generations.” These worlds, whether they are the worlds of other real or imagined individuals, alternate histories, or destinations meant to contrast with our lived realities, all serve to strengthen our ability to think outside of and explore the nature of oppression.

Black speculative imagining, while sometimes dark, violent, dystopic, and bleak, can also be exceedingly playful. This may seem contradictory, but there is an extensive history of Black people expressing feelings about oppression and white supremacy through dark humor and imagination. For example, J.P. Rossing argues that emancipatory racial humor functions as a critical public pedagogy—the practice of not only reacting to oppression with humor, but using that humor to subvert hegemonic racism. Black social media conversations which reimagine history often perform this kind of dark humor public pedagogy, as in the case of the hashtag response to rapper Kanye West’s comments on the nature of slavery in a 2018 *TMZ Live* interview. Listeners focused on a moment when West, unrecovered from recent backlash over his support for Donald Trump, said “When you hear about slavery for 400 years—for 400 years? That sounds like a choice,” adding that mental imprisonment was the root of this kind of “choice.”

#IfSlaveryWasAChoice emerged on Twitter as a result, a viral hashtag whose users parodied the notion of choice within a system of Black slavery. The parody tweets frequently took the form of users filtering the conditions of slavery through the modern workplace and/or technological experience, inflating the contrast to deliver a sharp critique of both late capitalism and the system of Black slavery that enabled its growth. A pertinent example from Twitter user @qdubz: “Applying to a slave auction straight out of

slave university and they ask for 10+ years of slave experience [#IfSlaveryWasAChoice](#)”

Another from user @jaybougiee reads, “when you’re at your slavery interview and massa tells you it’s unpaid,” paired with a popular GIF of actress Viola Davis rolling her eyes, collecting her purse, and preparing to exit a room.

When Lugones describes the dissonance between playfulness and the harsh realities of oppression, she does so in the context of her own personality. She knows herself to be playful—and knows she is not, all at once. She teases out this duality by acknowledging that her playfulness only exists as playfulness in certain worlds. In worlds where she is threatened, suppressed, or not “at ease,” she is no longer the playful woman from more comfortable and hospitable worlds. Afrofuturists go further than acknowledging that there are worlds in which we can and cannot be playful: they create alternate worlds where a multitude of ways of being and ways of being Black can be executed.

Arrogant vs. Loving Perception in Octavia Butler’s Speculative Works

This challenging approach to perception is found in many classic works of Black speculative fiction, but I would like to call attention to two generative texts that hold a startling mirror to many of the worlds that are particularly harrowing for women of color in the twenty-first century: Octavia Butler’s novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and

sequel *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Both books are gaining renewed attention as Butler's dystopian vision of the 2020s and our current Trump-led burgeoning fascist reality have seemed to collide, down to the detail of far-right presidential candidates promising to "make America great again." Butler's near-future texts are ideal for demonstrating the link between perception and world traveling.

Set in a dystopian California, *Parable of the Sower* follows a Black 15-year-old protagonist, Lauren Olamina. Lauren's world has been hurdled into chaos due largely to extreme class stratification and corporatization. Those with reserves of wealth and privilege have access to food, water, safe shelter, and the benefits of organized society. Lauren's world has been ravaged as an end result of arrogant perception coupled with power: human-driven climate change has made much of the earth unsafe and uninhabitable, with clean water both expensive and rare, pharmaceutical companies control the population with escapist drugs, and extreme socio-economic disparity drives desperation, poverty, and crime.

In the midst of this chaos, Lauren has a unique quality: a hereditary condition called "hyperempathy" allows her literally to feel the pain of those around her and to feel a wide range of the emotions she witnesses. She received this trait from her mother, who took a drug when she was pregnant with Lauren and later died in childbirth. It is implied

that this is what causes Lauren and her family to pathologize this phenomenon, referring to it throughout the story as a syndrome and a disorder. Lauren tells us early in the book that her “neurotransmitters are scrambled and they’re going to stay scrambled.” Certainly, in a world filled with anguish and struggle like the one Butler envisions, hyperempathy could be a detriment.

However, it is only through Lauren’s ability to empathize with those around her that she is able to discover a brighter path to the future. After the murder of her family and her subsequent escape with other survivors, she becomes convinced that the future of humanity rests among the stars on distant, uninhabited planets. The question is: how can she and the rest of humanity prepare for that future mentally and spiritually? Can they find an uncharted route toward a new world in the midst of oppression and violence? For Lauren, this readiness is found in a new spirituality she calls “Earthseed.” “Earthseed” is a reference to that future of transplantation, and it provides the tools for an inner transformation of perception and understanding. The survivors on Earth are seeds to be planted elsewhere—on other worlds when possible. They are able to move with loving perception and navigate to new worlds. Lauren repeats in several places in the novel that “The destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars.” She makes clear in her continual assertion that she did not invent or create Earthseed but happened upon it, the

same way we happen upon knowledge when we travel to one another's worlds. As we travel with loving perception, opportunities for exchanging knowledge, new skills, and joy arise in the form of understanding the lives and worlds of others. Traveling with loving perception aids in our ability to adapt to changing worlds and conditions.

Earthseed is based on a fundamental idea that God is change, and because God is change, we all have the ability to shape God. She says:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God

Is Change.

Earthseed is both a call to loving perception in the most strenuous circumstances and a literal and figurative example of “world traveling.” Lauren manages to see herself and others outside of the gaze of arrogant perception because she seeks a future without oppression and domination and knows such a future is a condition for the survival of humanity. Her hyperempathy, seen by others as pathological, facilitates her ability to maintain loving perception and remember, viscerally, the humanity and suffering of others despite the pain this often costs her. Earthseed’s final call for a literal transcendence of this world makes a striking metaphor for gaining insight into the worlds of others, empathizing and learning from their perspective, and partaking in the speculative play of future cooperative worlds.

Earthseed is not the only Black feminist call for transcending this world to achieve new heights. In *Racism 101* (1994), poet and theorist Nikki Giovanni expresses her investment in the science fiction television series *Star Trek*, reflecting on our duty to operate with loving perception and traveling beyond our worlds with the technologies we have:

I am an unreconstructed Trekkie. Man (read: humans) was meant to fly. Sometimes we get confused and think flight is a physical thing: something to do with engines or wings made of wax. Everybody told Icarus that if he used those wings when he got near the sun they would melt. I don’t know if Icarus simply did not believe them or if he thought his wings could withstand the heat, but he took off with the instruments available... and he failed. Or did he? Didn’t he, in reality, simply fall back to earth? And can it be a failure

when our goal is to reach higher? I think not... We seek to “kiss the sky,” because earth is our home, not our destiny. Our destiny is a better universe where we can live together in peace and understanding.

In *Emergent Strategy*, her 2016 book of speculative thinking and social justice methods,

adrienne maree brown takes much inspiration from *Earthseed* and its lessons, echoing

Giovanni’s call to take up the tools available to us to travel worlds and travel higher.

Brown uses *Earthseed* to describe the necessity of our adaptability and the necessity of

understanding how we fit into our communities, systems, and the universe at large. When

brown describes the role that Octavia Butler and *Earthseed* had on her thinking, she

writes:

Decades before my birth, [Butler] was working these same edges in her heart, pendulum swinging between curiosity, possibility, and hopelessness. Because if we can’t articulate more viable futures, and adapt, our human future is pretty hopeless. Octavia wrote novels with young Black women protagonists meeting aliens, surviving apocalypse, evolving into vampires, becoming telepathic networks, time traveling to recon with slave-owning ancestors. Woven throughout her work are two things: 1) a coherent visionary exploration of humanity and 2) *emergent strategies for being better humans*.

When brown spoke about *Earthseed* in our interview, she described reading it for the first

time as a “biblical experience,” finding herself drawn in both by the comforting nature of

the words and the practicality of *Earthseed*’s applications. For brown and others who read

Parable of the Sower, Lauren’s perception is a symptom of an advanced, loving

orientation to the world. brown’s strategy mirrors Lauren’s *Earthseed* values, seen most

clearly when brown defines emergent strategy as “how we intentionally change in ways

that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we belong to.” This change in perception and orientation toward others is a kind of loving perception, one that enables us to travel to our “liberated worlds” and prepares us to face a variety of potential futures.

Some of those futures are not the bright, hopeful futures imagined in *Earthseed*, but ones which mirror conditions of our present and past. Butler, aware of the dangers of world traveling, wrote another text which engages the concept of moving through time, not to our future, but to the past. *Kindred* is a literary titan which works as both a time travel speculative fiction venture and a slave narrative. The plot follows a young Black writer, Dana, who is oscillating through time between her modern 1970s life with her white husband and the pre-Civil War plantation where her ancestors lived. As her stays at the plantation grow longer and she bears witness to the horrors of slavery, exposed to a system that values and prioritizes arrogant perception and which is carried out by individuals operating from a place of arrogant perception, Dana is forced to contemplate her own positionality as a Black woman and the way it shifts when she moves from place to place and from time to time. Dana is constantly pulled from her present life back to the stark realities of slavery that her ancestors faced, and she finds herself preoccupied in her 1970s life with the anticipation of unexpectedly world-traveling. Dana is not unaware of

her 1970s existence being rooted in this pain from the past; she interacts cautiously with white police officers, describes the way her sense of safety and security is robbed through her experiences, and at one point describes her employment at a temp company as a kind of slave market. She is unable, physically, spiritually, or emotionally, to emerge unscathed from the trauma of slavery, even in her contemporary life.

While operating with loving perception for both her white and Black ancestors, Dana is intrinsically connected to their pain, struggle, and sacrifices. Like Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*, Dana faces consequences for moving through an arrogantly-perceiving world with an orientation of loving perception: in her last struggle to return to her original time, Dana loses her arm. Butler has Dana physically leave a piece of herself in the past, explicitly linking the Black body both with ancestors and with the history Black people have lived.

Read through Lugones, we can see Dana's loss as a result of the sometimes dangerous pursuit of world traveling, which can be forced upon us without our explicit consent or desire. There are worlds, like that of the plantation, where we are not at ease and are perceived with an arrogance so violent that there are both immediate and lasting consequences. Butler wields time travel not as merely a way to structure the novel, but to underscore themes of home, a Black sense of place, and Black historical trauma.

Whether it is preparing and moving toward future unknown worlds as Lauren did, or being trapped in worlds where we are perceived arrogantly as Dana was, it is clear that world travel for Black women requires fortitude, practice, and armor. We may arm ourselves with different ways of being and ontological approaches which support our survival or allow us to move with more freedom and less pain and remain intact. I propose a Black feminist cyborg ontology that may provide protection and advantages for Black women while world traveling, especially to digital worlds.

Feminist Explorations of the Cyborg

I am not the first to consider what happens when we place identities like “Black” and “feminist” before cyborg, nor the first to consider taking on the cyborg as more than a being of fiction, but as an ontological position one can occupy. However, previous theoretical work has addressed neither the issue of arrogant perception nor the potential “playfulness” of fictional or ontological cyborgs. Indeed, as I began this work, I questioned if a “playful cyborg” was a possible or necessary entity. Ultimately, I argue that while the cyborg itself may or may not have a capacity for playfulness, the exercise of speculating about a cyborg ontology could. Speculative theory and speculative fiction might serve as a bridge between what is too much and what could be. For managing oppressions and expectations that are too much to live within all the time, a cyborg

ontology could be adopted as needed and discarded as necessary. This is what I refer to affectionately as the “part-time cyborg” ontological benefit.

The practice of radical speculation from a place of loving perception is a politically necessary kind of play. This kind of thinking does lend itself to the playfulness Lugones describes, moving with loving perception as a part-time cyborg into other worlds of other women. In this section, I revisit notable theoretical contributions to “cyborg thought,” including significant cyborg theory in feminist studies and further ventures into explorations of Black fusions with technology and the Black super-human. I then propose an alternate Black feminist cyborg practical aesthetic, one which takes my speculative approach of Lugones’ concepts of perception and world traveling and applies them to the expanding realities of Blackness and Black people in digital landscapes.

Donna Haraway’s Feminist Cyborgs

Scholar Donna Haraway is known for amplifying the cyborg as a feminist theoretical concept. Haraway outlines what she calls a “cyborg political ontology” in her foundational essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” She gives four definitions of a cyborg throughout the essay: a “cybernetic organism,” a “hybrid of machine and organism,” a “creature of lived social reality”, and a “creature of fiction.” She uses these definitions in tandem within the essay,

thinking of them as overlapping concepts which work together to frame a complete image of a cyborg as a political creature. For Haraway, the cyborg is at once a futurist thought experiment, a description of the way beings actually operate in the world, and an opportunity to break free from the restrictions that socially constructed dualisms have imposed. In Haraway's imagining of a cyborg political myth, we would not be bound to the binaries of male and female, living and non-living, human and machine, or human and animal. This post-humanist critique means that an embrace of the cyborg is an embrace of flexible, porous boundaries and identity categories.

Published originally in 1985 in the University of California at Berkeley's *Socialist Review*, the manifesto was seen at the time as a radical critique of feminist identity politics. Rather than the second-wave feminist notion of grounded identity politics, Haraway argues for a politic of affinity and unity that does not demand an essentialist view of women. Haraway interrogates those dualisms in Western society which she deems responsible for the oppression of women, people of color, and non-humans. Importantly, Haraway is still seen as a pioneer of theorizing feminist technoscience because much of her approach is radically different from the anti-technology rhetoric in feminist scholarship at the time. Much of this rhetoric, which endorsed more natural, organic, nature-driven depictions of womanhood and feminism,

still shapes conversations about social technologies and social media. Haraway's optimistic voice was, as Judy Wajcman notes in her book *Technofeminism*, "a refreshing antidote to the technophobia that characterizes much of radical feminist and ecological thought." This move toward progress and potential in technosocial platforms informs the foundations of cyberfeminism and Black cyberfeminist discourse.

Where Haraway seeks and does not find in the cyborg an absolute answer which provides a kind of "way out" of heteropatriarchy and toxic binaries, I seek to theorize an in-between space which creates a speculative foundation for a Black feminist cyborg. This potential Black feminist cyborg cannot be a complete actualized answer to a set of issues, but it works toward an adaptive aesthetic and mode of being which can be employed when advantageous for Black people—especially as our interactions with social, material technologies grow increasingly important for our political organizing and dialogues.

In her manifesto, Haraway conceives of women of color, particularly Chicana women, as a group whose identity, like that of the cyborg, is similarly fractured. She then argues that the cyborg ontology is ideal for thinking about the way women of color operate in the world, at the intersections of multiple oppressions. Haraway's claim is that Chicanas are a group of women who, with mixed Spanish, North American Indian, and

African ancestry, are not “pure” in racial, social, national, or cultural terms. This fusion (and “impurity”) in Chinana women therefore lends itself well to the cyborg identity. In fact, Haraway considers the entire category of “women of color” to be a cyborg identity in and of itself, because it is “a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities.” Following her theme on “outsiders,” she invokes Audre Lorde’s *Sister*

Outsider. She writes:

Earlier I suggested that “women of colour” might be understood as a cyborg ... Audre Lorde (1984) captures the tone in the title of her *Sister Outsider*. In my political myth, *Sister Outsider* is the offshore woman, whom US workers, female and feminized, are supposed to regard as the enemy preventing their solidarity, threatening their security. Onshore, inside the boundary of the United States, *Sister Outsider* is a potential amidst the races and ethnic identities of women manipulated for division, competition, and exploitation in the same industries. “Women of colour” are the preferred labour force for the science-based industries, the real women for whom the world-wide sexual market, labour market, and politics of reproduction kaleidoscope into daily life.

Though Haraway’s argument about the cyborg might be useful for some women of color, her commentary on Chicana identity is troubling and appropriative. One of the strongest critiques of Haraway’s use of the history and stories of women of color comes from a Chicana feminist post-positivist realist perspective and directly challenges Haraway’s use of the story of La Malinche, the interpreter for conquistador Hernán Cortés and mother to his son. In Paula Moya’s *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, she addresses Haraway’s description of La Malinche when she argues

that Haraway's understanding of Chicana identity is an appropriation and misreading of the Mexicano/Chicano myth. Moya explains:

Today, La Malinche lives on as a symbol of enormous cultural significance for Mexico. As the mother of Cortez's son, she is figured as the symbolic mother of Mestizaje, the mixing of Spanish and Indian blood. As the "dark" mother, the "fucked one," the "betrayal of her race," she is the figure against which women of Mexican descent have had to define themselves. As the whore of the virgin/whore dichotomy in a culture that reveres la Virgen, she has been despised and reviled. Haraway's reading of the Malinche myth ignores the complexity of the situation... Haraway conceals the painful legacy of the Malinche myth and overinvests the figure of Malinche with a questionable agency.

Haraway's misuse and misunderstanding of this story is a prime example of why categorizing types of beings remains useful in some ways, but in Haraway's world of blurred identities, would I be able to frame this issue as a "white feminist tendency" to appropriate and inappropriately employ the words and wisdom of women of color? Would I be able to explicitly name the arrogant perception required for Haraway's articulation of Chicana or mestiza racial identity? I am concerned that further erasing certain categories of identity might allow for the power imbalances of the past and present to persist while also making them harder to identify and articulate. Haraway claims that there is nothing fundamental that binds women together politically and that womanhood is a socially constructed category like any other. However, she also seems concerned with the erasure of race, but it is unclear how the cyborg operates racially in

her political myth. If the cyborg removes social identities like “woman,” or “homosexual,” it seems inevitable that racial categories would be subsumed as well. However, Haraway’s emphasis on situated knowledges (rather than universalized notions of a “woman’s perspective”) seems to fight some of that particular critique of erasure.

Critiques and Possibilities for Black Feminist Cyborgs

Adopting a cyborg ontology is not a perfect armor for Black feminist world traveling. Of particular concern is the idea that women of color should go happily toward an imagining of the future which disrupts the category of “human” before we have been fully allowed to enter that very category. In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Haraway wrestles with the status of humanity as privileged over the categories of “animal” or “machine,” but she fails to adequately address the consequences that doing away with those categories may have on already marginalized populations. Being treated “like an animal,” or like a technology or machine of labor, is a language people of color can and do use to describe their experiences. It is conceivable that imagining women of color as cyborgs actually does the work of dehumanizing them more than the oppressive forces Haraway describes already have. Even in Haraway’s attempt to be more responsible with describing the relationships between human, animal, and machine, the elimination or confusion of these categories can be another way to silence the voices and experiences of

people of color. Those who take pleasure in a confusion of these boundaries might not understand the risks of blurring these boundaries—risks that have historically meant violence and pain for women of color.

Theorist Joy James expresses hesitancy about the Black cyborg with a different set of concerns. In a 2012 presentation at the University of Wisconsin–Madison called “Refusing Blackness as Victimization: Trayvon Martin & the Black Cyborgs,” James notes the psychic pressure of attempting to conform to the super-human standards of Blackness in the United States. She speaks about the cyborg as a “super-human,” whose modifications and improvements to its ethical and almost angelic spiritual capabilities generate “unusual strength and boundless love.” Part divine and part machine, the Black cyborgs James describes are rebellious moral agents who “demand not democracy, but freedom.” This demand for freedom is not simply the desire to move freely between worlds without fear or restraint. The angelic Black cyborg is equipped to tear down the systems that demand it be super-human simply to be read as human. This depiction of the super-human cyborg operating with unusual talents and loving perception is familiar: I understand Lauren from Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, imbued with hyperempathy and orchestrating travel to new worlds through Earthseed and loving perception, to be the type of cyborg James describes: spiritual, super-human, prone to

sacrifice and suffering at the hands of those moving through the world with arrogant perception.

But all is not heavenly in this depiction of divine mechanics: James warns us not only that “all Black cyborgs are not created equal,” but that the demands on this kind of Black cyborg are vast. Like Lauren, they must overcome the violence of white supremacy and “the brutality of imposed limits—the conditions of social and physical death.” For James, the construction of a Black cyborg who can “believe, endure, wait, and forgive against all odds is appealing but ultimately ineffective.” This is not meant to be read as fruitless, despite James’ cyborg’s ultimate ineffectiveness. She emphasizes the power in the ability to consider a new ontology and a new mode of being, even if it is “quite pessimistic.”

James articulates the frustration, the allure, and the necessity of being an ever-evolving Black cyborg in a US context. She renders the cyborg ultimately ineffective, unable to perform super-human feats consistently enough to do the work of being read as human within a white supremacist society. This is where I would like to intervene by imagining the Black cyborg through Lugones’ concept of world traveling, which may allow us a less fatalistic and more effective vision of a political Black cyborg. Being a super-human Black cyborg is an impossible, exhausting task to live in this world, but it

becomes possible when thinking about embodying the Black feminist cyborg only within worlds which contain others operating with loving perception, engaged in struggle toward justice. The cyborg might be useful, for example, when embracing a construct of Blackness wherein super-human strength and endurance are seen as divine birthright. Stories from our history of surviving inhumane circumstances are part of this tradition—stories of the Middle Passage, the terrors of slavery, and the indignity of modern racism are understood to be great feats of resilience, requiring an endurance of almost unimaginable depth. We can see these traits in the John Henry and Strong Black Woman myths, stereotypes which dehumanize Black people by super-humanizing them, suggesting that physical and emotional strength, endless labor, and resistance to pain are qualities that differentiate Black people from others. Melissa Harris-Perry describes the impact of the burden of the Strong Black Woman myth in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (2011):

One way Black women have demonstrated their agency under difficult circumstances is by crafting alternative images of themselves. The strong Black woman is the most pervasive and widely accepted of these self-constructions. By its idealized description, Black women are motivated, hardworking breadwinners who suppress their emotional needs while anticipating those of others. Their irrepressible spirit is unbroken by the legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection. Whereas the negative iconography of Black women as lewd, angry, or unnaturally devoted to their domestic employers is reproduced by the state and in mainstream popular culture, the image of Black women as unassailable, tough, and independent is nurtured within Black communities.

The #BlackGirlMagic phenomenon comes to mind as a logical next step in this tradition, as both a concept and a hashtag movement. CaShawn Thompson originated the term and the hashtag in 2013, articulating the power and accomplishments of Black women and girls, which to outsiders can seem to come “from thin air.” The hashtag has been popularized by Twitter users, celebrities, and activists who have embraced the concept of “Black girl magic” as a nod toward the intangible super-human quality required to survive under conditions Black women were never meant to survive. Sometimes, these reminders of the endurance and survival of which Black people are capable are sources of great cultural strength. Other times, myths of our ability to withstand pain and suffering leave us vulnerable to abuse and the internalization of the idea that our pain does not matter. The line between super-human “magic” and dehumanization is thin and permeable. The point at which the super-human construction of a Black cyborg falters occurs where James predicted: when the cost of being part machine, part angel, and part magical creature is too taxing for our humanity, our human minds and souls and bodies. The (somewhat limited) criticism for #BlackGirlMagic is just that: the Strong Black Woman archetype comes back to haunt us; the notion of Black girl magic does the work of relegating us to the inhuman before it begins to highlight our

strength. As actor and activist Jesse Williams stated in his acceptance speech for the Humanitarian Award at the 2016 BET Awards: “Just because we’re magic doesn’t mean we’re not real.”

I suspect that James’ angelic cyborg and Puar’s cyborgian goddess share an ancestry, born of resistance to the goddess/cyborg binary of Haraway’s framework and cousin to the virtual/physical new genre of humanity Greene Wade offers. By placing them in conversation, my intention is to embrace effective languages for the ways that Black feminists show up and exist across worlds, and to anticipate the ways those languages and ontologies can in turn be fashioned against us. In my interview with her, Imarisha implores readers to question developing technologies: “What are the potential outcomes [of this technology]? What are the repressive mechanisms that will be aided by this? And then, how can we subvert it and how can we challenge it? How can we disrupt it? And/or how can we appropriate it?” I in turn implore that we interrogate a kind of technology that has been used against us, in this case the cyborg, and appropriate it to suit our means.

(Re-)assembling the Cyborg for Black Feminist Futures

Arguably the most significant contribution to feminist cyborg theory since Haraway herself is Jasbir Puar’s essay, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess:

Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” which also grapples with identity as reflected in the figure of the cyborg. Puar’s essay was controversial for reasons completely unrelated to cyborgs in and of themselves; it is often misread as a call for the death of intersectionality theory. In fact, she grapples with the charred remains of Crenshaw’s framework, which sought to break binaries and re-center the marginalized and which instead has been used for the past twenty or so years to reinforce binaries and flatten identities. Rather than abandoning the conceptual underpinnings of intersectionality frameworks, she suggests that they be reworked, re-conceptualized, or at the very least supplemented by “a notion of assemblage.” She argues that the all-encompassing nature of intersectionality theory has meant a lack of real engagement with other frameworks that might be even more successful in the work of dismantling identity binaries. Puar puts forth Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of assemblage as one potential framework which deserves more attention in feminist theory, developing this framework further in her text *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007).

“Assemblage,” she notes, is a poor translation of the French word *agencement*, which, according to Puar, “means design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations—the focus not being on content but on relations, relations of patterns.” Contrasting these

webs of relationships and arrangements with the grid imagery of traffic intersections makes space for more possibility within identities, which are not always as stable as would be required if their components were discrete and self-contained. Where intersectionality “always produces an other,” assemblage/agencement works to deconstruct the notion of other by refusing to center normative identities like whiteness.

Invoking a host of feminist scholars who engage with science and technology, Puar posits the body as an unstable entity, fluid and changing and unable to be placed within grid-like intersecting categories of identity. Here, she makes a claim about the way we have conceptualized cyborgs in the field: that their placement at an intersection of “body” and “technology” reinforces the boundaries between those classifications, rather than working to blend and merge them. For Puar, Haraway’s cyborgs slip into the same binaristic trap as many who utilize intersectionality as a framework; Haraway articulates their blend of technology and humanity as a fusion of two different things, rather than as an entirely new being. To illustrate her point about intersections reinforcing constructed identity binaries, Puar asks that we interrogate the way the collapsed category “women of color” has been used to normalize white feminism and erase the specificity of theory meant to center Black women in particular.

Puar hopes that assemblage can do the work of breaking binaries that intersectionality has not. The theoretical harmony of “becoming-intersectional assemblage” is compelling to Puar, and rather than abandoning the goddess for the cyborg as Haraway has urged us to do since her *Cyborg Manifesto*, we are asked to envision a cyborgian goddess as a feminist theoretical assemblage, a being that contains all of the components, depth, and dimension that we afford other people when we operate with loving perception. As exemplified in the Black women protagonists in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower*, Puar envisions beings that need not find conflict between their divine and super-human qualities and cyborg identity. Adopting such an assemblage of the self—finding words, labels, and frameworks which apply to subjects rather than corralling them under cleanly-defined and delineated labels and identities—is part of the work of cyborgian-goddesses and part-time Black feminist cyborgs alike.

In her article, “New Genres of Being Human: World Making through Viral Blackness,” Ashleigh Greene Wade’s approach is similar to Puar’s with its shared roots in assemblage theory and commitment to thinking through new frameworks for being. From an explicitly Black feminist framework, she calls in Sylvia Wynter and Wehilye to a discussion of assemblage in order to power her central argument: we have shifted into a

new way of experiencing our own humanness and subjectivity, and it is an experience that fundamentally weaves our physical selves with our digital experiences. Weaving together Black techno-social practices and Black feminist notions of the human, Greene Wade produces a significant development toward theorizing the virtual-physical assemblage.

Central to Greene Wade's analysis is the idea of virality and viral Blackness. She names virality as "an affective condition in which content spreads widely, changing both the form of the original content and the channels through which it passes." She calls upon Puar and Patricia Clough as interlocutors in the conversation of virality, citing their introduction to the *Women's Studies Quarterly* volume devoted to the concept of virality which notes the spread of "viral" as a descriptor for things happening in biological, physical, financial, linguistic, and cultural realms. Greene Wade notes the fear that the word "viral" can evoke; the dominant use of viral is in discussion of spreading disease. While she urges us to expand beyond this fear and critically engage with the viral as a generative concept, I like to linger on the fear component of Black virality. The fear is essential for understanding how the Black viral has been tracked, surveilled, and covered: the white gaze looks upon Black viral phenomena with equal parts intrigue, confusion, and fear. Its effects are visible: social movements spring up, hashtags trend, bodies show

up, information is shared. The methods remain opaque, rendered as invisible as a virus. As Greene Wade notes, the most terrifying aspect of viral Blackness is its uncontrollable nature: “Within the carceral state, containment is extremely important for maintaining control, but the viral cannot be contained. While the source of viral content can be located, once it is released, control societies cannot dictate how or where it spreads.” This uncontrollable, mutable, spreading form of viral Blackness manages to blend the boundaries between the virtual and physical, to muddy binaries, and to resist legibility to whiteness. The subversion of control found in viral Blackness is part of what I will argue makes Black feminist cyborgs so effectively able to travel worlds. When mutability and shape-shifting themselves assist, viral Blackness becomes a powerful tool for achieving and maintaining a sense of cultural control.

The most critical aspect of the functioning of viral Blackness is the political force we are able to exert in digital spaces and manifest offline. Greene Wade asks us to consider the emergence of viral Blackness through #BlackLivesMatter (among other associated hashtags) and place it in the context of Black technological activism. She cites the mobilization efforts in 2014 around Ferguson, particularly organizing buses of protestors and funds and resources for protestors on the ground. She points to pre-social media periods, referencing events as far back as 1997, when Black women honed early-

Internet resources to organize the Million Woman March. In this project, I place this work in the framework of Anna Everett's "Black technophilia," the basic concept that Black people's love for and skill with technology is neither rare nor deficient but is part of the tradition of Black people's innovation in finding and creating tools for survival. In Greene Wade's analysis, hashtags, viral videos, and images from Black protests and demonstrations are not only tools, but also "material artifacts of viral Blackness." Greene Wade concludes her article by making the case that weak, appropriative, derivative hashtags stemming from #BlackLivesMatter serve to highlight the ways viral Blackness disquiets and disrupts white supremacy. #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter, for instance, rest on outmoded and fixed identity categories. She issues a call: "We have to release Blackness from essentialism so that it may be deployed toward liberation within a multiplicity of subjectivities." Moving toward conceiving of a Blackness that operates as a virtual-physical assemblage is part of that vision.

Though Greene Wade does not mention cyborgs, I place this essay and Puar's essay in conversation to illuminate my vision of the makeup of the cyborg: the Black feminist cyborg is a virtual-physical becoming-intersectional assemblage, slinking and changing from one world to the next, armored on digital platforms and able to shapeshift beyond the rigid grids of identity politics on technosocial platforms. This theory demands

that we re-think what a cyborg *is*. In the intellectual tradition of Puar, conceptualizing a cyborg as humanity and technology gracelessly mashed together leaves us with an indelicate and relatively worthless metaphor. If we think about a cyborg as a new genre of being, the way Sylvia Wynter via Greene Wade ask us to think about humans, it prepares us to imagine the cyborg as a virtual-physical assemblage equipped to both travel through and make worlds for Black feminists who seek refuge, feminist discourse, and methods for moving through online spaces. The part-time Black feminist cyborg is able to move as Black women so often do: as part of a side-hustle, as part of an informal, widespread Black aesthetic devoted to hustling in the margins, seeking and performing community support and maintenance, gaining insight from other places and people to be repurposed toward Black excellence. The Black feminist cyborg side-hustle is one which pays in security, heightened ability, heightened perception, and occasionally heightened suffering. Though the “side hustle” is a language of labor, it is labor performed for self and community. I take Joy James’ critique of Black cyborgs operating as super-human seriously, and argue that the part-time nature of this aesthetic allows for breaks, rest, and centering of the self rather than super-human strength and performance to please and serve whiteness and white people. The part-time hustle allows for anonymity: no one need know about your alternate cyborg mode of being. If we are all to embody a new

genre of being human and become virtual-physical assemblages, the part-time Black feminist cyborg theory serves as a method, a tool for the *becoming*. This concept quickly falls apart if there is commitment to the tool of technology as it has been traditionally discussed, even among feminist thinkers, as dominance and conquest through mechanical and digital means.

Technological Tools, Technological Weapons

Black feminist speculative fiction authors can offer us an alternative way of thinking through definitions of technology, often advocating a reassessment of what technology is, can be, and has been in the hands of Black people. In the interviews I conducted, I asked each participant two main questions related to the nature of technology: how have you conceived of or grappled with themes of technology in your speculative fiction work? And what would you consider the most dominant messages about Black people, bodies and technology that come from popular culture or mainstream speculative fiction?

In response to the first question, participants frequently mentioned cyborgs, the steampunk genre as a space to toy with our preconceived notions, and expansive definitions of technology. Tempest K. Bradford responded:

I mean, technically, again, the novel I'm writing now, it's steampunk, so there is a technology in it even though it's in the past. The technology is what is driving the commentary about social change[,] my commentary on

inequality[,] because in this story, it's set in ancient Egypt. The steampunk elements are copper scarab beetles that are really big. People ride around in them and they run on the power of steam generated by sunlight.

adrienne maree brown noted that she had grappled with themes of technology in her speculative fiction work “sort of flailingly? Like, I mostly imagine futures where technology is invisible or inside of us, cyborgish, enhancements. I also think of technology as how we do everything.”

Encapsulating both themes, Walidah Imarisha comments on the whitewashing of the definition of technology and steampunk as a site of reproducing racist and colonial narratives, and as a means of expanding and responding to definitions of technology for Black survival:

I think having conversations about what technology is, is also really important from the beginning. I think that we think of technology in a very Western, European white-centered frame. And so, I think that it's important to recognize that a lot of the ways we think about technology... I think that steampunk is a genre [that] actually is a really useful way to sort of externalize the implicit conversations that often happen about technology—the way... that technology is intimately linked to colonialism and the global spread of white supremacy [in] this sort of white racist utopian fantasy that white folks create when they create steampunk. So. You know, I think, again, if technology is not a useful term, then we just don't use that term. I do think it's useful to challenge that idea and saying, well, what is our definition of technology? Technology is actually much broader than just externalized robotic gadgets that often are what we think of when we think of technology. So I think that's one thing. I think the other thing, I definitely feel like I think about technology a lot. [I have] a couple pieces that center around [technology] that I'm working on. I'm actually working on developing a workshop that takes current developments and technology that folks think of as science fiction, but that are here now, and then has folks kind of imagine how this might be used against us in the future as folks try to change the world, because it will. And then develop potential strategies to challenge that... I don't think we can deny the digital technological advances that exist in this world. I think we do so at our own peril.

In line with their thinking about expanding both ideas of technology and “cyborgish” ways of being, I find something productive and playful about imagining taking on the label of a cyborg, which requires being built, shaped, taken apart, and re-imagined in the face of oppression. There are deep resonances between descriptions of the cyborg and the experiences of being a Black woman: feeling like a being both out of time and somehow advanced, forced to travel worlds the way Lugones describes, continually being drawn both into the past and the future, losing limbs and gaining playfulness along the way.

The cyborg concept has been considered by many feminist theorists in the decades since Haraway’s introduction and is increasingly relevant in the face of continuing technological advances. In *TechnoFeminism*, Judy Wajcman calls our attention to this fascination with the cyborg when she notes, “The cyborg has fired the feminist imagination. It crystallizes our pleasure in, desire for, and anxiety about technological transcendence. Perhaps this, and the infinite flexibility of what has become the postmodern icon, explains its rhetorical force.” Cyborg metaphors about the Black body and Black experience are present in literature, art, popular culture, and academic theory; indeed, Haraway specifically mentions the Black speculative fiction endeavors of Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler in her manifesto, appreciating them among other prolific feminist science fiction writers as “storytellers exploring what it means to be embodied in

high tech worlds,” and that they operate as “theorists for cyborgs.” Women of color is the category of coalition that Lugones writes about, framing their unique ability for world-traveling as a result of marginalized positionality. The cyborg in Haraway’s conception is also portrayed as an ideal creature for moving “between worlds,” as Lugones describes them, or, into and out of the margins. Fused with technology and flesh, the vulnerability and adaptability of the cyborg allows for the variety of shifts in perspective required for moving between worlds—perception, vulnerability, and adaptability being kinds of technologies of their own.

Moving into Digital Worlds

The Black feminist cyborg resists the assumption that technology is the province of white ingenuity and intelligence, and that technological engagement is incompatible with Black people and Black culture. Claiming space in discourses of social technologies can push back against the limited kinds of knowledge production that people of color can produce that is legible within white supremacy. A modern cyborg still lives in a human-dominated world with a very narrow conception of humanity. As Haraway acknowledges science fiction writers as cyborg theorists, I also turn to the writers I interviewed for their reflections on Black bodies and technology. Their contributions offer vital insights into both the genre of science fiction and real-world digital landscapes. Black women

operating as part-time cyborgs must move through these digital worlds, which provide new conditions for loving perception. A Black feminist cyborg is continually adapting to digital worlds where physical safety is less likely to be threatened and our access to one another is unprecedented. A Black feminist cyborg practical aesthetic is ideal for traveling to these worlds mediated through social media platforms, where we extend our Blackness beyond our physical bodies and simultaneously become aware of the embodied ways technology mediates and fuses with our lived realities.

Black Cyborgs Moving Forward

I have positioned the Black feminist cyborg as an ontological approach and a creature of fiction, but I would be remiss if I did not mention the rapidly closing gap between the cyborg as fiction and the cyborg as reality. In my interview with speculative fiction author Walidah Imarisha, the subject of bio-hacking was discussed in relationship to some of her latest writing and activist work. For example, she is in the process of developing a workshop which has participants think about concepts like bio-hacking, the import of technological and mechanical tools into one's body, often imagined as science fiction but already part of reality, and strategize ways to combat their inevitable use against Black bodies. Her upcoming fictional work incorporates bio-hacking themes to underscore both the anxiety about technological additions to bodies and Black resistance

to methods of white social control over Black bodies. Citing facial recognition software newly employed in airports and the recent trend of corporations bio-hacking willing employees with identifying chips, she tells an oppositional story of a dystopic world in which characters are guided by self-implanted chips that point them in the direction of the North Star. In the interview, she describes the research she conducted for background in her story. She says, with both the excitement and trepidation that the idea of fusion with technology, especially for Black people, can bring: “The piece I was reading about was folks, like, bio-hacking themselves and becoming cyborgs! And getting superhero powers, basically. I was like, this shit is real, y’all, people are cyborgs right now!”

Imarisha calls our attention to the narrowing divide between the cyborg as a creature of fiction and a creature of reality and imagines the way Black people can use technology to combat white supremacy. This speculative work through a Black feminist lens is imperative, because it challenges the notion that Black people can only interact with technology to serve white supremacist aims, and it rejects the erasure of Black people’s long, rich relationship with science and technology. It is transgressive in that it rejects the notion that Black people’s bodies and minds operate as machines and tools, having technology used on and through them. As I demonstrate in chapter four, Black people

harness the technological tools available to them and created by them. As social media drives much of Trump-era political discourse, Black people use it to facilitate cultural conversations, strategize for livable and desirable futures, and center the experiences of marginalized people. The Black feminist part-time cyborg aesthetic is a way to visualize the experience of moving in between the digital and physical, with room for both worlds. In the following chapter, I assess examples of world-traveling Black part-time cyborgs from popular media. These examples from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and the discography of Janelle Monáe illuminate the way loving perception partnered with cyborg theory can provide a method for fruitful Black feminist world traveling, self-expression, and play.

K. Tempest Bradford on Androids and Allegory

Caitlin: What would you consider the most dominant messages about Black people, bodies and technology that come from popular culture or from mainstream speculative fiction?

Tempest Bradford: The dominant message from mainstream culture is definitely that Black bodies are expendable and Black bodies are not as worthy as white bodies. This is a message that then gets compounded because then you have Black bodies that are

considered fat. They're even more degraded. "Oh, how dare you be fat and Black and a woman! What's wrong with you?" That's the messaging that comes over and over in the Western world.

This is one thing that actually you have to think about a lot because it's constantly coming at you. But I was recently in Egypt to do research for my book. One of our tour guys was an Egyptian man. He was talking to me about different conceptions of what is beautiful and what is considered valuable and worthy in bodies in Egypt and in different parts of Egypt.

Their conception of what is beautiful and what is acceptable is vastly different from America. Bodies of many different sizes are considered beautiful or considered acceptable. Obviously because it's Egypt, bodies that are light brown. That's the desirable thing.

It made me sort of wonder what would it have been like to grow up in a place where my body is the default acceptable. That is something that I've never been able to experience. It does definitely have a huge impact. And then in speculative fiction, I think that there

are a lot of speculative fiction authors that skirt talking about that. That you don't find too many fat people in space. Why wouldn't you find them there? They're like, "No they're not there." And you don't find too many Black and brown bodies in space. Why wouldn't they be there? They're also not allowed to be in fantasies even though we have dragons. Dragons we can have, we can't have Black people.

I was also talking at the Janelle Monáe panel about the allegory stuff where androids are used as an allegory for the other. Or Orcs are used as an allegory for the other. Whatever. We don't ever just have—why don't we just have some Black people so we can talk about this? They're like, "No, no it has to be an allegory."

But then androids are so often white people. They just have the features of white people. Even if they don't have "white skin," it's very clear that these androids are white people. But yet, they're to stand in for marginalized people who are very often people of color. So you have this weird thing where you've got white-looking androids and they're struggling. As much as I love Data, I'm like, "But that dude," well, technically Brent Spiner is Jewish. So there can be a conversation about whether or not as a Jewish person he counts as white.

But for a lot of people he's white passing. I love Data, but basically he's a white android.

Data struggles for personhood and whatnot. Is he a slave or is he not a slave? I

understand that conversation, but Data's a white dude.

What was the other... all the androids in the *Alien* franchise are white dudes. There were some other androids... I wrote an essay about this recently. Some other android that I was like, "That android was also a white dude." But they're here to talk to you about oppression. I'm like, "Ah, I don't like that," because it sort of [evades] responsibility for it. This is why I love Janelle Monáe's work so much because she's like, "But [if] the android's going to be other, then the android needs to be other and you have to contend with that. You have to contend with the fact that you're literally buying and selling and trying to subjugate these persons, whether they're artificial constructs or not. It's not a coincidence that they end up looking like Black people.

I firmly believe that. If we were going to create an alien race to enslave them, then we would just make them look like Black people because it would just be easier. BSG is the other one, *Battlestar Galactica*. There was a wider range of races shown in the android

community but it never seemed to be really clear what they were really trying to do with that. Whether or not they thought about the consequences of that. So it gets muddy there.

Caitlin: I love that. In my own work, I'm doing a ton of cyborg theory, and I'm trying to highlight the tension that white writers and white creators feel when they're producing something that's supposed to be very technologically advanced, something that they consider the providence of white men. So the androids often look white and look like [men]. But it's supposed to be the allegorical stand-in for essentially Black bodies. I appreciate you calling attention to that.

Chapter Two: Cyborgs and Other Dirty Computers: Untangling the Dreamer and the Dream

On the Subject of Star Trek

Caitlin: I'm really excited to pick your brain about a couple of things. I've got some basic questions, and then a couple of specific questions [about your work] if that's all right. So I'd like to start with you telling me: how did you first become interested in speculative fiction?

Walidah Imarisha: I mean, I've always been interested in it. Since I was a kid. My earliest memory is watching *Star Trek: The Original Series*. So. I came by it naturally. Yeah. So it has been something that has been a part of my life, the entirety of my life.

Caitlin: Sure, absolutely. You know I get that answer a lot. *Star Trek* always comes out.

Walidah Imarisha: It's pervasive.

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Caitlin: The first [question] is: how did you first become interested in speculative fiction?

Tempest Bradford: I think I can blame my mother for this one because one of my earliest memories is watching *The Search for Spock* when it came on television. My mother had been a really big fan of the original *Star Trek*. So I became sort of a fan and it was weird because it was a really long time before I actually watched the original *Star Trek*. I was a fan of the movies. There were so many times when I was like, "Who is that

guy? Where's Scotty?" And my mom is like, "That's Scotty." And I was like, "What? This is the weirdest. Why?"

So yeah, movies first. Yeah, I think that my interest in science fiction definitely dates to watching *Star Trek* as a kid.

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Caitlin: Thank you again for helping me out, Jennifer Cross. My first question to kind of open things up: how did you first become interested in speculative fiction?

Jennifer Cross: So, my parents are Trekkies. Go figure. So, I am an unabashed second-generation Trekker. And I guess it's for the same reason a lot of Black people—specifically Black women and femmes—are drawn to [the] original *Star Trek* is because we get to see a Black woman who is a senior officer...

Caitlin: Mmhmm, and she ain't no maid.

Jennifer Cross: Exactly! Like what Whoopi Goldberg said when she watched *Star Trek* and she said, "Look, mama! There's a Black woman on television and she isn't a maid or a slave or anything like that." And I find it really interesting that Whoopi Goldberg went on to be a cast member of [*Star Trek:*] *The Next Generation*. And... oh my God, I'm forgetting her name. Why am I forgetting her name? This is embarrassing. The, um—Leslie... from *Saturday Night Live*, she was in *Ghostbusters*?

Caitlin: Oh, yeah! Leslie Jones.

Jennifer Cross: Leslie Jones! Leslie Jones actually said on *The View* that she wouldn't be doing comedy and science fiction if it weren't for Whoopi Goldberg. So I love this cycle of how we're passing down our influence and our work to each other. That is what

has kept me involved in speculative fiction. Also recently it's just like this emergence of this... supernova of Black speculative fiction writers that has happened over the last ten years. I mean, don't get me wrong—we were always there. But now, thanks in part to social media, and this large democratization of media industries via, um, crowdsourcing or YouTube even, or, like, Patreon? There are more and more of us being able to put our work out there.

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Caitlin: How did you first become interested in speculative fiction?

adrienne maree brown: My father was a Trekkie—I never considered not being interested. :)

PREACHER: Rest easy, Brother Benny. You have walked in the path of the Prophets.

There is no greater glory.

BENNY: Tell me, please. Who am I?

PREACHER: Don't you know?

BENNY: Tell me.

PREACHER: You're the dreamer and the dream.

(There are stars streaking past the rear windows.)

Introduction

Avid *Star Trek* fans may recognize this “dreamer and the dream” passage from a culturally influential episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, “Far Beyond the Stars.”²¹ Assessed from an understanding of loving perception as explored in the previous chapter, I apply the concepts of loving perception and the “dreamer and the dream” to two modern media examples: the story of a Black space commander grappling with science fiction’s racist history in “Far Beyond the Stars,” and musical artist Janelle Monáe’s “emotion picture” music video for her album *Dirty Computer*; a testimony of Black queer loving perception told through cyborgs and androids as allegorical tools. This chapter begins with a description of “Far Beyond the Stars,” introducing the idea of the “dreamer and the dream.” This serves to propel a discussion of the outcomes of imagining Black people and Black bodies fused with technology, and the “cyborgish” methods that enable Black cyborgs’ world traveling. I then describe the evidence of a Black feminist cyborg aesthetic found in *Dirty Computer*, which can serve as a model for world traveling with loving perception. When operating from an oppositional position of loving perception, as demonstrated in both *Dirty Computer* and “Far Beyond the Stars,” I argue that we open up access to Black cultural lessons, resources, and warnings for Black feminist world travel with an eye toward technological engagement and cultural memory. Lastly, I analyze “Far Beyond the Stars” and *Dirty Computer* alongside Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) through andre m. carrington’s articulation of the qualities of the Black speculative.

Boldly Going to Racial Pasts and Futures: The *Star Trek* Universe

²¹ “Far Beyond the Stars,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, February 11, 1998

As my participants have noted in their comments about *Star Trek*, the show is a point of entry for many science fiction fans. A franchise with a complex legacy, *Star Trek: The Original Series* was created by Gene Roddenberry. Roddenberry was many things: a veteran of World War II, a former police officer with the LAPD, a pilot and aeronautics specialist.²² He left his flying career behind when he encountered television, went to Hollywood, and got his break with the creation and production of *Star Trek* in 1966.²³

The premise of the show and subsequent series is this: in the 2200s, humans have evolved beyond their need to oppress, subjugate, or colonize. All modern forms of racism and sexism have been eradicated on earth. The mission of Starfleet, Earth's space force with a traditional military structure, is one of scientific and cultural exploration, rescue, and support. Weapons and war are utilized only in dire circumstances or for defense once diplomatic efforts have failed. The humans of earth have joined with other planets and life forms to create the United Federation of Planets: an organization with values of mutual peace-keeping and discovery somewhat akin to the United Nations. Before each episode of the *Original Series*, viewers are welcomed with Roddenberry's articulation of the *Star Trek* premise: "Space...the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise, its five-year mission:

²² "Gene Roddenberry Biography," Roddenberry, August 14, 2017, <https://www.rodtenberry.com/bios/>

²³ Daniel Bernardi, *Star Trek and History Race-Ing toward a White Future* p. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1999)

...to explore strange new worlds
...to seek out new life and new civilizations
...to boldly go where no man has gone before.”²⁴

The explicit goal of Starfleet in their intergalactic activities is not one of conquest, warring, or domination. This was a deliberate shift from the stories found in mainstream science fiction during the 1950s and early 1960s. In fact, the “prime directive” of all Starfleet activity is a direct response to the harms of colonialism and imperialism: Starfleet is forbidden to interfere in the habitats, cultures, or technology of developing worlds.²⁵ Officers and teams are not allowed to interact with alien beings or environments until their worlds are on the precipice of advanced space travel.²⁶ This shift, while imperfect and far from the utopia Roddenberry imagined, set *Star Trek* apart from stories of arrogant perception wherein white men “boldly go” where they please with few ethical stipulations about their impact.²⁷

One of my earliest childhood memories is watching *Star Trek* sandwiched between my parents. A pair of Black nerds raising a Black nerd, they insisted I watch *Star Trek* and other science fiction media. This insistence was based on more than simple enjoyment; they worked deliberately to ensure that I saw positive representations of Blackness like those in *Star Trek*. The skewed depictions of Blackness I was otherwise

²⁴ “Gene Roddenberry Biography,” Roddenberry, August 14, 2017, <https://www.rodtenberry.com/bios>

²⁵ A response, though within a military structure and participating in colonial activities, not necessarily a sufficient response to those concerns.

²⁶ Micheal Charles Pounds, “Explorers’ –Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,” *African Identities* 7, no. 2 (2009): p. 210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725840902808892>

²⁷ Nichelle Nichols mentions in her memoir that Roddenberry’s original pilot was critiqued by NBC television executives for lacking “action,” something she clarifies means “violence” in this context. P.140

exposed to promoted damaging stereotypes of Black people as unintelligent, unproductive, and uninventive. By contrast, *Trek* offered new possibilities: I saw brilliant Black engineers, like Geordi LaForge from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and capable, highly-ranked officers like Nyota Uhura from *The Original Series*.

Nichelle Nichols played Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, a language and culture specialist, during *Star Trek*'s original series run from 1966 to 1969. The role was groundbreaking at the time, featuring a Black woman who was neither servant nor slave to white people. In her role, Nichols also carried out the first televised interracial kiss.²⁸ The impacts of Nichols' visibility were not lost on Civil Rights Movement leaders. During an NAACP meeting, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to her personally about her cultural influence. As Nichols recounts in her memoir *Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories* (1994), King professed to her during that meeting that he was a great fan, allowing his children to stay up late to watch the program. When Nichols suggested that she might leave the show to pursue other opportunities, King persuaded her to stay, insisting that her historic work in science fiction television was inspiring generations of Black activists, thinkers, and writers.²⁹

The multicultural vision of *Trek* resonated with the charged political times, cementing its place in the science fiction, media studies, and cultural studies canons. As andre carrington notes of the show's impact:

Star Trek famously showcased a "final frontier" for its audience, and a diverse cast seemed to embody the future on its set. It changed the way

²⁸ Nichelle Nichols, *Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories* pp. 194-197 (Boxtree, 1996)

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 164-165

television audiences thought about space and the way that critics and professionals concerned with space related to television audiences; to do so it had to change the way we thought about race, gender, and sexuality.³⁰

Roddenberry's influence on the way television audiences think about those topics is exemplified in his creation of characters of color and his investment in temperance and equality. In a genre that echoes the broader popular culture's definition of Blackness as Black manhood, *Star Trek* breaks the mold in creating Black women characters who are complex, competent, and in professional roles no more service-oriented than any other within the militaristic setting of *Star Trek's* exploratory organization Starfleet. In a genre with a history of erasing the futures and identities of people of color, *Star Trek* places them throughout its ranks, planets, and cultures real and imagined.

Star Trek had several successful spinoff and sequel series, as well as several movies, which maintain the integrity of Roddenberry's vision. One of those series, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, which ran from 1993 to 1999, was a first in a franchise of firsts. To date, it is one of the only mainstream science fiction television shows featuring a Black lead. Black actor Avery Brooks won the part of Benjamin Sisko, a 24th-century Starfleet captain and commander of a space station, from a large pool of actors of multiple racial backgrounds who auditioned for the role.³¹ The character was developed in traditional *Star Trek* fashion, without commentary on race or ethnicity beyond being human. Sisko's defining characteristic—something that differentiates him from the other

³⁰ andré m. carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* p. 68

³¹ Lisa Doris Alexander, "Far Beyond the Stars: The Framing of Blackness in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 44, no. 3 (February 2016): p. 151, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2016.1142418>

captains and commanders in the *Star Trek* universe—is the fact that he is a single father. His son, Jake, lives with him aboard the space station, and much of the show revolves around the task of parenting and their relationship as father and son.³²

For the first time in *Star Trek* history, the premise of *Deep Space Nine* takes audiences to a space station of the same name rather than a star ship. Set in the 24th century, the story opens against a backdrop of political and social unrest. The Cardassian and Bajoran people have been in conflict there for decades. The Cardassians, moneyed, well-armed, and warlike, have oppressed the Bajoran people and occupied their lands. Eventually, Bajoran resistance efforts pay off: they successfully overthrow Cardassian rule through sustained and bloody guerilla warfare. Knowing that their position in the region is vulnerable and ripe for exploitation or another attack from the Cardassians, the emergency government of Bajor invites Starfleet presence. It is their hope that a partnership with Starfleet will help stabilize Bajor and their position at Deep Space Nine, which is found to be at the entrance of a stable wormhole, a passage which connects two far-flung quadrants of the galaxy. Both Starfleet and the Bajoran government have an eye toward Bajor's entry into the United Federation of Planets post-stabilization.

However, the personal and political begin to blend as Sisko realizes he has a special role to fill in the Bajoran system of religion and spirituality. The Bajoran people believe that their god figures, the Prophets, reside inside of the stable wormhole next to Deep Space Nine. Sisko, experiencing vivid visions of the Bajoran Prophets and their

³² Many within Black and media studies have commented on the unique social commentary that comes in representing a single Black father raising his son on television in the 1990s. One popular article that address this important dynamic: Angelica Jade Bastién, “Deep Space Nine Is TV’s Most Revolutionary Depiction of Black Fatherhood,” *Vulture* (*Vulture*, January 19, 2018), <https://www.vulture.com/2018/01/deep-space-nine-revolutionary-depiction-of-Black-fatherhood.html>

questions for him, serves as a catalyst for connection between the Prophets and the Bajoran people. His title is “The Emissary,” and he must maintain a careful balance of spiritual, interpersonal, and political shrewdness and understanding in order to appease all of the parties invested in the future of Deep Space Nine and its wormhole.

Due to Brooks’ influence, the initiative taken by showrunners Michael Piller and Ira Steven Behr, or a combination of the two, *Deep Space Nine*’s approach to race and racism was different: Sisko’s identity, rather than being emptied out and deemed irrelevant in a post-racism world, was present in both overt and subtle ways. This remains one of the more progressive arguments in the science fiction television canon: Benjamin Sisko’s Blackness mattered to him and his family, even without the perpetuation of anti-Blackness into the future. The influence of Avery Brooks and the influence of his Blackness are found throughout the show. In her article “Far Beyond the Stars: The Framing of Blackness in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*,” Lisa Doris Alexander comments on the many ways that Sisko’s and his son Jake’s Blackness shows up over the course of the series: their family has roots in Louisiana, and the series incorporates visits home to Sisko’s father in New Orleans and Cajun cooking by hand. The commander has an affinity for African art, which he showcases on Deep Space Nine, and he demonstrates his love for the sport of baseball and the old Negro Leagues through the semi-regular donning of a Homestead Grays team cap.³³ These details, while small, are significant in their rarity within the “color-blind” approach to science fiction characters and stories. Alexander explains this rarity: “What makes the decision to include connections to

³³ Lisa Doris Alexander, “Far Beyond the Stars: The Framing of Blackness in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*,” p. 152

African and African-American history and culture [as] part of Sisko’s background unique is the fact that it seems wholly inconsistent with Trek’s utopian vision of the future that conflates the demise of racism with the demise of the importance of racial identity.”³⁴ In working collectively to develop this character, the showrunners, writers, directors, and actors contribute to an effort in loving perception, inhabiting the world of a Black man from the future who honors his connections to culture and the past.

Black Dreamers, Black Dreams

During the *Deep Space Nine* episode “Far Beyond the Stars,” Benjamin Sisko is pulled back in time through a series of lifelike visions to the United States in the late 1950s. This is a period known within the science fiction genre as the bloom of many traditional authors who would eventually constitute the science fiction canon, and known outside of the genre as a time rife with racial tension as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. In this period, Sisko inhabits a man named Benny Russell, a struggling science fiction writer. Though employed at a popular science fiction magazine, readers and curators alike marginalize Benny and whitewash his stories, removing Black characters during the editing process.

As experienced by many Black writers across genres, the opportunity to publish widely or for general audiences about the experiences and dreams of Black people during science fiction’s “Golden Age” posed a threat to white supremacy’s hold in this period of increasing racial and political tension. Benny’s vision, the success and mere existence of a Black authority figure in a futuristic, high-tech, high-stakes environment, would have

³⁴ *Ibid* p. 151

been an unacceptable challenge to the status quo. Preserving the future as the providence of white men was expected, and a project worth defending. It is so in “Far Beyond the Stars”: resistance to the idea of Black leadership in Benny’s story mounts, along with racist pressures in his personal life and violent encounters with the state, escalating until the full issue of their magazine is pulled and Benny is fired for refusing to change the characters in his story. Benny’s stress and grief reach their climax and his fragile hold on his mental health is fractured. An apparent breakdown sends him to the hospital.

Perched in an ambulance beside his community’s local street preacher, Benny begins to doubt his reality, uncertain whether he is Benny Russell, the science fiction writer or Benjamin Sisko, the Starfleet captain. The effect is disorienting: the audience, despite knowing that the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* saga will continue in the hands of Benjamin Sisko, is not provided the usual signals of certainty, the comfort of humor designed to lighten the tone, or a tidy, dismissive explanation for his experiences. As the preacher tells him that he is both “the dreamer and the dream,” stars reminiscent of the familiar exterior view of *Deep Space Nine*’s space station come into view, further confusing the lines between the realities of Benjamin Sisko and Benny Russell, shortening the distance between the characters in a powerful statement designed to unsettle and provoke members of the science fiction community.

The preacher’s message, cryptic as it may have seemed to Benny, contains a critical concept. Benny and Benjamin do not have to choose which reality they occupy, because the realities are not mutually exclusive. Benny *is* both: he contains both the dream he created of the future and the truth of Benjamin Sisko’s leadership, agency, and

intelligence. The violence of his present and past may serve to obscure and confuse these truths, but ultimately, he cannot escape that tension. Black people have this duality, expressed as both internal and external forces across time, genres, and diaspora. It echoes the idea of double-consciousness coined by W.E.B. DuBois and extended by many critical race scholars to address the friction between self-knowledge and damaging anti-Black societal narratives. In this case, the fictional setting serves to heighten and illustrate this tension, something I argue is a valuable use of the science fiction genre's many resources; time travel, space travel, and alternate reality all cooperate to emphasize the impact of anti-Blackness, rather than obscuring it by removing the real social conditions from their context.

In the *Star Trek* universe, visits to the past are usually rosy: introductions to great minds and heroes of history and fiction like Leonardo DaVinci, Sherlock Holmes, or Albert Einstein. These encounters with history follow basic patterns: the figures are brought in, often through the virtual reality programmable play and activity space called the Holodeck, to provide counsel, help solve problems aboard the ship, or seemingly provide a creative thrill for the writers of the episode. This is not to say that this episode is the first or only one to engage with these themes, or even that this is rare in the *Star Trek* universe: the franchise often tackles issues of oppression, social hierarchy, and personal loss. However, this episode executes a notable shift from whimsy and metaphor to concrete history in order to address racism as the science fiction community has experienced it in our reality, in the United States. As carrington writes in his description of "Far Beyond the Stars," the episode does "...deviate from *Star Trek's* typical racial

politics in one crucial way: [it replaces] allegory with history.”³⁵ It engages earnestly with the experience of Black Americans operating under realistic conditions, weighed down by the effects of double and triple consciousness: knowing Black strength, capability, and intelligence, while regularly hearing otherwise from narrators held up by the genre and in our culture who approach stories and people with arrogant perception.

Carrington makes an adjacent argument, employing this “chiastic formulation” of the whiteness of science fiction and the speculative fiction of Blackness, “invok[ing] the ways in which we can frame the meaning of Blackness in speculative fiction and media through a rhetorical structure characteristic of Black speech.”³⁶ Said another way, if it is true, as Samuel Delany tells us, that science fiction is its own kind of language³⁷, then Black speculative fiction is African American Vernacular English. It is a language that has different meanings and inflections for the writers and their communities, a language that calls Black people in when they encounter it. White science fiction, when defined by its whiteness and arrogant perception, fantasizes, fears, and manifests. Black speculative fiction mirrors, prophesies, haunts, and codes our survival in its lines. “Far Beyond the Stars” contains no cyborgs, no hosts, no new technologies. Its contribution to those thinking through notions of race, fiction, and technology is in the nature of the “dreamer and the dream” position of Black people performing and creating work that challenges white supremacy. It is in the ability of the writers, in this case, all white men, to navigate

³⁵ andré m. carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* p.161 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 21

³⁷ Samuel Delany. *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 2009.)

this sensitive terrain from a politic of opposition and loving perception which positions Benny as a thoughtful world traveler. Benny has contributions to make, which are undone and undermined by the culture and complicit actors surrounding him, despite excitement about science fiction's ability to break boundaries and expand possibilities. These conditions spoke to a generation of Black science fiction fans and creators, who have in turn worked toward rupturing the boundaries that limit expression, encountering resistance from both in-genre and societal sources.

Coding Survival: Cultural Memory and Encounters with the State in *Dirty Computer*

Similar themes of cultural memory, resistance to the state, and the mental burdens of oppression are found in the art of Black cultural figures from today's science fiction landscape. Janelle Monáe in particular has forged a bridge between music, Black futurism, cyborg theory, and Black liberation. Monáe's first three music releases preceding *Dirty Computer* are also science fiction storytelling in musical form. Her 2008 debut EP with Bad Boy records, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, is deeply inspired by the 1927 German science fiction film *Metropolis*. In the Fritz Lang-directed film, a dystopic future is the landscape for a socially stratified culture in which the wealthy son of a political leader falls in love with a woman from the metropolis' underclass. In *Metropolis: Suite One*, Monáe tells a similar story of forbidden love in which an oppressed class of androids and cyborgs (who possess many cultural markers of Blackness) are not allowed to have romantic relationships with humans. One of Monáe's

alter-ego characters Cindy Mayweather is an android who breaks this social taboo and falls in love with a human man, Anthony Greendown.

Monáe has described Cindy Mayweather and her interpretations of androids as the “new other” as our technology and society evolves. Her employment of Cindy is a claim that Blackness is made to extend itself and cover androids and cyborgs alike in this marked racial category. An alternative reading of Monáe’s use of cyborg imagery argues that the oppressed, dehumanized cyborgs in her fictitious reality are aligned with Blackness as a *result* of their oppression and domination in society, re-emphasizing Blackness as a categorizing technology. In the titular song from her 2013 album *The Electric Lady*, Monáe promises to “reprogram your mind” and urges us to “Come on, get in—my spaceship leaves at ten.”³⁸ Many listeners may interpret this lyric as an empty nod to her “electro-sophisti-funky” futuristic aesthetic. Those tracing the development of this story know that this summons is more than escapism: she foreshadows a departure from the current conditions of the world, beckoning those who may feel the call of feminist world-traveling.

I first encountered Janelle Monáe as a teenager in 2009, live. I had not heard of her, but I was attending a music and art festival in Seattle, Washington called Bumbershoot. Performing at an outdoor tent in mid-afternoon, she did not have the following and notoriety she does now: since then, she has released her three albums, *The ArchAndroid* (2010), *The Electric Lady* (2013), and *Dirty Computer* (2018), and acted in

³⁸ Janelle Monae, “Janelle Monáe (Ft. Solange) – Electric Lady,” Genius, July 30, 2014, <https://genius.com/Janelle-monae-electric-lady-lyrics>

award-winning films with themes of Black empowerment, like *Hidden Figures* (2016), Academy Award winner *Moonlight* (2016), and *Harriet* (2019). Growing up Black and queer in the whiteness of the Pacific Northwest, particularly in Oregon—which I occasionally refer to as the “sunken place” in the tradition of Jordan Peele’s metaphor for lack of political and racial consciousness in his film *Get Out*—seeing Monáe perform in the language of speculative fiction, something I felt was my language, had impact. She was wearing a tailored suit that exemplified her soft-butch, queer-coded early-career aesthetic. She used her trembling, jerking robotic movements paired with smooth moonwalking around the stage as she sang. Her energy drew a small crowd out on the lawn. She made a reference to the Borg, a cyborg collective of antagonists in the *Star Trek* franchise. During one especially memorable number, she finger-painted on cream-colored canvases, and hurled them, still wet, into the audience as she danced. Her performance flirted with the surreal and created a visual of Otherhood in her simultaneous performance of Blackness and cyborg, an exercise in speculative playfulness. A decade later, her inclusion here as an example of loving perception and Black feminist part-time cyborgs is in line with the development and explosion of Afrofuturism as a subgenre and aesthetic.

Dirty Computer extends the premise of the ArchAndroid to its most political path. Monáe released a long-form narrative music video including each song from her album; in it, she tracks the Black, queer, and feminist resistance movement which emerges from encountering a fascist state intent on erasing cultural memories of its more troublesome inhabitants unwilling to capitulate to the demand for uniformity.

In *Dirty Computer*, we enter immediately into a world which frames the state as an antagonistic and punitive site of oppression. The state is motivated to consolidate power and stamp out that which does not align with its ideas of normativity and uniformity. We are greeted with exposition which informs us: “They started calling us computers. People began vanishing, and the Cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty, it was only a matter of time.”³⁹ So begins an adventure in which we follow Jane 57821, a recurring android character from her continuing story, who has been captured by the state as a “dirty computer,” and is subjected to the erasure of her memories during a procedure called “Nevermind.” During this process, we are exposed to her memories and the story of political resistance and queer love they hold.

We first see the free Jane traveling via futuristic car with another Black woman passenger to an area under strict surveillance by robotic representatives of the authoritarian state, one of whom pulls them over by sounding a siren and requests their identification. We are treated to a very familiar scene despite the unknown context: the women tense and exchange a knowing look as they slow the vehicle and are approached. As the bot scans their badges and Jane’s retinas, granting them clearance, the anticipation of a conflict dissipates as quickly as it had arrived to make its statement about the universe we are entering. The bot flies away, prompting another knowing look between the passengers: with smiles, the women exit the vehicle and move to the trunk, revealing

³⁹ *Dirty Computer*, 2018. <https://youtu.be/jdH2Sy-BINE>.

several other Black women hiding within, suggesting lack of proper (or any) registration or clearance documentation for the undeclared members of the group. With all accounted for, the women continue on their ride.

This encounter sets the tone for the rest of the film, a dizzying display of disobedience to authority and wild, queer joy. Protest scenes and state violence are depicted in Jane's memory alongside parties filled with "dirty computer" nonconformists; her love interests and musings about sex span genders and overlapping timelines. These dirty computer activities of daily life are held up alongside political activity: one never outweighs the other, nor are they ever fully separated from one another. This duality heightens the effectiveness of the allegory she has chosen in the computer rhetoric. This association of uncleanliness with technology is an unexpected way to continue to center oppression at the hands of the state. The term is chosen carefully. The computers are not malfunctioning, broken, destroyed, or in error— metaphors that can obscure the malicious nature of fascism by dehumanizing its victims and which lean heavily on traditional narratives about the dominance of technology. With this stimulating pseudo-metaphor, Monáe both humanizes her androids and maintains focus on the entity being critiqued: the state, particularly a rigid, repressive, fascist state powered by fear and uniformity, particularly fixated upon race, class, and sexuality.

In the Nevermind facility, all is not well as Jane attempts to resist efforts to clear her memory. The act is being performed by two white men, the only white men who appear in the film without overt queer coding. Models of uniformity, they fulfill a limited

role in what appears to be a much larger system. As they work with the Nevermind technology, they squabble internally about the importance of her particular memories.

It is no mistake that the only white men we see outside of explicitly queer and non-normative settings are the “clearers,” tasked with deleting memory regardless of the associated cultural value of those memories or their understanding of and engagement with it. The conflict they experience over their duties is limited; they are shuttered by their own privilege and compliance with the state. In a perceptive observation of the state’s failures, the film encourages the audience to engage in critique without flattening the antagonistic force to sheer villainy.

Nevermind is the state’s solution to this clear-eyed opposition in its radicals. I argue that Nevermind serves as a symbol of movement and social justice fatigue, not just a simple forgetting. The exhaustion that comes from continuing a fight—from being pressed into uniformity, to being kept from community and liberation—leads to a fatigue that leaves Black people and queer people weary enough to say “never mind” rather than to continue in what feels like endless or insurmountable struggle. The message calls us to remember that while the burden of blame for forgetting does not lie upon the shoulders of the oppressed, it is our responsibility to remember, to seed our cultural production so that it grows, is passed down, is communicated in ways that can be readily understood and accessed by others for their own use and understanding. The audience is compelled to appreciate both the personal sense of loss Jane experiences in losing her memories, and the implication that the loss of both memory and drive can have devastating effects on social justice in terms of action and sustainability.

Things appear hopeless for Jane when she encounters her girlfriend, played by Tessa Thompson, whose memories have been erased and who has been subdued into compliance. Jane desperately attempts to rehabilitate her and remind her of their connection to one another, but the devastation is twofold: Jane's girlfriend has not only forgotten her and her own inclination to mistrust the state but is now tasked with participating in the removal of Jane's memories. The message here is not subtle: the state, or any force with enough power to command conformity, will use your own people against you should it successfully corrupt their ideology.

Jane's knowledge that "it be your own people" is not used as a means to condemn her partner, or any other dirty computer subjected to the Nevermind process. Rather, she takes it upon herself to rectify the loss of cultural and personal memory. Her stance is clear: fascist regimes require disruption. Extreme nationalism requires disruption. And queer communities, Black communities, communities whose lives and choices are perceived as disruptive in and of themselves are often our vulnerable front lines against fascism's encroachment upon social freedoms.

Ultimately, Jane finds success through peaceful but vigorous direct action. Things initially appear lost when, upon recovering her girlfriend's memory, she is escorted to the final stage of the Nevermind process. The last scene before the credits is of Jane approaching a man we know to be her other partner, introducing herself not as Jane, but as "Mary," a "torch" meant to bring him "from the darkness to the light." It appears the memory erasure and subsequent assimilation have been successful, but the scenes during the credits tell us otherwise. Releasing the Nevermind gas into the building, Jane and her

girlfriend are seen physically supporting her boyfriend and limping toward escape together. Their memories recovered, they are surrounded by the bodies of their former peers as agents of the state. They exit the building toward a brilliant light—the outside unknown and open.

The political messages in *Dirty Computer* are largely overt and do not require strenuous labor to interpret. Rather, my focus is on thematic emphasis of Monáe's use of allegory and narrative approach: *Dirty Computer* as an answer to the question, "Can we produce generative, oppositional Black science fiction that emerges from a position of loving perception?" It is important to determine why such a production might benefit social justice work and Black liberation. Monáe tells Jane's story deliberately through this genre because of its power to move seamlessly between metaphor and direct critique, between playfulness and rebellion, and between speculation and observation. This is an act of speculative play, a form of engagement which demands deep imaginative work in order to make sense of the many potential paths toward liberation. Monáe situates herself as a dreamer creating this world, as a dreamer within the world she creates, and actualizes the dream of producing art which speaks back to the state, Black people, and the rise of fascism in our political moment.

Then, why androids, rather than elves, or witches, or Black and queer people representing themselves? The audience can appreciate the meaningful perspective shift that results when the film removes us from our current world while still addressing things that feel close to an approaching reality. Our worlds, increasingly surveilled, enmeshed with technological tools and platforms, where the boundaries between humanity and

technology have begun to bend in social life, lifestyle logistics, and political arenas.

Gabriel Ellis argues as part of a collective reading of *Dirty Computer* that the influence of Haraway's cyborgs is observable in this work:

The source of this [cyborg] creature's political power, [Haraway] argued, was its ability to break down binaries like organism/machine and male/female. Monáe has embraced this power since day one, and as the other contributions to this collection show, she wields it more powerfully than ever on *Dirty Computer*. Always both one and many, both rapper and singer, and human, machine and goddess, she remains cyborg as long as she defies reification.⁴⁰

The android figures in *Dirty Computer* are uniquely situated to inhabit and extend the binary-breaking space Haraway once envisioned, while creating space for a specific experience of Black womanhood and Black women's history. As Aleksandra Szaniawska writes in her article "Gestural Refusals, Embodied Flights" (2019), "Apart from imagining the android 'body' as a site of limitless possibilities, Monáe's personification of an android also provides powerful commentary on how Black women's bodies have been invaded and exploited under chattel slavery and during its aftermath."⁴¹ The resonances of slavery in Jane's story of captivity, erasure of cultural and personal memory and history, and resistance to the state are visible throughout the story she has

⁴⁰ Gabriel Zane Ellis, "Janelle Monáe's Dirty Computer Music Video/Film: A Collective Reading." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 13, no. 2 (2019): p. 263
doi:10.1017/S1752196319000154.

⁴¹ Aleksandra Szaniawska, "Gestural Refusals, Embodied Flights," *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 4 (February 2019): pp. 40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2019.1655371>

created with her albums. Her emotion picture explicitly makes this connection while still carving out space for joy, for the pleasure of existing in a body in spite of attempts to control and manipulate that body into the service of the state. Szaniawska reflects upon this melding of historical conditions and futuristic storytelling: “This meeting ground between an android as a commodity and an enslaved Black person as a commodity is where Monáe’s resistant tale of Black queer futurity is inextricably linked with historical conditions of violence.”⁴² Monáe’s androids know that much of their power comes from the body, the means by which we experience pleasure, struggle and pain. Knowing this, Monáe does not let the metaphor overwhelm the connection to Black audiences in favor of Haraway’s traditional collapse of racial and sexual specificity; as Ellis writes, “Monáe makes a powerful argument for a model of the cyborg that embraces, rather than effaces, racial, sexual, and human identity. She refuses to be lost in the mix.”⁴³ In this refusal, she expertly navigates what I referred to in chapter 2 as the “part-time” nature of the cyborg, unbound to restrictive permanence or exclusion of biological delights, pleasures, and play.

Returning to the concept of Lugones’ loving playfulness from chapter one, Monáe’s work embodies this form of perception which allows for surprise, delight, joy, and discovery even in the midst of oppression— perhaps especially then. Within a position of loving playfulness, Monáe builds upon Jane’s development, furthers the struggle for liberation in her world, and moves in accordance with the notion that “there

⁴² *Ibid*, 41

⁴³ Gabriel Zane Ellis, “Janelle Monáe’s Dirty Computer Music Video/Film: A Collective Reading.” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 13, no. 2 (2019): p. 264
doi:10.1017/S1752196319000154.

are no rules that are to us sacred.”⁴⁴ The same story arc told through a lens of arrogant perception, or a perception without the notion of play, would not do the work of speaking to Black women and Black queer people’s ability to use joy and pleasure as tools of resistance. When Black people’s interactions technology are reduced and flattened to service, subordination, and caricature, we can readily identify the arrogance that aided those interpretations. These concepts have life outside of the media in which they are housed. Applying what we learn from Monáe’s cyborgs with loving perception can aid us in navigating our own interactions with race, technology, and labor.

Otherhood, Surrealism, Haunting, and Black Futurism: carrington’s Model for the Black Speculative

In *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, andre carrington makes a distinction between the “whiteness of science fiction” and the more expansive “Blackness of speculative fiction.” He identifies four qualities of Black speculative fiction: surrealism, haunting, Otherhood, and Afrofuturism, which I rearticulate here as Black futurism. These qualities, present in the examples of “Far Beyond the Stars” and *Dirty Computer*, describe the particular characteristics and contributions of Black speculative fiction—even when carried out by white writers. Here, I describe the ways both of these media examples align with this understanding of the Black Speculative, evoking the fiction of Octavia Butler to further clarify each example’s conformity to this Black speculative tradition.

⁴⁴ Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* P. 96 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003)

Surrealism, a tool that can be utilized to describe the uncanny experience of existing in the margins of Western society, is present in many classics of the Black speculative fiction canon. Citing social historian Robin D. G. Kelley on surrealism, carrington notes that to participate in the interrogation of the lines between ideation and the material is a “rebellion against Western civilization itself.”⁴⁵ This is most apparent in Black speculative fiction that does not seek to explain the mechanisms, be they science or magic,⁴⁶ of the fantastical elements of stories and worlds. This is true in the case of “Far Beyond the Stars” and Octavia Butler’s classic novel, *Kindred*. In both of these, surrealism replaces science and explanation, transporting a Black character inexplicably through time. Sending protagonists through time without rationalization, Butler and “Far Beyond the Stars” storywriter Marc Scott Zicree depict traumatic facets of Black history and experience in order to interrupt and haunt their characters. In *Kindred*, protagonist Dana is whisked through time and space to come face-to-face with her ancestors, enslaved Black people on an American plantation, as well as white slaveholding ancestors whom she must protect to ensure the existence of her own family line. When she leaves the plantation for the final time, her arm does not make the trip back. Leaving part of herself in her personal history while symbolically signaling the collective trauma of slavery, the loss of Dana’s arm represents an inability to achieve wholeness and peace while the unfinished history of slavery remains to be contended with. Benjamin Sisko travels to a time that, from his 24th-century position, is the distant past. Rather than have

⁴⁵ andré m. carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* p. 24

⁴⁶ In “Far Beyond the Stars,” the implication is that Sisko’s experience is a vision provided by the Bajoran prophets. The mechanisms and intention behind this action are up to the viewer’s interpretation.

Avery Brooks simply *be* Benjamin Sisko catapulted through space, the character of Benny Russell allows Sisko, Brooks, and the audience to fully immerse themselves in the setting of 1950s Harlem. In doing so, we are able to acutely see and feel the trauma of attempting to further Black futurism in an anti-Black climate—something that Brooks and Russell know well, and Sisko has never had to navigate. The stakes of Black futurism are revealed all the more powerfully by the notion that the way Black people experience and relate to time may not be fixed or linear. This is a concept explored throughout *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* as early as the series pilot wherein Sisko explains the concept of linear time to the baffled Bajoran Prophets.⁴⁷

These disorienting trips through time underscore another principle of Black speculative thinking: haunting. Calling on a Black feminist tradition that includes projects around death and trauma by Alice Walker, Sharon Holland, and Orlando Patterson, carrington ultimately invokes Avery Gordon's text *Ghostly Matters* (1997) to describe haunting in the Black speculative tradition. Noting that “violence and loss have characterized minority subjectivity,” carrington argues that “Haunting will not go away so long as its conditions of possibility remain intact.”⁴⁸ In the Black experience, the conditions of haunting remain ever possible and suspended in a violent, anti-Black history. Carrington cites trauma, the threat of premature death, and the limited scope of opportunities as sources of horror and haunting in the Black experience. These elements manifest through metaphor and faithful depictions of reality in Black speculative fiction.

⁴⁷ “Emissary.” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, January 3rd, 1993.

⁴⁸ andré m. carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. p.

As Benny Russell questions his reality at the end of “Far Beyond the Stars,” the audience holds relevant information: next week, they will watch the next episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and continue the adventures of Captain Benjamin Sisko in the 24th century. Benny Russell’s life is one that has already been lived. The inclusion of this episode, an unusual trip to the past that was relatively novel in the *Star Trek* universe and in science fiction more generally, was an act of loving perception which honors the characters of Benjamin Sisko and Benny Russell in its efforts to inhabit their worlds, and honors Avery Brooks’ vision and insight as the director of the episode. In telling the story of “Far Beyond the Stars,” *Deep Space Nine* makes an explicit link between science fiction’s racist history and the triumph of a Black futurist vision found in Benjamin Sisko.

Afrofuturism, or Black futurism, is at the root of the stories and characters in “Far Beyond the Stars” and *Dirty Computer*.⁴⁹ I use Afrofuturism to describe a Black cultural lens, aesthetic, and framework for projects exploring Blackness, technology, futurism, and time. Tales of future space captains and Black queer androids fit squarely in this theme. I would like to call attention to a quality of Black futurism highlighted by Walidah Imarisha. In the following passage, I emphasize the claim she makes about the relationship between Blackness and futurism:

Walidah Imarisha: ... many people don’t like the term Afrofuturism, and you know...“this is just Blackness.” It’s like, needing a different word for what? It’s Black. You know? *Being the ancient future is Blackness*. And I think that framing is powerful. So if Afrofuturism can help us get to people understanding that, then I’m for it. If it kind of moves us away from

⁴⁹ I found my participant Walidah Imarisha’s assessment of Afrofuturism vs Black futurism very compelling, in that it more accurately describes the scope of the term, and distances itself from other terms like “Africanfuturism” which describe different kinds of projects. For more on this, see Nnedi Okorofor’s description of the term “Africanfuturism” here: Nnedi Okorofor, “Africanfuturism Defined,” Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog, October 19, 2019, <https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>

understanding that, and if it means that it gets siloed off on this other sideline, or we spend all our time debating it, I don't think it's useful.

Blackness being “the ancient future,” out of time with Western notions of linear progress, finds a concrete example in the case of Russell/Sisko in “Far Beyond the Stars.” When Benny Russell questions his reality, he articulates this notion of ancient futurism in his objection to his publisher's attempt to suppress his story about Deep Space Nine:

BENNY: You can pulp a story, but you cannot destroy an idea! Don't you understand? That's ancient knowledge! You cannot destroy an idea! That future, I created it, and it's real! Don't you understand? It is real! I created it and it's *real!*⁵⁰

This quotation is calling attention to the timelessness wisdom that ideas cannot be killed. With the assertion that by writing and envisioning the future of Benjamin Sisko that Russell has *created* that future, bringing it into existence through thought and word, is the epitome of Black futurism's complex relationship with time. Black people are the ancient future, bringing about their own futures by traveling worlds, resisting marginalization, and sacrificing mind and body—as Dana does in *Kindred*, as Benny and Sisko do in *Deep Space Nine*, and as Janelle Monáe does through her near-future exploration of androids as an oppressed class of “others.”

Monáe's inclusion under the banner of Black futurism is long established: the world she has created through her music and the *Dirty Computer* film moves beyond the mask of allegory and takes up the tool of science fiction to illuminate an experience of Otherhood. Drawing from Isiah Lavender's notion of otherhood, carrington notes that “Otherhood names both the state of being Other in relation to a dominant culture and the

⁵⁰ “Far Beyond the Stars,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, February 11, 1998

sense of ‘place’ (or neighborhood as the term suggests) marked out for that state of being.”⁵¹ The plot of *Dirty Computer* finds Jane transported to a facility, a place away from larger society, to reinforce assimilation efforts. The state’s goal there is to eradicate the presence and ultimately the *existence* of Otherhood. Marked as “other” in the name “dirty computer” itself, the androids populating Jane’s world know a marginalized and suppressed existence. Through Jane and her romantic partners, the audience learns that it is an existence worth remembering, recovering, and celebrating. In *Dirty Computer*, Otherhood is a source of strength, not only a site of oppression.

The stories contained in “Far Beyond the Stars” approach meta in their expression of Otherhood: viewers know the contents of Benny Russell’s stories as *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, which feature a Black space captain named Benjamin Sisko tasked with the command of a space station. As Benny Russell dreams of the future that *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* depicts, we are left to contend with the discriminatory history leading to that future; Sisko and the television audience are haunted by it, pulled back to it despite attempts to move forward without addressing it. To add another layer to the meta-awareness required for the development of this episode, it is directed by Avery Brooks, the actor playing Benjamin Sisko. At once, Brooks is performing as Benny, a representation of the anti-Blackness in science fiction in the 1950s, as Sisko, a groundbreaking role designed to crack the glass ceiling in science fiction television and media more generally, and as himself, a Black man attempting to showcase the way racism in the genre and racism in the United States work in tandem to thwart the potential

⁵¹ andré m. carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. p. 25

of Black futurism and Black speculative play. As Brooks, he sends a challenge to the denial and silence surrounding genre-wide racism in the 1990s; with Benny, he reflects on the haunting and perpetual Otherhood of the Black experience; as Sisko, he delivers on the promise of Black futurism. He must contain each of these subjectivities at once: he is the dreamer and the dream. As Carrington asks us to envision *Star Trek: The Original Series*' communications specialist Lt. Nyota Uhura as the "voice and the listening ear of our race," I ask that we consider the likes of Benjamin Sisko and Janelle Monáe's character Jane as our Black dreamers and our Black dreams, evidence of investments in radical Black futurity.⁵²

Conclusion

This chapter uses case studies from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* emotion picture in order to clarify the ways Black cyborgs and Black futurists can operate from positions of loving perception. These examples respond to the questions that emerge from chapter one's demand for an appreciation of the guiding Black feminist work and writing in science fiction and chapter two's Black feminist part-time cyborg theory: What kind of relationships with technology are dreamed up in mainstream science fiction? Who gets to do that dreaming? Whose dreams are considered deferred reality and whose are the inconsequential dreams of a lab rat? In both "Far Beyond the Stars" and *Dirty Computer*, the weight of cultural and personal memory, of resistance to oppression, and the attempt to control the labor and bodies of

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 88

Black people are major themes, whether highlighted by being explicitly expressed or loudly absent.

Also apparent are the differences in the approach to characterizing Black people's relationships with power and technology and envisioning the fullness of their subjectivity. *Dirty Computer* compels viewers to situate Black people as the dreamers of our own futures and the narrators of our pasts. When we dream from Black futurist and Black feminist frameworks which take into account both controlling and controllable elements of the power relationship between Black folks and social technology, there is room for the dreamer, the dream, and an orientation of loving perception. In the case of *Dirty Computer*, the dream is one of recovered memories, queer Black love and expression, and joyful disobedience to unjust, overreaching authority.

Walidah Imarisha on Technology, Cyborgs, and Bio-hacking

Caitlin: So, have you ever grappled with themes of technology in your work before? What was that experience like for you, thinking through *how* to use technology as a theme?

Walidah Imarisha: I think having conversations about what technology is, is also really important from the beginning. I think that we think of technology in a very Western, European white-centered frame. And so, I think that it's important to recognize that a lot of the ways we think about technology... I think that steampunk as a genre actually is a really useful way to sort of externalize the implicit conversations that often happen about technology. The way that it is intimately... that technology is intimately linked to

colonialism and the global spread of white supremacy in this sort of white racist utopian fantasy that white folks create when they create steampunk. So. You know, I think, again, if technology is not a useful term then we just don't use that term. I do think it's useful to challenge that idea and saying well: What is our definition of technology? Technology is actually much broader than just externalized robotic gadgets that often are what we think of when we think of technology. So I think that's one thing.

I think, the other thing—I definitely feel like I think about technology a lot. I'm actually working on developing a workshop that takes current developments and technology that folks think of as science fiction, but that are here now, and then has folks kind of imagine how this might be used against us in the future as folks try to change the world, because it will. And then develop potential strategies to challenge that. I think one of the things is that I don't think we can deny the digital technological advances that exist in this world. I think we do so at our own peril.

So, I think that it is incumbent on us to be—if we are a modern embodiment of futurism—to be truly futuristic and say: Alright, facial recognition software. It has been tested at airports now. This will be something that is used at every single airport. So what does that mean? What are the potential outcomes? What are the repressive mechanisms that will be aided by this? And then, how can we subvert it and how can we challenge it? How can we disrupt it? And/or how can we appropriate it? And so, one of the pieces—(I don't know if this is too much? Am I talking too much? Like you can just be like “Okay! Next

question!”)...The one thing that I’m working on a lot [where] I actually went “yikes! It’s a little too close to home now, so let’s take a break,” started with... it was actually Gabriel [who] talked to me first about biohacking, and then I started reading about it. And so I was completely intrigued with the way... so, and biohacking is happening with corporations, right? Like, where they’re implanting—

Caitlin: —the chips, yeah!

Walidah Imarisha: Yeah! In their workers to make their lives easier. But the pieces I was reading about was folks like biohacking themselves becoming cyborgs! And getting like superhero powers, basically. I’m like, this shit is real, y’all! Like, people are superheroes right now. They’re developing extra senses through this. And so, the one that really intrigued me was a person who implanted a chip in their leg and then could always tell where the magnetic North was.

And so, I started writing a piece centered around, like, North Star chips. And it’s set in a post-apocalyptic future where it basically has become too expensive for the United States government to support the entire country. So they have basically annexed the rest of the country except for the Northwest, which they built because there’s environmental destruction and devastation as well. So they built a dome over that. And then they create, make the rest of the nation into a third-world colony, basically, and are extracting resources with no semblance or facade that they will be giving anything back. And that involves the reinstatement of Black folk. And so it centers around this. So they’re doing these projects where they’re trying to build better slaves, basically, with technology. And

there's a little girl who is being experimented on and she actually, they—in their minds they mess up, but in our minds it's awesome—she's able to alter herself and other people like... they're trying to make Black folks less intelligent, better workers, and give them augmented abilities that will help with the work. But she actually ends up hacking herself, and then is able to hack other folks. And basically, start teaching folks how to do this—how to create this North Star chip. And so you know, obviously very much inspired and, like, she's like a really young Harriet Tubman. She's like, she does not play! She is like, “I will rip your chip out, which will in essence kill you if you're just—you know, like there's no going back.” You gonna be free, or you gonna be “decommissioned” is what they call it.

Chapter Three: How to Treat Your Host: HBO's Westworld and Arrogant Perception

Walidah Imarisha on Care and Authority

Caitlin: I want to actually jump a question or two ahead because we're on the topic of Octavia Butler and talk about your short story "Black Angel." Which reminded me so much of Butler's work, because women of color are so often both hindered *and* strengthened by their sacrifices, by their courage, by their empathy for other people. And so, where do you see real world opportunities to heal and recover from the trauma and the exhaustion that this can cause?

Walidah Imarisha: We have to be building those spaces into the work that we're doing. I don't know 100 percent how to do that at all, but I feel like we absolutely have to care for ourselves. I often feel like the ways that self-care manifests is a stepping away from the work. I think that's because we are not building these holistic organizations and communities that can hold us when we are in that state. And we have to be shifting to that.

I think the focus on self-care, as someone who's been doing organizing for a number of decades, I think the focus on care, especially among young folk of color, young radical folk of color, queer and trans folk of color, is really important. And I don't think that we had that focus as much when I was starting organizing, and I think it definitely took its

toll on a lot of folks. I think it's important not to go too far the other way, and say, "you know, this was a rough year, so I'm taking a year or two off, and I'm not going to be involved in any movement work. I've done my time." How do we find that balance so that we still are responsible to one another, and we're still responsible to these movements? We need to find a way to make that responsibility not feel like a burden. Which is what I think wears people down, is both the oppression from the state, but then having nowhere to go where you don't feel like there is this weight on you. So you have to start away from everything. So it's like, how can we be accountable to each other in a joyful way, in a joyous way?

Caitlin: So, more about "Black Angel": what was your inspiration for writing this Black "fallen angel" figure?

Walidah Imarisha: It's been a character I've thought of since high school. I loved comics, and I always created superheroes in my head, and all I had was Storm. So I was like, wow, "I'm going to make some more that look like me!" Everyone's like, "all of your characters are grumpy, big-haired Black women." and I'm like, "And? What?! Like, go read somebody else's stories!" Which is basically what Octavia said too—they were like, "are you ever going to write white male main characters?" and she was like, "no, boo, go read 95% of science fiction then! Don't read mine. I'll be fine!" It's been interesting because I'm actually an atheist, and so it's funny because I've had folks come up to me and be like, "Yes! I struggle with my faith as well!" And I'm like, "Oh, I'm sorry!"

I think for me in many ways, the figure of God is like, the ultimate authority which, in both God and the state, ultimate authority is a white man. Who is always right, and you cannot question. And if you do, terrible things will happen to you. In many ways, giving in to that authority can provide—especially in the neocolonial status—can provide benefits for you, like you can assimilat[e] and [pull] yourself up by your bootstraps. Maybe you might be Oprah, who knows? You can get some semblance of comfort from that. But that means you then have to close your eyes to the atrocities that are happening around you every moment of every day. I wanted to create a character that would rebel against all of that, but also to be real about [how] that will take its toll. It will cost us. Physically, mentally, and emotionally. And we will need healing, as we talked about, from that. The short story is part of a longer story arc that I'm working on. There are more and more folks who come into it that help us heal in community while doing the work. And really thinking about what freedom likes, and what she wants.

Introduction

A show tackling the porous boundaries between technology and personhood, HBO's series *Westworld*⁵³ is flush with critiques on the nature of memory, agency, and self-determination. The themes explored here are similar to ones found in "Far Beyond the Stars" and *Dirty Computer* as explored in the previous chapter, but *Westworld* provides an example of Black cyborgs unable to occupy an orientation toward Black world-traveling or loving perception. As the show's writing reifies white supremacy into near and alternate futures, extending the "lab rat" status of Black people and technology into an alternate future. *Westworld* showcases the violent consequences of arrogant perception for Black people and cyborgs alike.

I remember watching the first several episodes with excitement, thinking the show might attempt to do the work of undermining tropes about the parameters of Black functioning and ability within science fiction worlds. Often in new fictional worlds, especially when created by white and white-adjacent writing from a more mainstream perspective of arrogant perception as is the case with *Westworld*, Black people are omitted entirely from political and social landscapes. Here, they play central roles and initially appear to challenge dominant narratives about Black people in science fiction. Ultimately, however, *Westworld* serves to remind us of the limitations of post-racial attempts at media and analysis, and it provides a robust example of the subordination of Black people and bodies within mainstream science fiction media.

In this chapter, I analyze *Westworld* and its projection of white supremacy into a post-racial future wherein race and racism are as unspeakable as they are available for

⁵³ The series is based on Michael Crichton's 1973 film, *Westworld*.

consumption and arrogant play—sites of access to marginalized people and bodies to exploit. In the case of *Dirty Computer* and *Westworld*, Black cyborg figures find ways to adapt to and manipulate the world around them for their continued survival. With *Westworld*, I take a closer look at two of the Black characters: Bernard Lowe and Maeve Millay. Both characters have relationships with technology defined by the arrogant perception, white supremacy, and colonialism of the worlds they live in and travel to. Through these examples, I seek to demonstrate the consequences of living in a world engineered with the arrogant perception of its creators, preventing Black feminist part-time cyborgs from obtaining relief or retaining cultural identity and memory.

“Welcome to Westworld”

The plot wanders, but the premise is straightforward: wealthy human guests seeking a luxury experience pay to visit “Westworld,” a Western frontier theme park populated by lifelike androids indistinguishable from humans called “Hosts.” For my purposes, I think of these Hosts as cyborg figures in the tradition of Haraway’s fatherless, binary-breaking cyborgs, and some in the tradition of Joy James’ super-human, angelic Black cyborg figures.^{54 55} Deborah Netolicky, writing about what *Westworld’s* Hosts and academic writers have in common, traces the Hosts’ similar theoretical roots, extending additionally to Frenzt and Deleuze and Guattari’s desiring-machines and bodies without organs. She describes the premise of *Westworld*:

⁵⁴ Donna Haraway. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.”

⁵⁵ Joy James, 2012. Presentation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2012.

In the show's Westworld (an Old-American Western-themed game park of sorts) cyborg creatures look, feel, suffer, and behave like humans; the cyborgs' suffering, we learn, is key to their humanity. Like Haraway's cyborg, Westworld androids are ubiquitous and invisible (Haraway, 2006). Their artificial intelligence is made up of coded memories, scripted dialogue and loops of repeated behaviours. Their bodies were once made up of the true cyborgic combination of "part metal, part meat," as Frenzt (2009, p. 821) describes the nature of the cybernetic organism. Later, however, as technology evolved, their bodies are made up of organic matter: muscle, flesh and bone. These later cyborgs—3D printed humanoids dipped in skin on Vitruvian Man style hoops—are virtually unrecognizable as different from the humans.⁵⁶

As she explains, Hosts are mechanized, their personalities dictated by encoded stories and relationships, rooted in an emotional and often traumatic "cornerstone" memory which serves to motivate them, heighten their interpersonal believability as humans. The Hosts are programmed with scripted narratives that last days or weeks, designed to delight any desires of their guests: sex, violence, and adventure, for most. The Hosts' design permits and anticipates all manner of violating treatment, all to be physically sanitized, patched up, and wiped from the Hosts' memories entirely once experienced, reminiscent of Jane's experience in *Dirty Computer* with the Nevermind facility. The Hosts, moving in a maze inward toward consciousness, are boundary-crossers and binary breakers in that their mere presence disrupts what is human and what is not, what is conscious and what is not, what is exploitation and what is not. They are cyborgs defined by the weight of their potential for personhood and by the treatment they receive from their creators and the world around them. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of

⁵⁶ Deborah M. Netolicky, "Cyborgs, Desiring-Machines, Bodies without Organs, and Westworld: Interrogating Academic Writing and Scholarly Identity," *Kome* 5, no. 1 (2017): pp. 94 <https://doi.org/10.17646/kome.2017.16>

“bodies without organs” captures this precarious balance of potential and struggle.

Netolicky argues this point:

The cyborgs of *Westworld* are literal bodies without organs, but also bodies without organs in the Deleuze and Guattarian sense: “nonstratified, unformed, intense matter ... the full egg” (1987, p.153). The *Westworld* cyborgs represent unformed consciousness, potential consciousness, awakening consciousness. They are the embryonic egg through which intensities pass again and again.⁵⁷

Using these frameworks to discuss the show’s characters and storylines has been attractive to scholars, particularly philosophers, as they focus on themes of consciousness, desire, gendered violence, and embodied experience. The plot lends itself to these discussions, but contemplating race in the show’s notably racially diverse cast is a gap in analysis of this series, with few contributing scholars in ethnic, Black, or women’s and gender studies taking up the charge as I do here.

In order to understand the racial dynamics at play, the history of the characters must be brought to light. The park began with two partners: Dr. Robert Ford⁵⁸, a white scientist and the current director of the park, and Arnold Weber, a Black scientist specializing in artificial intelligence, computing, and robotics. Their Host creations were designed to mirror humanity, and Weber considered sentience part of that process. He worked closely with the oldest Host in the park, Dolores, to help direct her toward

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 95

⁵⁸ Robert Ford is most commonly referred to as “Ford” or “Dr. Ford” throughout the show, which is how I refer to him going forward. However, the distinction between Ford being addressed formally, by last name, and Arnold Weber and Bernard Lowe largely being referred to by their first names, is an example of the subtle marginalization of both Hosts and people of color within the *Westworld* setting, one which closely mirrors micro-aggressions against Black people in professional environments in our lived reality.

selfhood and understanding. As the park arrangements were finalized, Weber came to the conclusion that the Hosts were capable of achieving consciousness. Despite this realization and the implication that potentially conscious beings would be imminently exposed to any manner of abuse and enslavement, the capital investment in the park is high and pressure to continue with its opening mounts. The partners disagree on the urgency of the issue: Ford criticizes Weber's approach to the nature of the Hosts throughout the show, citing his attention to the interiority of the Hosts as softness, a weakness to exploit, and his ultimate undoing.

In a sense, it is literally his undoing. Weber concludes that the only way to stop the park from opening is to take drastic measures. He asks Delores, whom he has been coaxing to consciousness and building a particular friendship with, to kill him and all of the Hosts in the park. It is his hope that with the scandal of human death and uncertainty associated with the park, they would be forced to close their doors. She executes his wishes.

Following Weber's death, Ford and all investors move forward with opening the park. Weber's death disturbs Ford in personal and professional capacities, and he makes a pivotal choice: he recreates his partner's likeness and personality as a Host named Bernard Lowe, and positions him as chief of engineering of Westworld alongside himself as director. Unlike the other Hosts, Bernard's identity remains a secret: to himself, his coworkers, other Hosts, and even the audience for a large portion of the first season.

Including Bernard, two of *Westworld*'s central Host characters exist in Black bodies.⁵⁹ Their stories, while never directly engaging with race, reveal much about the way a white writer's room⁶⁰ oriented toward arrogant perception crafts Black characters and narratives. They are used to further the goals and plots of powerful white men, particularly to do the dirty, physical work for whiteness. For my purposes, I track the development and narratives of these principal Black characters, Bernard and Maeve. Bernard and Maeve are emblematic of Black bodies used as tools toward powerful white men and their desire for conquest.

Instrument of Arrogant Perception: Bernard Lowe

It seems implausible in the beginning of the series that the character Bernard, a mild-mannered though occasionally bumbling programmer who serves as *Westworld*'s head of engineering, would be a site of sustained conflict. The audience is introduced to Bernard, unaware of history, as he attempts to isolate codes created by Ford called "reveries," which have been causing errors and glitches in Hosts, blending memories and actions from previous narratives and roles. Bernard is initially shown in his element, competently working within a Host's mind to isolate problems and develop fixes. As the season progresses, we learn more about Bernard that retrospectively helps indicate his

⁵⁹ There is one other central Black character, Charlotte Hale. Played by Tessa Thompson, Hale is the executive director of the board that oversees *Westworld*, Delos. She is a fierce arrogant perceiver in and of herself, but is thwarted by a white Host at the end of the second season, and her body is used as a lowercase-host for the consciousness of another Host. A topic for a future article on the punishments awaiting Black characters who attempt to operate as white arrogant perceivers.

⁶⁰ In that whiteness and white supremacy are the lens through which the story is written, and whiteness in the demographic makeup of the writer's room—excepting Lisa Joy. Joy is a writer and co-showrunner for *Westworld*, wife of head writer Jonathan Nolan, and is half Taiwanese.

status as a Host: his past is marred with a tragic but simplistic story about the loss of his child and the subsequent dissolution of his marriage, and his personal life is sparse but for an ongoing affair with a coworker. The most dynamic relationship he has seems to be with Dr. Ford, his unrevealed creator. Before Bernard's identity is recovered, Ford influences Bernard's behavior and thoughts for his own benefit: gently nudging Bernard toward his cornerstone tragic event when his behavior or thoughts appear too disruptive, restoring him to his docile temperament. This is because, as Ford tells us, Hosts are made more lifelike and human through struggle and trauma, and reminders of that trauma serve to recalibrate a Host's primary drives and motivations.

The way Ford approaches Bernard, the uncanny specter of his friend and business partner, tells the audience much about his position as an arrogant perceiver. Over the course of the first season, Ford uses Bernard for a variety of self-serving tasks, often violent and illegal activities too risky for the park's director to engage in. Bernard's memory is manipulated, and he is unaware that he has been directed to kill the coworker he has been seeing romantically to protect Ford's power and position within the business. When Bernard's closest associate on the engineering team begins to question Westworld's operations too deeply, he is again directed toward violence, kidnapping and hiding the employee. These actions are charged with more than questionable ethics: it is significant that the instrument that Ford uses to carry out violence against white women is a Black man. At Ford's behest, Bernard is made both servant and threat to white womanhood, a position which reflects the historically contentious relationship between white people and abusing Black bodies, especially when intimacy, labor, and desire are at play.

Rather than feeling guilt or internal conflict about using the likeness of his former partner to carry out these actions, Ford calls Bernard his “perfect instrument,” and the “ideal partner” in the same breath, revealing at once both his desire for power over him and his position as an arrogant perceiver.⁶¹ In a season one conversation with the woman he will eventually instruct Bernard to murder, Ford spends time remembering the origins of the park and his assessment of Arnold Weber’s shortcomings:

FORD: In the beginning, I imagined things would be perfectly balanced. Even had a bet with my partner, Arnold, to that effect. We made a hundred hopeful storylines. Of course, almost no one took us up on them. I lost the bet.

Arnold always held a somewhat dim view of people. He preferred the Hosts. He begged me to not let you people in, the money-men: Delos. But I told him we’d be fine—that you didn’t understand what you were paying for. It’s not a business venture, not a theme park, but an entire world. We designed every inch of it, every blade of grass. In here, we were gods. And you were merely our guests.

THERESA CULLEN: And how did that work out for Arnold?

FORD: Sadly, he lost his perspective. He went mad. I haven’t, as you well know. I have always seen things... very clearly.⁶²

Choosing domination over others instead of respect for self-determination, Ford ensures that he is explicit in communicating the stakes of his choices. The audience is not left to wonder if he has rationalized or emotionally minimized the impact of his actions or relationships with Arnold Weber, Bernard, or the other Hosts; he says in the tenth episode of the first season that “to acknowledge [their] consciousness would have destroyed [his] dreams,” positioning his desire over their survival⁶³. This proclivity toward arrogant

⁶¹ “Westworld: The Well-Tempered Clavier” (HBO, November 27, 2016)

⁶² “Westworld: Dissonance Theory.” (HBO, October 23rd, 2016.)

⁶³ “Westworld: The Bicameral Mind.” (HBO, December 4th, 2016.)

perception and domination of others is a fundamental component of Ford's character. The writers position him as an antagonistic figure, a cautionary tale, but also uplift him as an enigmatic genius. We are meant to see in Ford both the dangers of ego and violence and the success they can bring to an individual. This is most apparent as Ford provides some exposition regarding the world outside of the park. With minimal irony, he says, "We destroyed and subjugated our world and when we ran out of creatures to dominate, we built this beautiful place."⁶⁴ The admission that there is a pattern of destruction and conquest of cultural and natural worlds suggests that, much like in our reality, the individualistic nature of arrogant perception is the accepted, and perhaps elevated, mode of thought and behavior. As whiteness is elevated, so too is elevated the arrogant perception that flattens and erases racial identity, emptying the meaning out of racial categories while still exploiting them with investments in colonial and white supremacist ideologies. Ford is able to use Weber and Bernard—their minds and bodies—in a pattern of arrogant perception that forecloses empathy and understanding, because using Black bodies as technology has been a critical strategy of whiteness and white supremacy. This dynamic moves unexamined through the show, creating additional barriers and conflicts for Black Hosts that also go unrecognized through language or action.

One such barrier is that despite Bernard's inability to control his own thoughts and actions, he is routinely in a position to defend the actions Ford takes through him. Working continuously as Ford's shield, he serves as scapegoat for all of the responsibility, guilt, and social consequences for Ford's choices: after he murders his romantic interest

⁶⁴ "Westworld: The Well-Tempered Clavier." (HBO, November 27th, 2016.)

at Ford's direction, he is held accountable for this action by Ford himself. Ford reveals Bernard's Host identity to him, shuts off Bernard's emotional affect (but not before telling him how proud he should be that he is able to have those emotions at all) and requires him to perform cleanup of the body, murder scene, and all evidence linking himself and Ford to the crime. When Bernard attempts to resist on moral grounds, Ford asserts control again—not only demanding he perform the action, but erasing memories of the murder, cleanup, and his entire relationship with the woman in question. When Bernard is later consoled by a coworker, he has no personal memory of his affair.

By the time viewers are privy to the truth of Bernard's origin, Arnold Weber has already been dismissed by Ford as too sentimental, impractical, and idealistic to have succeeded. Rather than serving as a powerful statement about oppression and personhood, his suicide-by-Host is reduced to a dramatic ploy carried out by a man too sensitive and burdened by empathy to function successfully in the kind of world able and motivated to create Westworld. Despite this stance, Ford chooses a similar path as his partner under radically different circumstances: sensing the park's executive board pushing for his removal and limitations on his power within the park, Ford crafts a sequence of Host code as part of his "final narrative," which directs Hosts to murder the human guests present at the formal banquet the park puts on to celebrate Ford's new initiative, including Ford himself. For his own death, Ford chooses the Host Dolores. This choice mirrors the one his partner made before the opening of the park: Weber, too, used Dolores as the method of his death. That is the extent of their similarity. In Weber's death, there was self-sacrifice, an attempt at integrity, a recognition of the rights and autonomy

of the beings around him.⁶⁵ In Ford's suicide through Delores, there is destruction of human life and Host life over power and refusal to relinquish control. Even the eventual softening of Ford's position on Host consciousness goes without comment, while his actions are instead implied to spring from spite, anger at being pushed out, and a sense of mastery over his creations. The show does not indicate why these different men may have made such different choices with different sets of priorities, and there is no suggestion that Weber's position as a Black man may have come from a place of historically situated unease about creating a class or racial category of lesser beings and controlling their behavior, movements, and thoughts despite their propensity for consciousness and an inner emotional life. This opportunity is missed as the show maintains its carefully constructed silence around race, and around prejudice and social hierarchy more broadly.

After Ford's death, Bernard's life is thrown into chaos. He is faced with another barrier in the dissonance stemming from being newly aware of his Host identity and his ability to pass as human.⁶⁶ While the park's security team rushes to establish threats and

⁶⁵ The "Black scientist who sacrifices his life for the future" is something of a trope, positioning Black men's lives as expendable and normalizing Black self-sacrifice and death. One such example comes from the movie *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), wherein Joe Morton's character's iconic death scene comes after he has saved humanity from the future harm his research would have caused. Morton and director James Cameron discussed making the character's death more meaningful as an attempt at repairing science fiction's erasure of Black people. Gamespot's Michael Rougeau interviewed Morton on the subject, and he said: "Richard Pryor said that the reason Black characters in science fiction films either don't get cast at all, or they die early on in the film, is because Hollywood doesn't think we're going to be around in the future. And I think James's whole thing was he wanted a Black or minority character to be sort of central to changing the world." See more: Michael Rougeau, "Terminator 2's Joe Morton Shares the Story Behind His Iconic Death Scene," GameSpot (Gamespot, August 25, 2017), <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/terminator-2s-joe-morton-shares-the-story-behind-h/1100-6452875/>

⁶⁶ Examining the notion of "passing" in the context of *Westworld* and other cyborg-focused media and the interplay between biological passing and racial passing would make for generative future research.

recover humans throughout the park, Bernard is recognized as the head of engineering; he travels alongside park board members and attempts to secure the repairs he needs for continued functioning and the memories that have been taken from him by Ford. On this journey, he reconciles with the woman he took captive (something he did with no awareness during or after the fact) and is subsequently trotted throughout Westworld as something of a high-profile prisoner. Eventually, he has an opportunity to assist the Host Delores in helping the Host consciousnesses escape into a digital archive the Hosts have taken to calling the “Valley Beyond,” freeing them to live on in immortal peace.

Bernard is guided by Ford’s unrelenting visage and voice, guiding him toward solutions to his problems and toward consciousness itself. As the show continues, it becomes clear that the visions of Ford he has been experiencing are merely his imagination as he moves toward self-actualization. Stated again, the voice that ushers Bernard into self-actualization is the man who created, used, and controlled him after fashioning him from the human model of Arnold Weber.

One of Bernard’s most dynamic moments on screen was his encounter with Maeve, the other principle Black Host on the show. He is challenged by her, leading to the revelation that he himself is a Host. Their brief conversation in episode nine unsettles Bernard:

BERNARD: Jesus. System, locate Dr. Ford for me! Send him a message, highest priority!

MAEVE: Don't. After all, we've been down this road before, darling. I thought you looked familiar when you walked in. Took me a minute. I thought you were one of them.

BERNARD: Analysis. Why did you—

MAEVE MILLAY: Wouldn't you rather speak man-to-man? Or, rather, whatever it is we are.

BERNARD: *We* are?

MAEVE: You don't know, do you? He's got a keen sense of irony, our jailer. But I see the logic: it takes a thief to catch one.

BERNARD: You and I? [BERNARD shakes his head in disbelief.] System, I need assistance—

MAEVE: Freeze all motor functions. [BERNARD is frozen in place, still conscious.]

You're still in there, aren't you? Scared out of your wits. It's a difficult thing, realizing your entire life is some hideous fiction. I could make you give me that tablet, turn your mind inside out. Make you forget all this. But I'm not going to do that to you, because that's what they would do to us. And we're stronger than them, smarter. We don't have to live this way. So, you're going to clear me for immediate return to the park where I have a date with a homicidal bandit, and I'm late enough as it is. Now.⁶⁷

Maeve recognizes him for what he is: a Host. She suggests that his loyalties should lie with his fellow Hosts. For Bernard, this ask is too great as he attempts to puzzle through the consequences of Ford's actions and the implications for his own identity. While he returns later to play a fundamental role in the fight for freedom among the Hosts, he and Maeve part, leaving her to continue on her quest toward liberation for herself.

⁶⁷ "Westworld: The Well-Tempered Clavier." (HBO, November 27th, 2016.)

Strong Black Cyborg: Maeve Millay

Maeve, introduced to us as one of the park's many Hosts, is a former rural settler repurposed as the local brothel's madam. The writers approach her with something akin to a mania of implicit bias and cognitive dissonance. They move frenetically through characterizing her under different tropes and controlling images: as an undesirable mammy figure so unflinchingly forthright as to frighten brothel clients, as a "tragic mulatto" figure driven only by instinctual ties to motherhood and trauma, as a jezebel whose attractiveness and sexuality are primary tools of persuasion and exchange, and as a ruthless sapphire willing to harm those around her to meet her own needs.⁶⁸ Writers use her as an immovable pillar of strength to drive plotlines forward, and for relief from the dark dystopian tone of the show, peppering episodes with her "sassy" retorts. In season one, Maeve's first plot point revolves around a team of Westworld employees attempting to refine her code to make her less severe toward the park's guests. They work to resolve these concerns, debating whether she should be retired entirely or have her personality adjusted to be more palatable. As they fine-tune her affect, the Westworld staff are unaware of a larger problem: Maeve is beginning to recall distant memories of narratives past, including a timeline in which she and her daughter were set upon in her home by the Man in Black, a ruthless and wealthy park client. As Maeve's memories begin to surface, she works toward developing her theory of what happens to herself and other occupants of Westworld, gathers a renegade team, and Blackmails Westworld employees into

⁶⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009)

assisting her in her quest to escape the park. It is in a conversation with a mild-mannered technician, Felix, that Maeve is informed about the nature of her creation and her status as tool and toy to her creators:

FELIX LUTZ: Everything you do, it's because the engineers upstairs programmed you to do it. You don't have a choice.

MAEVE: Nobody makes me do something I don't want to, sweetheart.

FELIX LUTZ: Yeah, but it's part of your character: you're hard to get. Even when you say no to the guests, it's because you were made to.

MAEVE: And you are like *them*, not like me?

FELIX LUTZ: Right. Well, I can't exactly afford to go to the park, but, yeah, I'm human. Like the guests.

MAEVE: How do you know?

FELIX LUTZ: Because I know. I was born. You were made.

MAEVE: We feel the same.

FELIX LUTZ: We are the same these days, for the most part. One big difference, though. The processing power in here [FELIX gestures to Maeve's head] is way beyond what we have. It's got one drawback, though.

MAEVE: What's that?

FELIX LUTZ: You're under our control. Well, their control. They can change you however they like, make you forget. Well, I guess not you. I don't understand how you're remembering all of this, or how you're waking yourself up, but everything in your head—they put it there.

MAEVE: Bullshit! No one knows what I'm thinking.

FELIX LUTZ: I'll show you. Give me a sec. [FELIX retrieves a tablet] I have to pair it with you.

MAEVE: Pair what with me?

FELIX LUTZ: You can improvise a little, but most of what you say was designed upstairs. Same as the rest of you.

MAEVE: This is just a cheap trick. I've run a brothel for ten years, and if there's one thing I know, it's when I'm being fucked with! This can't possibly—I can't, can't. I can't...⁶⁹

In the way that Bernard's agency is snatched away in the twists of *Westworld's* plot, Maeve is similarly taken down from a pedestal of self-determination. In fact, later in season two, Bernard himself discovers and informs Maeve that someone else has edited her narrative to desire autonomy, freedom, and escape. As Felix demonstrates above, even her words are part of a complex, unwinding flow chart of predetermined data. The *Westworld* employees she has compelled into participating in her plot also make it clear to her that she is not acting of her own volition. This creates natural tension for viewers about the true nature of Maeve's mind and agency, but unlike white Host characters like Dolores and Teddy, little narrative satisfaction is to be had in resolving or exploring that tension. As Maeve is gently "diagnosed" by Felix Lutz in a *Westworld* laboratory, it reproduces old patterns of characterizing the escape plans and fantasies of enslaved Black people as mental deficiencies and illnesses, pathologizing desire for liberation.⁷⁰

There are notable differences in how the show handles the possibility of Maeve's consciousness and the depth of her interiority versus the characterization of the show's white Hosts. Lansberg reflects on the show's treatment of Maeve when she discusses these same discrepancies: "But the show has taken little interest in her psychical and

⁶⁹ "Westworld: The Adversary." (HBO, November 6th, 2016.)

⁷⁰ The medical term for this was "drapetomania;" Charles Willoughby explores its influence in his article: Christopher D. E. Willoughby, "Running Away from Drapetomania: Samuel A. Cartwright, Medicine, and Race in the Antebellum South." *Journal of Southern History* 84, no. 3 (2018): 579-614. [doi:10.1353/soh.2018.0164](https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2018.0164).

emotional development, relishing instead her “bad-ass” attitude. Most important, for the Black woman, the issue of consciousness has never really been on the table. It is only the characters played by white actors who are imagined to have limitless potential.”⁷¹

Maeve’s potential seems limited within the series to her desire to reunite with her daughter and her movement through the different themed parks in the second season of the show. We learn through Maeve and other characters that things are much bigger than Westworld: parks with different time periods and cultural themes also operate simultaneously with similar Hosts and narrative loops. Rather than a figure of excitement and intelligence, Maeve becomes a tool of the writers to drive action forward and open up the worlds of the parks to us. We see a glimpse of a highly orientalist depiction of a colonial British India themed world. Maeve has an extended visit to “Shogun World” in the second season, a step back into a version of feudal Japan through a lens of white arrogant perception, complete with stereotypes of merciless shoguns, performing geishas, and gendered violence. As she seeks her daughter in this world, it seems a crack in the veneer of racial innocence for the writer’s room: Maeve’s nonwhite body is placed deliberately to navigate these worlds with overt racial and cultural settings in order to sidestep and otherwise obscure the colonial, white supremacist nature of traveling through these worlds with the intent to serve as voyeur, conqueror, or both⁷². Maeve, with

⁷¹ Alison Landsberg, “Post-Post-racial America: On *Westworld* and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture,” *Cultural Politics* 14, no. 2 (January 2018): p. 202, <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-6609074>

⁷² “Shielding” this way with a Black figure or character is taken up in Angela Dillard’s book *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner Now*, which charts how TV news and conservative think tanks employ Black, Asian, and Latinx “experts” to spout conservative opinions like anti-affirmative action or anti-abortion in order to “erase” white patriarchy’s investment in these and pretend they are “color blind” political stances.’ See: Angela D. Dillard, *Guess Who’s Coming to*

her noble mission, tendency toward understated quips, and shield of Blackness, is identified as being able to “world travel” effectively, without being read so much as a colonizer as to require a direct address of these dynamics. *Westworld*’s dedication to the unspeakable quality of the post-racial mire it creates makes it unwilling to delve into the tangled connotations of a “Shogun World” or “British India World,” and Maeve serves as an escape vehicle out of those loaded conversations that may have demanded reflexivity.⁷³

The most strikingly traumatic feature of Maeve’s story is, not unlike Bernard, her origin story. Her original narrative was a peaceful existence, living alone with her daughter as a Western settler.⁷⁴ As her memory begins to recover while she fills her new role as madam of the local brothel, she repeatedly has flashbacks of an attack on her home and the death of her daughter. Initially, the attack appears to be from a local tribe of Native Americans. The viewers learn, however, that the attack was carried out by the Man in Black, a wealthy park visitor who serves on the board of the company that oversees the park. Intent on securing more information from what he believes is a game Ford has designed for him, he kills both Maeve and her daughter. The Man in Black morbidly reflects on the moment in episode 9, “I killed the woman and her daughter. Then something miraculous happened: she was alive, if only for a moment.”⁷⁵ This is a

Dinner Now?: Multicultural Conservatism in America (New York: New York University Press, 2002)

⁷³ One interesting fact of the show is that the only racial or cultural category discussed with any depth is the Indigenous population of Westworld. I am not aware of any published work commenting on the handling of indigenous Hosts and what the show has to say about indigenous knowledge production outside of white colonialism, but the topic is ripe for inquiry.

⁷⁴ A complicated “settler” positionality with its own set of violent colonial implications, all of which are also unexamined and undiscussed in the show.

⁷⁵ “Westworld: The Well-Tempered Clavier” (HBO, November 27, 2016)

reference to the running theme of suffering and trauma being linked with humanity and personhood. This concept, troubling enough to those observing through a lens of loving perception, becomes incredibly violent when applied through Black characters. To say that a Black woman is made alive in the moment of her death is a treacherous glorification of Black social death. To say that pain and trauma bring about humanity for members of a marginalized (and formerly enslaved) group of people is dangerously anti-Black and permissive of abuse toward that group. A conclusion which reflects the need to control and dominate others, the idea of pain revealing the humanity of Black bodies opens the prospect that causing Black people pain and suffering is not only something to condone, but something ultimately beneficial for their personal and spiritual development. *Westworld* did not create this argument; it is consistent with a perspective of arrogant perception that repurposes echoes of the White Man's Burden and pre-Civil War notions of Black enslavement as benevolent and paternalistic.⁷⁶ Challenges to or extensions of this argument would be thoughtful, fascinating conversation starters about the continuing legacies of white supremacy and myth-making in *Westworld's* universe. Set in a post-racial environment which renders these racial underpinnings unspeakable,

⁷⁶ See examples of this position, Kipling's "White Man's Burden" poem, and an article examining its themes and impact: Patrick Brantlinger, "Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" and Its Afterlives." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 50, no. 2 (2007): 172-191. [doi:10.1353/elt.2007.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/elt.2007.0017).

Calhoun, John C. *A Disquisition on Government: and a Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States*. Birmingham, Ala.: Paladium Press, 2007.

Kipling, Rudyard. "The White Man's Burden." *Poems - The White Man's Burden*. Accessed February 24, 2020. http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_burden.htm.

Maeve's suffering is part of a series of random, disconnected events, rather than a deep commitment on the part of either the fictional *Westworld* and/or the very real writer's room of *Westworld* to participate in the continuation of white supremacy. She is a strong Black cyborg unable to emerge consciously as a Black feminist part-time cyborg, bound by the domination of arrogant perception in *Westworld*.

Black Hosts, White Men: Ford's Arrogant Perception of Black Cyborgs

Many of the show's disparate threads lead to this pivotal truth: much of the trauma, oppression, and violence experienced by Bernard, Maeve, and the other Hosts is collateral in an arrogant game being played between Dr. Ford and one of *Westworld's* biggest financial backers. The most pervasive theme that unites the conceptualization of Bernard and Maeve is the constant undermining of their personhood in order to advance white men's desires. Both can trace the sources of their trauma to wealthy white men: Bernard's cornerstone was invented by Dr. Ford in an attempt to make him a more authentic—and more subservient—version of his old partner, and Maeve suffered the loss of her child and the life she knew at the hands of one of the park's influential visitors, bent on power and control. Ford's effect, and perhaps the effect of the writers of *Westworld*, is one that seeks to rupture the notion of the “dreamer and the dream,” where neither Weber, nor Bernard, nor Maeve can move to alter their fates and futures. Bernard's coming to consciousness is framed by the recklessness—and ability—of Ford, rather than Arnold's influence of loving perception or Bernard's own fortitude and resistance. In this way, Bernard is barred from inclusion in the Black speculative “dreamer and the dream,” contained by a world in which he is perceived arrogantly.

Where Bernard is a caricature animated by white arrogant perception, Arnold Weber is a Black scientist so upright in his ethics and strong in his understanding of power and responsibility that he would rather die than further the subordination of an emerging class of conscious creature. He knows that memory—his memory and the memory of his death—is a legacy of loving perception that ripples across the inward-focused, selfish behaviors of the owners and stakeholders of the park to those working to recover lost cultural and personal memory—the Hosts. Bernard, in unwitting homage to this legacy, ultimately frees many of his fellow Hosts into the digital Valley Beyond, including a copy of Ford himself. Maeve, when presented with the opportunity to finally escape the park, returns, finds her daughter, and manages to see her through the door to the Valley Beyond before she is killed by Westworld’s security in their attempt to stop the separation of Host minds from their bodies and preserve what they consider their intellectual and physical property from coming to harm.

Attempting Travel in “Post-Racial” Westworld(s)

It is not clear how overtly the writers intended to write a post-racial world, or if the occasional and flattened acknowledgement of race is part of a larger strategy to demonstrate the deep connections between whiteness and late-stage capitalism wrapped up in neoliberal dreams of even playing fields. No matter the intention, the “post-racial mystique,” as Catherine Squires frames it, is present in the show’s desire to “obfuscate institutional racism” and overemphasize individual choice and individual identity.⁷⁷ By “post-racial,” in this context, I mean the suggestion of a world-state in which race does

⁷⁷ Catherine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* p. 6 (New York: New York University Press, 2014)

not hold power or influence in the social order. Many uplift this notion of post-racial as an anti-racist goal, some even consider it a modern reality: much of the Obama-era sociopolitical discourse questioned the relevance and importance of race in post-2008 America.⁷⁸ However, many use the idea of post-racial social landscapes to avoid entanglements with race and white supremacy. That avoidance is upheld by a combination of suppressing identity markers and remaining silent on matters of history, race, and racism. In *Westworld*, both the script writing and the fictional world appear to support this “post-racial” world-state, avoiding commentary or reflection on race and flattening characters of color to assimilated same-ness. In doing so, they reflect many of the problems found in unironic deployment post-racial ideology and rhetoric, particularly the repetition and tacit support of racial stereotypes and racial violence, and white supremacy operating under the protection of the silence around race. The result is media plagued by unchallenged racist attitudes.

The choice *Westworld* makes to silently carry out deeply racial and often racist narratives without naming them is an example of the “entrenched effects of institutional racism and the media texts that deny...racial inequalities.”⁷⁹ For a show fixated on the advances in technology required to produce believable, thinking humanoid robots, the site of the body itself and the ways in which the body has been politicized are relatively absent: there are few messages about race inside or outside of the park apart from brief flashes of Orientalism featured in the colonial Indian and feudal Japanese theme parks.

⁷⁸ See: Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama's Race: the 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010)

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 5

Beyond the content relating to cyborgs, Landsberg’s assessment of what drew interest to the show resonates with my own when she notes: “What draws me to *Westworld*, however, and its relevance for this analysis, is the way it constructs a world in which race seems not to matter, goes entirely unmentioned, even as racial stereotypes and hierarchies are embedded in the show’s narrative and aesthetics.”⁸⁰

Westworld is a place which extends the arrogant perception of our reality into the future, where any disruption to the forces of capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy is either unfathomable or unsuccessful—and is certainly unspoken. Landsberg also comments on the effect of a post-racial treatment on *Westworld’s* Black characters, arguing:

Under the guise of being race neutral, or multicultural, the show tacitly affirms white supremacist ideologies, perpetuates stereotypes about the locus of Black women’s worth, and perhaps most distressingly reserves consciousness and humanity for those with white skin. This racial hierarchizing is only underscored by the fact that Bernard, too, the other Black main character, is also revealed to be a Host. White audiences are invited to indulge in these ideologies under the cover of post-racial discourse. *Westworld* was celebrated as groundbreaking, thoughtful, and edgy. Nevertheless, its participation in postracial discourse—as evidenced both by its diverse cast and by its refusal to speak race—works to provide cover for racism.⁸¹

This refusal to name race and racism, paired with deep aesthetic and narrative investments in race and racism, is another trap for the Black feminist cyborg. Oppression that cannot be named is challenging to address, and it is a hurdle that those making tools

⁸⁰ Alison Landsberg, “Post-Post-racial America: On *Westworld* and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture,” *Cultural Politics* 14, no. 2 (January 2018): p. 202, <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-6609074>

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 202.

of Black bodies, people, or Hosts count on. For Maeve and Bernard, the consequences of living in a world where they are perceived arrogantly are deadly—repeatedly. All that is left for them in *Westworld* is survival and death, a constant tension rooted in a tug-of-war of white men perceiving arrogantly. It is as Maeve tells us as she continues her struggle toward autonomy: “Survival is just another loop.”⁸²

Conclusion

In *Westworld*, as with *Dirty Computer* and the “Far Beyond the Stars” episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, Black characters contend with the life-threatening, memory-snatching, joy-stealing effects of anti-Blackness and the arrogant perception of Black people and bodies. In *Westworld*’s bleak and dystopian landscape, Black Hosts are relegated to the status of technological tools and writing devices to provide lessons and service for white characters and audiences. Netolicky likens the cyborg behavior of *Westworld*’s Hosts to the practice of academic writing, for example. She explains, “The academic writer melds themselves with their electronic devices and with software for word processing, reference management, data generation, and data analysis. They become one with their online identities through social media, Twitter bios, academia.edu profiles, and citations.”⁸³ In the coming chapter, I argue that this melding with technology and social platforms has created unique conditions for Black feminist theorizing, disruption, and protest. Television, Twitter, music, and speculative fiction converge in the

⁸² “*Westworld: Trompe L’Oeil*” (HBO, November 13, 2016)

⁸³ Deborah M. Netolicky, “Cyborgs, Desiring-Machines, Bodies without Organs, and *Westworld*: Interrogating Academic Writing and Scholarly Identity,” *Kome* 5, no. 1 (2017): pp. 93 <https://doi.org/10.17646/kome.2017.16>

case of *Confederate*, another proposed story from HBO, and the resulting digital protest organized and carried out by Black feminist thinkers. There is much to be done in the digital “Valley Beyond;” far from Eden, the work that waits for us there impacts our identities, political futures, and ability to travel worlds in our efforts toward freedom.

K. Tempest Bradford on Grief and Labor

Caitlin: And how have you conceived of or grappled with themes of technology in your speculative fiction work, if at all?

Tempest Bradford: Yeah, a little bit. There’s a story I wrote called “Élan Vital” and it’s one of my best stories, but it’s also a story that I don’t read because it’s about my mother’s death. I’m just like, “I can’t talk about this!” And I sob. But basically with that one, when I first tried to put it into a story form—because it came out of an idea that I got from dreams—but when I put it in story form, I was coming up with this idea of the main character: her mother is in this facility where they resurrect dead people.

So, a person dies, but they have the ability to resurrect them and they can resurrect them for a couple hours, a few days, maybe longer. It’s not super permanent, but then once they die again then they can be kept in a sort of... suspended animation, and then brought back. The way that they are brought back—and the thing that determines how much time they have—is that they take a sort of life force from a family member. So the family

member can give up some of their life force in order to bring that person back for a few hours, a few days, whatnot.

So my main character is doing this because like me, her mother died when she was in her early 20s and she's not ready. The story takes place on the day when she's gone to visit her mother and they're talking about things. Her mother, because of the conversation that they're having, her mother realizes that she has been coming to visit her far more often than she had led on.

Her mother's upset by this because she's like, "You can't be giving up your life force for this. You have to go live your life." And then she also realizes, she says, "How come you're doing it so much?" And the protagonist tells her that she does it every time she also comes to give life force to someone else. Because originally when this process was created it had to be a family member. Then as the process was refined, they were like, "Now it can be anybody. It doesn't have to be a family member."

She is basically selling her life force so that other people's family members can be resurrected without them having to give up their life force. *Like me, the protagonist of this story is Black and I make it pretty clear that it's white people who pay for this, and it's very often Black people who are the ones who are giving up their life force so that white people can get time with their passed-away family member without having to give away anything themselves.*

That was, other than me writing this story about processing my mother's death and whatnot, I was also very much thinking about the ways in which technology, which is supposed to be an equalizer, can be used to create more oppressive systems because the character is willing to do it because she so desperately wants more time to spend with her mother. *But it's not a coincidence that her mother was one of the first people that they did this to, because it was an experiment.*

It's not a coincidence that she's even offered the chance to do it for these other people because they're like, "*Well, she's an expendable body and they aren't.*" So that's the story in which I deal most directly with that kind of technological consequence. I wrote that when I was sort of at the very beginning of thinking about becoming a technology journalist.

Most of my other stories are fantasy. But most of the time, the stuff that I think about technology does tend to go into my more nonfiction work or just my media criticism—thinking about the future and thinking about how the future is presented in other things. I think that I tend to want to write fantasy more than I want to write science fiction because I despair so much of the technology. We have these wonderful cell phones, and these cell phones are going to be the downfall of us, but I really enjoy being able to play Pokémon. So I guess I accept downfall.

I'm sure that at some point it's going to come up more in my work. I mean, technically, again, the novel I'm writing now, it's steampunk, so there is a technology in it, even

though it's in the past. The technology is what is driving the commentary about social change, I guess, my commentary on inequality because in this story, it's set in ancient Egypt. The steampunk element are copper scarab beetles that are really big. People ride around in them and they run on the power of steam generated by sunlight.

Other than the actual mechanical workings of them, the other thing that they need to work is "Ba spirit." In ancient Egyptian spiritual thought, the Ba is one part of your soul. There are three parts to the soul. The Ba is one part, that's the part that's you, that's your sort of personality.

The machines need the Ba soul to run them. At this point in my story, the Egyptians don't know why the machines need a Ba soul because it's based on an older machine that the ancients had, and they recreate it. They're like, "Well, the instructions say there should be a Ba soul in here, so we'll put one in."

In order to get people to put their Ba souls in the machine, they strike deals with them and they say, "Oh, well, you're poor, but when you die, we'll make sure that your family is fed and they don't lose their home or whatever if you agree to do with for twelve years."

But the government, I guess you could say, of this culture has made it so that all these people are poor. It's sort of the system's fault that these people are poor. So they create the conditions under which the people need to do this, which is sort of an abomination.

They create the conditions and then they give them this out. Then they're essentially indentured servants for twelve years, disembodied and doing the work, and the scarab beetles are basically a function of, again, this system because they ferry around important royal people. They help to bring in the harvest. *They're tools that are only used by the Pharaoh and the government.*

So I didn't think that I was writing a story about the exploitation of poor people until I was like, "Well, how do these things run?" Because I was just like, "Well, it's really cool, it's a copper scarab and it's flying around." And I was like, "This is a story about exploitation using technology." That wasn't in the very original conception of this, but that is really what I've learned into as I've been developing this story.

Caitlin: Wow. Okay, I want to touch on any part—that was extremely powerful. Can you tell me where—backing up to the first part of the way you answered that question, can you tell me where that short story is published?

Tempest Bradford: Yes. It is published at Straight Horizons.

Caitlin: Sounds beautiful. I just got a little misty eyed—I lost my mother recently and I'm in my 20s. I'm going to read that. Thank you. And thank you for such an expansive understanding of technology. It's really what I'm after when I ask that question. Yes, okay, we went there.

Chapter Four: Navigating Digital and Speculative Worlds

Brittney Morris and Part-Time Twitter Hustling

Brittney Morris: ...and that's when I planned out the whole book in a single day and then I wrote the rest of it in eleven days and there was kind of a rush on that one because the next Twitter pitch contest for writers was happening in thirteen days and you have to have a finished manuscript to participate, and I knew that if anyone was going to have a Wakanda-inspired or *Black Panther*-inspired book, they were going to have it done by the next PitMad—it's called PitMad, the pitch contest—in three months and I said, I need to be the first one with this idea and so that's what really prompted that eleven-day streak of just me writing everything down super fast and then querying agents on the twelfth day. So yeah, that was kind of the whole *SLAY* journey.

Caitlin: That's amazing, and I don't know anything about the Twitter publishing ... Can you tell me more about that?

Brittney Morris: Yeah, so PitMad is an event that happens every few months. It is a pitch contest for aspiring writers who don't have agents to condense their book into a—what is it now?—280-character pitch in a single tweet, and so on the day of PitMad—which, I think the most recent one was December 6th—December 6th, aspiring writers from all over the world get on Twitter, they craft a 280-character maximum pitch for their book. They tweet it with the hashtag #PitMad, and then agents and editors from all over the world will log in, follow the hashtag, and if they want to see your query letter, they'll

click “like,” and if you get a lot of attention with a pitch contest like that, you can have a lot of agents that are after your book and you can create a lot of instant buzz for your work. So it’s a really, really amazing resource.

Caitlin: Wow.

Brittney Morris: And yeah.

Caitlin: Okay, so—sorry. No, this is taking me places. Forgive me: how did you find out about this? Somebody told you or you joined Twitter and found out or just word of mouth?

Brittney Morris: I joined Twitter and found out. Yeah, I joined Twitter and then I started... I think I did a simple search for writers or authors and that led me to find the writing community and then I actually, the day I joined Twitter, it was the day of an annual writing mentorship program called Pitch Wars, and it was the last day and so I was, like, panicking. I was like, I want to enter this, and I missed the deadline by two minutes.

Caitlin: So you thought, never again?

Brittney Morris: Two minutes. I was so upset and so from then on, I was like, when is the next one? What can I do?

Caitlin: Okay.

Brittney Morris: Which is funny because this year, I’m actually a Pitch Wars mentor, so that was an amazing change.

Caitlin: Congratulations. That’s really cool.

Brittney Morris: Yeah. So that was kind of how I found PitMad and Pitch Wars and the writing community in general.

Caitlin: Yeah, and so then you got your agent, and you got your book contract, and what was that process like? I know I'm off book, so if you don't want to talk about it, then you don't—

Brittney Morris: That's okay.

Caitlin: —have to, but I'm just curious. So through this Twitter competition, somebody pressed "like." Simon Pulse, right?

Brittney Morris: Yeah.

Caitlin: Okay, and what was that like?

Brittney Morris: So Simon Pulse themselves didn't actually click "like." What was it? I think I had 150, I think, this round, agents and editors click like, which is more attention than I was expecting. Most of the hashtags you see going down the list have zero. Some have one or two, some have six and have like fifteen and then it starts jumping into forty and sixty and seventy and 150 and the highest I've ever seen, I think was 8,000 and that was a huge anomaly. I don't know what happened with that. It was an amazing pitch.

Caitlin: The algorithm gods were like, *yes*, that will be a hit.

Brittney Morris: Yeah, it was an amazing pitch. It was about a mermaid, a Black mermaid, who would capture the souls of those thrown overboard during the middle passage.

Caitlin: Oh, I'd read the hell out of that. Okay, I understand. I understand. I understand. I understand.

Brittney Morris: Right?

Caitlin: I'm on board.

Brittney Morris: I was like, yep. Couldn't have happened to a better pitch.

Caitlin: Wow, okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay.

Brittney Morris: But anyway—

Caitlin: You got 150.

Brittney Morris: Yes. 150.

Caitlin: And how did you narrow from there?

Brittney Morris: So out of those 150 likes, I think seventy-five or so were actual agents and editors who followed the rules. There are a lot of people every time that just click “like” because they're trying to be supportive and they like the sound of it and they forget that the like button is supposed to be for agents and editors only. So I narrowed it down to the seventy-five agents and editors and then from there, I weeded out agents who either hadn't really represented anything like *SLAY* before, agents who had no sci-fi on their manuscript wish list, and I was kind of like, why are you here? Those agents and editors, and then there were several agents on there who didn't have very strong credentials and seemed kind of new to the game or it was very hard to find information on them online and so I didn't really know much about them and then from there, I narrowed it down to forty and I queried forty of them. Fifteen got back to me and asked for the full manuscript

and then eight made offers and my agent, the one that I actually signed with, actually wasn't one that initially liked my pitch.

I don't know if she missed it. It's so easy to miss those, but I actually threw her name in the hat because I said, well, if I'm getting all this attention from PitMad, I might as well put in my top agent picks, and so there were several agent picks that I had on my list.

Quressa Robinson was one of them, my agent. Oh my goodness, what is his name? Brook Sherman, the agent behind *The Hate U Give*, was another one of my dream choices.

There were several on that list but [of] all eight people who made offers, Quressa was the one who really got the book. She had lived Kiera's story to some degree, just like I had, and she was extremely passionate about it. She had also been an editor at [this publishing company] for five years, so she knows how they think.

She knows what they're looking for, and she helped me kind of polish the manuscript before we sent it out to editors, so that was a huge unexpected help and once we went out on what's called submission, which is where agent sends out the manuscript to editors at various publishing houses, we started getting offers back. We had several offers, I think it was another eight. It's weird, the number eight and the number thirteen have played a huge part in this. It was really strange.

Caitlin: Spooky.

Brittney Morris: But eight of them came back, and so we had an auction. We went to auction, which is where—essentially, it's a bidding war where they take up, and up, and

up, and up the offer price. And we ended in the six-figure ballpark, which was unprecedented. I'm so grateful, and shortly after, I quit my job, and now I do this full time.

Caitlin: Killing it. I'm so pleased. I'm so impressed. That process is amazing. Thank you for telling me about it. I had no idea that was through Twitter and so much of my work is about Twitter as a resource, so I was definitely trying to zoom in on that—and that might appear in the text at some point. So that's really cool. Thank you for going into that for me.

Introduction

“Real versus Unreal. Virtual versus Physical. You hold the hands of both and can't tell one from the other.” I use this passage from LaShawn Wanak's short story “She's All Light” as a starting point to relate to the way Black women navigate and gather in digital spaces in a method of world-traveling. Occupying an aesthetic of a Black feminist part-time cyborg, Black women use spaces like Twitter to do the work of hashing out identity and resisting the erasure of their perspectives and theoretical contributions. I carry out this exploration in five parts.

Part one introduces Wanak's “She's All Light,” which emphasizes the misgivings of one Black woman about the livability of virtual worlds and the successful connection she maintains with another Black woman who chooses to tip the delicate balance of “part-time” cyborg activity and move fully into the virtual world. I use “She's All Light” as an allegorical centerpiece to demonstrate the way Black feminists and Black

cyberfeminist thinkers are aware of the personal risks of investing in digital communities and theorizing Blackness in public virtual spaces and still routinely choose to participate in these spaces, heighten their cultural impact, and use social platforms as places to generate theory and political resistance in community. I examine this contentious relationship in the space of “Black Twitter,” specifically. Far from operating as a utopia, Black Twitter has been successful in its modified role as a place to gather, theorize, and come to voice among Black people. “She’s All Light” functions as a template for thinking through Black women operating as part-time cyborgs, whether they choose to fully immerse themselves in online platforms like Twitter, or whether they may feel more salient connections to Black women and other women of color outside of the domain of cyberspace.

In part two, I establish Black Twitter as a fast-paced and ever-morphing space in which Black people routinely stay one step ahead of the attempts of white-dominant media platforms to control, exploit, or even understand it. Black Twitter is comparable to the virtual meeting space where the characters in “She’s All Light” connect across space and time. In this reading, Black Twitter is a place where the part-time Black feminist cyborg can come to voice—that is, perform a kind of shapeshifting via code switching between academic and everyday talk; be creative; connect with other Black women; and choose to strategically address either Black audiences primarily or dominant audiences, depending on what the needs and goals are for herself and her community. The third section continues to argue for Black Twitter as a contested but legitimate space for Black women to “gather”—as the characters in “She’s All Light” do—to come to voice, to

access and witness moments of others coming to voice, and to build on Black feminist theory. This platform serves bell hooks' call for more accessible spaces for Black women of all backgrounds to gather together to theorize together.

Part four extends this line of thinking, providing examples of coming to voice through the sharing of collective pain and framing these collected moments of outcry as a "gathering." As part of my investment in a Black technophilic tradition,⁸⁴ I examine two characteristics of contemporary Black feminist theory in depth: the accessibility of Black feminist theorizing and the concept of coming to voice. Using the example of #McKinney, an incident of police brutality carried out by a white police officer against a young Black girl at a pool party in McKinney, Texas in 2015, I place reactions from high-profile Black activists and scholars and from Black laypeople in the context of Black feminist theorizing and collective coming to voice in response to the incident.

The final section takes up the digital protest supporting the hashtag #NoConfederate as a case study. Examining how a part-time Black feminist cyborg might operate in a space like Twitter, I argue that Black women were effectively able to strategize against the arrogant perception of the white speculative gaze that the creation of a show like HBO's proposed series *Confederate* exemplifies. *Confederate* imagines a world in which the American South is still a slaveholding confederacy in modern times, navigating the ethical quagmire of enslaved Black people and political tensions between a divided United States. Showcasing a common critique of the premise of the show,

⁸⁴ Everett, Anna. "On Cyberfeminism and Cyberwomanism: High-Tech Mediations of Feminism's Discontents." *Signs* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1278-286. doi:10.1086/422235.

#NoConfederate was an initiative by Black woman determined to remind us that we have no need to time travel to imagine that we exist in the white supremacy endorsed by the Confederacy. This tactic is akin to other speculative Black strategies, particularly recalling Octavia Butler's novels *Kindred* (which reminds us that the trauma of slavery is still affecting us now) and *Parable of the Sower* (which reminds us that the violent white supremacist future we imagine has already arrived). In the case of these examples from both established and proposed speculative fiction efforts, I argue that Black women need to "travel" in experimental ways to be free.

Blending Black Physical and Virtual: Reading LaShawn Wanak's "She's All Light"

Exploring the potential for a part-time cyborg practical aesthetic in Wanak's "She's All Light" speaks to the growing body of work in digital Blackness studies, cyberfeminist studies, and cyborg theory. These disciplines seek to question and bend a perceived stark divide between the "reality" of the physical world and incorporeal virtual spaces. Published in 2010 in *Daybreak Magazine*, the plot follows a young Black woman's conflict over her friend's decision to "scape," a word Wanak uses to describe the action of permanently giving up a biological body to upload one's personality and exist solely as an avatar on the Internet. These uploaded people exist largely on evolved social media platforms, communicating and moving through these platforms with avatars, which may or may not mimic their previous physical bodies.

When the story was published a decade ago, social media platforms were not nearly as integrated into our experiences as they are now. For example, elements like

livestreaming and mass cultural conversations grouped by hashtags were not a daily reality. In Wanak's imagined (and prophetic) world, they are the current reality. Cameras constantly monitor your daily movements at your command for a host of followers to comment and "rank" your activities and online presence. Much like the features on 2019's Twitter and Instagram, polls sent to followers provide a space to receive input on your decisions and actions in the world.

The story begins with a poll asking followers whether the central character, Tilda, should respond to a series of communications from her friend Neicy on the morning of June 22, 2049. 581 of her "chatbuddies" vote and ultimately determine that Tilda should meet with Neicy, who invited her to lunch for the purpose of asking her to be her proxy during her "scaping" process.⁸⁵

Tilda is unhappy with Neicy's choice: she asks first if she is sick or mentally ill. These ableist assumptions are the only assumptions that come to mind for Tilda as she considers why someone may choose not to be in their biological body. She persists, and asks if it is a choice related to Neicy's boyfriend, but Neicy clarifies that she was offered a "net only" job, and thought she could "use a change," revealing a lack of investment in her biological form that Tilda finds disturbing. She tells Neicy that "The Net's all images. You can't do anything real in there."⁸⁶ Throughout the story, Tilda expresses concern over Neicy's future inability to participate in in-person conversations and the permanence of her choice to scape. Neicy's work involves enhancing the scaping experience and

⁸⁵ "Scape" being a truncated form of the word "escape."

⁸⁶ LaShawn M. Wanak "She's All Light." DayBreak Magazine. February 15, 2010. <https://daybreakmagazine.wordpress.com/2010/01/08/daybreak-fiction-shes-all-light/>.

aligning it as closely as possible to offline physical experiences. She says, in a video from her company, that they work toward a scaping community without the social and physical barriers that their physical world contains.

A series of arguments with both Neicy and her other friends (particularly a chatbuddy who tells her that “the human brain is composed of electric impulses going through gray matter. Scaping simply transfers those impulses to digital rather than organic,” and describes scaping as our “next evolutionary step”⁸⁷) soften Tilda’s outlook in time for her to support Neicy’s transition to her digital self. As Neicy’s body shuts down and her larger-than-life avatar arrives on the Net, she reaches for Tilda’s avatar’s hand and we are delivered the introductory quote to this chapter: “Real versus Unreal. Virtual versus Physical. You hold the hands of both and can’t tell one from the other.”

When I interviewed Wanak, I asked directly about this quotation. She explained Tilda’s moment of clarity about the perceived divide in her physical body and digital self:

Well in this case, yeah, it really was because Neicy had transferred herself. It became the question of which is the “real” Neicy. For the main character, it really didn’t matter because what made Neicy *Neicy*, is... Neicy. If that makes any sense. ... She still retained enough of her own self that the main character ... was trusting the process enough to know that Neicy wouldn’t change—only as far as what was spiritually, or what the conscious Neicy would be.

This trust and emphasis on sense of self are the primary themes of the story, resulting in a warm parable about friendship against the backdrop of ubiquitous social technologies.

Many stories depicting similar realities are dark and dystopian in tone, anxious about the ever-creeping surveillance involved in social media and resistant to the confusion of

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

boundaries between the public and private sphere. The Orwellian “Big Brother” concept is often the driving source of narrative conflict and tension in sci-fi contemplations of human interactions in cyberspace. “She’s All Light” is no less aware or critical of these concepts, but it lacks the bleak tone of dystopian fiction. The anxiety usually expressed about such an invasive technosocial experience is muted, found only in her primary character whose apprehension fades through the course of the story. Though the conflict centers the choice to divest of oneself of one’s physical form, Wanak’s two central characters act and interact as if social media’s blurred spheres are a natural part of life, rather than a new or troublesome invasion.

Perhaps this acceptance of blurred boundaries reflects the historical experiences of Black women having never known an existence with clearly defined or guaranteed divisions between public and private spaces, and knowing little bodily autonomy in either. The concept of Black life without constant policing and authoritative gaze is equal parts historical fiction and high fantasy. Racial and gendered roles determined for Black women during slavery designated them as both hard physical laborers and workers with domestic, family-oriented skills.⁸⁸ Further, Black women’s lives and labor took place in both their private *and* public spheres, and whites could violate their space and bodies in either sphere. Unlike middle and upper class white women who could presume some expectation of privacy, Black women have not enjoyed the same. This understanding of the roles of Black women operates to make the private and public distinction less distinct.

⁸⁸ For reflection on the multiple roles of Black women during slavery and how labor influenced Black women as a very specifically gendered group, see the chapter “The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood” in *Women, Race, and Class*. Davis, Angela Yvonne. *Women, Race & Class*. London: Women’s Press, 1986.

Indeed, our private experiences, from raising families, to sex and sexuality, to the form and workings of our bodies, are subject to the intrusion of the white gaze and ongoing cultural commentary.⁸⁹ Black women's public labor is critiqued and maligned from within and outside of our community. For example, the discourse surrounding Black women's insistence on work and leadership—even labeled “matriarchy”—is framed as destructive to Black community and unsuitable for women's roles.⁹⁰ These dystopian conditions are not new, and Black women adapt within them and learn to create lives worth living. We build lives that allow us breath for things like friendship parables from within a dystopian landscape, as we find in “She's All Light.”

The experience of blended public and private spheres is an advantage in a variety of difficult situations where Black women are called upon to survive, but my project's focus on technology and Black technological interaction means examining the ways this longstanding practice of moving between spheres impacts the way we navigate social media and other technosocial spaces. One of the most fascinating discussions of Black women's social media savvy comes from Catherine Knight Steele's lecture on Black women's responses to “fake news” and Russian bots and trolls during the 2016 election cycle, as articulated in her lecture “Digital Black Feminist Discourse and the Legacy of Black Women's Technology Use” at the Berkman Klein Center in 2017.⁹¹ Using many of

⁸⁹ A thoughtful introductory explanation of the impact of slavery on Black women's sexuality and stereotypes under the white gaze can be found in the chapter “Stereotypes, False Images, Terrorism: The White Assault on Black Sexuality.” Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.

⁹⁰ Staples, Robert. “The Myth of the Black Matriarchy.” *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 3/4 (1970): 8-16. <http://www.jstor.org.ezp3.lib.umn.edu/stable/41163415>.

⁹¹ Catherine Knight Steele, “Digital Black Feminist Discourse and the Legacy of Black Women's Technology Use.” Lecture, The Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, Cambridge, MA, November 21, 2017.

the same frameworks, like Black cyberfeminism and Black technophilia, Steele's words highlight the ways Black women use digital communication with a unique skillset that is built on centuries of Black feminist wisdom and understanding. This allows Black women greater insight into and discernment of false representations than their white counterparts. Steele gives a compelling example of this wisdom and experience in action, when she finds that Black women as a group had higher than average ability compared to other demographic groups to discern between Russian bots spouting right-wing propaganda and genuine user accounts on Twitter during the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election.⁹²

Within the same lecture, Steele argues that Black feminist writers' online communication changes the shape of both Black feminist thought and the technology itself.⁹³ This understanding of the way Black women shape themselves, their communities, and the technology they use invites us to reconsider the theme of Black women navigating the politics of online representation in "She's All Light." In the story, I was curious about the consequences of leaving physical Blackness behind, and what remains with us as we enter digital space—be it Black feminist knowledge that protects us from being moved by falsehoods, to a skillset in community-building. I was curious

⁹² Steele also utilizes Joan Morgan's "fucking with the grays" to describe Black women's cyberfeminist activities and work. Fucking with the grays means embracing and interrogating the tensions within our feminism, the way that the theoretical ideas and lived reality of Black womanhood do not always align. Fucking with the grays is a framework I have not used explicitly here, but is an undercurrent in this discussion of the cyborg as an entity that disturbs binaries. Fucking with the grays as a lens and a way of being is very sympathetic to this reading of a Black feminist cyborg: please read these cyborgs as entities that must and do fuck with grays.

⁹³Knight Steele, Catherine. "Digital Black Feminist Discourse and the Legacy of Black Women's Technology Use."

about Wanak's perception of her character's experience of Blackness in discussion about abandoning physical form, and I clarified this further in my conversation with her:

Caitlin: So, Neicy's character "scaping," or turning her biological form into an online consciousness and an avatar. You mentioned earlier in our conversation that you wanted to see what that would look like from this Black woman's perspective, right? Do you think that an integration with social technology like this or the absence of a physical body has different implications or consequences for Black people?

LaShawn Wanak: Yeah, honestly, I hadn't thought that far ahead when I originally wrote it. I totally think it would. There was a special reason why I left Neicy as she was [with her avatar similar in appearance to her left-behind physical form] and did not turn her into like an animal avatar like the other character did that was a mouse. Because Neicy I think overall was proud of her identity. And her silk, as it was, was something that she was always proud of. So her Blackness, her fatness, her hair, everything that made her *her*, or everything that was physical about her made her, *her*. And that was an identity that she was willing to take with her even into the digital space where everything is a lot more fluid and changeable. That is what makes Neicy easy and... But that's because she was—is—comfortable with her Blackness. And I don't think at the time she would have wanted to change it, because it's her identity. It's... I'm trying to think of who else... There were a lot of other characters to ever find their way. And I originally did the other characters, I can't remember what their races were. I know that the mouse was a white woman, an older white woman. I had that right off the bat. But others, I left that ambiguous.

Caitlin: But you wanted to highlight Neicy's.

LaShawn Wanak: Yeah. And I want to say that overall it depends on... It's basically up to the individual, I think. I think there will always be people who, like, for instance, there will be Black people who are very uncomfortable with their identity and/or they don't see it as a strong part of their identity and they will readily give that up and become something else. But I also foresee if that's everything that ever was to happen, a lot of Black people keeping their physical representations because it's what makes them, *them*. If I was to go online, I might give myself locs again, because I realized I miss them. But I doubt that I would change my own form because it's what makes me, *me*. So my curves, my hair, my breasts, my feet, you know, they are all part of me. And it took me a while to look, you know, it took me a while to love myself...

Caitlin: You've earned it.

LaShawn Wanak: So that's how God made me, so I don't want to change that. Yeah.

Caitlin: So yeah, I love that implicit claim there—there's the idea that the physical stuff does make us, *us*. Then when it doesn't get taken from Neicy, there's something really powerful about Blackness that doesn't disappear when the physical disappears.

I maintain that this concept is a fascinating one: what of Blackness remains when we do not rely on the overworked “Black body” to carry our theorizing? In “She’s All Light,” Tilda’s fears that Neicy’s connections to her friends, her community, and her own sense of identity would be severed in the process of scaping dissipate as Neicy’s avatar enables a new way to travel worlds and heighten her impact through the added mobility that scaping provides. As is the case in this story, I am invested in the notion that theoretical work interrogating the divide between the physical and virtual, especially as it pertains to questions of race and Blackness, will be set on the stage of social media.

The blending of body and technology are often conceptualized as physical, tangible pieces of machine, gears, and wires. As my interview participants like Walidah Imarisha, adrienne maree brown, and Jennifer Cross have mentioned, this simplistic notion of what counts as technology has not only historically limited the recognition of Black people’s technological and scientific facility but also limits theoretical understanding of the technology that surrounds us.

The Black feminist cyborg is a theoretical tool that can aid in navigating the collapsing boundaries between physical and virtual. The Black feminist cyborg is flesh

and code bound up in one another, only binary in the rhythm of ones and zeroes that power movement through a technosocial topography defined at this moment by social media and other forms of online communications. Without the recognition or understanding of the cyborgian enhancements that make occupying Black digital space and inhabiting a Black body possible, the Black cyborg always looks like a mystery, if not rendered completely invisible. The transparency of code allows for structures like Black Twitter to exist and function in the periphery of the white gaze. Always a step behind, white journalists and media specialists scramble to understand what Black people are saying and doing on the Internet. The language confuses them, the platforms elude them (“is Black Twitter, like, a separate site?”), the speed and nature of Black hashtags and challenges outpace them. Our code is too slippery for conquest; it changes the moment it is grasped. The cyborg herself is long gone, moved offline or to the queer and distant digital planets of others. She is somewhere far beyond the stars, poised to travel to newer, queerer Black worlds housed in cyberspace.

Black Twitter and Black Cyberfeminism

Twitter is used globally by Black people navigating the current racial landscape. An increasingly political tool since its inception in 2006, Twitter is a focal point in conversations about several different social movements and socio-political events, gaining prominence during the rise of the #Occupy movement and employed prolifically by the #BlackLivesMatter movement. On Twitter, users create posts that contain up to 280 characters at a time of micro-content, producing commentary for either a general audience or directed specifically at other Twitter users. These dialogues between users are

usually identifiable through their use of the “@” symbol, which users insert before another user’s Twitter handle to address other users directly. The platform uses algorithms to curate a user’s feed that, in the most recent iteration of an ever-changing code, are designed to sort tweets from those you follow based on a mixture of prioritizing recent posts, posts that have received high levels of engagement from other users, and any media (such as videos, memes, or GIFs) that are present in a tweet.⁹⁴ Twitter is a fast-paced, real-time platform, and it has become a primary source of news, social commentary, and popular culture happenings for Millennials, especially.

“Black Twitter,” the term for the hub of Black people on the platform engaging in public discourse about Black life, culture, and politics, is a phenomenon of interest in the emerging field of digital Blackness studies. In his book *Distributed Blackness* (2020), André Brock, Jr. analyzes Black Twitter as a “technical artifact,” a practice, and a set of beliefs about race and technology from both in-group and out-group observers and participants.⁹⁵ Through Catherine Squires’ notion of a Black counterpublic, specifically a public-facing “satellite counterpublic,” Brock conceptualizes Black Twitter as a space where we may “employ protest rhetoric and reveal the ‘hidden transcripts of Black discourse’” and resist the dominant narratives about Black people and Black people’s relationship(s) with technology.⁹⁶ In this chapter, I argue that the rhetorical practices of Black women in this satellite counterpublic stand as Black feminist theorizing in and of

⁹⁴ Cole Nemeth, “How the Twitter Algorithm Works in 2020.” Sprout Social, February 11, 2020. <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/twitter-algorithm/>.

⁹⁵ André Brock. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. P. 82 New York: New York University Press, 2020.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* P. 84

themselves. Drawing from a framework of Black feminist theory outlined by bell hooks in her texts *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), I address the resonances between Black feminist Twitter activity and important components of Black feminist theorizing. I argue that the practice of tweeting about the lived experiences of Black womanhood both fits within a traditional understanding of Black feminist theory and works toward an expanded Black feminist theory. The expansion of Black feminist theory I discuss takes into account Black digital theorizing and the growing Black digital landscape, offering a space for radical, community-driven Black feminist pedagogy outside of the academy.

Radical Access to Black Feminist Theorizing on Black Twitter

There are resonances between the feminist theorizing that hooks and other prominent Black feminist theorists perform and describe in their writing, and the kind of Black cyberfeminist theorizing that happens on platforms like Twitter. As hooks tells us, theory cannot be separated from practice, and I add to this assertion that Black digital theorizing can no longer be separated from activism. hooks recognized the need for a bridge between academic feminism and a feminist theorizing that can reach women who need its revolutionary impact. Importantly, through Black digital theorizing, feminist theory can be touched and shaped by those women. hooks is addressing an issue of logistical access in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* when she notes that “many women will not leave or are unable to leave their homes to attend feminist conferences and public talks,” and suggests that perhaps “door-to-door contact could be one way that

feminist ideas could be shared.”⁹⁷ Twitter provides that door-to-door interpersonal connection she sought, just as Neicy sought untethered access to other people in “She’s All Light.” This Black cyberfeminism, originally articulated by Kishonna Gray, can address a unique set of conditions facing Black women in an expanding digital landscape. Tressie McMillan Cottom touches on these conditions when she says that Black cyberfeminism can offer us a “cohesive argument for interrogation and resistance.”⁹⁸ Furthermore, Black cyberfeminism allows a space for us to “interrogate how social relations of dominance are translated through digitally-mediated relationships with technology.”⁹⁹ A robust Black cyberfeminism must include a full appreciation of the Black feminist theorizing that occurs in technosocial spaces. As Moya Bailey calls us to recognize in “All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave,” when Black women do this kind of intense theoretical labor, their words are often not recognized as the rigorous works of digital humanities and Black feminism that they are.¹⁰⁰ Contributing to conversations in Black cyberfeminism and digital Blackness studies, Bailey’s essay highlights the necessity of recognizing the theorizing efforts of Black women on Black Twitter as substantive, generative, and pedagogical Black cyberfeminist work.

⁹⁷ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston, MA: South End, 1984. P. 110

⁹⁸ Tressie McMillan Cottom, “Black Cyberfeminism: Ways Forward for Classification Situations, Intersectionality and Digital Sociology,” p. 13. *Digital Sociologies*, July 2016, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/vnvh9>

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 12

¹⁰⁰ Moya Bailey, “All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave.” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1.1 (2011)

I think about radical access to Black cyberfeminist theorizing in two ways: intellectually and linguistically accessible theorizing, and logistical access to digital space through technology. There is the ongoing question of access to a feminist community within discussions of feminist theory. For hooks and others in her generation of feminist scholarship, this has meant interrogating the racism that happens in spaces like feminist consciousness-raising groups, feminist studies classrooms, and academic spaces that isolate Black women from theoretical feminist conversations. hooks describes the need for linguistic access to feminist theory in *Feminist Theory* when she writes: “Difficulty of access has been a problem with much feminist theory. A feminist essay with revolutionary ideas written in a complicated, abstract manner using the jargon of a specific discipline will not have the impact it should have on the consciousness of women and men because it will probably be read only by a small group of people.”¹⁰¹ I suggest that there are opportunities Twitter might provide Black women for radical access to what has been described as a digital cultural hub for Black people and Black feminists. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks asks: “Where can we find a body of feminist theory that is directed toward helping individuals integrate feminist thinking and practice into daily life?”¹⁰² The social media platform of Twitter allows for collectivism and coalition on a much broader scale than pre-internet feminist theorizing could imagine. There is a literal archive of Black feminist thoughts and activity housed on Twitter, written in a language that is accessible to Black women from varied backgrounds, bound in hashtags like

¹⁰¹ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 112-113

¹⁰² bell hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. P. 70

2012's #GirlsLikeMe, initiated by author and trans icon Janet Mock to hold visible space for trans women to share their lived experiences; or author and cultural critic Mikki Kendall's 2013 hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, designed to skewer the white feminist tendency to demand support from women of color but refuse to reciprocate the same solidarity when women of color come under threat from white supremacy. Black vernacular is claimed, embraced, and utilized to explore high theoretical concepts. When hooks comments that "Any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public,"¹⁰³ the wide range of feminist and Black radical commentary shared on a daily basis on Black Twitter seems a modern confirmation of her assertion. This is because Black Twitter theorizing can be done both in high academic language, and in vernacular that is recognizable to Black people from all kinds of educational and geographic backgrounds. This code-switching can happen within a single hashtag or conversation, and sometimes within a single tweet. One such example is a tweet posted by author Kaitlyn Greenidge, as she grapples with the impact of systemic oppression on marginalized people in a combination of technical language and casual language emphasized with AAVE:

What a gas, to be told you can escape the depression of poverty & family trauma if you just work hard enough & try therapy, only to be outmaneuvered by global fascism, white supremacy, the death of capitalism, and ecological collapse

structural oppression said "you THOUGHT, bitch."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* P. 64

¹⁰⁴ Kaitlyn Greenidge. Twitter Post. March 6th, 2020.

<https://twitter.com/surlybassey/status/1235934469913182209>

Where hooks articulated concern that the theorizing that happens in largely white, upper-class, institutions claims to speak for all women while linguistically alienating the women they claim to speak to and for, the users like Greenidge who participate in Black Twitter hashtags and conversations are not beholden to academic language, posturing, or politics. Rather, the theorizing that takes place on Twitter is unrestricted by these forces and is able to reflect a wider multiplicity of Black thought and experience. This multiplicity can be a productive turn away from the “all women are oppressed” narrative hooks critiques in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. hooks argues that upper-class, academic, white feminist discourses erase other kinds of oppression that women experience on the basis of class, race, and other factors. Instead of one monolithic “sisterhood”-inspired narrative about women’s oppression and women’s experiences, Black Twitter provides a space to add one’s voice, and come to voice, about Black female oppression.

Often in this line of research, questions about access to digital spaces come up long before accessibility of language. Much of the critique about thinking of Black Twitter as a representative population, and about a lot of virtual community building generally, is that only some people have access to these online spaces. Usually the argument is made on socio-economic grounds, or on a geographical basis, as in: what does it mean when we only hear from people in countries that have open Internet access, or from those who can afford regular Internet access? With the focus on that concern, the overwhelming amount of people who do have access to collective theorizing because of these digital communities has been de-emphasized. For example, a 2014 Pew Internet Research study indicated that 72% of Black people had regular access to the Internet via

a broadband connection or a smartphone, and that Black people between the ages of 18-29 use Twitter at proportionally higher rates than their white counterparts.¹⁰⁵ This critique is a valuable one that pushes us toward a more rigorous analysis of the way that Black people are seen as incapable of properly obtaining and utilizing technology, and how the Black body is seen as incompatible with technology if it not oriented toward white supremacist goals of efficiency, productivity, and labor.

The accessibility that Twitter offers creates opportunity for sharing theory and lived experiences of Black womanhood. That said, there are also considerable risks that come along with that exposure. Twitter users are able to do certain things that mitigate some of the risks of online engagement: users can limit their audiences through private accounts, blocking other users from viewing their tweets, and sharing tweets and thoughts via direct messages to other users. Users also curate their feeds through choosing who to follow, muting certain users and/or keywords, and organizing feeds by themes and/or users. These strategies make surveillance harder and continue to evolve with the platform. However, not all needs are addressed through these platform-based mechanisms.

One moment stands out in my mind as having demonstrated both sides of this point: the 2015 social media Blackout in which Black, indigenous, and other women of color ceased using social media for a brief period of time. Elegantly named “#ThisTweetCalledMyBack,” an homage to the foundational feminist text *This Bridge*

¹⁰⁵ Smith, Aaron. “African Americans and Technology Use.” Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. January 06, 2014. Accessed November 16, 2016. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/06/african-americans-and-technology-use/>.

Called My Back (1981), the Blackout centered the kind of labor and burdens women of color have been expected and often forced to bear. In #ThisTweetCalledMyBack, several women of color who had large followings on Twitter and regularly covered issues related to race, social justice, Black feminism, and gender made an effort to raise awareness of the unrecognized labor they were doing on Twitter and in the blogosphere. Stressing that the devaluation of the work we can do in techno-social spaces is a way that we undermine the knowledge production of Black women, the collective released a statement, part of which read:

In an age where young women often have cell phones with internet access before they have access to healthcare and social services, why are so many so quick to demean the work of digital feminism in the hands of Black women? When depression, anxiety and disability make it so that getting out of bed, much less into the streets, is a debilitating challenge and risk, why do we demean social media and tell people they can't fully engage without taking up physical space? Whose interests are we centering if we constantly hyperfocus on the limits of grassroots social media, instead of the impact and possibilities, while not making the physical spaces safe or accessible for these women? When we ask these questions, we uncover that the only people who meet these qualifications of real activism are cis gender, able bodied people—frequently male.

We replicate systems of power because we place high valuation on spaces they can access and devalue the spaces that marginalized identities have access to, while refusing to make the physical spaces of our movements safe by addressing interpersonal abuse or accessibility. People who have access to those spaces and understand how to navigate those systems then capitalize off the labor of marginalized women, show up to the movement and halls of academia, and present themselves as thought leaders and change makers. Once we expand our understanding of violence to include plagiarism, harassment, gaslighting, emotional abuse, ableism and exploitation of labor, we find huge fissures in a movement that the women we are prescribing solutions for fall through on a daily basis. We find a replicated system of violence that prioritizes those closer to systemic and hierarchal values of bodies rather than anti-violence. We then use this hierarchy to convince ourselves that these people are important (sometimes they are) and that their

work is more necessary than addressing the violence that follows marginalized women attempting to engage a movement. (#ThisTweetCalledMyBack Collective 2015)

The frustrations outlined in the statement about the lack of value placed on Black women's online labor are echoed in the tensions rising between friends Neicy and Tilda in Wanak's "She's All Light." As Neicy prepares to scape, opening herself up to online violence and scrutiny as she uses her disembodied mind wholly in cyberspace, Tilda's concern that Neicy's contributions, company, friendship, and identity may be lessened or destroyed by her decision to act without her body serve as rationale to diminish and erase the work Neicy has done in digital spaces. Neicy's work with the company "Wilcox Enterprises" involves making the sensory experience of scaping more realistic, introducing taste, touch, smell, and the things that we "take for granted" in offline life. After she scapes, Neicy drags an exhausted Tilda world-traveling, visiting sites she did not have access to in her physical form: "[Neicy has been] dragging [Tilda] everywhere, both online and off—parties, chatrooms, the mall, virtual beaches, Downtown. She's even trying to talk [Tilda] into going to Mt. Rainier tomorrow."¹⁰⁶ The freedom, flexibility and speed involved in Neicy's travel is possible only through the Net. Though the experience frightens Tilda, she ultimately comes to respect Neicy's new reality, wherein she may live in a way that feels authentic for her.

With this undercurrent of anxiety demonstrated in "She's All Light" coming from within and outside of Black feminist communities, it is unsurprising that the mainstream frames the theoretical and activist efforts of Black women as lackluster, lazy, and

¹⁰⁶ LaShawn M. Wanak "She's All Light." DayBreak Magazine.

inadequate. Much of the work that Black women produce is judged by mainstream audiences as lacking, uncritical, or unsubstantial, if it is recognized at all. Recalling, for example, the vast scale of erasure of Black women's organizing, theorizing, and mobilizing during the Civil Rights Movement in favor of emphasis on Black men's leadership, the tendency to dismiss Black women's labor in digital space is in line with this historical pattern.¹⁰⁷

The trend extends to Black women in the academy. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks discusses the way the work and theorizing of Black women is interpreted when she notes, "There were many times early on when my work was subjected to forms of dismissal and devaluation that created within me a profound despair. I think such despair has been felt by every Black woman or woman-of-color thinker/theorist whose work is oppositional and moves against the grain."¹⁰⁸ Dismissing the work of Black women due to their employment of a methodology and platform that mainstream white activists and scholars are less comfortable with is a standard practice. This practice upholds white normative forms of theorizing and activist work and reifies the labor of Black women as illegible, if not invisible. Further, this practice has proven a tremendous roadblock on the path toward a moment of liberation found in coming to voice. Black women's digital theorizing is often treated with similar dismissal and erasure, but the platform allows for

¹⁰⁷ For example, Melissa Harris Perry discusses the way the thankless, ongoing political and social labor, something she calls the "history of misrecognition of Black women" of Black women in America has contributed to the trope of the "strong Black woman" and the sense of shame many Black women feel in their roles as American citizens See: Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. P. 22. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

¹⁰⁸ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* P. 72

collective resistance to that erasure through hashtag campaigns like #SayHerName, #BlameABlackFeminist, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and #BlackGirlMagic.

When hooks described coming to voice and educating women about feminist theory and the oppression of Black women, there was no public infrastructure in place where the dialogic relationalities between Black women could be expressed. Now, Twitter has become a cultural hub that Black people and people of color access every day. It is simple and straightforward to use, has no fees for membership, and is integrated into everyday personal technologies. Twitter moves quickly, and it lacks the kinds of barriers that academic feminist theorizing comes up against before it is made public. For example, editors and reviewers can choose to validate the perspective of the theorist, or they can dismiss it, ensuring it is not widely read. On Twitter, coming to voice can have the same transformative power that it does offline, a sentiment that has been captured in the Tweets of Black women who have participated in the Black Twitter phenomenon. Though Black Twitter cannot be conceived as a fully democratized space, there have traditionally been few opportunities for Black women to have such a widespread access to one another's words and knowledge production. Black feminist academic theorizing has largely been difficult and expensive to produce, difficult to disseminate among the Black women outside of the academy for whom it is meant, and often difficult to read and understand for those without access to spaces where academic language and jargon are used. This question of access to Black thinkers is reciprocal, as women in the academy who do not have access to communities of Black women are at a disadvantage when producing

theory. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, it is necessary for Black feminists to resist isolation from other Black women intellectuals:

The visibility provided U.S. Black women and our ideas via these new institutional locations has been immense. However, one danger facing African American women intellectuals working in these new locations concerns the potential isolation of individual thinkers from Black women's collective experiences—lack of access to other U.S. Black women and to Black women's communities.¹⁰⁹

Twitter and other digital platforms may not be utopian, equitable digital spaces, but they can allow room for other voices to push back against the Black feminism articulated in and overdetermined by the academy. Access to a space like Twitter in which Black women can use a multitude of voices to speak to their experiences provides an opportunity for Black feminist theorizing's collective expansion, growth, and development.

Coming to Voice in Digital Space

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks provides an account of a woman's interaction with a Black theorizing group. Gathered together discussing race, gender, and class in a Black-owned restaurant, hooks describes the group of people from diverse backgrounds, some with college educations and others without. Engaged in a debate about a (Black) woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion, hooks describes the encounter:

¹⁰⁹ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000. P. 41

During this heated discussion one of the Black women present who had been silent for a long time, who hesitated before she entered the conversation because she was unsure about whether or not she could convey the complexity of her thought in Black vernacular speech ... came to voice. As I was leaving, this sister came up to me and grasped my hands tightly, firmly, and thanked me for the discussion. She prefaced her words of gratitude by sharing that the conversation had not only enabled her to give voice to feelings and ideas she had always “kept” to herself, but that by saying it she had created a space for her and her partner to change thought and action.¹¹⁰

This coming to voice was the moment where the woman involved felt her liberation begin, and in listening to the others in the group come to voice, her healing began. In her 1989 publication *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks gives us the language of “coming to voice,” in what she calls the feminist turn to the action of coming to speech from silence. She presses the uniquely revolutionary act of women of color coming to voice:

As metaphor for self-transformation, it has been especially relevant for groups of women who have previously never had a public voice, women who are speaking and writing for the first time, including many women of color... However, for women within oppressed groups who have contained so many feelings—despair rage anguish—who do not speak, as poet Audre Lorde writes, “for fear our words will not be heard nor welcomed,” coming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others.¹¹¹

The Black feminist tradition of coming to voice is at once an act of vulnerability and an essential component of Black feminist theorizing. Audre Lorde comments on this vulnerable moment of movement to speech in *Sister Outsider*, writing “Of course I am

¹¹⁰ hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. P. 73

¹¹¹ hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston, MA: South End, 1989.

afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.”¹¹² It is worthwhile to explore this concept of coming to voice as the precise starting point of a move toward a Black feminist liberation for an individual. It is also worthwhile, through the feminist lens of digital Blackness and digital theorizing, to think about the opportunities and dangers of coming to voice in digital spaces. I am particularly invested in the way the Twitter platform has allowed normally silenced perspectives within Black feminism to come to voice and be heard by a broader audience.

A scarcity of spaces in which to come to voice was part of the inspiration behind the radical consciousness-raising groups of feminism’s second wave, where women came together to discuss their lived experiences under patriarchy, embodying the “personal is political” notion. The personal is political concept has been unevenly applied to women of color’s expressions of their lived experience. As I argue in my essay “Hashtagging from the Margins,” calling attention to Black Twitter theorizing using white feminist rhetoric from the second wave serves a purpose:

...to contextualize this kind of activity within feminist discourse, to make it legible to those more familiar with feminist studies and feminist studies concepts and terminology. Women of color do not need to think of their collective dialogue and activism on Twitter as “consciousness-raising” in order for it to be valuable or effective. Rather, this is a grammar that aids mainstream feminists in seeing how critiques of Black Twitter and women of color on Twitter frequently carry the same racist, exclusionary, and othering language and attention from white, mainstream feminism and predominantly white media coverage.¹¹³

¹¹² Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984. P. 42

¹¹³ Caitlin Gunn. “Hashtagging from the Margins.” *Women of Color and Social Media Multitasking: Blogs, Timelines, Feeds, and Community*. Edited by Sonja M. Brown Givens and

Black feminist scholars from the era of consciousness-raising groups, like hooks, describe in detail the racism and condescension Black women and other women of color experienced in overwhelmingly white group theorizing sessions during that moment in mainstream feminism's history. Those spaces, like predominantly white higher education institutions and white feminist-dominated activist and political organizations, often felt more isolating and traumatic when the oppression we face as women of color was largely ignored and unaddressed. However toxic those spaces may have been for Black women, the idea that Black feminist theorizing needs space for Black women to come to voice in relative safety is fundamental for Black feminist theory's healing and transformative effects. Patricia Hill Collins notes the necessity of this space for coming to voice in *Black Feminist Thought*: "While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance."¹¹⁴ Hill Collins speculates about potential spaces for Black feminist discourse, suggesting Black churches and community organizations may serve this role. In "She's All Light," Neicy adamantly argues for the value of the work she is able to do in a digital world of her own making—the way it aids her activism, her social relationships, and her sense of self-healing and self-expression. Black Twitter has helped

Keisha Edwards Tassie. p.23-24

¹¹⁴ Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. P.100-101

serve this function for many Black women who turn to the platform to listen, come to voice, and find healing.

The Case of #McKinney: Twitter as Mourning and Healing Gathering Space

Frequently, Black women have come to Twitter to discuss their collective pain, specifically as it relates to anti-Black violence in US culture. This is conveniently and intentionally organized and documented through the use of hashtags. Hashtags that respond to tragedies in the Black community or social conditions of Black life (and death) permeate Black Twitter. We see them as names of those murdered by police or slogans related to their deaths (#HandsUpDontShoot, #SayHerName, #EricGarner, #RenishaMcBride), we see them as responses to the racial climate (#IfIDieInPoliceCustody, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #BlackLivesMatter), and in response to specific events (#AssaultAtSpringValleyHigh, #Ferguson, #BaltimoreRiots, #ConcernedStudent1950). Through these hashtags, Black Twitter has become a place where Black women's voices link their individual pain to collective struggles for Black personhood and come to articulate the need for and practice an ethics of healing. One particular instance of Black feminist group theorizing was the recent hashtag #McKinney. The stimulating incident took place in the summer of 2015 at a pool party in the Texas town of McKinney, where the scene turned violent upon the arrival of the police. In the hectic aftermath of a racially-charged dispute between the hosts of the party and Black teenagers in attendance, white then-Corporal Eric Casebolt threw the 15-year-old, unarmed, bikini-clad Dajerria Becton to the ground, handcuffed her, pressed his knees

into her back, pulled her box braids, and brandished his sidearm at the assembled crowd of Black teenagers, screaming expletives.

We know this story partly because one of the teenagers in the crowd recorded Casebolt's actions surreptitiously and posted the video on YouTube and Twitter shortly after. Within hours, the video had gone viral with millions of views.¹¹⁵ The hashtag #McKinney on Twitter served as a rallying cry against police brutality, a demand for the dismissal of Cpl. Eric Casebolt (who later resigned), and a digital space to talk about the ways this modern Black movement, #BlackLivesMatter, can center the pain and struggles of Black women and Black children. Activists and community leaders like Deray McKesson and Johnetta Elzie had words to share on Twitter after the incident:

I think I might've died in McKinney, Texas—that was all I could think of when I saw the video.¹¹⁶

What the fuck did I just watch?? This maniac is dragging this poor girl by HER HAIR. What the fuck¹¹⁷

This commentary is more than a profane proclamation or a rhetorical question, though it may not be immediately legible as Black feminist theorizing. “What the fuck did I just watch” is a question posed to an intended audience of Black Twitter users, who were

¹¹⁵ Eromosele, Diana Ozemebhoya. “Texas Teen Slammed by Cop Speaks Out: ‘The Officer Getting Fired Is Not Enough’.” *The Root*. June 9, 2015. <https://www.theroot.com/texas-teen-slammed-by-cop-speaks-out-the-officer-gett-1790860090>.

¹¹⁶ McKesson, Deray. Twitter Post. June 7th, 2015, <https://twitter.com/deray/status/607609398593220608>

¹¹⁷ Elzie, Johnetta. Twitter Post. June 7th, 2015 <https://twitter.com/Nettaaaaaaaa/status/607602816228671489>

meant to witness this query and grapple with the horror and pain of watching a Black girl's public dehumanization. This question prompts outrage at an image of Black brutalization that may otherwise be normalized and too banal to draw comment. The phrasing of this particular tweet is in the tradition of the daily lived expressions of Black womanhood that Black feminist thinkers have claimed as foundational for Black feminist theorizing. Hill Collins describes this ongoing informal speech:

The commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women growing from our everyday thoughts and actions constitutes a first and most fundamental level of knowledge. The ideas that Black women share with one another on an informal, daily basis about topics such as how to style our hair, characteristics of "good" Black men, strategies for dealing with White folks, and skills of how to "get over" provide the foundations for this taken-for-granted knowledge.¹¹⁸

As Hill Collins suggests, this kind of speech is taken for granted and often deemed inconsequential. Moments like an outraged inquiry, "what the fuck did I just watch," in response to a video of a Black girl being hurt by a white agent of the state are overlooked on Twitter as chatter, rather than taken up as the knowledge production and instances of coming to voice they are. Other Black women discussed the event in McKinney as a reflection of Black womanhood in the United States and of the treatment of Black women and children. Our pain, physical, emotional, or spiritual, is so often illegible within white supremacy. In #McKinney, there was a tangible case study of this disregard for our subjectivity and our bodies. Black women and children like Dajerria Beckton are

¹¹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. P. 34

dehumanized and brutalized, our wounds largely erased and ignored. Speaking to this, cultural critic and popular Black feminist Twitter figure Jamilah Lemieux tweets:

Thinking about #McKinney and how I haven't really been treated 'like a girl' or 'like a woman' by White men throughout my life...¹¹⁹

These moments of coming to voice are possible not only for those with reputations as scholars and activists, or those with large online followings. Hundreds of retweets and tweets quoted with exclamations of pain, hurt, and surprise paired with images and other media do this work. When Twitter user @MoseTheArtist retweeted footage of Casebolt apprehending Black teenagers with the simple caption “PLEASE RT THIS LOOK AT THIS BS #McKinneyPolice #EricCasebolt #McKinney,”¹²⁰ they use the gathering space of Twitter to amplify stories through hashtags and ultimately to force public engagement with Black pain. “LOOK AT THIS BS” then becomes a demand for witness to Black pain, a demand for attention to Black grief, and a demand for an interruption in the comfortable, white silence left when Black women are not free, able, or heard in efforts to publicly have their pain acknowledged. Other Twitter users, like user Kayla Reed, comment on the impression that the series of images and videos had: “I still can't shake the visual of that officer pulling his gun out on those children. THEY RAN FOR THEIR LIVES #McKinney,”¹²¹ in another case of utilizing all-caps to emphasize shock and pain. The focus on children, especially Black girls, was not ignored by Black women on the

¹¹⁹ Jamilah Lemieux, Twitter Post. June 8th, 2015
<https://twitter.com/JamilahLemieux/status/607965562984140800>

¹²⁰ @MoseTheArtist. Twitter Post. June 7th, 2015.

¹²¹ Kayla Reed, Twitter Post. June 7th, 2015.

platform who felt particularly moved by that detail. To that end, writer Stacia L. Brown tweeted, “These #McKinney kids? #KaliefBrowder? We carry that everywhere.”¹²²

The story of a Black girl in a bikini being handcuffed and shoved into the concrete by a raving, armed white man twice her size would not have been able to be carried everywhere—that is, receive the kind of coverage it did—had platforms like Twitter, or video sharing platforms like Vine or YouTube, not been accessible so readily. Upon seeing brutality, people can quickly create digital witnesses who share their own reactions to moments of pain like those discussed in #McKinney. The social media platforms that allow footage to be shared, tweeted and re-tweeted, re-blogged, and posted enable a conversation about the content of that footage.

Theorizing Black Feminist Pain on Twitter

Earlier, I turned to hooks’ description of a woman coming to voice after a group theorizing session. In the passage, the woman thanked hooks for the conversation about race, gender, and sexuality. The woman in her story began a process of healing after coming to voice, as hooks accounts:

She stated this to me directly, intently, saying over and over again, “there’s been so much hurt in me.” She gave thanks that our meeting, our theorizing of race, gender, and sexuality that afternoon had eased her pain, testifying that she could feel the hurt going away, that she could feel a healing taking place within.¹²³

The way that hooks describes theory as a place to come for healing mirrors the way Black women often describe their interactions in the digital space of Black Twitter. Being able

¹²² Stacia L Brown, Twitter Post. June 8th, 2015.

¹²³ bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. P. 73

to come to voice and express the daily pain and struggle of moving through the world as a Black woman is a major way in which Black feminists have utilized the Twitter platform. Artist, writer, and sociocultural critic Zahira Kelly communicates this sentiment in her tweet:

that is what we do here on twitter too. it often becomes a group therapy/discussion/theorizing session on the fly. u don't generate that.¹²⁴

Though Kelly describes her engagements on Twitter as theorizing, many women do not specifically frame their actions on the social media site as theoretical or even as Black feminist in nature. Following hooks' tradition, I am unconcerned with the particularities of labels for theorizing in this case, beyond their more academic use in providing context and implying critical engagement; the fugitive space that Twitter provides is not invested in narrowly defining itself through language. hooks points to her past argument about labeling actions and conversations "feminist" or "theoretical" in the text of *Teaching to Transgress*, noting that: "The possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being; concurrently one may practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term, just as we can live and act in feminist resistance without ever using the word 'feminism.'"¹²⁵

Theory does not do this healing work all on its own. Not every incident of theorizing on Black Twitter is meant to provide healing, nor is Twitter a platform that is inherently theoretical or healing. What makes Black Twitter and Black feminist Twitter a powerful place is that it is a space made for mourning and healing with great intention

¹²⁴ Zahira Kelly, @bad_dominica Twitter Post, December 1st, 2014

¹²⁵ bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. P.62

and will. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks comments on this quality of theory when she warns: “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing toward this end.”¹²⁶ The idea of coming to theory in pain, and of theory as a place for healing, is something that routinely comes into conversations on Black Twitter, notably in the form of hashtags about Black death and Black pain. hooks describes in *Teaching to Transgress* that she came to theory “because [she] was hurting—the pain within [her] was so intense that [she] could not go on living.”¹²⁷ Her claim is that she came to theory wanting to understand the things that were happening around her, but also to make her pain go away.¹²⁸

Imagining the digital space of Black Twitter as a place where one may come to voice provides fascinating new possibilities for women who are not able to be physically present in spaces where coming to voice is appreciated or valued. Dialogue with other Black women about Black womanhood no longer requires access to a pre-determined physical space where people are willing or able to witness your coming to voice. Anti-racist, feminist spaces where a collective is ready to witness that liberating moment of speech were much more difficult to find before Twitter and other social media platforms were readily available. On Black Twitter, many find the space to speak about lived experience of Blackness and marginalization. Media and journalism scholar Meredith Clark addresses that point when she notes:

¹²⁶ *Ibid* P.61

¹²⁷ *Ibid* P. 59

¹²⁸ *Ibid* P. 59

[Black Twitter] now introduces a digital dimension of cultural richness that is inextricably tied to the legacy of the lived Black experience in the United States. Into Black Twitter comes our personal experiences with a shared historical legacy of marginalization, systemic and often subtle racism, and paradoxically, a denial of opportunity to interact with the dominant culture as individual actors uncharacterized by media stereotypes of Black people and Black culture.¹²⁹

Black Twitter is a space where observation and critique of anti-Blackness and misogyny can be affirmed. Often, Black Twitter is policed by white feminists and others who are threatened by an assertive Black woman's voice, but actively and completely silencing Black voices entirely has proven a much more difficult task on the platform. In this space, Black women validate each other in ways disallowed in institutions where white power and authority ultimately have control over whose voices are heard, amplified, and centered, as in academia and other kinds of professional writing avenues. This is to say, Black women can come to voice in dialogue with other Black women. We are not required to compete to be heard in digital space. This is how digital theorizing gives us room to develop fresh tactics in resisting marginality, ready to implement for political protest, further theorizing, and cultural critique alike.

#NoConfederate: Black Feminist Techno-Resistance

One such instance of Black cyberfeminist cultural critique came in the form of a digital protest called #NoConfederate. *Confederate* was announced in July of 2017 as a forthcoming drama series from HBO written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, best known for their writing on the show *Game of Thrones*. This section of the chapter

¹²⁹ Meredith Clark, *To Tweet Our Own Cause: A Mixed-methods Study of the Online Phenomenon "Black Twitter"*. P. 76 PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014.

provides a case study of this rhetorical protest, carried out via the technological resources legible to both in-group and out-group audiences, which showcases the way Black feminists resist speculative fiction created from a mindset of arrogant perception.

The narrative of the show follows an alternate world in which the South managed to secede from the Union during the American Civil War, resulting in two separate nations. The southern nation developed with legal Black slavery, still being actively practiced in modern times. HBO's press release from July 19th, 2017, described the show as follows:

Confederate chronicles the events leading to the Third American Civil War. The series takes place in an alternate timeline, where the southern states have successfully seceded from the Union, giving rise to a nation in which slavery remains legal and has evolved into a modern institution. The story follows a broad swath of characters on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Demilitarized Zone—freedom fighters, slave hunters, politicians, abolitionists, journalists, the executives of a slave-holding conglomerate and the families of people in their thrall.¹³⁰

Benioff and Weiss comment further on its development and content:

There won't be dragons or White Walkers in this series, but we are creating a world, and we couldn't imagine better partners in world-building than [producers and writers Nichelle Tramble Spellman and Malcolm Spellman], who have impressed us for a long time with their wit, their imagination and their Scrabble-playing skills.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Jackson, Matthew. "HBO Announces *Confederate*, an Alternate History Drama from Game of Thrones' Benioff and Weiss." SYFY WIRE. July 19, 2017. <http://www.syfy.com/syfywire/hbo-announces-confederate-an-alternate-history-drama-from-game-of-thrones-benioff-and-weiss>.

¹³¹ *Ibid*

My objective is not only to critique the concept of *Confederate*, to challenge the rationale behind a white supremacist fantasy developed at a political moment when alt-right white supremacists are experiencing increased political attention and power, or to analyze why mainstream stories about Black people are so frequently about our pain and bondage.

Though I offer some of those critiques, my objective is to support an understanding of the resistance to *Confederate* as a knowing, Black feminist response to the dangers of a white supremacist speculative gaze for Black people, and as a resistance to the rewarding of a speculative imagination defined and shaped by white arrogant perception.

#NoConfederate emerged as a response to the reveal of the premise of the show. The digital campaign was started and orchestrated by five Black feminist writers known for their activity on social media and in the entertainment industry: Shanelle Little, a marketing manager and initiator of the #NoConfederate campaign (@ShanelleLittle), April Reign, known for her media criticism and the #OscarsSoWhite viral hashtag (@ReignOfApril), Jamie Broadnax, the founder and editor-at-large of the online Black Girl Nerds publication (@JamieBroadnax), screenwriter and podcast host Lauren Warren (@iamlauren), and film and TV critic ReBecca Theodore-Vachon (@FilmFatale_NYC).

Together, they launched an effort via Twitter that would ultimately pause the production of *Confederate*. In a move of technological savvy, #NoConfederate creators attached their cause to the immense visibility and popularity of *Game of Thrones*, Bienoff and Weiss' primary project with HBO. To great effect, the hashtag #NoConfederate was used in conjunction with the hashtags #ThronesYall and #DemThrones, used to live-tweet *Game of Thrones* with Black viewers, and #GameofThrones, the mainstream hashtag

used to live-tweet and follow along with episodes as they air. Curious *Game of Thrones* tweeters were exposed to the campaign against *Confederate* and were drawn into the digital dialogue around white supremacy in speculative fiction. The additional attention from *Game of Thrones* fans magnified the urgency of the cause, not only boosting universal awareness of the campaign itself but encouraging attention to the political climate in which the show was being developed.

The announcement of the show came in a moment of heightened white supremacist activity: within a month of the July 2017 announcement, a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia erupted over a push to remove a monument of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. The August 11th, 2017 protest at the University of Virginia gained national attention and drew hundreds of Unite the Right protesters.¹³² Approximately thirty university student counter-protesters faced the marching crowd at Lee's statue, and violence followed. The following day, a continuation in the form of an afternoon rally would be the site of more violence: protesters and counter-protesters arrived with arms. Increasing bouts of fighting led to a declaration of unlawful assembly by the slow-moving Charlottesville police, which did not quell the energy of the right-wing protesters. Ultimately, police responded to an incident in the afternoon in which a car reversed down a street filled with anti-fascist counter-protesters, striking and injuring many and killing a woman named Heather Heyer.¹³³

¹³² Heim, Joe. "How a Rally of White Nationalists and Supremacists at the University of Virginia Turned into a 'Tragic, Tragic Weekend.'" *The Washington Post*. August 14, 2017. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e5a30d23afe1.

¹³³ *Ibid*

The timing of this event was not lost on *Confederate* writers nor #NoConfederate digital protesters. In the wake of arguments about the value of imagining a Confederate nation that holds modern power over American identity and politics, the tangible effects of the real-world historical Confederacy's ideological stronghold rippled throughout the country. This was reflected in Tweets linking the fatal events of the Unite the Right march and rally to the devastating impact of indulging a fantasy of a successful Southern Confederacy with a modern practice of slavery. On August 12th, after Heyer was struck and killed, Twitter user Jamar Perry wrote, "What happened today proves that we don't need media reimagining and fetishizing the lives of Black suffering in this country. #NoConfederate."¹³⁴ In the following example, Black Twitter users juxtapose their critiques of *Confederate* with images from the rallies on the 11th and 12th:

¹³⁴ Perry, Jamal. Twitter Post. August 12th, 2017
<https://twitter.com/jamarperry/status/896561727420211200>



Benjamin Dixon
@BenjaminPDixon

Follow



Sorry @HBO but #Charlottesville stole your plot line. #NoConfederate



6:17 AM - 12 Aug 2017

Figure 3: @BenaminPDixon, 12 August 2017.

In contrast, celebrities like Judd Apatow and representatives from HBO suggested that having an opinion before viewing the show was premature, or akin to censorship.¹³⁵

Future viewers were implored to give the show a chance before making up their minds.

Having ample access to the consequences of living within a manifested white supremacist technological/labor fantasy, the idea of giving a show and its writers a chance was not a simple ask of Black feminist viewers. HBO did not address the imbalanced optics of greenlighting and funding *Confederate* before seeing a script or other confirmation of the show's ability to responsibly depict slavery and white nationalism. Rather than blind, thoughtless objection to a plot involving racism and slavery, #NoConfederate is concerned with questions of perspective and ownership of narrative. At the root of this protest is a lack of trust in Benioff and Weiss, white men without a history of engagement or sensitivity with Black history and communities, to create stories that can expand our understanding of slavery or white supremacy in productive ways. Benioff and Weiss write regularly and controversially about trauma and violence; *Game of Thrones* has long been criticized for gratuitous depictions of assault and rape and particularly callous treatment of its characters of color.¹³⁶ Based on this current body of work, author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates leveled criticism about their

¹³⁵ "Censorship is never a good idea. They haven't even written a word. Seems a tad early to judge their work and intentions." Apatow, Judd. Twitter Post. August 4th, 2017. <https://twitter.com/juddapatow/status/893611019297112064?s=11>

¹³⁶ See: Davies, Madeleine. "The Game of Thrones Rape Scene Was Unnecessary and Despicable." Jezebel. April 22, 2014. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://jezebel.com/the-game-of-thrones-rape-scene-was-unnecessary-and-desp-1565671570>., Davies, Madeleine. "Game of Thrones: Well, We're Talking About Rape Again." The Muse. May 20, 2015. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://themuse.jezebel.com/game-of-thrones-well-were-talking-about-rape-again-1705291904>, Ferreday, Debra. "Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom." Australian Feminist Studies 30, no. 83 (2015): 21-36. doi:10.1080/08164649.2014.998453.

trustworthiness with the delicate, painful, and unfinished work of slavery in an opinion piece for *The Atlantic*:

And one need not wait to ask if Benioff and D.B. Weiss are, at any rate, the candidates to help lead us out of that morass or deepen [our understanding of slavery]. A body of work exists in the form of their hit show *Game of Thrones*. We do not have to wait to note the persistent criticism of that show is its depiction of rape. Rape—generational rape, mass rape—is central to the story of enslavement. For 250 years the bodies of enslaved Black women were regarded as property, to be put to whatever use—carnal and otherwise—that their enslavers saw fit. Why HBO believes that this duo, given their past work, is the best team to revisit that experience is a question one should not wait to ask.¹³⁷

Writing for *Esquire*, Gabrielle Bruney noted the legacy of misogyny in *Game of Thrones* before its eighth and final season. She comments on several of the moments in the show that galvanized audiences, including the graphic, violent on-screen rape of the young character Sansa Stark, and the depiction of Jaime Lannister raping his sister Cersei next to the tomb of their child. These incidents gained particular notoriety not only as gratuitous and regressive treatment of women and the conflation of sexual violence with character development, but as marked departures from the events of the books. Many people criticized the addition of more rape scenes to a fantasy already filled with canonical sexual violence led many to criticize the show's handling of the subject matter. Though Benioff and Weiss cling to historical realism as a defense of these depictions, devotion to other aspects of historical fantasy realism was less important to the writers

¹³⁷ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Don't Give HBO's 'Confederate' the Benefit of the Doubt." *The Atlantic*. August 05, 2017. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/08/no-confederate/535512/>.

and showrunners. Bruney lambastes the writing team over the unevenly applied call for historical realism:

Martin and the showrunners, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, have not found that realism demands the vivid depiction of the rape of men, though it is also a widely perpetrated weapon of war. Instead, the burden of realism is disproportionately placed on the rape of women. And not old women, or unconventionally attractive women, both of whom are also the targets of rapists. The only conclusion is that the show is depicting what it imagines audiences want to see—sex, violence, and sexual violence inflicted upon attractive women.¹³⁸

With these critiques of Benioff and Weiss’ handling of sexual violence, Nicole Silverberg (@NSilverberg), screenwriter and comedian, issued a devastating Twitter response to *Confederate* on this theme. Her critique takes the form of a satirical depiction of the first few pages of screenplay and features a fictitious conversation between white slave owners who claim that “so much of this show is about how our life is also hard,” and “[we] don’t even know wut rape is but 98% of the sex [we’ll] have on this show will be rape”:

¹³⁸ Gabrielle Bruney, “The Treatment of Women on ‘Game of Thrones’ Will Tarnish Its Legacy,” *Esquire* (Esquire, April 11, 2019), <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a27099255/game-of-thrones-treatment-of-women-controversy-legacy/>

wow, the first page of HBO's
Confederate has leaked!!!!!!! excited
to share it with you all!!

"CONFEDERATE" BY TWO DAMN WHITE DUDES

INT. MANSION

Bill (white, 40s, extremely hot, will make \$1million per episode) looks out the window. He sighs.

John (white, 40s, super fucking hot, will make \$1million per episode and win an Emmy for his "compassionate" portrayal of a "modern slave owner.")

JOHN

What r u thinking about

BILL

Our slaves

JOHN

Ah, of course. So much of this show is about how our life is also hard

BILL

Slavery is an economic necessity. We will keep trying to explain that over and over again

JOHN

Yes. Also we are heartthrobs

BILL

I don't even know wut rape is but 98% of the sex I'll have on this show will be rape

JOHN

Cool me 2

BILL

Even critics who don't like the idea of this show will comment on the gorgeous cinematography & our acting

JOHN

In 2017, black people are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites, and for drug charges it is almost six times the rate of whites. Our "fantasy" show is v poignant and good

Figure 4: @Nsilverberg, 20 July 2017

Benioff and Weiss have more than a devastating sexual violence problem; their handling of race in *Game of Thrones* is also heavily critiqued in the media and in academic circles. Dr. Matt Hardy of Australia's Deakin University has published about the rampant Orientalism in the program and the source novels in his article "Game of Tropes: The Orientalist Tradition in the Works of G.R.R. Martin."¹³⁹ Reflecting on the show in a press release for Deakin, Hardy claims:

The series reinforces the link between Eastern cultures and depravity that's been part of the Western imagining of the "Orient" for centuries—where people from the Middle East are depicted as "fallen" compared to the more honourable people of the West.

These same tropes appear over and over again in *Game of Thrones*—the West (Westeros) is shown as a "good" culture of proud families, brave warriors and enlightened thinkers, while the East (Essos) contains threat, danger, and unpleasant practices.¹⁴⁰

The novels and the show are rife with these Orientalist images: the Dothraki, the largest group of ambiguously brown people on the show, are depicted as savage, uncivilized and warlike. The enslaved people of Essos require a white savior to rescue them, a white woman named Daenerys who, after being sold to a Dothraki leader by her brother and repeatedly raped by him on screen, came to lead a large group of Dothraki after his death. The two Black characters in the show are devotedly in her service, and in love with one another. They have little reach or characterization beyond that role.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Mat Hardy, "Game of Tropes: The Orientalist Tradition in the Works of G.R.R. Martin." 2014 International Journal of Arts & Sciences. ISSN. 1944-6934

¹⁴⁰ Deakin University, "Game of Thrones Reinforces Racist 'Oriental' Stereotypes: Deakin Research," accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/media-releases/articles/game-of-thrones-reinforces-racist-oriental-stereotypes-deakin-research>

¹⁴¹ For a thoughtful examination of the racial overtones in *Game of Thrones*, see: Tyler Dean, "Game of Thrones' Complex Relationship to Racism and Colonialism," Tor.com, June 20, 2019, <https://www.tor.com/2019/06/10/game-of-thrones-complex-relationship-to-racism-and-colonialism/>

With doubts about the ability of Benioff and Weiss to appropriately handle a narrative depicting historical events which hold immense power over American notions of race, critiques of the importance of the narrative itself come sharply into view. The question moves from “are these the appropriate people to tell this story?” to “why does *this* story need to be told?” For those who study and critique speculative fiction, a pressing question is always, “what can this kind of speculation reveal about our culture that we may not already know?” The answer from #NoConfederate proponents, as white supremacists waving torches and Confederate flags marched down the street, was a resounding “not much.”

“I Lost an Arm on my Last Trip Home”: Black Feminist Responses to Slavery Fantasies

Rather than the radical speculative endeavor *Confederate* writers claim is possible within the world they’ve built, Black writers, particularly Black feminist writers, view this premise as a failure of imagination. Joy Reid, correspondent for MSNBC, called the concept “repugnant” on Twitter, commenting that “it plays to a rather concrete American fantasy: slavery that never ends, becoming a permanent state for Black people.”¹⁴²

Roxane Gay also discusses this speculative failure in her essay “I Don’t Want to Watch Slavery Fanfiction”:

This show’s premise highlights the limits of the imagination in a world where oppression thrives. These creators can imagine a world where the Confederacy won the Civil War and Black people are still enslaved, but they can’t or aren’t interested in imagining a world where, say, things went in a completely different direction after the Civil War and, say, white people are enslaved. Or a world where slavery never happened at all. What would

¹⁴² @JoyAnnReid. Twitter Post. July 19th, 2017.

happen in a show where American Indians won the conflicts in which they were embroiled as the British and French and other European nations colonized this country? What would happen if Mexicans won the Mexican-American War and Texas and California were still part of Mexico?¹⁴³

Gay's essay also illuminates a critique of the *Confederate* concept with timely consequences: that while white nationalism experiences a public resurgence, a show that depicts an independent Confederate South may serve to glorify the concept of a modern country operating under explicit, violent, slaveholding white supremacy. She argues that seeing a white supremacist fantasy on screen, regardless of artistic intention or portrayal, will be enough to rouse the interest and engagement of the alt-right movement. Rather than a critique of slavery and the logic of the Confederacy, *Confederate*'s premise mirrors the propaganda of white nationalist campaigns of the past, recalling in particular the impact of the film *Birth of a Nation* in recruiting new members and supporters to the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁴⁴

This notion was commonly found in tweets using the #NoConfederate hashtag. For example, Dylan St. Jaymes tweets: "This is why we're saying #NoConfederate. These people don't need to see their wet dream of white supremacy played out on television every week."¹⁴⁵ Cultural critic Tanya DePass issues a similar statement, with language that echoes Roxane Gay's assessment of *Confederate*, when she tweets: "Never

¹⁴³ Roxane Gay, "I Don't Want to Watch Slavery Fan Fiction." *The New York Times*. July 25, 2017. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/opinion/hbo-confederate-slavery-civil-war.html?_r=0.

¹⁴⁴ See: Thomas Cripps, "The Birth of a Race Company: An Early Stride Toward a Black Cinema." *The Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 1 (1974): 28-37. And Thomas R. Cripps, "The Reaction of the Negro to the Motion Picture Birth of a Nation." *The Historian* 25, no. 3 (1963): 344-62.

¹⁴⁵ Dylan St. Jaymes, Twitter Post. August 11th, 2017

watched GoT, have zero interest. I know the same people can't be trusted with a show that is modern AU¹⁴⁶ slavery fanfic. #NoConfederate."¹⁴⁷ Author and activist J. Skyler issues the critique that *Confederate* would serve as inspiration for white nationalists, tweeting, "If Confederate strives for realistic storytelling my biggest concern is that it will give REAL American neo nazis a blueprint. #NoConfederate."¹⁴⁸ Alongside critiques that there is a modern practice of slavery in the form of mass incarceration and unpaid prison labor, arguments that *Confederate* has a new story to tell that aids in the disruption of white supremacy were met with suspicion and contempt by #NoConfederate supporters. The parallels between the proposed show and the political narrative playing on our national stage are close enough to cause discomfort.

The timing of the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville highlighted the modern-day relevance of the United States' love affair with white supremacy. Benioff and Weiss, having encountered critiques about racism and misogyny in their stories for years, knew a project like *Confederate* would not be received without comment by their audience. They announced the inclusion of married Black showrunners and writers Malcolm Spellman (known best for his work on *Empire*) and Nichelle Tramble Spellman (known best for her work on *The Good Wife*) in the project. The Spellmans' participation was not enough to quell misgivings about the legacy of Weiss and Benioff in *Game of Thrones* or the outrage at the show's premise. The four showrunners had an interview

¹⁴⁶ AU is a common abbreviation among fanfiction writers for "alternate universe."

¹⁴⁷ Tanya DePass, Twitter Post. August 6th, 2017
<https://twitter.com/cypheroftyr/status/894391465081810946?s=11>

¹⁴⁸ @jskylerinc, Twitter Post. August 6th, 2017.
<https://twitter.com/jskylerinc/status/894380790187868161>

with Joseph Adalian of *Vulture* during which they addressed many of the critiques levied at the project via the #NoConfederate hashtag, including describing the relationship between the four “partners” and a response to the notion that the present and past of white supremacy are not so easily disconnected. Tramble Spellman suggests that it is in fact the relevance of slavery in our real world that she found compelling in the *Confederate* concept, and that the alternate history would provide new ways of having direct and challenging conversations about race in the United States.¹⁴⁹

On Twitter, many of the responses to the Spellman team were skeptical about their judgment, particularly concerning their lopsided connection to Benioff and Weiss. Less than a week after the Unite the Right rally, the official #NoConfederate Twitter account posted a comment: “Just wondering if Malcolm and Nichelle Spellman (the Black producers of *Confederate*) still think this show is a good idea. #NoConfederate.”¹⁵⁰ The question is both rhetorical and genuine; many users participating in #NoConfederate comment on the disappearance and sudden silence of the Spellmans after the press release about *Confederate* proved controversial. Shanelle Little, one of the activists responsible for the rise and support of #NoConfederate, tweeted: “after 7 seasons of 0 Black creatives---Benioff and Weiss get ZERO trust credits to handle their confederate fantasy...Maybe I’d consider what the Spellman’s think if they’d stuck around to talk to the community they expected to cape for them. #NoConfederate.”¹⁵¹ Activist and public

¹⁴⁹ Josef Adalian, “The Producers of HBO’s *Confederate* Respond to the Backlash,” *Vulture* (*Vulture*, July 21, 2017), <https://www.vulture.com/2017/07/hbo-confederate-producers-exclusive-interview.html>

¹⁵⁰ @NoConfederate. Twitter Post. August 16th, 2017

¹⁵¹ @ShanelleLittle. Twitter Post. August 1st, 2017

policy expert Faye Anderson went so far as to call the Spellmans “house negroes” for Benioff and Weiss.¹⁵²

Though Malcolm and Nichelle Spellman vehemently deny being used as puppets, props, or tokens in their *Vulture* interview response, the story of their coming together for *Confederate* reveals another truth. Benioff jokes with Adalain: “...And once we realized it was going to be a bigger story, we knew we didn’t wanna do it by ourselves because we’re...lazy. [*Laughs.*] And they’re two great writers. We’ve known Malcolm and Nichelle a long time, socially, and always talked about doing something together at some point.”¹⁵³ This statement, landing far from the attempted shot at demure, instead highlights the role they saw fit for the Spellmans: who can do this work under the cover of Blackness? This addition of the Spellman team to the concept in an attempt to cancel the backlash and/or effects of the premise does not suggest partnership, but service and a role to fill. Malcolm Spellman further clarifies their addition to the project: “They had this script, the movie version, but they felt taking it to TV would be better. And they knew they needed Black voices on it,”¹⁵⁴ adding later that the debate about the content of the show should not be “litigated on Twitter.”¹⁵⁵ Though Twitter may not be the appropriate avenue for litigation, it was a fitting place for community discussion, reaction, and ultimately protest against the creeping influence of white supremacy.

All four showrunners insisted that a different approach must be used to tackle serious historical events. #NoConfederate supporters remained skeptical that Benioff and

¹⁵² @Andersonatlarge. Twitter Post. August 21st, 2017.

¹⁵³ Josef Adalian, “The Producers of HBO’s *Confederate* Respond to the Backlash.”

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*

Weiss, so mired in arrogant perception that it expresses itself through rape, slavery, white saviorism, and racial stereotypes in *Game of Thrones*, could be true collaborative partners with the Spellmans, or collaborative storytellers with Black people seeking to make and consume anti-racist, thought-provoking media. Rather than a speculative fiction act of reparation, the way andre carrington describes the writing and direction of the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episode “Far Beyond the Stars,” *Confederate* had the markings of a project designed to uphold the grasp of whiteness and arrogant perception on both speculative fiction and US culture.¹⁵⁶

There is a careful, winding way forward for those who seek to explore Black slavery in fiction. There is scrutiny over the rehashing of slave narratives in fiction and popular media from inside and outside of the Black community: debates over its usefulness, the impact of widespread images of Black pain and subordination on new generations, the delicate balance that must be maintained between cultural memory and glorification of Black death and pain.¹⁵⁷ The lines between what Black people as a community wish to remember, what we must remember in order to survive, and what kind of stories threaten our continued survival may appear blurred, but the internal logics of cherished slavery narratives reveal a fundamental difference: the arrogant or loving perception of the creators and participants of a story.

¹⁵⁶ andré m. carrington, *Speculative Blackness: the Future of Race in Science Fiction* p. 163 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

¹⁵⁷ Beyond the example of *Confederate*, debate over the 2016 remake of the TV mini-series *Roots* comes to mind. See for the thrust of the debate: “Roots Producer Defends Show after Snoop Dogg Criticism.” BBC News. BBC, June 1, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-36424078>.

To this point, in a dissertation about Black speculative fiction and the harm, both modern and ancestral, of Black American slavery, I would be remiss if I did not gesture to the importance of Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979). As mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, the book's protagonist, a Black woman named Dana living with her white husband in the 1970s, moves violently between her own time and a slaveholding plantation which houses her white, slave-owning ancestors. The novel is celebrated in its presentation of a legacy of slavery that still haunts Black people, still calls us back to our shared pain, and echoes in Dana's modern 1970s existence. For Dana and other Black women, slavery still leaves deep, raw physical and psychological wounds that are inevitable when navigating its bloody political and familial entanglements, and *Kindred* does not dwell on the moral discomfort and personal fortitude of white people. It characterizes the white slaveholders, especially Dana's direct ancestor Rufus Weylin, as the vicious, entitled arrogant perceivers responsible for the subordination of Black people—as humans, but humans to be survived, since arrogant perception does not allow for a shared and reciprocal understanding of human subjectivity and the value it holds.

Simply put, Butler writes from a position of loving perception, invested in the worlds of Black women as we figuratively and physically move through time and space in our struggle to get free. This level of sophistication in storytelling about American slavery is possible without the added insult of narratives which explain, excuse, sympathize, or complicate the moral position of white slaveholders and those participating in or complicit in the maintenance of slavery. Dana's life in the 1970s, like our lives in the 2010s and now 2020s, are not neatly defined as post-slavery or free from

the effects of slavery. *Confederate* takes the unfinished work and pain of slavery and attempts to diminish its grip on our political landscape through a feat of arrogant perception and white supremacy. As *Kindred* argues, it is impossible to separate the legacy of slavery from its modern effects—even as *Confederate* attempts to erase this reality through the fantasy of new and different effects of an imagined modern Black slavery.¹⁵⁸

It is similarly difficult to separate consumption of television from our digital conversations, and from our lives beyond the Internet. The turn away from cable and broadcast television, paired with the increase in Internet-based television streaming services and original content, has an impact on how we interact with content and content creators.¹⁵⁹ The tactics displayed in #NoConfederate are influenced in part by the legacy of Black women’s popularization of live-tweeting shows, particularly shows produced or written by Black television giant Shonda Rhimes of *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder* fame. In the introduction to *Adventures in Shondaland*, a collected volume dedicated to the influence of her work, Michaela D. E. Meyer and Rachael Griffin acknowledge the strategic linkage of Twitter fan conversations with the airing of *How to Get Away with Murder* episodes:

In recent years, Twitter has become an essential component of real-time television viewing, with producers and creators establishing official hashtags for following conversations about television episodes, storylines, and series. Ingram-Waters and Balderas explain that this new era of “social television”

¹⁵⁸ Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Doubleday, 1979.

¹⁵⁹ A 2017 Pew Research study found that 61% of young adults 18-29 use steaming services as their primary method of watching television. “61% of Young Adults in U.S. Watch Mainly Streaming TV.” Pew Research Center. September 13, 2017. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/13/about-6-in-10-young-adults-in-u-s-primarily-use-online-streaming-to-watch-tv/>.

connects fans in more immediate and tangible ways, and offers fans the ability to directly interact with industry professionals including writers, directors, and actors.¹⁶⁰

In the Shondaland tradition, taking advantage of the reach of live-tweeting *Game of Thrones*, #NoConfederate's public, visible campaign put pressure on the HBO network and the show's creators to respond and be accountable for the kinds of stories being financially and artistically supported. This was provoked by the understanding that there is now little separation between where and how people consume media, and where and how people publicly respond to it. With cultural practices like live-tweeting shows and widespread participation in media and cultural critique via social media and blogs, the way television is incorporated into our internet experience mirrors the way our social lives have been incorporated into our Internet experience.

As the virtual and physical gap narrows in media, politics, and social interaction, what happens on screens is not easily separated from what happens off of them. The use of the #NoConfederate hashtag beyond its original purpose points to this understanding: since its implementation, #NoConfederate has been used to draw attention to alt-right activity, to petition cities to remove statues that honor figures of the Confederacy, and to critique the upcoming Benioff and Weiss project. Though HBO denies that the public reception of *Confederate* influenced decision-making,¹⁶¹ the echoes of the digital

¹⁶⁰ Griffin, Rachel Alicia, and Michaela D. E. Meyer. "Riding Shonda's Rollercoasters: Critical Cultural Television Studies in the 21st Century." *Adventures in Shondaland: Identity Politics and the Power of Representation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018. P. 13

¹⁶¹ Kiefer, Halle. "HBO's Confederate Delay Allegedly Not Due to Controversy, But Rather Business." *Vulture*. February 09, 2019. Accessed March 28, 2019. <https://www.vulture.com/2019/02/hbos-confederate-delay-reportedly-not-due-to-controversy.html>.

campaign haunted the process of developing the show. In fits and starts, the *Confederate* team announced pauses and delays in the timeline of production and writing. As it stands, HBO's *Confederate* has been canceled.¹⁶²

Conclusion

#NoConfederate is an exemplar of the three fundamental arguments I make in this dissertation: 1) That the power of speculative language and ideas shift between oppressive and liberatory depending on the perspective of the creator who wields them; 2) that #NoConfederate showcases Black cyberfeminist skill as an instance of digital protest; and 3) that #NoConfederate provides a moment in time to observe the boundaries between what happens in digital space and what happens offline. As these boundaries narrow, they create a negotiable landscape for Black feminist cyborg theoretical intervention. These themes emerge in the project through media and through the variety of responses from the keen speculative minds of my interview participants.

My interview with Walidah Imarisha took place on August 17th, 2017, shortly after the events in Charlottesville on the 11th and 12th. When I asked if she grappled with themes of technology in her work, she addressed the idea of *Confederate* at the end of her answer:

¹⁶² Violet Kim, "HBO Confirms Confederate Is Officially Dead," Slate Magazine (Slate, January 16, 2020), <https://slate.com/culture/2020/01/hbo-cancels-confederate-game-of-thrones-creators.html>

...And when *Confederate*, you know, the TV—it's sad that we have to identify which *Confederate*... like exactly what racist thing with the word "confederate" are we talking about in this period of time since there are so many? Like, "Which racist *Confederate* thing in our culture do you mean?" Like. Fuck's sake. But the show, when the show was announced I was like, "yikes," and then of course—when everything else happened, I was like, this does not feel like far-off science fiction anymore.

The moment of confusion in which it was necessary for Imarisha to clarify whether she was referencing the *Confederate* television announcement or the Unite the Right rally to protect Confederate statues indicates an indefinite line between speculative fiction and political reality. Black experiences often mirror the violence held within the white imagination, in and outside of fiction. As speculative work serves as a cultural blueprint, resistance to depictions and fantasies of white supremacy in fiction becomes pressing. In the case of #NoConfederate, speculative language is acknowledged for its power and used to "talk back" to white supremacist fantasy in tandem with Black cyberfeminism.¹⁶³ A model of techno-resistance, #NoConfederate saw an overlapping community of Black feminist writers, theorists, and Twitter users drawing connections between white violence on screen and in their communities and using their technological cunning and experience to push back against fantasies of Black subjugation and death.

Arguing that haunting, Black death, and social technologies are bound up in one another is straightforward in light of recent political events. "Black Twitter" is no longer a new, opaque concept. We have been using live features on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to record and broadcast our brutalization and deaths; the specters of fallen Black

¹⁶³ bell hooks. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*.

activists resonate in our timelines, feeds, and hashtags. Our ghosts exist in our machines alongside the living. From within this documentation of brutality, pain, resistance, and theory-making, Black feminist cyborgs continue to find pathways to community and survival. Part-time Black feminist cyborgs can continue to move toward bringing full selves and experiences to every space they occupy. That is thrilling work for the part-time cyborg: as Neicy tells us in “She’s All Light,” “They will be people, real people, with their own community and culture. And we get to be its pioneers.”¹⁶⁴

Tempest Bradford and the “Tempest Challenge”

Caitlin: I’ve had some of my other participants mention the “Tempest Challenge.” Can you tell me what inspired that effort?

Tempest Bradford: Yeah. The Tempest Challenge started off because I was writing articles for a website called xoJane for Maryanne Kirby, who was the weekend editor at the time. I was trying to come up with a post for the weekend. Maryanne actually was hanging out with me that day. I can’t remember exactly what I was thinking about, but it had to do with, I had read some articles, new essays recently, where somebody was like, “I decided to only read women for a year,” or, “I decided to only read these people for a year,” and how that changed people.

¹⁶⁴ LaShawn M. Wanak, “She’s All Light.”

It also came out of the fact that in 2011 I was like, “I need to read more short stories,” because I wanted to have a broader base for me nominating the stuff for the Hugo and for the Nebula and then just reading more because I’m a writer. So you have to read other stuff. But then I was like, “But every time I think about reading more short stories, I get sort of anxiety,” because you open up a magazine and you start reading these stories and they’re full of racist nonsense and sexist nonsense. You just never know when you’re going to encounter this.

So then you’re like, “Ah! I don’t want to pick up that magazine anymore because I might encounter this terrible nonsense.” Then I was like, “Wait a minute, what if I just don’t read white people? I just don’t read them. That will probably help.” I was like, “I won’t read...”—I think I started with men—I was like, “I don’t want to read white people. But I’ll read women.” So I was like, “White women are fine. I’ll read women and I’ll read men of color and women of color obviously.” Then at some point I was like, “Well, I might read white men if they are gay or something or bisexual.”

So then for me, I personally started basically narrowing it down to anybody who’s not a cisgender, heterosexual white man. I’m going to read stuff by everybody else. That turned out to be a challenge because sometimes I would get a whole issue of a magazine and there would be nothing that I could read under my own terms. I was like, “Well, guess I’m not even dealing with that magazine anymore.”

I started doing that and I would write up a monthly report on the stories that I liked and this eventually turned into a column that I had on IO9 where every month I would be like, “Here are the stories that I read that I really loved this week.” It very specifically was not a review column. I didn’t talk about all the stories I read and said, “I didn’t like this but I liked this.” I was only like, “These are stories that I loved; you should read them.” It was a weekly column.

I had read these essays from other people talking about, “Oh, I spent a year only reading women, I spent a year only reading that.” I’m going along with my IO9 column. I think I had been doing it for nine months at that point. One day, somebody in the comments of my weekly column was like, “You know, I started to notice a thing about the stories that you put up and that they’re all by women, or when they’re not by women, they’re by men or whatever, they’re by men who are Black or other people of color. Or if there’s maybe a white man then that white man is a gay guy. So I just don’t think that you’re being honest with us. You’re just saying these are the best stories you read, but I think it’s the best stories that you read by people who aren’t white men. I think you should close this because you’re being disingenuous about what you’re doing here.”

I was like, “I don’t remember ever saying that... Okay.” But it was interesting because I was waiting for somebody to notice this, because I never called it out. I never said, “By the way, I have a preference for these stories.” I never said any of that. So I found it

interesting for somebody to notice, or at least for somebody to notice and then say something about it.

That comment came through and I was like, “Oh, okay.” But then we were of course talking about how, why is it that I just can’t have just preferred these stories by these people? Why does it have to be an agenda, because suddenly there are no white men up in here and the assumptions behind that—that, you know, I couldn’t just enjoy these stories more. It has to be that I’m purposely—and I was purposely, but why is that your assumption?

That’s when I was like, “Okay, so this is what’s going to be my article for this weekend, is challenging people to…”—I think it was, how I was like, “I challenge you to stop reading heterosexual cisgender white male writers for one year.” It was sort of a culmination of, I mentioned the other articles that I read where some people were like, “I only read women for a year. I only read this.” I was like, “You can do that, or you can just say ‘Woo, let’s just take all these and just only read these other things.’” I talked about the benefits of it. I also talked about why I personally started doing this challenge myself. I was like, “Go forth and make some lists and it’ll be great.”

Then the people lost their minds. xoJane was a pretty popular site but it wasn’t the most popular site ever. I figured that the people, the regular commenters in xoJane, they’d be men or whatever, but it would just be regular readers of xoJane and some other people. Of course, I shared it on my Facebook and whatnot. But then everybody and their mother

started sharing this article. It quickly became an internet firestorm because everybody and their mother was like, “Oh my God! She said we have to stop reading white men! How could she? Our livelihoods!”

I legit saw somebody having [that] conversation. He was like, “But if people do this challenge, that means that they won’t buy my book.” It’s like, “Is your book coming out sometime this year?” “Um, it’s not published yet, but when it is, people ... And that will affect, because when the book comes out, it’s so hard for a first book too.” I’m like, “Sir, what are you doing?” And then in the talking to him, I was like, “Wait a minute, aren’t you gay?” He’s like, “Yeah.” I’m like, “They can read you [according to] the terms of this challenge.” He’s like, “But my other white friends...” I’m like, “Okay. All right, all right, okay.”

Yeah. Dudes were all up in a twist about how it was just the worst thing. It was going to take food from their baby’s mouth and money from their wallets. Then also the people who were like, “She’s so racist for saying this.” One of the problems—and this is why social media is the devil—one of the problems was that because the title of the post was so long, when it was shared on Facebook especially, what people saw was, “I Challenge You to Stop Reading White Men,” The “One Year” got cut off because the thing was so long.

As we know, so many people don't even read the articles that they see on Facebook, they see the headline, they see the teaser text and then they go in on their long dissertation about how everything that's written in the article is wrong that they have not read. So there was that problem. Then there was the whole thing where people were like, "Even if it's one year, it's racist to say that you shouldn't read... What if I said you shouldn't read Black people?" It's like, "Mm-hmm, okay."

But beyond that, it was the very idea that I said, I challenged people to do this because people acted as if, by me saying this, that I could somehow make it true. There were times when I really wanted to say to people, "Do you think that I'm coming to your house to take away your books by white men? Because the way you are reacting to this is like you think that I'm coming there. You don't have to do this."

Caitlin: Fragile.

Tempest Bradford: Right. You don't have to take this challenge, you can say no. People, I remember some people leaving comments on the original post where they were saying, "Well, but I can't do this challenge because I have to read these other books. I'm like, "Okay, why are you telling me? I don't care. If you can't do it, you can't. No one said that you had to. It's not homework, this ain't college. Calm down."

But people didn't calm down because apparently if you made a declarative sentence on the Internet, then people feel like they have to justify to you why they don't want to take

your declarative sentence and do the thing. But I was like, “Nobody told you you had to do the thing.”

So that was sort of the bad reaction to the thing. But there was also more people, not even just as many, but more people who totally understood what I was doing. They would say, “Yeah, I’ve been doing a version of this for years because I had to stop reading white men because every book I read by them was horrible and I just had to stop.” I’m like, “Mm-hmm (affirmative), I know that feeling.” And other people who said that at first they had a little bit of resistance to the idea. But then they actually went to their shelves, they’re like, “Oh, you know what? It’s been a real long time since I’ve read a book that wasn’t written by a white man or in some cases a white woman. I haven’t read any books by people of color.” And making them reevaluate what’s going on.

In some ways, it’s been really great to watch people have those discussions about what it is that they learned about themselves just from even thinking about it. They say, even if you’re not doing the total Tempest Challenge, they’ve decided that, “I’m going to make sure that every fifth book I read is a book by an author that I don’t know that comes from a marginalized identity that I seek out.” That part is really great.

One of the things I try to do is I try to give people a list. I had, for a short while on YouTube, I was doing a series where I was talking about the books I love. But the thing that got in the way of that YouTube series is that I hate editing video. I just don’t want to do it. I require a lot of editing because I can’t stick to the script. I really don’t like editing

video. Other people have offered to do it. Then I'm like, "But then I have to pull out my camera and I have to record the video." It's all so hard. Everything is so hard because I just want to write my book.

But then there were other people who also did that. They picked up... one of the things I love about Book Write, is Book Write is nothing... well, not nothing, but a lot of their content is basically lists of things that will be like, "Well, if you like fantasy, here's a list of seven books, seven fantasy books written by Black women. Here's a list of twelve books written by people who are somewhere on the disability spectrum. Fiction, nonfiction, whatever." I don't necessarily feel like it's all on my shoulders to do that job.

Every now and then—it's died down now because it's been a few years—but every now and then, I still have people who come up out of the woodwork to be like, "How dare you!" And I'm like, "Oh, look, Twitter has a block button." That's very nice, very nice. Clickety click. Sometimes it surprises me the number of people who are like, "What? I remember you. You're that lady who said that we should stop reading white men." I'm like, "Yes that was me. I told you never to read them ever again. What are you doing? I told you. I was on the Internet and I told you and you have to listen to me because I'm from the internet."

Conclusion: Harvests of Survivors

Walidah Imarisha on Octavia Butler and Holding Space for our Current Moment

And so I'm incredibly thankful for the visionary presence of Octavia-- that she's gone and her presence is so important that she is providing a North Star for many of us right now. And giving us language. To be like, "yes we are a harvest of survivors," just every piece that you can break it down and it resonates. Also the peace of saying: we're taking rest days because we survived, and we can mourn and be triumphant at the same time. We can mourn those that are lost, and still celebrate that we are still here. I think so many folks do that, you know Audre Lorde is another obviously amazing person who is able to hold those complexities of loss and triumph at the same time. But I feel like sharing that, and sharing other things like that, where I'm trying to hold space of not just reacting to this moment. I think it's hard to hold. I'm sure you feel it.

When I started this project, I was faced with the difficult task of convincing others that a Black feminist cyborg was a necessary construction. I was occasionally told I was overselling the urgency for understanding Black digital conversations, Black cyberfeminist theorizing, pedagogy, and online community-building. Now, I write the conclusion for this dissertation sitting at home, where I have been for the past month social-distancing and respecting the stay-at-home order for Minnesota residents. The

threat of a global pandemic has forced many of us inside with no recourse but to take to online platforms for our teaching, socializing, political news, and education. In such a short span of time, many have been forced to rapidly adapt to digital landscapes. It is a challenging process. It has been painful, even for the cyborg-inclined among us. It is necessary work, and this project attempts to showcase the need for development in feminist studies along the intersections of digital Blackness studies, technology, and speculative fiction.

Technology is by no means our saving grace. As we know from our work in the academy, from concerns over racist harassment on the Zoom video-chatting platform¹⁶⁵ to ethical implications for the use of student data on the Canvas¹⁶⁶, there are ongoing attempts to mitigate harm caused to ourselves and others in digital worlds. To frame the flight to digital communities that has occurred in the past several weeks as utopian concept is not the position of my work. However, what we do know now as a community in the midst of this crisis is that learning to navigate online communities is no longer supplementary, a luxury, or optional for survival in the academy and other worlds. The time to develop methods and theories for traversing this terrain is now. The time, truly, was yesterday.

¹⁶⁵ Shannon Bond, “Racial Slurs And Swastikas Fuel Civil Rights Pressure On Zoom,” NPR (NPR, April 10, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/10/831379995/racial-slurs-and-swastikas-fuel-civil-rights-pressure-on-zoom>

¹⁶⁶ Jeffrey R. Young, “As Instructure Changes Ownership, Academics Worry Whether Student Data Will Be Protected - EdSurge News,” EdSurge (EdSurge, January 17, 2020), <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-01-17-as-instructure-changes-ownership-academics-worry-whether-student-data-will-be-protected>

Guided by yesterday's prophets Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, I join with Black feminist voices of today in speculative fiction to make sense of the relationship between Black people and technology and project those insights into the future. In the midst of rising fascism and political turmoil from 2016 to 2018, I turned to Black feminist speculative fiction authors for clarity. I had six conversations on Black futurism, technology, the whiteness of science fiction, and the relationship between speculative play and activism. This project is my attempt at furthering those conversations, and bridging fields with much to say to one another: media studies, feminist studies, and Black studies. In our feminist theorizing, we can take up a speculative mantle in order to envision the future for our disciplines, for higher education, for ourselves as Black people. In the future of this field, I call for increased attention to the intersection of speculative fiction and digital cultures, and for increased incorporation of Black speculative fiction into the canon of feminist theory. While this project did not cover the fruitful work of disability studies in regard to cyborg theory, which is a source of robust contribution to practical applications of cyborg practical aesthetics.¹⁶⁷ Future scholarship must engage with this discipline in order to expand upon the applications of feminist cyborg theory.

In uncertain times, we must turn to those with a track record for finding pathways out of uncertain times, and we must do so from a position of loving perception. As with most experiences of Blackness, attempts to marginalize also bring opportunities for

¹⁶⁷ See for example: Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013)

resources, tools, and understandings: insight into the white supremacist imagination *and* radical black speculative potential. This was a lesson my father repeated over and over during my childhood: Black people must understand and be able to navigate white culture, white ways of thinking and being, in order to anticipate spiritual and physical violence and survive. Our lives and our playfulness may come to depend directly on our ability to blend our old and new understandings of our relationships with technology. We have the opportunity to become a new genre of human in time for our new kind of normal. With its timely strategies for movement, understanding, and communication, the Black feminist part-time cyborg can be an aspirational aesthetic. It reminds Black people: in the midst of struggle and in the face of arrogant perception we adapt: we retain our humanity, we maintain our playfulness, and we take rest days. We rest, and then we prepare to be harvests of survivors in this and other worlds.

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