

**NARRATING THE (IM)POSSIBLE: DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE
AND THE PROMISE OF A LIBERATED FUTURE**

A dissertation

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

May 2018

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Acknowledgments

L'union fait la force. Unity makes strength. During my time at Tufts, Haiti's motto served as a reminder that I was only as strong as my community. From my first year until my last, my advisor, Elizabeth Ammons, believed in my abilities as a scholar and an educator. My mentors, Christina Sharpe and Modhumita Roy, ensured that I was not only doing well as a graduate student, but they also invested in me as a person with many interests and responsibilities. I will forever be thankful for having these scholars as role models.

Wendy, Douglas, and Chantal: thank you for every encouraging word, gentle reminder, and inviting smile. Thank you for enriching my experience at Tufts with your thoughtfulness, generosity, and warmth. You are East Hall.

James, Kyle, Shannon, Cory, Chris P., Genevieve, Asha T., Seohyon, Margaret, Jen H., Gayathri, Sukie, Anna, Daniel, Molly, Vivek, Matt S., and Brad: thank you for being my Tufts family. Thank you for all the laughter, the pep talks, study sessions, and memories.

Idora, Mary, Steph, Carmen, Jen Rich, Asha A., Allegra, Christine, Ruth, Patsy, Saffiya, Eddie, Melanie, Kadian, Jerida, Shirley, Alyssa, Renata, Mayen, Sam, Crystal, Chrissy, and Damian: it was easy to write about Acorn because of you. Thank you for your friendship, love, and support. Thank you for reminding me every day that I was strong enough to get through this.

Giana, Laetia, Dessaix, Sophia, Romario, Tati Elise, Elzora, and Jessica: thank you for keeping my head up. Ma famille, this is for all of us. Jon, thank you for choosing to be part of my journey. There will never be enough words in the English language to tell you what it means to have you as my partner.

To my father, Amry: I would not be here without the love and support that you have given me throughout my life. Mon cœur, merci.

There is so much more that I could say, and I apologize if I have left anyone out. Thank you to all my professors for your willingness to share your research with me. Thank you to everyone who has supported me throughout my Tufts career.

Dedicated in loving memory to my mother, Marie Gina Maurissette. In your name, anything is possible.

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Introduction

“African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind).”

—Mark Dery, “Black to the Future”

Dystopias are generically placed in projected futures, the final outcome of certain logics, imagined spaces of environmental degradation under totalitarian rule. However, this science fiction “abstraction [is] a disservice to the particular realities of imperialism/globalism/etc.” (Freedman 60) and their impact on people of color. My epigraph, taken from Mark Dery’s seminal essay concerning Black people and science fiction, frames one of the arguments in my dissertation about how tropes used by predominantly white science/speculative fiction writers, especially in their literary utopias/dystopias, abstract the very real lived dystopic experience for marginalized communities. Thus, my dissertation, *Narrating the (Im)Possible: Dystopian Literature and the Promise of a Liberated Future*, challenges the literary classification of dystopias as science fiction through an engagement with the historical subjugation of Black and Indigenous people as the dystopic foundation for white settler utopias in the Americas and the Caribbean.

I argue that for marginalized Black and Indigenous communities, the white settler colonial projects begun by Christopher Columbus in 1492 produced real dystopias across the Western hemisphere that continue into the present day. Rather than discuss the fantastical elements of the speculative/science narratives in my dissertation, I explore the various ways in which the writers highlight the often-obfuscated realities of New World slavery, white settler colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism. Borrowing Frantz Fanon’s phrase, “the fact of

blackness”¹ in the context of the New World is one of rupture and dis-orientation toward Western postulations of what it means to be human and inhabit the world. Regarding Native Americans, the “fact” is the assumption that they are in the process of vanishing from the world. These “facts” allow for the implementation of white settler utopias across the Americas.² By naming white settler colonial nations utopias, I underscore their beginnings as false sites of *terra nullius*, “nobody’s land,” in the Americas and the Caribbean where they could imagine themselves as the first human inhabitants.

Throughout my chapters, I counter white settlers’ histories of conquest and subordination of Africanness and Indigeneity that project dystopian “futures” in which certain racial identities become figures of the past. Especially, I examine Octavia Butler’s speculative/science fiction novels that, while engaging with the dystopian foundations of white settler utopias, gesture towards a future where Black people not only exist, but they are essential to a new utopic vision for the future. My decision to include Butler in every chapter pays homage to her role as one of the first Black women to be celebrated in the predominantly male and overwhelmingly white field of science fiction. But more importantly, Octavia Butler, as the mother of Afro-Futurism,³ “has created entire alternative worlds that uncannily reflect reality and deflect and undermine it at the same time by generating subjects who improve on the available human models” (Spillers 2008, 4). In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Ytasha

¹ See Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) in which he discusses the impact of the West’s antiblackness on Black people.

² In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia* (2005), Frederic Jameson argues that Thomas More’s *Utopia* is “cotemporaneous with most of the inventions we use to define modernity: conquest of the New World, Machiavelli and modern politics, Ariosto and modern literature, Luther and modern consciousness, printing, and the modern public sphere” (1).

³ “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno-culture—and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called Afro-Futurism” (Dery 8).

Womack writes, “Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (9).

In her Afro-Futurist novels, Butler considers how Black women will disrupt the material reality of dystopian societies and offer radical possibilities for a decolonized future.

Concentrating on four Butler novels –*Kindred* (1979), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *Parable of the Talents* (1998), and *Lilith’s Brood* (2000), I pair each with another visionary text: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991).

In my title, I parenthetically enclose the “im” in impossible to mark the false image of there being only rare acts of resistance by Black and Indigenous people against white settler domination in America.⁴ By focusing on the continuous, and continued, Black and Indigenous counter-violence to white settler contamination of land and people in their speculative/science fiction narratives, I argue that the writers I discuss show that Black and Indigenous futurity becomes not a question of if, but when. This futurity is the violent, pained, and loving process of colonized people reclaiming their bodies, histories, and land.

Though some of my texts are traditionally considered to be speculative/science fiction, I read them as historical fictions that destabilize temporal and spatial specificity. In doing so, I build on critics such as Carl Freedmen, who analyzes science fiction as “perhaps paradoxically, a

⁴ See Herbert Aptheker’s *Negro Slave Revolts in the United States 1526-1860* (1939) and Richard Price’s *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (1996) for information on Africans’ numerous (and common) rebellions, revolts, and insurrections against slavery. For an account of Indigenous resistance, see Ward Churchill’s *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (2001).

version of historical fiction” which “engages the whole Hegelian and post-Hegelian problematic of historicity by projecting [. . .] a future significantly different from the empirical present while also in concrete continuity with it” (43, 50).

My dissertation intervenes in the field of science fiction, specifically Utopia/Dystopia studies, and challenges how the field continues to center white authors’ abstraction of the historical subjugation of Black and other marginalized people into warnings against climate disaster, government surveillance, and state-sanctioned violence against dissenters. The writers I consider engage with how white settler ideologies, namely anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity, that position some as worthy of life and others as worthy of only labor and/or death have already led to the disproportionate occurrence of the dystopic reality I have outlined above. These “feminist texts—sometimes situated in a sf frame—hybridize utopia and dystopia, and present them as interactive hemispheres rather than distinct poles, contesting the standard (classical) reading of utopia and dystopia as discrete literary genres and exposing the artificiality of such rigid classifications” (Mohr 7). While revealing the true horrors of the dystopic reality for marginalized people, the writers I discuss also offer utopic visions of liberation in their science/speculative fiction narratives, although they always do so with the recognition that achieving change will be an extremely difficult process.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon states that decolonization is “always a violent process,” “a program of complete disorder” in which there is a “meeting of two forces” (36). In my dissertation, I trace decoloniality⁵ as the *modus operandi*

⁵ Michaeline A. Crishlow argues in “Making Waves: (Dis)Placements, Entanglements, Mo(ve)ments” that “‘decoloniality’ is the ‘refusal of a hegemonic frame of self-referencing, and as a changed relation to such frames that cast humanity and its progress in terms of a particular re-ordering of discriminatory development’” (131). I find this formulation of decoloniality especially useful for my analysis of the texts in Chapter Three.

for disrupting the white supremacist logics/ideologies that underpin the world constructed by white settlers. Decoloniality expresses a shift away from white settler epistemologies and knowledges towards alternative modes of thinking and being. My project emphasizes utopic visions of liberation imagined by marginalized communities in opposition to the dystopian nation formations in the Western hemisphere. Sylvia Wynter's anti-colonial theories of white Western preoccupations with Man that cast non-white peoples as "Other" enhance my analysis of the bifurcation of the world into white utopias and non-white dystopias. Fanon's call for decolonization through direct and continued counter-violence is also important to my study as a response to what I identify as white settler utopias.

Chapter One, "Remembering America's Dystopic Past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," discusses the antebellum plantation system in the United States, as well as slave ships, as dystopic sites where Black people lived a real-life, realized sci-fi nightmare. In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015), Simone Browne argues that "slave narratives are sociological in that they reveal the social life of the slave condition, speak of freedom practices, and detail the workings of power in the making of what is exceptional—the slave life—into the everyday through acts of violence" (12). If George Orwell's *1984* (1949) showcases one key element of fictional dystopias, specifically constant surveillance, Morrison's *Beloved* and Butler's *Kindred* show multiple mechanisms of terror, especially surveillance, that divided the plantation into a utopia for whites and a lived dystopia for enslaved Africans. In their speculative slave narratives, Morrison and Butler reject the portrayal of paternalistic relationships between enslaved Africans and white slave-owners and the "humane" treatment of enslaved people. They reveal that "slave life" was an exceptional,

realized dystopian experience and portray multiple forms of “freedom practices” within their narratives to represent historical Black modes of resistance against white settler power.

In *Beloved*, Morrison offers an example of the contradictory realities for antebellum white owners and enslaved Africans through the dystopian landscape of the Sweet Home plantation. She juxtaposes false memories of the plantation’s beauty with horrific spectacles of white violence to illustrate the sublimated realities of the full extent of white sadism during antebellum chattel slavery. Through the reunion between Sethe and Beloved, Morrison establishes a link between remembering and healing, even if the memories are traumatic. In Baby Suggs’ command to perform acts of Black love, I argue that Morrison gestures toward one of the formerly enslaved Africans’ “freedom practices” that they were denied under slavery. Thus, Black love and remembrance shape my analysis, and I draw attention to Black parenting as a praxis of resistance, even as the law of *partus sequitur ventrum* foreclosed the possibility of Black women’s reproductive rights. Throughout the novel, Morrison’s narrativization of Black people’s generational and self-love destabilizes normative understandings of slavery’s foreclosure of kinship and futurity and insists on the reality of Black love as a praxis of resistance even in the face of horrific white violence.

Following my analysis of *Beloved*, I address how Butler’s *Kindred* narrates “American domination [as] the only domination from which one never recovers [...or rather] from which one never recovers unscarred” (Césaire 77). In *Kindred*, Dana (Edana) Franklin confronts America’s miscegenated past, specifically through her returns to the past to rescue her white “ancestor,” Rufus.⁶ Dana’s dystopic experience on the plantation illustrates how “sociogeny, or what [Sylvia] Wynter calls the ‘sociogenic principle,’ is understood as the organizational

⁶ Ancestor is in quotation marks because I believe that Butler calls white ancestry from the antebellum period into question.

framework of our present human condition that names what is and what is not bounded within the category of the human, and that fixes and frames blackness as an object of surveillance” (Browne 7). Butler stresses, I argue, that chattel slavery created a legal dystopia for Black Americans, whether they were enslaved or “free,” especially considering how “white culpability was displaced as black criminality, and violence was legitimated as the ruling principle of the social relations of racial slavery” (Hartman 1997, 83). Throughout the novel, Dana’s lack of a guidebook for resistance to slavery confines her to ideas of changing Rufus from a sadistic to a sympathetic slave master and offering literacy as a means of escape for the enslaved Africans on the plantation. However, Butler complicates any sympathetic readings of Rufus and uses him to show the full-scale horrors of white male slaveowners, including the ownership of their own children.⁷ Furthermore, Butler emphasizes how white “women actively participated in [...] protective models of [white] womanhood and motherhood and prescriptions for domestic relations” (Stoler 35). Her novel questions how any Black person can be told to “get over it,” a history that lives in the body. Importantly, Butler refers to historical Black figures, such as Harriet Tubman and Denmark Vesey, as signposts of the physical counter-violence that Dana is unwilling to commit.

Chapter Two, “Unsettling Utopias in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*,” explores the construction of post-apocalyptic communities built in response to late racial capitalism in Atwood’s and Butler’s novels. In both, the “thematic

⁷ In an 1805 letter, Thomas Jefferson writes: “I consider the labor of breeding women as no object, and that a child raised every 2 years is of more profit than the crop of the best laboring man” (Harris 1720). Jefferson’s letter exhibits one of the main reasons I refuse to acknowledge white slave-owning rapists as ancestors to Black Americans. In addition, the “use of Africans as a stand-in for actual currency highlights the degree to which slavery ‘propertized’ human life” (Harris 1720).

concerns of these ‘dystopias’ involve transgressions of subject/object, male/female, human/animal [...] or human/nonhuman, master/slave, nature/nurture, nature/culture, mind/body, sanity/madness, self/other, literacy/orality, codes/stereotypes, the relation between myth and history with regard to the (im)possibility of a representation of reality and truth(s)” (Mohr 12). I begin with Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* to show how white settler utopian projects are always apocalyptically designed. *Oryx and Crake* portrays the conditions that lead to a dystopian apocalypse by investigating Western obsessions with shaping nature through technology, leading to devastating consequences. By centering the narrative on white male obsession with “improving” the natural world through science, Atwood, through the character of Crake, reveals how the impulse to conquer the “New World” continues to be the source of catastrophic change. Crake exemplifies how, as Patricia Melzer argues, the “construction of universal ‘humanness’ itself is disclosed as a patriarchal concept –and as a white-supremacist one” (Melzer 71).

Following my close reading of *Oryx and Crake*, I examine how Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* engages with the unspoken of Atwood’s text: how does a Black woman survive the apocalypse? Through Lauren Olamina, a hyper-empathetic black teenager, Butler presents her reader with an all too familiar world projected into a possible future. After the destruction of her walled community by arsonists, Olamina assumes, reluctantly, a role as leader of a group escaping the violence of a ravaged California. Olamina’s utopic vision, presented in *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, calls for shaping spiritual knowledge in a way that acknowledges one’s connection to Earth, “God,” and people. The common refrain in the text is “God is Change”; by shaping God people shape themselves. Shaping is dialogic, not hierarchical. The “perfect” is always out of reach in the text, symbolized by space travel, and requires much more development on Earth if it is to be achieved. Shaping is a praxis of resistance that distinguishes

itself from a Judeo-Christian conception of God that was used as one of the weapons of slavery and colonialism. Although I read both novels in this chapter through the lens of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," I underscore how Olamina embodies Haraway's cyborg because she "seizes the tools to mark the world that marked [her]" to create new pathways for the future (Haraway 2000, 311). Throughout the novel, the act of shaping and Olamina's knowledge come from alternative epistemologies, as well as cosmologies, and Butler presents those anti-dystopian frameworks as the future that must be sown now.

In Chapter Three, "Maroonage Writ Large in Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents*," I focus on the figure of the maroon, Black fugitive, the law-breaker, and the creator of Black futurity. Katherine McKittrick's assertion in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006) that "spaces of black liberation were invisibly mapped across the United States and Canada" (18) guides my analysis of Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and Butler's *Parable of the Talents*. Brand attends to the historical practice of maroonage as a praxis of resistance that creates a space for Black liberation while Butler proposes that maroonage will become the most vital method for surviving the future. I focus extensively on fugitivity and multiple forms of maroonage that are critical in understanding past and present Black American conceptualizations of freedom and Brand's and Butler's texts as metafiction on maroonage, both *grand* and *petit*. Grand-maroonage is understood as one's complete removal from the plantation system; petit-maroonage refers to running away from the plantation for short periods of time. I expand on traditional definitions of "maroonage" and "maroon" to show maroonage in several ways – traditional, erotic, spiritual, and epistemological –and discuss how reading particular acts as maroonage reveals the longevity and futurity of subversive acts against the continuation of the

dystopian reality that both authors depict. Joining the traditional definition of maroonage to Audre Lorde's deployment of the erotic as "a resource [. . .] that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized power" (Lorde 53), I underscore how the erotic is an attempt to dislodge oneself from Eurocentric modes of discourse, domesticity, and dynamism.⁸

In Brand's novel, Marie Ursule taps into the erotic by performing a science of resistance, poisoning. Her Convoi Sans Peur (without fear), a group of enslaved people who no longer wish to be part of the plantation system, free themselves from that dystopic system through poisoning. But rather than being defeatist, the mass suicide is an act of aggression designed to devastate the plantation system (*Moon* 17). This act also brings the Sans Peur home, to Africa, through spiritual maroonage; and by naming her character Marie Ursule, Brand draws attention to a genealogy of Black women resistance fighters. Ursule's name also closely resembles a "goddess from the Haitian Voodoo pantheon, Erzulie [who] fought in the Haitian slave rebellion in the late eighteenth century" (Evans 6). By tracing Brand's allusions to the Haitian Revolution, to African and Haitian cosmologies, and to historical maroonage, I argue that reading erotically can re-order the world by foregrounding sublimated histories and allows for marooning oneself away from white settler history's presentation of the Black experience as acceptance of the dystopic conditions maintaining white utopias.

Drawing on political scientist Neil Roberts' suggestion to use "freedom as maroonage" as a heuristic device to explore ideations of freedom (*Freedom as Maroonage* 4), I turn to Butler's *Parable of the Talents*, the sequel to *Parable of the Sower*, to examine multiple iterations of maroonage. Much of the novel centers on Larkin Beryl Ife Olamina Bankole, Lauren Olamina's

⁸ See Carolyn Cooper's "Erotic Maroonage: Embodying Emancipation in Jamaican Dancehall Culture" for a discussion of Jamaican dancehall as a form of erotic maroonage.

daughter, who reads her mother's journals. Larkin's misreading of those journals, particularly the verses from *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*, reflects how Eurocentric models of interpretation hinder later generations' understanding of measures that are taken to ensure survival. As a text within a text within a text, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* contradicts Larkin's misreading of why her mother performs certain acts to survive. In *Talents*, even more than in *Sower*, *Earthseed* becomes the book of maroonage, a book of shaping oneself away from the dystopic systems we contend with today and that may possibly repeat in the near future. Rather than Haraway's cyborg, I read Olamina as a grammarian, "well-versed in the 'techniques of ordering a select body of facts within a framework that is completely consistent with the system of values'" (Wynter 1994, 55), but a grammarian who is always writing against the system that oppresses the dysselected, who are "all *native* peoples, and most extremely, to the ultimately zero degree, all people of African descent, wholly or partly . . . , who are negatively marked as *defective humans* within the terms of Man's self-conception, and its related understanding of what it is to *be* human" (original emphasis, Wynter 2011, 25).⁹ I argue that *Talents* is Butler's indictment of what has already happened to Black women (enslavement, loss of family and home, being defined as "mad"), but it is also a reading of Black women's resistance. Butler's "feminist speculative standpoint, partaking of information from rational inquiry as well as imaginative inquiry, is a figure of inventiveness that incites both narratological and historical disruptions" (Wagner-Lawlor 3-4). Butler compels us to find the space between Larkin and Olamina for the creation of our own kind of maroonage that fits our contemporary society.

My final chapter, "Future Terrains in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* and Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*," requires holding both of these things in mind: humans are

⁹ See Sylvia Wynter's "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man" (2011).

powerful yet humans are insignificant. In this chapter, I look at the end of the world, by which I mean an end to white supremacy, heterosexism, patriarchy, xenophobia, and the not yet named hate that is carried throughout the Americas. I use world instead of Earth because it is important to separate the two. World signifies the Western imposed geographical boundaries and cultural norms, while Earth is the land itself. In the end, boundaries will disappear, but the Earth will not. I focus on the unrestrained indictment of five hundred dystopic years of white supremacy, heterosexism, patriarchy, exploitation, and xenophobia in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* to call attention to the ways in which physical and spiritual counter-violence are written in the text. Silko stresses that in the United States, white Americans' devastation of the Earth and genocidal oppression of Native people are "as central to the nation's founding as the irony of slavery" (Miles 169). For Silko, reclaiming the land requires the expulsion of white people because "there was not, and there had never been, a legal government by Europeans in the Americas. Not by any definition, not even by the Europeans' own definitions and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land. Because stolen land never had clear title" (*Almanac* 133). De-legitimizing white European claims to ownership of the land, even in a fiction, is a radical act. By ending my dissertation with *Almanac's* historical record of Black and Native resistance to European invasion and enslavement and its prophecy of Black and Native victory, I show the longevity of Native resistance, physical and otherwise. *Almanac* prophesies the end of the dystopic world of white settler colonialism, which exists in the American past and present but will not be in the future for Native Americans.

I conclude the chapter with Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (2000), originally titled *Xenogenesis*, which continues the theme of boundaries disappearing while the Earth remains. Comprised of three novels—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989)—Butler's trilogy serves

as a condemnation of human beings' hierarchally-driven intelligence, which is genocidal. Butler demonstrates that the human tendency to create division is suicidal and cannibalistic because the divisions created by race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and geography result in destruction. Through the use of an alien species, the Oankali, Butler challenges us to be self-reflective about the particular ways in which humans destroy ourselves and reveals the possibilities for a new world, this time without the violence that comes with white supremacy, heterosexism, patriarchy, and xenophobia. The dystopic realities that I analyze throughout my dissertation are portrayed in *Almanac of the Dead* and *Lilith's Brood*, which then move beyond that focus in powerful ways. These speculative/science fiction works by women of color reveal that "the work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the 'racial calculus and... political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago' [Hartman 2008, 6]" (Sharpe 2016, 13). Silko and Butler un-construct the Americas, reclaim the land from whiter settlers, and reshape dystopic sites into spaces of healing, envisioning futures in which Black and Native peoples are no longer the collateral damage of white settler utopia building.

Chapter One—Remembering America’s Dystopic Sites in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*

“Europeans ‘invented’ America –named it the New World, accommodated the staggering implications of that idea, endowing it with features of paradise, and projected pent-up desire for freedom and space upon it.”

–Terrence Martin, *Parables of Possibilities*

“We must use our position at the bottom [...] to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.”

–The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement”

The Americas are a constructed dystopian world, achieved primarily through the implementation and evolution of the plantation system, which “quickly exhausts the soil” and required that Black people be “maintained in subjection only by systematic degradation and by deliberate efforts to suppress [their] intelligence” (Williams 7). Therefore, rather than placing dystopias strictly within the imaginary spaces of science/speculative fiction, I analyze Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) as dystopian literature that critiques the plantation system which upheld utopic white settler nations; those nations’ “normative culture of blanchitude [...] inscribed the globe, coding value and nonvalue, binding the structures of production under the hegemony of its imaginary social significations” (Wynter 1979, 150).¹⁰ My analyses argue that Morrison and Butler unsettle existing fictions littering U.S. history textbooks¹¹ and challenge political rhetoric about the period of the transatlantic slave trade. Specifically, the writers disrupt the portrayal of “paternalistic” relationships between

¹⁰ This must also be understood as a white supremacist nation formation, whereby “white supremacy may be understood as a logic of social organization that produces regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of hierarchized ‘human’ difference” (Dylan Rodriguez qtd. Weheliye 3).

¹¹ Following the U.S. Civil War, the United Daughters of the Confederacy were partly responsible for the favorable representation of slavery in American textbooks. They are also partially responsible for the public symbols and monuments of Confederate “heroes” who fought to maintain slavery.

enslaved Black people and white slave-owners and the “humane” treatment of enslaved Black people. They also emphasize Black resistance to enslavement. Morrison’s *Beloved* and Butler’s *Kindred* center on multiple forms of resistance against the totalizing effects of the plantation system’s dystopic regime of terror, surveillance, “education,” and dehumanization. They blend different genres –the slave narrative, realist novel, and/or speculative fiction –to produce literary masterpieces that show the interrelations among Black Americans’ past, present, and future, as well as challenge the “stereotype of the Southern slaveholder as the paternal master [that] underlie[s] the entire mythology of Southern aristocracy” (Wynter 1979, 151). In both texts, the writers argue that a category of non-being is formed on the plantation through the ‘paternalistic’ sadism of white slaveowners. Furthermore, both writers draw attention to Black people’s collective trauma experienced in the antebellum and postbellum U.S. By showing how Black identity formation in the face of apocalypse, vis-a-vis slavery, creates defamiliarization with one’s own body, I explore how both writers present slavery’s multifaceted project: turning African people into one monolithic category of property, preventing familial relationships, and blocking the possibility of a free Black future. Importantly, I show how resistance strategies developed during slavery are essential for surviving the contemporary moment, especially ones implemented by Black women.

The antebellum¹² plantation simultaneously existed as a dystopia for enslaved Africans and a utopia for white settlers. By naming these plantations white utopias, I position them as “no place,” or “the good place which is no place” (Sargisson 1), the white settler’s imagined space in which resources are abundant, labor is expendable, and resistance is unimaginable and

¹² It is also important to note that following the Civil War, formerly enslaved Black Americans were often forced to work on their former plantations as sharecroppers. While my chapter focuses on the antebellum plantation system, sharecropping serves as an example of one way in which Emancipation was not fully realized for all Black Americans after the Civil War.

impossible because conquest seems already *fait accompli*. “No place” frames the antebellum plantations as sites of elision, particularly in the erasure of the African and Indigenous peoples who produced the wealth of European and Western hemisphere nations. W.E.B. Du Bois aptly describes white settler antebellum plantations as “places where ‘niggers’¹³ are cheap and the earth is rich [. . .] outlands where like a swarm of hungry locusts, white masters may settle to be served as kings, wield the lash of slave-drivers, rape girls and wives, grow as rich as Croesus” (“The Souls of White Folk,” 45). The *fait accompli* utopic vision of the Americas remains in the history books and canonical narratives of American history, thereby sublimating the continuous, full scale, and always present resistance of African and Indigenous peoples as anomalies and fantastical. Furthermore, “slavery concealed a black sense of place and possibility of ‘black geographers’ through punishment, dehumanization, and racist discourses, which undermined (but did not prevent) black geographies” (McKittrick 9). Unfortunately, “whatever popularity the [traditional] slave narrative had—and they influenced abolitionists and converted anti-abolitionists—the slave’s own narrative, while freeing the narrator in many ways, did not destroy the master narrative” (Morrison 1992, 51). However,

through their rendering of the autobiographical, the ethnographic, the historical, the literary, and the political, slave narratives are sociological in that they reveal the social life of the slave condition, speak of freedom practices, and detail the workings of power in the making of what is exceptional—the slave life—into the everyday through acts of violence. (Browne 12)

Thus, my dual project in this chapter is to concentrate on examining spaces within Morrison and Butler’s narratives that reveal the dystopian experience for Black Americans, as well as focusing

¹³ This will be the only appearance of the term to highlight white supremacists’ ideas of Black people. In future references to the term, I will use n* in its place.

on the multiple forms of ‘freedom practices’ within the narratives that represent historical Black modes of resistance against white settler power. By centering the continuous, and continued, African/Black counter-violences to white settler contamination of land and peoples, I argue that a Black decolonized future becomes not a question of if, but when. This futurity involves the violent, pained, and loving process of reclaiming Black bodies and histories, as well as unsettling dystopic spaces.

In “The Time of Slavery,” Saidiya Hartman reflects on what has been lost due to the transatlantic slave trade. Caught between feelings of kinship and alienation, Hartman recounts her “return” to Ghana for an “impossible mission: the search for dead and forgotten kin” (Hartman 2002, 762). It is a return punctuated by declarations in young Ghanaian children’s letters that “because of the slave trade [she] lose[s] [her] mother, if [she] knows [her] history, [she] know[s] where [she] come[s] from” (Hartman 2002, 761). Hartman already understands that “to remember slavery is to imagine the past as the ‘fabric of our experience’ and seizing hold of it is ‘the key to our identity’” (Hartman 2002, 758). For Africans in the Americas, descended from the first global citizens, knowing themselves in the U.S. means challenging white settler history, a white imaginary timeline of conquest and progress. It is re-membering African people in place of itemized cargo. It is re-membering the bodies to the flesh in the archives¹⁴ in which African humanity was not a given, acknowledging how “Black subjects are rarely, then, critically analyzed for the ways in which they are mapped and cited in order to ‘flesh out’ specific disciplinary, interdisciplinary knowledges” (McKittrick 20). It is confronting white settlers’ history that extols hypocritical constitutions of democratic freedom; it is

¹⁴ In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers’ distinguishes between the ‘body’ and ‘flesh,’ arguing that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (67).

acknowledging that this nation was built on enslaved African labor and the genocide and removal of Indigenous peoples. Therefore, the United States was never the “land of the free,” but it was the home of the brave Black and Indigenous Americans determined to create a future for their people. Writers such as Morrison and Butler recognize that this “[h]istory matters [...] because they consider a slave past to be intimately bound up with the present, as a point of departure for the African diaspora or a condition of existence for fractured identities” (J. Sharpe xii).

In *Beloved*, Morrison writes about “the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it” (*Beloved* xvii).¹⁵ The novel traces Sethe’s, a formerly enslaved Black woman, “rememory” of the events that led to the murder of her child. It reveals the antebellum plantation system as a dystopian reality for enslaved Africans, and, through the character of Beloved, gives voice to the voiceless, “those African persons in the ‘Middle Passage’ [who] were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic’¹⁶ [. . .]: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, [. . .] in movement across the Atlantic, [...] *nowhere* at all” (original emphasis, Spillers 1987, 72). Building on Spillers’ oceanic “nowhere,” I assert that the American plantations existed as a dystopian nowhere, a space of white utopian projections of dominance through African enslavement and Indigenous genocidal removal. However, I stress Black remembrance as one of the key aspects of decolonizing and unsettling the white settlers’ version of history. According to Frantz Fanon, decolonization is “always a violent process,” “a program of complete disorder” in which there is a “meeting of two forces” (*Wretched of the Earth*, 36). In

¹⁵ *Beloved* is inspired by the true story of an enslaved woman, Margaret Garner, who was imprisoned and tried for killing her child, destroying her owner’s “property.”

¹⁶ In her use of ‘oceanic,’ Spillers is also referring to the “Freudian orientation as analogy for undifferentiated identity” (Spillers 1987, 72).

discussing *Beloved*, I focus on the violent process of confronting the real history and memory of slavery. During antebellum slavery, complete disorder required disrupting slavery's dehumanization project, pitting two forces—white supremacists' declarations of African inferiority and Black reclamations of humanity through love—continuously at odds.

Beloved's dystopian landscape, the Sweet Home plantation, offers an example of the contradictory realities for antebellum white owners and enslaved Africans, exposing what “Édouard Glissant suggests [are] geographies produced in conjunction with, and often because of, white European practices of domination [into] ‘various kinds of madness’” (McKittrick 2).¹⁷ In the beginning of the novel, Sethe reflects on the beauty of Sweet Home, the “wonderful soughing trees” and “beautiful sycamores”; the plantation “rolled itself out [in her memory] in shameless beauty” (*Beloved* 7). Sweet Home's ‘beauty’ requires unseeing the “boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (*Beloved* 7). Morrison's juxtaposition of the plantation's beauty with the mutilated bodies of the Sweet Home men draws attention to the simultaneity of the dystopian Black experience and the white settlers' utopian vision of American space. Sethe's initial memory of the plantation reflects the false memory of white settler history, the sanitized version of the brutalities of slavery. However, through her re-memory of her violation and escape from the plantation, her reading of Sweet Home gets fleshed out with the boys, the dead, the dying, and the burned Sweet Home men: the hanged men, Halle's buttered face, Paul D with “an iron to eat,” and a “crisped Sixo” (*Beloved* 222). As she reflected in the beginning of the novel, Sweet Home “never looked as terrible as it was [. . .] fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves” (*Beloved* 7). By having Sethe revise her memory of Sweet Home throughout the novel, Morrison narrativizes the process by which Black

¹⁷ See Édouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, p. 60.

Americans come to know their own history within white settler history. The process requires looking beneath the ‘lacy groves’ for ancestral bones that feed the trees. Like Sethe’s tree on her back, the dual perceptions of these spaces are the “visible secret” (Brand 2001, 16) of antebellum slavery.

In *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), Dionne Brand argues, “liv[ing] in the Black Diaspora is [. . .] to live as a fiction –a creation of empires, and also self-creation” (Brand 2001, 18). It is through revealing the secret, making it hyper-visible, that Sethe can begin to follow Baby Suggs’ edict to “‘Lay em down [. . .] Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don’t study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield’” (*Beloved* 101). Laying her mess down requires Sethe to re-member herself, move beyond the fiction of white settler history, and stitch together the pieces of her rememory that she had refused to speak but were etched on her back. The primary fiction she must move beyond is the Schoolteacher’s creation of the Black people on the Sweet Home plantation into n*, reducing them to mere characteristics, both human and animal. If Mr. Garner, Sweet Home’s previous owner, treated the “world [as] a toy he was supposed to have fun with” (*Beloved* 164), Schoolteacher treats the world as a laboratory. He determines what counts as knowledge, highlighting how the nineteenth century saw a rise in “the mania for collection and quantification of natural specimens” (Wallis 44),¹⁸ especially the collection of Black people as evidence of African inferiority. Schoolteacher’s treatment of the Sweet Home family reinforces his dictum that “definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (*Beloved* 225). In his notebook,

¹⁸ In “Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz’s Slave Daguerreotypes,” Brian Wallis goes further to discuss how this mania “coincided with other statistical projects, the beginning of the annual census, statistics of crime and health, and the mapping and surveying of new lands, exemplifying a new way of seeing the world” (44). Schoolteacher exemplifies how science has been used to reinforce racist ideology.

Schoolteacher creates a fiction of Blackness through an accumulation of the Sweet Home family's characteristics, cataloguing how "racial domination and human injustices are spatially propped up by racial-sexual codes, such as phenotype and sex" (McKittrick 3). His method of distinguishing the Sweet Home family's characteristics into human and animal traits reflects slavery's dehumanizing project. Without Mr. Garner's "special kind of slavery" (*Beloved* 165), Sweet Home's lacy grove façade is exposed as a lie.

Along with unearthing the reality of the plantation system as a dystopic space, Morrison shows how the slave ship also existed as a dystopic space. During the oceanic voyages of the *Maafa*, the African Holocaust (commonly known as the Middle Passage), the slave ship was a liminal dystopic space, a transitional site of unmaking humans into chattel. In *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007), Marcus Rediker asserts that the plantation system was bound to the slave ship, a moving dystopian oceanic space. On the slave ship, "people of all kinds –men, women, and children, black, white, and all shades in between, from Africa, Europe, and the Americas – were swept into the trade's surreal, swirling vortex" (Rediker 14), and "the brutal treatment and greater restrictions on the movements of the slaves would doubtless have tended to increase [the captives'] mortality" (Williams 35). In the first chapter that begins "I am Beloved and she is mine" (*Beloved* 248), Morrison gives a voice to the enslaved Africans swallowed and trapped by the swirling vortex, including those who try to "leave [their] bodies behind," who "nasty themselves" due to lack of space, thrash and scream in the darkness of the cargo-hold's "slow-motion death" (Browne 49),¹⁹ who "fall into the sea which is the color of bread," and have no water for their tears (*Beloved* 248-9). Morrison's cacophony of experiences, narrated through the character of Beloved, reveals the monstrosity of the oceanic journeys of the *Maafa*. Her language

¹⁹ Browne uses this description of the cargo hold as an articulation of the "living death" Harriet Jacobs recounts in her slave narrative.

reverses slavery's dehumanizing project and casts the white ship captains as "men without skin" (*Beloved* 249), positioning them as monstrous and unnatural Others. Since "we need to recognize the crucial role of language, of the imposed system of meaning" (Wynter 2001, 34) in how the category of human came into being, I argue that Morrison subverts the white supremacist-imposed system of meanings that positions the Black body as monstrous and unnatural, and she offers white slave merchants as abjections and negations of the human.

Morrison further reverses this unmaking of Black people into property with the continuous repetition of the words "love" and "sing." On the slave ship, by singing and loving one another, enslaved Africans resisted commodification. On *Beloved's* ship, the enslaved Africans' songs fill her ear, drowning out the sound of the white slave merchants' abuse. *Beloved* loves a male shipmate, his song reminding her of home, the "place where a woman takes flowers away from their leaves and puts them in a round basket" (*Beloved* 250). In "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," Omise'ke Natasha Tinsley classifies these relationships as queer but

not in the sense of a 'gay' or same-sex loving identity waiting to be excavated from the ocean floor but as a *praxis of resistance*. *Queer* in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths. (199)

Tinsley's reading of Black love as a praxis of resistance is especially useful for my reading of *Beloved*. Loving the Black body upsets the normative order because the bonds forged between African slaves disrupted their identities as commodified flesh. Tinsley's use of queer reflects the

seeming oddity of loving what antebellum white supremacist logic of racial hierarchy catalogued as nonhuman and monstrous. For the ‘queer’ slave, loving and being loved as a person is a praxis of resistance, refusing the violence of slavery, even as “the very mechanics of slavery alert us to the ways that slaves’ humanness was always recognized, accounted for, disciplined, and circumscribed” (C. Sharpe 2010, 104), as in the case of Schoolteacher’s notebook. By *feeling* and *feeling for* their fellow shipmates, enslaved Black people resisted commodification (Tinsley 193), shaped their own identities, and accounted for their own humanity.

In *Beloved*, Morrison also provides radical Black parenting as a praxis of resistance and attainable futurity in direct opposition to the project of dehumanization. What does radical Black parenthood look like during New World slavery? How can people dehumanized into property assert themselves as parents? Historical slave narratives offer different iterations of motherhood, from grandmother-mothers, aunt-mothers, sister-mothers, surrogate-mothers, to mother-mothers.²⁰ As an enslaved mother-mother,²¹ Sethe attempts to do the unforgivable: murder all her children rather than have them remain enslaved, but she manages to kill only one child. In “Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved,’” Terry Caesar argues that Sethe’s “action is horribly exacerbated with despair, fatigue, and confusion whether [she] in fact kills her child in order to save herself rather than her child” (Caesar 113). Caesar’s calling into question Sethe’s motives mirrors the novel’s opening in which Sethe lives with her dead baby’s spiteful haunting, the baby “throw[ing] a powerful spell [. . .] no more powerful than the way that [Sethe] loved her” (*Beloved* 5). This spell of doubt is cast over the entire novel. What this doubt speaks

²⁰ See Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) for firsthand accounts on how enslaved Africans formed and maintained familial bonds during slavery, even as white slaveowners did everything in their power to break up Black families.

²¹ By this, I mean she is the biological mother of her children.

to, as well as Caesar's (and others') questioning of Sethe's motivation, is the difficulty of representing the unrepresentable. Slavery attempted to render the Black woman an impossible mother, the law of *partus sequitur ventrem* automatically rendering her children property. Yet, time and time again, Black women resisted this impossibility. Sethe's powerful love, even if it is misread by those who cannot fathom what actions are done to counter the sadism of slavery, is an example of this resistance.

The reader's first glimpse of this powerful love occurs in Sethe's caring for Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law (another impossible title during slavery). Sethe provides a bedridden Baby Suggs "anything from fabric to her own tongue" because color is the only thing that interests Baby Suggs, a formerly enslaved woman "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meaning of dead" (*Beloved* 4). The relationship between Baby Suggs and Sethe is an example of radical Black motherhood, a familial relationship which contradicted the very nature of enslavement. Throughout the novel, Sethe and Baby Suggs alternate between mothering and being mothered by each other. It is Baby Suggs who offers Sethe a grounded mother-daughter relationship, one denied her because her mother-mother had not been allowed to mother her and then was burned beyond recognition for an act of resistance.²² Even her choice of Halle as a husband was based on his treatment of Baby Suggs, for he was a "twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother [that] he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change [and that] was a serious recommendation" (*Beloved* 13). Morrison inserts what had been impossible since "the [enslaved] female could not, in fact, claim her child [. . . and]

²²In the novel, Sethe's mother is only recognizable by her brand after being brutally murdered for her role in resisting slavery. In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015), Simone Browne states, "Branding was a measure of slavery, an act of making the body legible as property that was put to work in the production of the slave as object that could be bought, sold, and traded" (26). Therefore, Sethe is unwilling to have her children carry the brand of slavery.

‘motherhood’ is not perceived in the prevailing [antebellum] social climate” (Spillers 1987, 80).

Not only does Baby Suggs claim Halle, she claims Sethe as her daughter-in-law and Sethe claims her as mother-in-law.

But it is not only Sethe that Baby Suggs claims as kin. One of the novel’s most powerful manifestations of radical mothering, and decolonization, exists in the Clearing. Unlike the Sweet Home Plantation, which highlights the “production of black spaces in the diaspora [being] tied to locations that were and are explicitly produced in conjunction with race, racism, captivity, and economic profit” (McKittrick 9), the Clearing serves as a Black space of radical possibility within the dystopian antebellum U.S. There, for twenty-eight days, Baby Suggs births Black people into a future where they were not meant to exist as more than commodified flesh. Baby Suggs brings formerly enslaved people’s flesh back to life, for in the Clearing, “[they] flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass” (*Beloved* 103). She demands, “[They] got to love it” (*Beloved* 104). Her edict to ‘love it’ reminds the formerly enslaved of what they were unable to feel during slavery, their hearts beating freely. She reminds them that in the dystopic expanse of antebellum United States:

they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. (*Beloved* 103)

Through Baby Suggs, Morrison articulates how the “violent regulation of blackness as spectacle and as disciplinary combined in the racializing surveillance of the slave system” (Browne 42). In Baby Suggs’s edict, each body part stands in for a form of labor forced on enslaved Africans. Eyes that watched white children as their own children were sold, killed, or worked away from

their sight. Skin marred for any violation of the master's will, real or imagined. Hands that held white babies, stirred food they were not allowed to eat, tilled land they would never own. Necks that were chained, broken, or severed for crimes that white owners made up to display their power.²³ To resist remaining commodified flesh, these formerly enslaved Black Americans must kiss, laugh, weep, and touch. To gain back their bodies, they must feel their way out of the remnants of slavery. They must grieve for what they have lost and love what remains in their Black community. Baby Suggs's neighbors respond by dancing, crying, laughing, and embracing. Morrison suggests that these subversive acts of communal and self-love, which would erroneously appear as spectacles under the watchful eyes of the white masters and overseers, became an important form of resistance for Black people living within the dystopian antebellum American landscape.

To claim herself and to self-create, Sethe must first confront the grief she has accumulated during and following slavery. Beloved gives her the opportunity to remember all that she has forgotten. Through Beloved's all-consuming love, and her reciprocal powerful love, Sethe experiences feelings that she has kept locked inside. In the chapter that begins "Beloved, she my daughter" (*Beloved* 236-41), Sethe (re)claims ownership of the daughter that slavery took away from her. Beloved allows her to tend to her lost daughter. Sethe remarks, "Funny how you lose sight of some things and memory others" (*Beloved* 237). Like Harriet Jacobs peering at, and loving, her children through holes in a wall,²⁴ Sethe had merely been watching her children, particularly Denver, loving them through a wall of memory that she had refused to break

²³ See Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831), and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) for more examples of white masters' barbarism.

²⁴ See *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* for more on her seven-year experience hiding from her sadistic slaveowners in plain sight.

through. Beloved listens to her suffering, something she would not allow Denver to do, and Paul D could not do because he is trying to escape his own horrors.²⁵ In a small room in 124, Sethe begins to heal even as her body is sucked dry by Beloved. By telling her story, Sethe gives voice to the emotions she has attempted to forget feeling. By feeling, she resists embodying the living death imposed on her during slavery.

Similarly, Sixo, one of the Sweet Home men, resists commodification by refusing to engage in the language of slavery, exhibiting a clear form of overt counter-violence. While “the bridge between Africa and the Americas is articulated negatively in terms of separation, the unremembered dead, and the second-class status of African Americans in the United States” (Hartman 2002, 765), Morrison subverts this tradition through Sixo. He prefers his native African language and refuses to speak English, rejecting the language because “it would change his mind –make him forget things he shouldn’t and memorize things he shouldn’t, and he didn’t want his mind messed up” (*Beloved* 245); he saw no “future in it” (*Beloved* 30). Morrison remarkably challenges the future of white American Empire through Sixo’s insistence that he sees no future in speaking English. Sixo un-educates himself, recognizing the danger of the white imposed system of meaning, recognizing its “central strategy, in the case of plantation relations, was the creation of a lack of being by and through its imposition of the structural law of being” (Wynter 1979, 153). Thus, Sixo is a figure of resistance who rejects the language of slavery by which he was relegated to a category of nonbeing.

The passage concerning Sixo’s capture and murder deserves special attention. When he is caught trying to escape, Sixo laughs and sings, his acts of defiance embodying Baby Suggs’

²⁵ Paul D’s experience on the chain gang highlights one of the white supremacist tactics for “breaking” resistant Black men: rape. On the chain gang, “Occasionally, a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus” (*Beloved* 108). The forced exchange of fellatio for food haunts Paul D throughout his time with Sethe.

demands in the Clearing by displaying his love for himself, his baby's mother, the seven-mile woman, and his future child. Even as they attempt to burn him alive, "Sixo straightens . . . through with his song . . . [and] laughs . . . interrupts his laughter to call out, Seven-O! Seven-O!" (*Beloved* 266). He calls out 'Seven-O!' out of joy because his beloved and child have escaped bondage. Morrison's narrativization of Sixo's generational and self-love destabilizes normative understandings of slavery's foreclosure of kinship and futurity and insists on the reality of Black resistance, even in the most horrific instances of white violence. These acts of love –Sixo's sacrifice for a Black future, Baby Suggs' twenty-eight days of re-birthing Black people in the Clearing, and Sethe's healing from the brutalities of slavery through powerful Black woman love –provide the possibility of un-constructing the white world through the "complete disorder" of loving Black people.

In his 1852 address, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," delivered on July fifth to the Rochester Antislavery Sewing Society, Frederick Douglass proclaimed, "I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul . . . that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July" (Douglass qtd. in Martin, 38). I begin with Douglass' emphatic declaration of to underscore the importance of Octavia Butler setting her fantasy, *Kindred*, in 1976, the United States' bicentennial. *Kindred* chronicles Black protagonist Dana (Edana) Franklin's travels through time to rescue her white ancestor,²⁶ Rufus Weylin, from numerous near-death experiences. Through Dana's time travel, Butler highlights how slavery created a co-dependent relationship between white slave masters and enslaved Black people, in which "the certainty of self as master [could] only be obtained by and through a constant cultural and emotional terrorism at" Black people (Wynter 1979, 152). By setting the novel during the

²⁶ There needs to be new language for the classification of white slave owners when they appear in Black Americans' ancestry.

bicentennial, Butler draws attention to the United States' hypocritical legacy as a democracy founded on principles of freedom. In fact, enslaved Africans' unfreedom was crucial to the founding and success of white American settler utopias; "the legal captivity of Africans and their descendants was central to the codification of rights and freedoms for those legally constituted as white and their legally white descendants" (C. Sharpe 2010, 15). Butler's narrative functions as a dystopian text that looks backwards emphasizing the always already dystopian Black experience in the Americas. Enslaved Black people endured a holocaust; "transatlantic slavery was and is the disaster" (Sharpe 2016, 5) that produced the dystopian landscape.²⁷ Importantly, Octavia Butler inverts narratives, like Mark Twain's *The Tragedy of Pudd'n'head Wilson and the Comedy of Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894) and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), in which a "white" person is horrified by their discovery of Black ancestry. In Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, the horror comes from discovering how white people appear on Black family trees. *Kindred* grapples with the United States' miscegenated past to discuss its racist present and possible future in the same way that Morrison's *Beloved* engages with slavery's monstrous past to make possible Black futurity. Butler's speculative fiction asks the question: Whom should you claim as kin? Unlike the carefully pruned family trees of white settlers, with their carefully selected leaves only displaying white ancestry, some Black family trees are gnarled by sadistic and lustful white men.

Through the science fiction technique of time travel, Dana, "hollowed out by the impossibility of meaningful action, reduced to the see-saw of collaboration and rage" (Gomel 2010, 66), witnesses firsthand white male sadism, specifically the rape and torture of Black women, which undermined the white settler utopian builder's proclamation of a free nation and

²⁷ All colonial histories in the Americas include the rape and torture of Black and Native/Indigenous women; however, I focus on the U.S. in this chapter.

should point many Black people away from any proud claims of white ancestry. Two of the most troubling questions for Dana in *Kindred* are who should be called kin, and who should be pruned from the tree? Thus:

What *is* new and distinctive [in] Butler's handling of the [slave narrative] format or frame, [is] her particular choice of past cultures to extrapolate from. She has chosen to link science fiction not only to anthropology and history, via the historical novel, but directly to the Black American slavery experiences via the slave narrative. (original emphasis, Govan 79)

Kindred explores how the United States' miscegenated past complicates generational and ancestral love. Dana's reasons for her journeys into the past reveal the intimate and oftentimes sadistic relationships between Black and white people in antebellum United States.

Butler's narrative mimics the tradition of "slave narratives [that] depicted faithfully and graphically the brutal reality of slave life and each showed the direct impact of slavery, that peculiar institution, not only on the narrator's own life and that of his/her family but also the debilitating and corrupting effects of such an institution on those who held power within it, slaveholders" (Mitchell 81). In contrast to *Beloved*, the mothering that exists within *Kindred* is often a necessary tool for a different type of survival than Black people loving themselves and each other into a liberated future. Dana must 'mother' her white ancestor, Rufus, to ensure that she exists in her present, which entails Rufus raping her Black ancestor, Alice. Through time travel, Dana bears witness to the quotidian forms of brutality used to maintain order on the plantation, and the "Black and white characters [...] move through an historically viable setting, one which explores the tangled complexities of interracial mixing during slavery and beyond; linkage through phenomenal psychic energy; and emphasis on blood ties and the responsibilities

that result” (Govan 88). Importantly, however, since it is not constricted by the mandates of pre-emancipation slave narratives, Butler’s, as well as Morrison’s, bleak portrayal of slavery serves as a reminder of how the plantation system, in its very design, attempted to eradicate the Black family and fracture the Black psyche. Furthermore, Butler creates Dana and her Black ancestor, Alice, as mirrors of one another: “physically, they look alike; intellectually and emotionally, they function as two halves of the same woman, flawed duplicates separated by the dictates of their respective historical time and the resultant sexual-political consciousness each maintains by virtue of their particular social circumstances” (Mitchell 93). In this mirroring, Butler narrativizes the splitting of Black people into two caricatures on the plantation: the “Sambo”²⁸ and the Rebellious Slave. Furthermore, she replaces the “stereotype of the Southern slaveholder as the paternal master [underlying] the entire mythology of the Southern aristocracy” (Wynter 1979, 151) with a de-sanitized portrayal of the sadism of white people in the plantation system, showing the full scale of how “easily slaves are made” (*Kindred* 177) due to emotional, psychological, and physical terrorism. Dana, by knowing “slavery at an affective and bodily level rather than as a matter of abstract historical knowledge” (Dubey 350),²⁹ confronts her own ignorance about the various ways Black people, especially women, resisted enslavement using

²⁸ See Sylvia Wynter’s “Sambos and Minstrels” (1979) in which Wynter argues that the plantation system necessitated the formation of the complacent slave, Sambo, and the “‘rebellious’ stereotype of Nat Turner [to] legitimate the use of force as a necessary mechanism for ensuring steady labor” (Wynter 1979, 151).

²⁹ For more on the embodied experience of slavery in *Kindred*, see Lisa Long’s “A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*,” Sherryl Vint’s “‘Only By Experience’: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-slave Narratives,” and Lisa Woolfrock’s *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*.

subversive tactics which may have been read as complacency by white (and whitened)³⁰ eyes but were powerful assertions of humanity.

Dana appropriately begins her narrative by recognizing that “the trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it” (*Kindred* 12). Like many contemporary Americans, Black and non-Black alike, understanding the extent to which Black people’s unfreedom maintained (and continues to maintain) white American democracy requires an education in the various ways Black people’s lives were controlled through the plantation system. Thus, Butler “revisits slavery in order to challenge the redemptive accounts of US racial history” (Dubhey 345). Importantly, even un-enslaved, “free” Black people were subject to many of the same forms of control as the enslaved, such as limited mobility, surveillance, and white violence. Throughout the novel, I argue, Butler positions Dana in a limbic space of freedom/unfreedom to show that Black freedom is always circumscribed by white fear and dependency. Additionally, through the relationship between Dana and Rufus, Butler underscores how the United States’ miscegenated past complicates understandings of ancestry. Most importantly, the book confronts readers with the full depth of the trauma of unlearning white settler history that obfuscates the severity and magnitude of the plantation as a dystopic site designed to end Black futures and provides a roadmap for (re)claiming Black people as kin, regardless of biological connections.

The opening chapter, “The River,” where Dana first travels to the past to save Rufus from drowning, like the “I am Beloved and she is mine” chapter in *Beloved*, draws attention to how aquatic³¹ spaces turned Africans into chattel. By having her first travel be to an aquatic space,

³⁰ I used whitened to signify non-white people who are indoctrinated into believing that Black people passively accepted slavery.

³¹ I switch to aquatic rather than oceanic because it’s a river.

Butler has Dana perform the *Maafa*. The time traveling device in the novel is Dana's personal Middle Passage; she is held in a slow-motion of near-death based entirely on a white boy-then-man's self-destructive personality and rapacious desires. In many traditions, rivers are important sites of purification and rebirth. However, rather than purification, Dana's baptism in the river bathes her in antebellum anti-Blackness. While she resuscitates a near-dead Rufus, his mother, Margaret, beats Dana with her fists. Although Dana easily brushes away her attack, Margaret's violent response, Dana's first encounter with antebellum white violence, is important for many reasons. Often the image of a violent, anti-Black white person is male, but Butler makes sure that white women's participation in anti-Black violence is foregrounded. Margaret's maternal rage is bolstered by her anger that a Black person has dared touch her son. Furthermore, Dana literally breathes life into Rufus, usurping Margaret's position as his life-giver. Dana's life-giving act shows one of the many ways Black women were used during slavery since enslaved Africans in the Americas, especially women, were forced into intimate relationships with white people as caretakers. This intimacy offered little protection from sexual violation because often the same breasts that offered milk to white men as children were used for sexual violation later in life,³² because "treated as a commodity, the slave woman's body was frequently colonized by the white master, both to satiate the male's lust and to increase the labor force, since any resultant children would by law follow the condition of their enslaved mother" (Beaulieu 11).

Dana's first encounter with antebellum white violence, fear, and dependency provides little preparation for the complete immersion into the plantation system that she will become a part of in her subsequent journeys. Returning to the present, dazed and confused, Dana informs her white husband, Kevin, that the memory of the experience "become[s] like something I saw

³² See also *Beloved*.

on television or read about –like something I got *second hand*” (my emphasis, *Kindred* 17). I stress second-hand because it underscores how we, Black Americans, access knowledge about the traumas of slavery. Although it is a trauma that is studied by all Americans at some point in their educational journey, the second-hand trauma of reading and witnessing the sadism of slavery impacts Black Americans differently than other racial groups. The distance afforded by not being Black can allow a detached reading/understanding of slavery. Through her journeys into the past, Dana becomes a Black student of Black American history, along with her own ancestral history of enslavement. However, she realizes just “how far [...] contemporary subjects [can] embody or identify with slave experience given that their access to slavery is inevitably mediated by late twentieth-century notions of freedom, agency, and bodily integrity” (Dubey 351). The Weylin plantation provides Dana with glimpses into how the system of slavery relied on “the value of white [needing] to be constantly realized, recognized, attained by the social act of exchange with the relative non-value of black being, a non-value represented by the Symbolic Negro/Sambo” (Wynter 1979, 153).

Dana’s first lengthy stay on the plantation occurs shortly after rescuing Rufus from setting fire to his bedroom curtains. She wonders “what kind of man was he going to grow up into” (*Kindred* 25), but the unasked question, and the more difficult one, is how can he *not* grow into a man willing to destroy anything because he cannot get his way? Dana initially believes that Rufus is a product of his environment. She thinks that she can “mother” him into one of the paternalistic slave masters she has learned about in her studies on slavery. However, her ignorance about how his “certainty of [...] self as master can only be obtained by and through a constant cultural and emotional terrorism directed at” (Wynter 1979, 152) her and other Black people constantly puts her in danger, even as she is caught in a loop of rescuing Rufus from

danger because of her need to remain alive. She is tethered to Rufus because if she were to “live, if others were to live, he must live” (*Kindred* 29). Thus, Dana, like all enslaved people on a plantation, is forced into her, and others’, undoing. As Sylvia Wynter explains, “the social machine of the plantation system [. . .] colonized, above all, Desire. The colonization of desires once carried out and effected by and through the social interrelationships of the different parts of the system, then leaves this colonized desire to work ‘freely’” (Wynter 1979, 152). Dana’s initial willingness to see the good in Rufus reveals her ignorance about the full extent to which goodness and slave owning are incompatible, an incompatibility that is exposed throughout the novel.

It is Dana’s first exposure to the space outside the plantation that shows her how fragile her safety, and the safety of other non-enslaved peoples, is. In her first encounter with Alice, just a young girl at the time, Dana witnesses the precursor to our contemporary police state. Alice’s father, an enslaved man, has visited her mother, a Black freewoman, without a pass from his master. The slave pass system, an aspect of the dystopian lived experience for Black Americans, served as “the earliest form of surveillance practiced in the Americas [. . .] regulated through violence and the written word” (Browne 52). Viciously removed, bound to a tree, and whipped in front of Alice and her mother, Alice’s father is subjected to treatment that closely mirrors the present condition of Black people in this country suspected of crimes. Dana is “less prepared for the reality” (*Kindred* 36) of white sadistic antebellum practices than the young Alice, and her lack of preparation reflects how little she truly understood about the antebellum South, where enslaved Black people were continuously tortured to maintain order. Through this scene, Butler draws attention to “the kinds of surveillance practices employed during chattel slavery in the southern United States [. . .specifically] the ‘information technologies’ of the written slave pass,

wanted posters and advertisements for runaway slaves and servants, and organized slave patrols [...which were] key features of [... the] plantation system” (Browne 52).³³ Therefore, “paperless blacks were fair game for any white” (*Kindred* 34), which Dana experiences first hand when she is mistaken for Alice’s mother. After securing Alice’s father, a patrolman returns to rape Alice’s mother, but stumbles upon Dana instead, and her body becomes a proxy for Alice’s mother.

Dana retaliates against the would-be rapist, tearing his flesh, knowing that she “could stop him, cripple him, in this primitive age, [and] destroy him” (*Kindred* 42). However, she stops short of doing so.³⁴ Returning to the present because of her near-death experience, she is reassured by her husband that she could survive the past. However, she is unsure that “it’s possible for a lone black woman –or even a black man–to be protected in that place” (47), even with a gun or knife.

As Jared Sexton argues in *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiculturalism* (2008):

Racial slavery gives rise to the question of the [Black] body’s propriety: not only disputed claims to the products of [Black] labor or the form of [Black] expression, but also [Black] enjoyment, [...] desire, and the whole range of [...] imaginative powers. The *ethos* of slavery, the ideological and affective matrix of the white supremacist project, admits no legitimate black self-defense, recognizes no legitimate assertions of black. (148)

The plantation system, in fact the entire nation, was not designed for Black survival but instead for the use of Black people’s labor until they were no longer of value; and Dana’s realization of this spurs a reflection on her past use of the term “slave,” casually used to describe her

³³ See Christian Parenti’s *The Soft Cage: Surveillance in America from Slave Passes to the War on Terror* (2003).

³⁴ Dana’s refusal to cripple the patrolman is the first of many difficult decisions she makes regarding self-defense against a white assailant.

experience at a temp agency. Butler uses Dana's reflection to show the ways in which some equate any unwanted labor as slave labor without recognizing the extreme depravity of white masters to maintain power and capitalize on Black labor.

Returning to the past with Kevin cements Dana's understanding of white depravity. Kevin's journey aptly begins in the chapter entitled, "The Fall," which literally concerns Rufus' fall from a horse. Metaphorically, though, the fall represents the Fallen state of the plantation, which is the dystopic site of the evils that exist because of white people's fall from grace due to their enslavement of other humans and their genocidal need for dominance. It is in this dystopic space that Dana witnesses and experiences the full breadth of horrors that can be meted out to Black people, and Kevin's entry into the space provides her few protections. She must pretend to be his slave and paramour to maintain the illusion of a servile and always sexually available Black woman; the "classification of black femininity was therefore also a process of *placing* her within the broader system of servitude –as an inhuman racial-sexual worker, as an objectified body, as a site through which sex, violence, and reproduction can be imagined and enacted, and as a captive human" (original emphasis, McKittrick xvii). As Kevin's "racial-sexual worker," Dana fits within the fallen landscape as the tiller of white male sexual desires and the fertile soil of white female moral superiority; her "blackness provided the occasion for self-reflection as well as for an exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing and longing" (Hartman 1997, 7). Dana's limbic space of freedom/unfreedom emphasizes Black women's bodies as never completely free from white violence, but she soon finds spaces maintained by Black women within the plantation system to survive slavery's dehumanization project.

However, before finding these spaces, Dana continues "mothering" Rufus by teaching him how to read and write, skills enslaved Africans were denied by law. Butler's choice of

Dana's reading material—*Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)—constitutes an ode to early science fiction narratives of conquest and interactions with the “Other.” In *Robinson Crusoe* “Friday’s geographies are so intimately tied to his perceptibly savage body that he must *willingly* give up on his understanding of land in order to fulfill Defoe’s representational narrative of subaltern subjugation” (original emphasis, McKittrick 4). Butler’s selection of *Robinson Crusoe* underscores Dana’s performance of servitude to appease Rufus, whose comfort with her, like that of his adventure heroes’ comfort with their ‘others’, rests in his belief in his superiority; the mandates of the plantation system ensure his safety. Dana’s safety, however, is precarious, partly due to Rufus’s mother’s hatred of Dana’s “mothering” and Kevin’s relationship with Dana. Under the guise of Christian morality, Rufus’s mother restricts Dana’s movements into Kevin’s room, with Rufus’s mother’s surveillance of Dana’s movements reminding the contemporary reader that modern-day “surveillance [of Black women’s sexuality] is nothing new to black folks [and ...] is the fact of antiblackness” (Browne 8). This raced-gendered surveillance is one of the mechanisms that ensure white people’s complete control and order on the plantation. Dana’s disregard of plantation mechanisms places her in danger; and because Kevin’s stay on the plantation requires her to work for their lodging, her work in the kitchen pushes her further away from nineteen seventy-six and deeper into the nineteenth century.

Significantly, it is in the nineteenth-century cookhouse, maintained by an enslaved woman, Sarah, that Dana “finds cooperation, collaboration, and nurturing in her ancestral home” (Mitchell 56) through her relationships with other Black people on the plantation. Sarah’s cookhouse is a site where “another collective identity [forms,] whose coding and signification moved outside the framework of the dominant ideology” (Wynter 1979, 156), and it is also her

introduction to *sousveillance*,³⁵ “acts of ‘observing and recording by an entity not in a position of power or authority over the subject of the [sur]veillance’” (Browne 19). Rather than cast Sarah as a mammy, a “representational practice [that] relies on the circulation of stereotyped images and ideologies of black womanhood that seek to position black women as ‘the faithful, obedient domestic servant’” (Browne 58), Butler presents her as enacting *sousveillance*,³⁶ tracking and reporting on the white people’s movements on the plantation to mitigate their abusive power. In addition, while watching Sarah throw unknown ingredients into a pot, Dana marvels “how amazing that [Tom] Weylin had sold her children [except her mute daughter, Carrie] and still kept her to cook his meals [...and] was still alive” (*Kindred* 76). Butler hints at one of the resistance strategies that Black women utilized during slavery: poisoning. Ultimately, Sarah’s nurturing and resistance to a mammy role provide comfort and inspiration to Dana on the plantation, especially as she fears acclimating to the horrors of slavery.

Dana’s fear of acclimation begins with a children’s game in which young enslaved children on the plantation act out the roles of the auction block. Witnessing the children at play makes Dana realize why she and Kevin “had fitted so easily into [antebellum] time” because they were “observers watching a show” (*Kindred* 98). The children’s innocence while playing “auction block” makes Dana fully realize that the Weylin plantation, like all plantations, is

³⁵ Steve Mann coined the term in “Veillance and Reciprocal Transparency: Surveillance versus Sousveillance, AR Glass, Lifelogging and Wearable Computing” (2003) to discuss the use of technology by marginalized people to record abuses of power.

³⁶ Dana also unwittingly performs *sousveillance* through her refusal to look down when she speaks to the Weylins, a practice they expect from Black people. bell hooks “notes that although black people ‘could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can only observe or see,’ the violent ways in which blacks were denied the right to look back ‘had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze’” (hooks qtd in Browne, 58). Thus, “‘Black looks’ were politicized and transformative when as, as hook states, ‘by courageously looking, we [Black Americans] defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality’” (Browne 58).

“diseased” (*Kindred* 99). It reminds her that for these Black children, the auction block is their future, one of the dystopic sites of “profitable ‘atomizing’ of [their] captive body” (Spillers 1987, 68). The ease with which she and Kevin had immersed themselves into the white supremacist logic of the plantation, one in which the idea of educated slaves is preposterous and dangerous and their future is determined by their profitability, spurs Dana into action. In addition, Kevin’s earlier statement that this “would be a great time to live in” (*Kindred* 97) propels Dana into an act of resistance: teaching Nigel, an enslaved boy, how to read. Her discomfort in Kevin’s acceptance of the racial hierarchy further disturbs her; she realizes “how easily people could be trained to accept slavery” (*Kindred* 101). She recognizes that she ought to be doing something to aid in Nigel’s possible escape from enslavement.

Dana’s own training to “accept slavery” begins with her first whipping at the hands of Rufus’s father when he catches her in the act teaching Nigel how to read. He whips her so severely that she is catapulted into the present, and Weylin’s anger and subsequent brutalization of Dana shows how the institution of slavery turned “ordinary”³⁷ men into sadists. In the present, Dana can heal herself with medicines unavailable in 1819, the year of her whipping; and she spends the time, waiting for another of Rufus’s kidnappings,³⁸ recalling the Middle Passage. She reads everything, even part of *Gone with the Wind* (1936), “but its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage” (*Kindred* 117) disgusts her; the picturesque portrayal of happy slaves undermines the brutal reality of what she has witnessed and experienced. Kevin’s World War II books concerning the Holocaust more closely resembles the quotidian violence of the Black

³⁷ In her assessment of Tom Weylin, Dana notes that he “wasn’t the monster he could have been with the power he held over his slaves. He wasn’t a monster at all. Just an *ordinary* man who sometimes did monstrous things his society said were legal and proper” (my emphasis, *Kindred* 134).

³⁸ In the novel, Dana describes the unexplained journeys back to the past as kidnappings (*Kindred* 38).

American holocaust, because “like the Nazis, antebellum whites had known quite a bit about torture” (*Kindred* 117). Thus, Butler highlights that enslavement was genocidal by design because it was meant to eradicate African people once their labor was no longer useful, strip them of their cultures, and transform them into living machines.³⁹ And like Dana, many Americans do not fully grasp this until they learn about the true horrors of slavery, not the recycled narrative of it as merely unpaid labor.

Dana’s next return to the plantation forces her to witness another horror of slavery, the foreclosure of Black love. She stumbles across a fight between Alice’s lover, Isaac, and Rufus over Rufus’s attempts to rape Alice. This near rape of Alice makes Dana realize that she has “been foolish to hope to influence him” (*Kindred* 123); her efforts, the text emphasizes, are futile in the dystopic reality of antebellum slavery. Following a brief period of freedom, Isaac is disfigured by the removal of his ears and is sold further south. Butler uses Isaac’s mutilation to illustrate one of the sadistic ways in which Black people were punished for attempting to participate in American freedom. The mutilated Black body signifies white supremacists’ response to Black people exerting their right to freedom within the U.S. dystopia; the white dominant structure in the United States will only allow a partial status of freedom to Black people. Alice, though born free, is enslaved on the Weylin plantation for her role in attempting to free Isaac, further illustrating the criminalization of Black freedom, which *Kindred* insists, is

³⁹ For more on this connection, see Alexander G. Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* in which he discusses the formation of modern concentration camps pre-Nazi Germany: “Modern concentration camps were initially constructed in the 1830s in the southeastern United States as part of the campaign for ‘Indian removal’ to detain 22,000 (Gunter’s Landing, Ross’s Landing, and Fort Cass), and later during the Dakota War of 1862 on Pike Island near Fort Snelling, Minnesota, in which 1,700 Dakota were interned. So-called contraband camps, which existed during and immediately following the Civil War, were designed as temporary domiciles for ‘freed’ slaves throughout the U.S. South” (Weheliye 35).

always contingent on remaining within the parameters of white law designed to maintain Black unfreedom. Alice's entry into the plantation system truly teaches Dana about Black women's role within the plantation as Alice is turned into Rufus's racial-sexual Other, fully under his control.

Due to Rufus's terrorism, Dana begins to identify more closely with the other Black people on the plantation, particularly Alice, and their pain becomes a "conduit of identification" (Hartman 1997, 20). Alice is an unwilling participant in her torture until the day "she adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little" (*Kindred* 169). Similarly, Dana becomes more subdued under the threat of violence, not to herself, but others. However, Butler emphasizes that if pain is a conduit of identification, so is resistance. Like Isaac and Alice, Dana attempts to escape the plantation, but she is quickly caught,⁴⁰ beaten, and brought back to the plantation, the black geography of escape hidden to her. Through her recapture, Dana quickly learns that "nothing in [her] education or knowledge of the future had helped [her] escape" (*Kindred* 177). Or in the words of Audre Lorde: "survival is not an academic skill" ("The Master's Tools," 2). This whipping leads to an attempted suicide to escape the horrors of the plantation.

Returning to her present of nineteen seventy-six, Dana turns on the radio and listens to a news story about Black people protesting against apartheid in South Africa and the war in Lebanon (*Kindred* 196), events that, like the World War II books, remind readers of the global and continuous assault against people of color. Butler emphasizes the connection to illustrate that

⁴⁰ Another enslaved woman, Liza, informs the Weylins of Dana's escape. Butler uses this episode to show how surveillance was not only conducted by white masters, but also Black informants who sought to garner favor by betraying Black people. What happens to the informant is a spectacular display of Black solidarity. Sarah makes sure that she is punished for betraying Dana; Liza "mysteriously" falls and hurts herself.

the dystopic past is the present, a palimpsest of earlier figurations of who can be considered human, and that the “past is neither inert nor given [and] the stories we tell about *what happened then*, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and political stakes of these stories rebound in the present” (original emphasis, Hartman 2006, 133). The white supremacist logic of the plantation system envelops the world and has continued past the antebellum period in the United States, and the ways in which we remember and tell that story has implications for how we construct our present and future. The same white supremacist logic that instituted the control, surveillance, terrorism, and annihilation of Black people on the plantation is at the root of the continuing devastation of people of color in the world today.

Dana’s two final journeys into the past further show her how inhuman slavery makes white people. During her penultimate journey, her great-grandmother, Hagar, is born. Although Black women’s children with white masters were considered property under the law of *partus sequitur ventrum*, Rufus plans on freeing Alice’s children, Joe and Hagar;⁴¹ yet, to maintain control over her, he refuses to tell Alice and hits Dana when she questions his decisions, “breaking [. . .their] unspoken agreement” (*Kindred* 239). Rufus’s acts of dominance over Alice, and Dana, demonstrate ways that white slaveowners maintained control over Black women by fracturing kinship bonds; “the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and humanity imputed to the enslaved” (Hartman 1997, 6). Simultaneously, Dana’s initial refusal to kill Rufus reflects how inextricably linked white and Black people became on the plantation through forced codependency. This complicated and contradictory perspective on kinship –Rufus’s violent

⁴¹ Butler’s choice in names for Alice’s children is important because the names evoke important enslaved Biblical figures. But as Alice notes, “In the Bible, people might be slaves for a while, but they didn’t have to stay slaves” (*Kindred* 234).

violation of bonds and Dana's tortured belief that she must maintain them –underlines Butler's argument that slavery forecloses the acknowledgment of ancestral bonds between white slave owners and Black descendants. Dana's loss of an arm signifies the psychic violence of confronting the sublimated sadism of U.S. slavery, highlighting how the "socio-political order of the New World [...] *represents* for its African and Indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile" (original emphasis, Spillers 1987, 67). Dana cannot return to the present completely whole; the plantation system relied on the psychic and literal disfiguration of Black people. Thus, Butler hooks "together [...] past and present locations through time-travel, memory, knowledge, and literary production" (McKittrick 2) to critique the sadistic mechanisms of antebellum slavery and trace its continued legacy in the world. In addition, by ending the novel with Dana returning to the dystopian antebellum site of her dehumanization in 1976, this time looking for evidence of her Black family, both biological and bonded through enslavement on the plantation, Butler provides her Black readers with a way to constitute a new self. If Black people are meant to survive the dystopian landscape of the United States, we must learn the hidden routes to freedom paved by our ancestors, the subversive tactics that stalled the plantation system, and create a new utopic vision. Also, as the Combahee River Collective so eloquently put it, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression" (*This Bridge Called My Back* 215).⁴² We must recognize the necessity of Black women's complete freedom as the index for measuring true liberation.

Morrison and Butler show that the plantation functioned as a dystopic site designed to alter our sense of "Blackness as a site of radical possibility" (McKittrick 1) and to confirm white

⁴² Although I do not focus on Native American women in this chapter, it is also extremely important to include their sovereignty as a measure of true liberation in the United States.

ideologies of Black inferiority. However, their texts also stress that Black people's insistence on dismantling the system, vis-a-vis enslaved people's "long and sustained counterstruggle" (Wynter 1979, 156) against dehumanization, shows that there is hope for radical Black futures. As we see in *Beloved* and *Kindred*, it requires the work of locating and following in the path of ancestors, biological and otherwise, who carved out spaces of freedom within and outside of the dystopian United States.

Chapter Two—Unsettling Utopias in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and Octavia

Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*

“Sometimes “I” is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then what is comes apart the closer you are to it. This makes the first person a symbol for something.”

—Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

“[T]he struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethno-class (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves.”

—Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom”

Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) recounts the ongoing injustices against Black people in the United States, from microaggressions to extrajudicial death at the hands of vigilantes to state sanctioned murder at the hands of police. Her book speaks to the ways these events rest within the body, impacting one’s ability to speak, act, and live within the confines of a white supremacist capitalist society. I begin with the epigraph from Rankine’s work to underscore the significance of the “I” in the construction of those who bear witness to such traumatizing underpinnings of our society’s failures. Further, I want to suggest, if the “first person [is] a symbol for something,” the “I” in first person dystopian narratives is important for the framing of what the future could be and who can exist in it. Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) present two diverging models of the “I” in dystopic futures: an “I” who, in a disturbing future, restores “order” by maintaining white patriarchal control of the (un)natural world, and an “I” who disturbs the “order” of that world to create space for change. This chapter explores the two writers’ speculations for futures created in response to the disordered world of North America.

Both Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* are concerned with answering the following questions:

What tropes are necessary to comprehend climate change or to articulate the possible futures faced by humanity? How can a global process, spanning millennia, be made comprehensible to human imagination, with its limited sense of place and time? What longer, historical forms aid this imagination, and what are the implications and limits of their use? What is impossible or tremendously difficult for us to understand about climate change? (Trexler 5)

I argue that Atwood and Butler's feminist dystopian narratives highlight the unseen, or rather obfuscated, realities for marginalized communities within the Americas as they traverse a terrain devastated by man-made ecological disasters. For Atwood, the "I" is white, male, revisionist, patriarchal, complacent, complicit, and deadly. For Butler, the "I" is Black, woman, truth-teller, hyperempathetic, radical, prophetic, and life-giving.

In "Transgressive Utopian Dystopias: The Postmodern Reappearance of Utopia in the Disguise of Dystopia," Dunja M. Mohr argues that "feminist texts –sometimes situated in a [science fiction] frame –hybridize utopia and dystopia, and present them as interactive hemispheres rather than distinct poles, contesting the standard (classical) reading of utopia and dystopia as two discrete literary genres and exposing the artificiality of such rigid classifications" (7). Both Atwood and Butler present 'ustopias,' coined by Atwood, as "the imagined perfect society and its opposite" (Atwood 2013, 66). Atwood's ironic utopia is a disastrous bioengineered replication of the past; Butler's utopia is a promise of a future unmoored from our present failures to care for diverse populations. Importantly, both texts foreclose neat endings, "map[ping] not a single path but rather several motions and changes that may lead to a potentially better future" (Mohr 9). In doing so, both authors move from an "I" to a "We" that

emphasizes the importance of a collectivity in the shaping of a better world. My focus, then, falls on how they differ in their presentation of how we can get there. Both texts underscore Sylvia Wynter's argument, stated in my second epigraph, that the "the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and the securing of the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves" ("Unsettling," 260). In Atwood's novel, the narrative structure and re-presentations of "past" and "present" demonstrate how the fundamental arrangement of knowledge contaminates the world, while Butler's novel challenges us to conceptualize a humanity that has space for all.

I begin with *Oryx and Crake* to show how white literary utopian projects are always already apocalyptically designed. By centering the novel on white male devotion to "improving" the natural world through science, Atwood reveals how white Man's⁴³ impulse to conquer the environment and people continues to be the source of catastrophe and devastation. Atwood portrays the possible devastating apocalyptic consequences of Western obsessions with shaping nature through technology, specifically biotechnology, and reveals how the social construction of

⁴³ In "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man," Sylvia Wynter argues that "'Man' is not the human, although it represents itself as if it were. It is a specific, local-cultural conception of the human, that of the Judeo-Christian West, in its now purely secularised form. Its 'Other' therefore is not *woman*. . . Rather because *Man* conceives of itself, through its Origin narrative or 'official creation story' of Evolution, as having been bio-evolutionarily selected, its 'Other' and 'Others' are necessarily those categories of humans who are projected, in the terms of the same Origin narrative, as having been bio-evolutionarily dysselected – i.e. all *native* peoples, and most extremely, to the ultimately zero degree, all people of African descent, wholly or partly . . . , who are negatively marked as *defective humans* within the terms of Man's self-conception, and its related understanding of what it is to *be* human" (25). I use Wynter's formulation of Man and the dysselected to underscore how different groups are positioned as Human and 'Other' in these works.

Nature is “the province of white men [and] has had material and metaphoric consequences for those not belonging to that single social group” (Evans 185). Following my close reading of *Oryx and Crake*, I examine how Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* engages with the unspoken of Atwood’s text: how does a Black woman survive the apocalypse unmoored from the white man’s constructed world?

Oryx and Crake, the first of Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy, presents readers with a future devastated by cold, hard science. The novel begins in the twenty-first century United States and follows Snowman’s, née Jimmy, memories, fragments of revised ‘truths’ to create a linear narrative of how society deteriorates and Crake is changing the “whole world [. . .] [into] one vast controlled experiment” (*Oryx and Crake*, 267) to produce a ‘utopia’ devoid of human frailties. Moreover, Snowman’s memories center “everything in terms of the nuclear family unit –father, mother, child –which then becomes replicated in the homosocial triangle of friend, lover, and self” (Brydon 453). While much of the novel concerns the progressive deterioration of the society around him, specifically the pleeblands that Jimmy has only visited once, the major focus falls on Snowman’s telling of Jimmy’s story – how he was born, educated, manipulated, and now suffers. Snowman believes that he is the sole human survivor of Crake’s manufactured pandemic and that he is responsible for Crake’s bioengineered Crakers. While Snowman is the protagonist of the novel, through Crake Atwood criticizes white Man’s scientific impulse for improvement, primarily the use of biotechnology to perfect humans and other living beings. She “parodies, on the one hand, the artificiality of *constructing* any utopian society at all, one particularly one devoid of (erotic) desire and the arts – such a society she considers to be doomed for failure – and, on the other hand, she describes a twofold dystopia: the dystopian society of the past before the apocalypse struck, and the post-apocalyptic primal world of the present” (original

emphasis, Mohr 17). In re-creating the world by eradicating, in Sylvia Wynter's terms, the dysselected, Crake takes white supremacist logic to its apocalyptic end. Furthermore, through *Snowman* Atwood reveals how white paternalism is positioned as the only means of survival. I focus on Crake's genetic manipulation of living things, especially humans, and *Snowman's* re/creation of a history that reduces his complicity in creating the post-apocalyptic conditions. In archiving and revising the world's destruction and its re-creation into a post-apocalyptic after-life, *Snowman* continues Crake's white supremacist project of eradicating the world of the dysselected by revising the past to make sense of his present and the future of the world. As Hannes Bergthaller argues in "Housebreaking the Human Animal," *Snowman* and Crake, and the institutions they attended (Martha Graham Academy and Watson-Crick respectively), present two different approaches to confronting human flaws: "traditional humanism, which in *Oryx and Crake* appears to have pathetically failed, and an aggressive posthumanism that ruthlessly remodels human nature according to 'ecological' criteria – an approach whose triumph the novel depicts as indistinguishable from catastrophe" (729). Both approaches require distancing oneself from the lived reality of being human. Both men have a mediated sense of reality, which is filtered through "television and the Internet, and is thus suspect, because edited" (Atwood 2004, 517). Just as their version of reality is suspect because of its being edited, *Snowman's* reconstruction of the past is suspect because of his constant revisions of what has taken place; he creates a "second self,"⁴⁴ Jimmy, who can innocently claim to have no awareness of Crake's plot.

⁴⁴ See Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems and the Economic World* (1994) for more on how simulations impact the ability of children, and I would argue people in general, to understand reality, and how they project themselves onto the reality of their machines.

In *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth Century Novel*, Teresa Heffernan theorizes that in science fiction, “the present world is portrayed as exhausted, but there is no better world that replaces it – these narratives refuse to offer up a new beginning or any hope of rebirth or renewal; the end is instead senseless and arbitrary” (5). The “present” of *Oryx and Crake* is a barren wasteland cultivated by the Crakers, their hybridity “represents the unnatural, the transgressive, the grotesque and monstrous results of technoscientific stupidity and greed” (Hollinger 456). Rather than the Eden of Crake’s imagination, the space is replete with Atwood’s most sustained critique of our contemporary world. It is a literal utopia, a veritable “no place,” in which Snowman serves as caretaker and recorder of human history. In this waste space, capitalism, symbolized through his broken watch, is equated with stillness and death, since “nobody nowhere knows what time it is” (*Oryx and Crake*, 3). The devastated landscape illuminates the “senseless and arbitrary” end of “official time” (3). Atwood’s critique of techno-capitalistic endeavors⁴⁵ shores up much of the novel: Western progress is exploitative and unsustainable, “endless labour, the digging, the hammering, the carving, the lifting, the drilling, day by day, year by year, century by century; and now endless crumbling that must be going on everywhere. Sandcastles in the wind” (45). Additionally, nature does not abide by human rules and cannot be shaped to fit white Man’s designs. The ants will survive; the hybrids will adapt; nature will persist, or there will be “evolution without human intervention” (49).

⁴⁵ For Hannes Bergthaller, Snowman’s “[repeated] invocation of colonialism is apposite in more than one way: firstly, because sexual violence against women and children is Atwood’s most important trope for the general breakdown of cultural restraints; secondly, because European colonialism is the direct historical predecessor of the exploitative transnational capitalism Atwood excoriates; and thirdly, because like the latter, it was a system that, even while it cast itself as a force of civilized order, it in fact worked to disinhibit its functionaries” (“Housebreaking,” 733).

The aquatic terrain of the novel's opening, seen through Snowman's eyes, is all too familiar. Atwood takes what "already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current sociocultural, political, or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusions" (Snyder 470). Lit with a "rosy, deadly glow," the aquatic space is littered with the residual impact of capitalism on the environment (*Oryx and Crake*, 3). Atwood critiques white masculinity by equating whiteness with death and decay; Snowman is a "creature of dimness, of the dusk" (6) compared to the "the amazingly attractive, [Crakers] – each one naked, each one perfect, each one a different skin colour – chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey –but each one with green eyes" (7). While it may appear that Atwood's decision to have "Crake's aesthetic" (7) resemble a Benetton⁴⁶ ad envisions a future of multiracial diversity, the description of the Crakers as an edible arrangement belies any future where Black/Brown bodies are not made readily available for white consumption. Crake's "children" are merely the colorful bouquet left behind in the wake of Crake's pandemic.

Snowman, the Crakers' "cross between pedagogue, soothsayer, and benevolent uncle" (*Oryx and Crake*, 7), shapes their understanding of the world and positions himself as the all-knowing prophet. In his waterside proselytizing,⁴⁷ he may not be God, which is reserved for Crake and (barely) Oryx, but he acts as prophet, spreading the 'Word' according to Crake.

Without him, the Crakers would be without knowledge of how to survive; their world would end.

⁴⁶ A clothing company known for its use of racially diverse models in advertisements.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, Snowman's re-creation of the Crakers' origin story mirrors the secularized origin of the Natural Man presented in Sylvia Wynter's "Unsettling": "Omnipotent God had created the world for the sake of His Own Glory, thereby creating mankind only contingently and without any consideration for its own sake, . . . , had left it, in the wake of the Adamic Fall and its subsequent enslavement to the Fallen Flesh, without any hope of being able to have any valid knowledge of reality except through the mediation of the very paradigms that excluded any such hope" (275-6). Crake's removal of (what he views as) the fatal flaw of "enslavement to the Fallen Flesh" underscores how he believes himself to be better than God.

They are mere ornaments, while the other life forms that refuse to die are mere annoyances. Furthermore, if “Snowman’s double status as the text’s primary survivor of and witness to trauma fundamentally shapes the novel’s treatment of the complex interplay between memory and fantasy, between individual and collective experience, and of the affective and ethical obligations presented at the crossroads of human history and futurity” (Snyder 474), the aquatic space becomes a space of revision, history in flux. Snowman revises Jimmy’s personal history, simultaneously revising the history of events leading to the apocalypse. Snowman’s odyssey from well-meaning observer to “lone” survivor serves to distance him from his involvement in the destruction of the world. While he bears witness to the collective trauma produced by Crake, he unburdens himself of his role in the events leading to the apocalyptic events of the novel, most significantly displayed in his note about the pandemic. As a “survivor,” he elicits sympathy. However, read unsympathetically, and he must be read unsympathetically, Snowman becomes the barren space, “all, all alone” (*Oryx and Crake*, 11), of whiteness. From Snowman’s perspective, he must bear the weight alone, the only human left to tell the story of Man, or rather the Fall of Man. From the reader’s perspective, however, Snowman as the sole white Man stands for the complicity of all followers and conformists in white Man’s disastrous techno-capitalist transformation of the Earth and exploitation of human/nonhuman living beings.

Much of the criticism surrounding the novel is concerned with Atwood’s critique of biotechnology and man-man ecological disaster.⁴⁸ Atwood’s Crake, as the “mythic founder, must be without all human frailties, in order to be able to stand outside the corrupt society and to

⁴⁸ See Ralph Prodzik’s “The Posthuman Future of Man: Anthropocentrism and the Other of Technology in Anglo-American Science Fiction”; Danette DiMarco’s “Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained: Homo, Faber and the Makings of a New Beginning in *Oryx and Crake*”; Hannes Bergthaller’s “Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*”; and Anthony Griffith’s “Genetics According to *Oryx and Crake*.”

reform it” (Freedman 86). Atwood’s description of Crake, presented through Snowman’s memory, as someone whom “you could have an objective conversation with, a conversation in which events and hypotheses were followed through to their logical conclusions” (*Oryx and Crake*, 69), critiques white men’s impulse to shape the world into an emptied space for the “perfect” race and ecological and scientific purity, the logical conclusion of centuries of genocidal development and environmental degradation. As Patricia Melzer argues, Atwood’s Crake, nee Glenn, exemplifies how the “construction of universal ‘humanness’ itself is disclosed as a patriarchal concept and as a white-supremacist one” (71). Crake is a cold, obsessive scientist, presenting himself to Snowman as a detached observer of Man’s weaknesses. His early experiments are designed to “eliminate what he called the G-spot in the brain” since God is simply a “*cluster of neurons*” (*Oryx and Crake*, 157) interfering with people’s ability to adapt and change. In his scientific view, religion serves as an impediment to growth, not because of people’s reliance on faith to show them the way, but rather because it takes up space in the brain that could be used for emotionless logic. Crake edits the Crakers, creating a “posthuman race devoid of every feature that he considered destructive: religion, art, violence, and sexual possessiveness” (Mohr 18) to ensure the creation of a new world without the problems of the old one.

Crake’s method of creating a new world with a “perfect” race comes in the form of distributing a drug, BlyssPluss, which will “eliminate the external causes of death,” which are “war, which is to say misplaced sexual energy, which we consider to be a larger factor than the economic, racial, and religious causes often cited. Contagious diseases, especially sexually transmitted ones. Overpopulation, leading [. . .] to environmental degradation and poor nutrition” (*Oryx and Crake*, 293). Rather than address the root causes of war, the scientists in Crake’s unit

focus on sexual energy as a way to lay the blame for war on those most impacted by war. His test subjects come from the “ranks of the desperate, as usual” (296). Crake’s experiment draws attention to the scientific practice of testing on people of color, especially Black people and people from the “Third” world.⁴⁹ Atwood’s decision to have the pandemic distributed through the BlyssPluss drug underscores the unethical treatment of people of color in the name of science. Additionally, Crake “has literalized the pastoral fantasy of humanism – he has employed the tools of genetic engineering in order to breed the wildness out of man, creating a species of human beings that will be congenitally unable to soil the planetary *oikos*” (Bergthaller 735). If Crake’s science, similar to the science of eugenicists, is the hope for the future, then the novel shows that we are all doomed.

I return now to how Snowman’s revision frames the narrative. In a flashback, Snowman recalls how as Jimmy, he wrote:

I don’t have much time, but I will try to set down what I believe to be the explanation for the recent ~~extraordinary events~~ catastrophe. I have gone through the computer of the man known here as Crake. He left it turned on –deliberately, I believe –and I am able to report that the JUVE virus was made here in the Paradise dome by splicers hand-selected by Crake ~~and subsequently eliminated~~, and was then encysted in the BlyssPluss product. There was a time-lapse factor built in to allow for wide distribution . . . For success of the plan, time was of the essence. Social disruption was

⁴⁹ In the United States, the most explicit example of this is the 1932-1972 “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male” where Black men did not receive adequate treatment for the disease and did not give formal consent to be tested on. They were lured into the program under the guise of receiving medical treatment. See the Center for Disease Control’s report for more details about the study: <https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>

maximized, and development of a vaccine effectively prevented. Crake himself had developed a vaccine concurrently with the virus, but he had destroyed it prior to his ~~assisted-suicide~~ death [. . .] it is my belief none, with the exception of Crake, was cognizant of what the effect would be.

As for Crake's motives, I can only speculate. (346-7)

The note undermines Snowman's insistence on Jimmy's lack of knowledge of Crake's plan, and the key strike-through phrases reveal his admiration for Crake and his project. In both iterations of the note, Jimmy attempts to produce a narrative that makes sense but also underscores Crake's genius. His first framing of the apocalypse is as an "extraordinary event," as if the intended mass extinction of the human race was one of their video game simulations. The strike-through and revision to "catastrophe" does not negate the earlier iteration of excitement. The remaining strike-throughs absolve Jimmy of his culpability in the last stages of the end of the world. In a fit of rage over Oryx's murder, Jimmy "assists" Crake in his death, which forecloses any opportunity to learn of Crake's true designs. But Snowman can speculate by piecing together the fragments of Jimmy's memories. And in the remembering and revising of memory, and subsequent memorializing of Jimmy, Snowman realizes that he has known all along.

Crake's new world, populated by the Crakers, by hybrid animals,⁵⁰ and by Snowman, exposes the failures of white utopia building. Although he uses cold calculating science to determine the attributes of a "perfect" race, Crake's "idea of breeding and programming a new biological species redeemed from humanity's fatal flaws and vices has thus proved limited" (Pordzik 156). The Crakers still have their "G-spot" and still need gods, this time in the forms of Oryx and Crake. "One of the last images of the Crakers indicates their first steps towards art and

⁵⁰ Referred to as the children of Oryx.

symbolic thinking: they circle around a ‘scarecrowlike effigy’ (*Oryx and Crake*, 418) intoning a word that sounds like ‘Amen’ (*Oryx and Crake* 418-9)” (Mohr 21).⁵¹ Snowman must “get [his] story straight, keep it simple, don’t falter” (*Oryx and Crake*, 96). Snowman, like many recorders of history, simplifies and downplays Crake’s genocidal design for the new world, and the text’s inclusion, yet backgrounding of, Oryx suggests that he also (mis)attributes blame to her.

Indeed, while the title of *Oryx and Crake* gestures towards Oryx’s significance, the novel scarcely mentions her, which prompts important questions about what this means in the context of the novel. In “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” Donna Haraway argues that women of color “might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities and in the complex political-historical layers” (311). Even as a title character, Oryx remains at the margins of the novel, symbolizing the dysselected rescued for the purpose of sexual gratification. Atwood employs Oryx as an indictment of the exploitation of women of color by white men. Oryx seemingly complicates the otherwise straightforward narrative of white male domination of the world. She enters the novel in spurts, first as a child in a pornographic film, then as the adult lover of both Crake and Snowman. As a child, Oryx captures the men’s voyeuristic attention because “none of those [other] little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy [...but...] Oryx was three-dimensional from the start” (*Oryx and Crake*, 90). Her three-dimensionality rests on the fact that she “looked” back. For Snowman, her look serves as his invitation into her life; he “felt burned by this look – eaten into, as if by acid” (90). As a child, Oryx was able to turn his eye into him. Snowman, a detached observer of human depravity through online gaming and

⁵¹ Snowman’s creation story for the Crakers serves as a reminder of the man-made construction of the Bible by men in power. It was the ecumenical councils who provided Christians with the Biblical narratives that aligned with their desire for power.

pornography, believes himself to be more than a voyeur when it comes to Oryx. It is not enough to watch; he must know her.

As she relates her story to Snowman, Oryx's refusal to fit his image of victimization leads to his emphatic denial of her "whole fucking story [;] [a]ll this sweetness and acceptance and crap" (*Oryx and Crake*, 142). Yet, her narrative shows how the elevation of white masculinity and the oppression of women, especially women of color, are inextricable from an apocalyptic progression to the future. He does not have to believe her story; Atwood's readers know it all too well. Women of color are "the preferred labour force for the science-based industries, the real women for whom the worldwide sexual market, labour market and politics of reproduction kaleidoscope into daily life" (Haraway 2000, 311). Oryx serves as an index of the multiple sites of white male devastation. Her body carries the memory of white male invasion and deprivation of morality. Like the Crakers, Oryx is the colorful flotsam of white development. Her death at the hand of Crake, an act of "mercy," serves as a reminder of what will be sacrificed for the sake of progress. The execution is the logical conclusion of white utopia building. Atwood's novel serves as a reminder that if we continue in our cannibalistic progression, following the white male egocentric, scientifically detached, and complacent (and complicit) "I" of the past and present, we will be left with a barren future.

Atwood relies heavily on Wynter's trope of white Man conquering nature to show a future absent of humanity. The global process she concerns herself with is techno imperialism, rooted in earlier forms of colonization and imperialism. The less visible aspect of her critique, and one possible criticism of the novel, is the impact of that technoimperialism on the marginalized communities that are directly impacted by Crake and Snowman's decisions. To be sure, in the figure of Oryx, Atwood does highlight how women of color become the collateral

damage of white male utopia-building leading to dystopian realities. Butler, however, goes further. She offers women of color as alternative creators of the utopian project that can be carved out of a space within the dystopic reality of North America.

Published shortly after the LA uprising in 1993,⁵² Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* presents us with an all too familiar dystopic world projected into a possible future, mediated through the journal of Lauren Olamina, a hyper-empathetic black teenager. Coming of age within the walled community of Robledo, California, Lauren is shielded from a decaying Los Angeles, a "carcass covered with too many maggots" (*Sower* 8). The older members of her community who experienced life before the "Pox"⁵³ are nostalgic when "lights, progress, growth, all those things [which are] too hot and too poor to bother with anymore" (5) were important. The older community members' nostalgia underscores the generational division that comes to represent the elders' desires for a return to the very conditions that led to the dystopia of Butler's novel and an absolute refusal, by Lauren, to continue the progress of late capitalism. The novel gives a glimpse of the devastated consequences of modern late capitalism: the degraded environment, fearful humans, and disappearing nonhuman living beings all suffer directly from late capitalism's cannibalism. Within the walled community, although seemingly safe to the rest of the inhabitants of Robledo, Lauren understands that walls cannot guarantee safety from capitalism's reach.

Before the destruction of her walled community by arsonists, Lauren puts together "the scattered verses that [she's] been writing about God since [she] was twelve" (*Sower* 21).

Through her writings, Lauren embodies Haraway's cyborg, since her writing concerns "the

⁵² Following Sylvia Wynter's (and others') lead in "N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century," I will refer to the events following the brutal beating of Rodney King by the police as an uprising rather than a riot.

⁵³ The novel's current time is referred to as the Pox, likening it to an apocalypse.

power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (Haraway 2000, 311). Lauren’s journal entries serve as a reminder of recognizable experiences for marginalized communities in a capitalistic and racist system designed for their exploitation and subsequent deaths. Lauren’s utopic vision, presented in *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, offers an alternative framework to change our lives. With a sense of urgency, Olamina⁵⁴ writes the “literal truth” (*Sower* 21). Her verses engage with shaping spiritual knowledge in a way that acknowledges one’s connection to Earth, “God,” and people. Her Earthseed verses provide a “mode of being that fuses structures of feeling, social organization, and labor organization” (Morris 273). The common refrain in the text is “God is Change”; by shaping God, people have the possibility to shape themselves. Shaping is dialogic, not hierarchal. The “perfect” is always out of reach in the text, symbolized by space travel, and requires communal and non-exploitative development on Earth. Shaping is a praxis of resistance that challenges Judeo-Christian conceptions of God that demanded subservience and were used as one of the weapons of slavery and colonialism. Throughout the novel, as I will explain, the act of shaping and Olamina’s knowledge come from alternative epistemologies, as well as a different cosmology, and Butler presents those frameworks as the future that must be sown now. As John Gamber notes in *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures*, “Butler’s use of first person narrative, furthermore, riff[s] off of traditions from African American autobiographies and slave narratives [...], particularly with her inclusion of the themes of liberation, bondage, freed subjectivity, and especially the ability and right to write” (27). Butler blends generic conventions and forms –fugitive-slave narrative, dystopian/speculative fiction, and epistolary –to produce a novel of collective

⁵⁴ I switch to using Olamina here to signify her transformation into the shaper of Earthseed.

resistance, even as “I” remains in the center. Ultimately to exact change, however, Olamina’s “I” must – and does – become “We.”

If Atwood’s Snowman believes himself to be (an unwilling) prophet of Crake, Butler’s Olamina is the (eventual) willing prophet of Earthseed. Olamina has “to write. There’s nothing familiar left to [her] but the writing” (*Sower* 141). Olamina’s verses are a “revelatory distillation of experience” and give “name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde 36). Her Earthseed verses can “pry people loose from the rotting past, and maybe build a future that makes sense” (*Sower* 79). Future-oriented, Olamina recognizes that change necessitates understanding the knowledges of peoples who have shared a non-cannibalistic relationship to the Earth. One of the first books that she turns to is a book about Indigenous people’s cultivation of acorns in California, seeds that will come to symbolize both a return to a living past of communalism and the hope for a future freed from capitalistic destruction.

Butler’s “I” is trained on the requirements for survival, recognizing that “any kind of survival information from encyclopedias, biographies, anything that helps you learn to live off the land and defend yourselves [and] even some fiction might be useful” (*Sower* 52). Olamina’s determination to create an archive of survival information provides a praxis of resistance for those facing an apocalyptic end. The knowledge she gathers is the compilation and distillation of alternative ways to engage with the earth and humans which allow for a productive future. Composed through the eyes of a Black teenage girl, Olamina’s journals stand as a survivor’s guide and as an archive of the past, present, and possible future for marginalized communities. Additionally, they mark a departure from patriarchal forms of religion and discourse. Although outer space-bound in its destination, Earthseed is earth-based its implementation. It is a Book of the Living, designed for use in the here and now to ensure a future.

Each chapter of the novel begins with a verse from *Earthseed*, with the first providing the framework for understanding Butler's project in constructing the novel. According to *Earthseed*: "All that you touch/You Change./All that you Change/Changes you./The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change" (*Sower* 3). This seemingly simple verse redefines the Judeo-Christian understanding of God. He, in keeping with Christian doctrine, is no longer the "super-powerful man, playing with his toys [i.e. humans] the way [Olamina's] youngest brothers play with toy soldiers" (14). God is malleable, de-gendered, and part of the human condition. Power rests with humans' ability to adapt to their environment, shape their surroundings, and have that same environment shape life. I insert life rather than human beings because throughout the novel, Butler blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman living beings. Rather than Atwood's technoscientific dystopic hybridization (pigoons, rakunks, and the like), Butler presents her readers with adapting beings, from dogs to humans, who must change in order to survive.

What is it that one must survive in Butler's world? The same things that we must survive in contemporary society: war, rape, racial and class division, capitalistic greed, and patriarchy. To put it succinctly, we must survive each other. As an incessant journalist, Olamina serves as recorder of human history and her eye focuses on multiple manifestations of human failures, such as the overconsumption of natural resources for the sake of economic stability.⁵⁵ Standing behind Olamina as the creator and (first) prophet of *Earthseed*, Butler recasts the Messianic narrative with a Black female teenager modifying the testaments of old for a future of

⁵⁵ In the novel, President-elect, Charles Morpeth Donner has a "plan for getting people back to work [and] hopes to get laws changed, suspend 'overly restrictive' minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employees willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board" (*Sower* 24). His plans for stabilizing the economy come at the expense of workers and the natural world. At fifteen, Olamina understands the hidden (to others) consequences of his actions and attempted to dissuade the elders in her family from voting for him.

continuous, but necessary upheaval. Like the Biblical Jesus, Olamina's journey to becoming a religious leader begins at twelve, when her "father's God stopped being [her] God" (*Sower* 6). Like Jesus's questioning of the rabbis in the Temple in his twelfth year, Olamina pushes back on the teachings of her father's church. Through this child, Butler confronts the patriarchal nature of Judeo-Christianity, a religion which made the enslavement of African people possible through their conversion to a religious system that mandated enslaved people should listen to their master, their redemption relying on their acceptance of a predetermined hierarchy. *Earthseed* offers a future with no hierarchy; the collective is foregrounded in Olamina's verses, which resemble a "utopian text [...] a semiotic operation, a process of interaction between contradictions and contraries which generates the illusion of a model of society" (Jameson 29). Simultaneously pushing against and embracing elements of Christianity, *Earthseed* signifies a sharp departure from oppressive and rigid structures of paternalistic traditions.⁵⁶

Rather than give an extended history of how religion played (and continues to play) a part in the subjugation of non-white peoples, especially women, Olamina recalls how "deists like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson believed God was something that made us, then left us on our own" (*Sower* 13). Jefferson, best known as one of the writers of the *Declaration of Independence* and U.S. President – but who should be remembered as a slave-owner who repeatedly raped his young slave, Sally Hemmings, and fathered and owned her children – believed he "never yet could [. . .] find that a [B]lack had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration" and found Black people "inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (*Notes on the States of Virginia* 147). Franklin used his printing shop to produce

⁵⁶ Butler also critiques non-Christian paternalistic religions through the character of Richard Moss, who puts together "his own religion – a combination of the Old Testament and historical West African practices" (*Sower* 32) in order to further subjugate women in this dystopian landscape.

advertisements for the sale of enslaved Africans and bought enslaved Africans to operate his shop, all the while extolling independence and freedom. In fact, like Jefferson, Franklin believed “almost every slave *by Nature* a thief” and they “pejorate the Families [sic] that use them” (Franklin 5, 7). With the simple inclusion of these two famous figures of American independence and Christian “morality,” Butler throws into sharp relief the hypocritical nature of New World Christianity, disrupting “humanists’ revalorized conception of a more egalitarian relation between natural man and a Christian God, reconceived as a Caring Father who had created the universe specifically for man’s sake” (Wynter 2003, 278). Furthermore, she challenges both of their assessments of Black people. Butler’s novel is well above a “level of plain narration,” and it makes clear that almost every white man “by nature” is a thief, a critique that comes through especially forcefully in the representation of Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company –KSF– a multinational corporation located in small coastal city, Olivar.

Olivar presents itself as a way out of a crumbling economic future and a devastated late capitalist ecological reality, a corporation town covertly designed for the exploitation of the needy. Similar to corporation towns of the past, Olivar, made up of “upper middle class, white literate” people, relies on debt slavery for its continued wealth. It is merely a palimpsest of the plantation system; the white majority “mean to own great water, power, and agricultural industries” (*Sower* 106). With Olivar, Butler demonstrates the ongoing presence of colonial practices, through a “system of labor exploitation rather than antebellum chattel slavery” (Dubey 359). But as Olamina notes, “something old and nasty is reviving” (*Sower* 105). It is not only racial identity that determines who gets entrapped by Olivar; it is also class and gender. Furthermore, Butler’s decision to have KSF be a multinational corporation brings to the foreground the multiple and simultaneous colonialisms that have occurred throughout history.

For instance, Butler extends her critique of European colonialism to the too often elided (at least in the West) reality of Japanese imperialism. Her inclusion of Kagimoto reminds us that in the modern era the “European empires, together with Japan and the United States, rapaciously exploited the opportunity to wrest new colonies, expropriate communal lands, and tap novel sources of plantation and mine labor.”⁵⁷ But even Olivar cannot withstand the ecological and subsequent economic devastation taking place: “it can’t protect itself from the encroaching sea, the crumbling earth, the crumbling economy, or the desperate refugees” (*Sower* 105). There are two warnings that Butler sustains throughout this novel that are highlighted in this passage: if we continue in our capitalistic and cannibalistic endeavors, they will make refugees out of all us, and there will be no Earth to exploit.

Olamina recognizes, and tries to warn her community, that “everything was getting worse: the climate, the economy, crime, drugs [...] She didn’t believe [they] would be allowed to sit behind [Robledo’s] walls, looking clean and fat and rich and hungry, thirsty, homeless, jobless, filthy people outside” (*Sower* 167). Robledo’s walls offer the illusion of safety from the outside. When the walls are smashed down by painters, people who have become addicted to prescription drugs and setting fires, and Robledo is destroyed, Olamina with two survivors must begin the true work of Earthseed, initiating Butler’s *realistic* utopic vision for the future. I stress realistic because Butler does not present a future without struggle. From the outset, Olamina, Harry, and Zahra resemble fugitive-slaves journeying north. Zahra, Richard Moss’s youngest wife, was a literal slave, sold by her mother, surviving on the street before being bought by

⁵⁷ See Mike Davis’s *Late Victorian Holocausts in Sharing the Earth*, 248. In revisiting the global history of imperialism, Butler intervenes in a neatly packaged narrative of progress. Just as the “New World” was being colonized by Europeans, many parts of Asia were being colonized by the Japanese. This inclusion is striking in its simplicity and biting in its implications for what must end in order to change the future.

Moss. Olamina dons male dress for protection, mirroring the tactics of formerly enslaved women, most notably Harriet Tubman, on their liberation journeys. Harry, although white, becomes an immediate target by traveling with two women of color, because “mixed couples catch hell whether people think they’re gay or straight” (153). In the novel, the suggestion of miscegenation, even as the world is literally crumbling, still carries with it the threat of death. Clearly this northward movement is bound up in Black American history; it evokes the Black liberation narrative of the United States. Like Tubman, Olamina will rescue more along the way. Unlike Tubman, however, Olamina is at times a reluctant leader, primarily due to her hyperempathy, or sharing.

Olamina’s hyperempathy may be the most complex aspect of the narrative. Scholars grapple with how to read Butler’s inclusion of this ‘disability,’ especially because it results from her mother becoming addicted to Paraceto, “the smart pill, the Einstein powder” and because, within the logic of the novel, hyperempathy is perceived as a delusion (*Sower* 11).⁵⁸ However, the novel also attests to the very real effect of hyperempathy on Olamina’s mind and body, as well as on other characters that also have hyperempathy. Olamina’s passing as able-bodied and male has been read to show how “gender and health are contested concepts not readily written on the body and certainly not always visible” (Pickens 2014). While this is an important interpretation of Butler’s decision and broadens the way in which we read bodies,⁵⁹ I understand

⁵⁸ In his chapter, “Prescription Maximization,” in *Lively Capital*, Joseph Dumit presents a chilling observation about the distribution and accumulation of pharmaceuticals: “the state of biochemical accumulation in the bodies of Americans continues at a rate that seems unbelievable, absurd, and unsustainable” (46). He focuses on the use of clinical trials as “investments whose purpose is to increase the sales of medicines” (48). By telling people that they are at risk for any number of illnesses and then running these trials, the pharmaceutical companies maximize profits, but they also create the conditions for people to be put at risk.

⁵⁹ The inclusion of an invisible ‘disability’ is a common trope in Butler novels, one to which I will return in later chapters.

Olamina's hyperempathy as a necessary readjustment of the way humans engage with one another. Olamina's hyperempathy literally shows how:

[T]he body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness—all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlastingly optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games. (Rankine 20)

Olamina "shares" the pain of others; she cannot kill or maim without suffering from the same pain. Furthermore, it is not only humans, but all living beings that she can share pain with. How might the sadism practiced in slaughterhouses and factories change if humans could feel the same pain as the animals they carve up? We may not all become vegetarians, but we would think twice before utilizing and benefitting from the cruel forms of animal slaughter in practice today. How might the world change if we could feel with, not just feel for, the people we murder and abuse? We might not be so quick with a weapon. In Butler's novel, while the sharers' affective abilities put them at a disadvantage, "a weakness [and] shameful secret" (*Sower* 11), their sharing also allows for a paradigm shift. As Haraway theorizes, "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway 2000, 295).

Such a paradigm shift defines *Earthseed*, which Olamina begins to share along her journey with Harry and Zahra. Following the destruction of Robledo, she assumes the role of leader of a group escaping the violence of a ravaged California. Outside of the walls of Robledo,

“Earthseed/Cast on new ground/Must first perceive/That it knows nothing” (*Sower* 160). These lines emphasize one of the main tenets of Earthseed: humans are not the center of knowledge. They must learn from every aspect of the environment, including nonhuman beings. Olamina’s ability to read the environment around her, her continuous recording of the climate disasters, and her sharing provide her insight on how to reconstitute ourselves in the dystopic United States. Her Earthseed community must challenge and change the status quo. The ‘walls,’ as they had been established, must come down. She teaches her followers that “worship [of Earthseed] is no good without action” (197). Her God “exists to be shaped [because] [i]t isn’t enough to for us to survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse” (67). Her verses are a call to action to erase finally the neocolonial palimpsest and create new ways to engage with human/nonhuman beings and the environment.⁶⁰

In Olamina’s verses, her poetic aphorisms, Butler suggests a revolutionary praxis and truth that, at least to me, are irresistible. The verses, while they appear simple and straightforward, offer complex explorations of what it means to be human. They also offer brief histories and explain the conditions that can lead to the dystopian future presented in the novel. Olamina emphasizes how “writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs [. . .] Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism” (Haraway 2000, 312). Though seemingly simple, Earthseed cannot be neatly understood as a comforting spiritual text. It demands that the believer grapple with shaping its meaning. Further, “rather than tell easily resolvable stories, [Butler’s] aesthetic endeavors to raise difficult and

⁶⁰ Olamina’s urgency calls to mind Audre Lorde’s insistence about her own writing in her cancer journals. In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Lorde asserts, building on the words of June Jordan, that “the function of us all, as creative artists, [is] to make the truth, as we see it irresistible” (Lorde qtd. in Rowell, 62).

perhaps unsolvable questions” (Pickens 175). The unsolvable question of *Parable of the Sower* may be: when will this end? For Olamina, the end is marked by the revitalization of older systems of communal living. Her Earthseed community must find a space to shape change productively. It is with the creation of Acorn, “amid the ashes and bones” of Bankole’s family (*Sower* 282), that Olamina and others can reinvigorate both the land and the people. Like Morrison’s *Clearing*, Butler’s Acorn serves as a space of healing and reconfiguration, its very name signifying Butler’s commitment to an alternative framework or, rather, a revitalization of older forms of community. Acorn is a “source of sustenance [and] a nod to Californian Indigeneity as well as endemic sustainability” (Gamber 35). If the novel shows the devastating effects of racial capitalism, its ending with Acorn offers a possible solution rooted in the eradication of late capitalist hierarchal overconsumption and the installation of Black, female-led, earth-based communitarianism.

Acorn marks the beginning of a “future as a locus of radical *alterity* to the mundane status quo” (original emphasis, Freedman 56). By closing the novel with the creation of Acorn, Butler ends with a truly utopian vision that differs radically from Crake’s white supremacist one in *Oryx and Crake*. Butler’s novel “initially present[s] a dystopian world, and then move[s] on to a point of transition where we catch glimpses of the historical processes that lead from dystopia to utopia” (Mohr 7). It “challenge[s] and provide[s] alternatives to [the current] system, which rests on dualistic thought and hierarchal relations” (Sargisson 4). Butler envisions a world of reciprocity and multicultural unity, but one that will require continual adaptation to the world around us. Unlike Crake’s bioengineered future, Olamina’s proposed future “deals with [the] ongoing reality” (*Sower* 197) of a devastated world by combatting the root cause of society’s

ills⁶¹ with love and kinship. Unlike the decorative Crakers, the people of Acorn form a genuinely multiracial and multicultural community that embraces diversity. Olamina's Acorn is a locus of radical kinship. Its followers "make kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family [and that] troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible" (Haraway 2016, 2). The vision of kinship in *Parable of the Sower* resists and rejects oppression and posits a radicalism rooted in the desire to create a future society for future Black people, and other marginalized groups, who were never meant to have a future.

⁶¹ One of Olamina's Earthseed verses perfectly captures the root cause of society's ills as power struggles: "*All struggles/Are essentially/power struggles./Who will rule,/Who will lead,/Who will define,/refine,/confine,/design,/Who will dominate./All struggles /Are essentially /power struggles./And most/are no more intellectual/than two rams/knocking their heads together*" (83).

Chapter Three—Maroonage Writ Large in Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Talents*

“I would like one line of ancestry, Mama. One line from you to me and farther back, but a line that I can trace. I don’t know why I thought that or ask you. One line like the one in your palm with all the places where something happened and is remembered. I would like one line full of people who have no reason to forget anything, or forgetting would not help or matter because the line would be constant, unchangeable”

–Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*

Fugitive. Maroon. Ancestor. In this chapter, I analyze Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999) and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Talents* (1998) as Black Atlantic speculative fictions⁶² on fugitivity and maroonage, both *grand* and *petit*.⁶³ In *Freedom as Maroonage* (2015), political scientist Neil Roberts explains that maroonage

is a multidimensional, constant act of flight that involves [...] four interrelated pillars: distance, movement, property, and purpose. Distance denotes a spatial quality separating an individual or individuals in a current location or condition from a future location or condition. Movement refers to the ability of agents to have control over motion and the intended directions of their actions. Flight, therefore, is directional movement in the domain of physical environment, embodied cognition, and/or the metaphysical... [P]roperty [...] is the designation of a physical, legal, and material object that is under the possession and

⁶² See Ingrid Thaler’s *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions: Octavia Butler, Jewelle Gomez, and Nalo Hopkinson* (2010) for a discussion of Octavia Butler’s work as Black Atlantic speculative fiction. For Thaler, Black speculative fiction “proves to be a productive space for negotiating ‘double-consciousness’ and theorizing about the in-betweenness of black subjectivity” (4). While I find her joining of Gilroy’s theory on the Black Atlantic and speculative fiction useful, I do not focus explicitly on double-consciousness in my chapter.

⁶³ Traditionally, maroonage, derived from the Portuguese and Spanish term for escaped cattle, is understood as removal from the plantation. Grand-maroonage is understood as one’s complete removal from the plantation system; petit-maroonage refers to running away from the plantation for short periods of time.

ownership of an individual, institution, or state. Property can be private, collective, or common, thus spanning a range of property relations from atomistic conceptions to the communitarian. Purpose denotes the rationale, reasons for, and goal of an act begun by an individual or a social collective. Movement is the central principle of marronage to which the other three are inextricably connected.

(Roberts 10)

For scholars of traditional maroonage, “marronage is a normative concept forged in a historical milieu” in which distance, flight, movement, and constructions of alternative communities outside of the plantation system remain integral; “it has trans-historical utility” (Roberts 4) that offers an expansive framework to understand the multifarious means by which enslaved Africans removed themselves from white regimes of terror. Therefore, following Roberts’ call to perform “intellectual maroonage” by “developing alternative imagined models of freedom” (Roberts 13), I show maroonage in several ways –traditional, erotic, theological, reproductive, spiritual, and aquatic –to discuss how reading actions as maroonage reveals the frequency of subversive acts against enslavement and possible strategies against contemporary forms of subjugation. By “erotic,” I build Audre Lorde’s deployment of the erotic as “a resource [. . .] that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized power” (“The Uses of the Erotic,” 53). If slavery “stripped your history to bare facts and precious details” (Hartman 2006, 11), then the “precious details” of maroonage and fugitivity subvert the image of the enslaved people’s complacency⁶⁴ with white settler regimes of terror. By tracing maroonage and fugitivity, I highlight the decoloniality of both novels, building on Michaeline A. Crishlow’s argument in “Making Waves: (Dis)Placements, Entanglements,

⁶⁴ See Sylvia Wynter’s “Sambos and Minstrels” about the creation of the Sambo figure as a means to refute enslaved Africans’ resistance against slavery.

Mo(ve)ments” that “‘decoloniality’ is the “refusal of a hegemonic frame of self-referencing, and as a changed relation to such frames that cast humanity and its progress in terms of a particular re-ordering of discriminatory development” (131). My goal is to contribute to the scholarship on Black Atlantic speculative fiction that “rethink[s] modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the western hemisphere (Paul Gilroy qtd. Thaler, 3) and construct “an imagining of the future via the present with an awareness of the past that permeates the present” (Thaler 2). Using traditional maroonage, Lorde’s articulation of the power of the erotic, and Roberts’ argument that “freedom as marronage presents a useful heuristic device to scholars interested in understanding both normative ideals of freedom and the origin of those ideals” (Roberts 4), I engage with how these novels (re)turn to fugitivity and maroonage as an expansive means to explore the dilemmas of being Black in the Americas, emphasizing Black people’s insistence on freedom.

In *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*, Sarah Meer argues: “The fugitives themselves made an even more fundamental challenge to the ideology of slavery, since by running away, even from ‘good’ homes, they demonstrated that an intractable principle was at stake. They wanted to be *free*, even if freedom entailed poverty and discomfort” (94). Meer’s centering the frequency of Black fugitivity (and maroonage) is integral to repudiating the misleading idea that enslaved Africans needed literacy and/or exposure to white ideations of freedom as a catalyst for their struggle for liberation. Rather, these fugitive and maroon

practices signaled that spaces of black liberation were invisibly mapped across the United States and Canada and that this invisibility is, in fact, a real and meaningful geography. The life and death of black subjects was dependent on the

unmapped knowledges, while the routes gave fugitives, Frederick Douglass wrote, “invisible agency.” (McKittrick 18)

By highlighting the invisible practices and geographies of resistance and fugitivity, I argue Brand and Butler reveal how these exigent acts are crucial to expanding the archive about slavery and that “geography [. . .] matters because it carries with it (and on it) all sorts of historically painful social encounters and all sorts of contemporary social negotiations” (McKittrick 18). As Saidiya Hartman notes in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Transatlantic Slave Route*:

Commodities, cargo, and things don’t lend themselves to representation, at least not easily. The archive dictates what can be said about the past and the kinds of stories that can be told about the persons cataloged, embalmed, and sealed away in box files and folios. To read the archive is to enter a mortuary. (Hartman 2006, 17)

To Hartman, the archives delineate bare facts: Black people disassembled into favorable parts; Black subjectivity rendered unimaginable as enslavement turned human beings into living tools.⁶⁵ However, in their novels, Brand and Butler flesh out different archives: Brand provides a historical representation of resistance and Butler provides a future representation of continued transformative counter-violence to sites/cites of Black subjugation. By pairing two Black American women writers from different white settler nations (Canada and the U.S.), I draw attention to the Americas, including the islands in the Caribbean, as dystopic sites. I also emphasize the genealogy of resistance to enslavement at the center of the Black American experience, a legacy of fugitivity and maroonage that illustrates that “the truth is African people

⁶⁵ See also Orlando Patterson’s theorization of social death in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982).

did not passively accept slavery,' [they] fought back" (Hartman 2006, 230).⁶⁶ In Brand's novel, Marie Ursule, her daughter, Bola, and Kamena provide insight into marronage during the period of the transatlantic slave trade in Trinidad. In Butler's novel, Lauren Olamina highlights how marronage must become a fact of life in a society that no longer formally recognizes the ways in which slavery continues post-emancipation. Olamina's daughter, Larkin, and Marie Ursule and Bola's multiple descendants show how resistance can become illegible with the illusion of freedom. These neo-slave narratives reveal the impact of slavery, but also maroonage, on Black descendants.

At the Full and Change of the Moon chronicles the aftermath of an 1824 mass suicide on a Trinidadian plantation and its impact on Black descendants. The novel is polyvocal; Marie Ursule, Bola, and their descendants negotiate spaces of slavery and neoslavery that cannot abide by Black life. The novel moves from Trinidad to Canada to the United States and Europe, making "explicit references to intergenerational memory and trauma" (Grandison 771). While others have noted Brand's concerns with memory, unforgetting, and slavery, I focus on tracing multiple dimensions of maroonage in Brand's *Moon*. Her Black Atlantic work draws from the Black cultural practices of not only physical but also spiritual and mental resistance to enslavement. In *Moon*, Black "bodies and sites are redolent with the specters of the plantation and the experience of maroonage [. . . and Brand] write[s] what looks like journeys across water, across mind, space, and how people are always able to adapt, to fit, to figure out how to do this hustle which life has presented us with" (Bernabei 501). The novel begins with a "complex and

⁶⁶ During her journey in Ghana, an African priest reminds Saidiya Hartman of continental Africans' resistance to enslavement.

contradictory”⁶⁷ act of marronage: Marie Ursule’s employment of suicide in 1824 on a Trinidadian plantation as “a rejection of the racialized violence of the plantation that had defined their existence” (Ryan 1239). As “queen of the Convoi Sans Peur; queen of rebels, queen of evenings, queen of malingerings and sabotages; queen of ruin” (*Moon* 5), Marie Ursule “resemb[ling ...] a goddess from the Haitian Voodoo pantheon, Erzulie [. . . a] mythical figure [who] fought in the Haitian slave rebellion in the late eighteenth century” (Evans 6), functions as a figure of resistance and maroonage, signaling a long tradition of female resistance to enslavement. While Erzulie exists in multiple forms, it is the vengeful Erzulie Ge-Rouge⁶⁸ that Brand utilizes in her characterization of Marie Ursule to underscore the possibilities for powerful transformation through inimical acts. Brand’s deployment of Erzulie highlights enslaved Africans’ cosmologies, particularly Vodun, that radically challenged white settler nations. Malignerings and sabotages refer to quotidian acts of resistance performed by Marie Ursule, enslaved Africans, and indigenous people throughout the Black Atlantic.⁶⁹ In preparation for her ceremony to secure their freedom, Marie Ursule crossed the boundaries of the plantation system to listen to the “whispers from the Caribs and [... make] dealings with those of them left alive on the island after their own great and long devastation by the Europeans” (*Moon* 2). While

⁶⁷ In an interview with Rinaldo Walcott and Leslie Sanders, Dionne Brand describes Marie Ursule’s act as “a very complex and contradictory one” because she brings life (freedom) through death.

⁶⁸ In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), Maya Deren describes Erzulie Ge-Rouge as “awesome in her poignancy. When she possesses a person, her entire body contracts into the terrible paralysis of frustration; every muscle is tense, the knees are drawn up, the fists are clenched so tightly that the fingernails draw blood from the palms. The neck is rigid and the tears stream from the tightly shut eyes, while through the locked jaw and the grinding teeth there issues a sound that is half groan, half scream, the inarticulate song turned [into] cosmic rage” (62). For more on Erzulie, see also Joan Dayan’s *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (1998).

⁶⁹ See Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

attention has been paid to the creation of maroon societies,⁷⁰ I focus on the ways in which interactions between Black and Indigenous people produce knowledge that weakens the plantation system. Brand highlights these alliances, especially the sharing of resistance strategies and knowledge, by inserting a relationship between Marie Ursule and Indigenous people. These inter-group relationships are fundamental to the understanding of maroonage. At times, Indigenous peoples, such as the Caribs, Arawaks, and Tainos in the Caribbean, provided fugitive Africans refuge from slavery. Some fugitive Africans were incorporated into Indigenous tribes, forging familial bonds outside of white settler kinship frameworks and blending cosmologies, which resulted in groups that were not only bound together by kinship but also through direct opposition to white settler nations.

Importantly, while there is attention to Black male technoscientific resistance in science and speculative fiction,⁷¹ Brand employs an earth-based, Afro-Indigenous, radical (literally from roots) science to draw attention to the potentiality of alternative, non-white/Western scientific techniques used by women of color. Like Olamina in *Parable of the Sower*,⁷² Marie Ursule, using knowledge from the Caribs, performs a science of resistance in which she methodically and patiently collects “every new knowledge [...] sort[ing] out the most benign vines from the most potent, collecting them all, and anything else she [can] find, recognizing the leaves through resemblance or smell or bitterness” (*Moon* 1). Marie Ursule uses the knowledge she

⁷⁰ See Richard Price’s *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (1996) and Hugo Prosper Leaming’s *Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas* (1995) for discussions of fugitive Africans and Indigenous Americans “cooperat[ing] in building egalitarian spaces of maroonage for the members of both groups who were fleeing slavery” (Deren 64).

⁷¹ See Lisa Yaszek’s “The Bannekerade: Genius, Madness, and Magic in Black Science Fiction” for an exploration of Black male technoscientists in Black SF who follow in the tradition of Benjamin Banneker.

⁷² I draw attention the similarity to Olamina to reinforce my position that these are the types of knowledge necessary to survive the past, present, and possible future dystopic spaces in the Americas, and it is women of color who will engineer their use for our survival.

painstakingly develops over several years to enable the Convoi Sans Peur (Convoy Without Fear),⁷³ a group of rebellious slaves on slaveowner de Lambert's Mon Chagrin (My Sorrow) estate to collectively end their enslavement, a transformative act of anti-colonial resistance. Marie Ursule embodies Erzulie Ge-Rouge, her "whole body was rigid except for her hands passing the small copper pot to each one" (*Moon* 16-7). Marie Ursule enacts a powerful form of resistance during slavery, especially during the Haitian Revolution: poisoning. By mass poisoning the Sans Peur, Marie Ursule performs a ritual of healing while devastating the plantation system.

Throughout her enslavement, from the Bouchards to the Ursuline nuns and finally M. de Lambert, Marie Ursule directly opposes slavery. Her body bears the mark of her resistance: a missing ear, lashed flesh, and a limp caused by two years in an ankle ring. The "ghost of pain" in her ankle reminds her of slavery's true intent: to turn the living into the dead. It is only "breathing in sleep [when the enslaved] owned the movement of [their] chest[s]" (*Moon* 4). These disfigurements, meant to further subjugate and deter her from liberating herself and others, embolden Marie Ursule. Earlier in her enslavement, she warns one of her previous owners, Ursuline nun Soeur de Clemy: "*Pain c'est viande beque, vin c'est sang beque, nous va manger pain beque nous va boire sang beque*. Bread is the flesh of the white man, wine is the blood of the white man, we will eat the white man's flesh, we will drink the white man's blood" (*Moon* 11). Marie Ursule transforms the language of the traditional Catholic Communion into a promise of justice by subversively utilizing the pejorative *beque* to refer to the white man, while appearing to give the traditional response when eating the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. This replacement serves as Marie Ursule's warning of retribution against the nuns; she will

⁷³ I will use Sans Peur from now on to refer to the Convoi Sans Peur.

consume the white man as a different type of redemptive act, which she implies in her earlier action of smelling the “communion powder and smoke and [spitting] the taste from her mouth” (*Moon* 10). Thus, she performs theological maroonage, a rejection of white Christian morality; her act is rooted in her understanding that Catholicism’s iteration of Jesus is a white man’s invention. Furthermore, her enslavement by the nuns shows how religion and slavery were intrinsically linked in the New World: “the industry of slavery was how they kept God and flesh together” (*Moon* 11). Her action exposes how “since the sixth century and right up until the twentieth century it has been common Catholic teaching that the social, economic, and legal institution of slavery is morally legitimate provided the master’s title of ownership is valid and provided that the slave is properly looked after and cared for, both materially and spiritually” (Maxwell 10). Through Marie Ursule’s enslavement by the Ursuline nuns, Brand shows how religious institutions directly benefited from the enslavement of Africans.⁷⁴

Significantly, on Mon Chagrin, Marie Ursule, in concert with the other Sans Peur on the de Lambert plantation, dislodge Christianity as the theological center and (re)turn to sacred “praying in the old ways that they could remember” (*Moon* 13). It is a powerful performance of spiritual maroonage: re-membering their Africanness as a way to retain their humanity in the face of white dehumanizing practices of domination. Thus, “Brand does envision resistance for her Black female protagonists, most clearly in the memories that empower and stories that trace back towards Africa, offering means of (re)claiming colonized spaces” (Garvey 489). “The use of poison ironically gestures towards not only resistance but also a potential healing, and as Brand scripts Marie Ursule’s role, she reinscribes women’s rebellion as well as their refusal of

⁷⁴ See Vincent L. Wimbush’s *White Men’s Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery* (2012), John Francis Maxwell’s *Slavery and the Catholic Church: The History of Catholic Teaching Concerning the Moral Legitimacy of the Institution of Slavery* (1975), and Jennifer A. Glancy’s *Slavery in Early Christianity* (2002).

the invasions effected by the colonialism” (Garvey 492). Furthermore, the rebellious act performed in the novel draws attention to the illegibility of certain acts as transformative and/or recuperative forms of resistance or insurrection. It is through poisoning that Marie Ursule (re)births the Sans Peur, providing them with a new life, liberated from enslavement. In their final moments, Marie Ursule “sat with the dead, cooing to them like babies, strumming the heaving and clatter of air passages and limbs until someone came” (*Moon* 20); she is birthing lives that cannot be recognized without an understanding of the ways in which physical life under the conditions of enslavement may not be life at all. The Convoi Sans Peur understand that “only in the head could you kill yourself, never the body” (*Moon* 17) because living and enslavement are antithetical. They therefore learn “how to ignore the body, how to reach the other shore” (*Moon* 17). Although it remains unnamed, Africa is the “other shore.” Their act of resistance returns the Sans Peur to their homeland.

However, Marie Ursule chooses not to ingest the poison so she can witness de Lambert’s ruin. With that witnessing, Brand subverts the traditional trope of Black suffering as spectacle and inverts it to one of white suffering. The mass suicide destabilizes the de Lambert plantation by instilling the fear of financial ruin in the hearts of people who benefit from the plantation system and white supremacy. After a brutal beating and while awaiting the hanging that will allow her to rejoin her Sans Peur family, Marie Ursule does not “spare de Lambert her last look, she had seen all she needed to –their faces, de Lambert’s, mashed and broken in incredulity and terror and loss and sadness” (*Moon* 23). Although Marie Ursule’s embodied act of spiritual maroonage “was a catastrophe that [de Lambert] would recover from [financially]” (*Moon* 23), Brand complicates a disavowal of the impact of Marie Ursule’s rebellion through the repetition of the word “devastated.” Marie Ursule’s insistence that she bear witness to de Lambert’s

devastation draws attention to how this can be a subversive act when enacted by a Black spectator. Whether de Lambert acknowledges it or not, the aftermath of Black resistance—even when it is *only* Black life that is lost—disrupts, destabilizes, and devastates the system. Like Morrison’s *Beloved*, Marie Ursule becomes a specter that haunts the entire novel, thereby reminding readers how slavery haunts the New World.

Marie Ursule delivers slavery another blow by allowing Kamena to deliver the only child she lets live, Bola, to safety. Brand fully captures traditional definitions of maroon in the character of Kamena. Lucy Evans notes,

Brand plays on the double meaning of [maroon] when she describes Kamena, a runaway slave broken by his unproductive search for a place of refuge, as ‘[m]arooned.’ The positive connotations of the term ‘maroon’ in its evocation of a history of maroon slaves escaping oppression of plantation life are undercut in *Moon* by images of shipwreck, an aquatic metaphor used to evoke not movement but immobility. (“Tidal Poetics,” 12)

Kamena, charged with taking Bola to safety, is a troubling figure of maroonage, precisely because he too closely resembles the Western interpretation of what it means to maroon. He is plagued by memories of the Middle Passage and is thus incapable of looking into Bola’s eyes, eyes that remind him, and Marie Ursule, of the sea. While water is often restorative, delivering him at one point to Terre Bouillante, his singular conception of maroonage, Kamena is weighed down, often drowned, in water imagery. When he first picks up Bola, he “[feels] for a brief moment her weight as heavy as the ocean, [feels] for a moment a sudden difficulty standing” (*Moon* 15). Described as “a quiet man and made like wood” (34), Kamena remains rooted to a fixed, spatial understanding of maroonage. Like traditional scholars of maroonage,

he understands maroonage as a practice tied to a specific location, Terre Bouillante, a community of fugitives, both Black and indigenous, that operate counter to the plantation system. It is this fixation on Terre Bouillante and his unawareness, or rather unwillingness, to explore other dimensions of maroonage that cause his discontinuing to be a figure of maroonage that can be utilized by future maroons, much like Olamina's Acorn which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Marie Ursule offers Kamena multiple opportunities to embrace maroonage, from participation in the mass suicide to embracing a new location of safety, Culebra Bay. But "Culebra was not the Maroonage he had wanted" (*Moon* 55), possibly because of its proximity to the sea and the haunting presence of the Ursuline nuns, evoked by the "crumbling stones of the dead plantation" (55). Both the sea and the "dead plantation" offer him no peace; they serve as reminders, signs, of his former enslavement. Unable to find Terre Bouillante, he and Bola form a short-lived maroonage of two on Culebra Bay (51). Although Kamena obsesses over a narrow definition of maroonage, he does practice erotic maroonage through his relationship with Bola and Marie Ursule. Like many Africans during enslavement, Kamena, Marie Ursule, and Bola form an alternative kinship bond because, although "he was not Marie Ursule's man, not her brother and not the child's father, [. . .] they had lain in the same shack and breathed the same air of broken fields and broken hearts" (34). Like *Mati*⁷⁵ relationships forged during the Middle Passage, Kamena and Marie Ursule become family under the weight of the oppression they faced on the plantation. However, as soon as Bola is old enough to fend for herself, Kamena leaves to find what he believes will be his true peace in Terre Bouillante. But he can never find it again, and ends up "circling himself" (*Moon* 33) and relying on Bola to "hold" the

⁷⁵ Mentioned in the first chapter. See also Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage" (2008).

directions for him (*Moon* 59). Kamena's "circular movement lacks [a] sense of becoming, expressing instead the monotony of obsessive behavior" (Evans 11). As it becomes his obsession, Terre Bouillante loses its identity as a site of possibility, specifically because Kamena attempts to map it, just as European explorers had mapped Trinidad, and the rest of the Caribbean, centuries before. By working within the Western discourse of cartography, even as he uses alternative means of measurement (sleepiness, hunger, fatigue, and presence of animals), Kamena loses sight of maroonage. Bola recognizes the fallacy in attempting to map the space, for "maps are such subjective things, borders move all the time" (*Moon* 52). Although she is pointing to the way in which colonial spaces are always being remapped to fit the needs of Europeans, her logic can extend to maroon spaces. For the sake of safety, the borders would have to shift continuously. Put simply, if you can find it, chart it, and/or map it, it cannot exist as maroon space, as I will explain when I discuss Olamina's Acorn community.

Furthermore, the circularity of Kamena's movement enacts the opposite of liberation; it imprisons Kamena in a fixed site until "he must have finally left his body [...], where his eyes and his brains had been. Marooned" (*Moon* 65). In this way, Brand "disturbs any unexamined association of movement with liberation or empowerment" (Evans 14). Unlike Marie Ursule's death, which is rooted in her understanding of the erotic power of the spiritual plane, Kamena's death reinscribes him in Western definitions of maroonage as a fugitive from slavery, his body shipwrecked and surrounded by the sea.

Importantly, it is also through the sea that Brand articulates another type of maroonage tied to erotic maroonage: aquatic maroonage. In the character of Bola, Brand constructs a figure that expands on Western definitions of maroon. Although shipwrecked like Kamena, Bola embraces the sea: she "retreat[s] into the sea the way one retreats into the bush. [Flees]

the way one flees terrors, craving joys. The sea's billowing mountains and crinkling ridges [become] as well known to her as any territory is known by its travellers" (*Moon* 62). Like the inaccessible mountain and bush spaces of historical maroon camps, the sea figures as a space of refuge for Bola. On a rock off shore, Bola "could come to escape the Ursulines, who as she discovered had no control of water" (60). The spectral Ursuline nuns, Culebra Bay's haunting reminder of slavery, cannot cross the threshold into her oceanic space. "The idea and metaphor of sea also speaks to forgetting: the idea of washing away, disjoining pasts, or rupturing hurts to resuscitate or renew currents of mo(ve)ment. Yet because of its undercurrents of mo(ve)ments, this process also opaquely invokes and activates particular memories, or forms of memories" (Crichlow 126). Since Bola was born with the sea in her eyes, it is understandable that the sea becomes her maroon territory guarded from the residue of slavery.

But the sea in Bola's eyes is more than just a metaphor for the fullness of the world; Bola's eyes are prophetic. In them, Marie Ursule sees

iron melt and dirt washed and nothing she could understand, whole islands sink and rocks and big mountains of ice and barbed wire and fences and stalls and tunnels and lights that were not lanterns or flambeaux. And cities she did not know were cities [...] skyscrapers and trains and machines and streets, she [sees] winters and summers and leaves falling in muddy roadways and on pavements, dams bursting and giving way and boats and pirogues crashed on shores and steamers on water far off and aeroplanes way up in the sky and she [feels] a lifting she would never know. (*Moon* 45)

In Bola's sea eyes, Marie Ursule witnesses the multiple ways in which her descendants will be scattered across the globe. She witnesses nature's destruction and mechanistic creations that seem unfathomable. In Bola's eyes, she witnesses her descendants' richer possibilities that "she would never know," but also the ways in which slavery will be replicated in the "barbed wire and fences" of detention centers and the prison industrial complex. Since Brand has named Marie Ursule after the Haitian Vodun goddess, Erzulie, this character has been given "exclusive title to that which distinguishes humans from all other forms: their capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need" (Deren 168). Through Bola's eyes, Marie Ursule taps into the spirit and power of Black potentiality. Additionally, Bola's sea eyes are excessive, constantly spilling tears that have healing potential. Earlier, her drenching Kamena with a "shower of tears like a rain forest" (*Moon* 35) finally makes his wooden body move toward Culebra. It is her eyes that convince Marie Ursule to send her away to corporeal freedom with Kamena.

Bola inherits Marie Ursule's erotic power; the spirit of Erzulie has passed into Bola, but it manifests into a maroonage tied to sexuality and reproduction. It is not Erzulie Ge-Rouge, the enraged goddess rebelling against enslavement and oppression, but Erzulie, the Rada Goddess of Love, "'an independent childbearing woman, who offers the possibility of having a child without a man,' and in doing so 'also offers an alternative family structure' which 'reflects the all-female households characteristic of many Caribbean societies'" (Melanie Otto qtd. in Evans, 6). Bola, filled with "lust," brings multiple children into the world, giving them "what she had, which was her senses all tuned to their pitch" (*Moon* 68). She hands them off one by one "because every child was not a child but had its own life and its own way" (69). In "The Uses of the Erotic," Audre Lorde asserts that "another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the

open and fearless underlining of [the] capacity for joy” (56). For Bola, giving away her children to their own way opens the possibility for them to explore their joy. Bola does not have hopes for the children to experience things that are unrealistic or fantastical; the joys for which she wishes are simple things: “you can breathe and drink water? You lucky” (*Moon* 69). This luck can only be understood through an examination of all that she had witnessed in her life with and after Marie Ursule, because her “eyes saw too much” (*Moon* 8): her mother’s missing ear, her limp, the lashes on her skin, the sadness mixed with resistant fury; Kamena’s circular wanderings, and his half dead body searching for maroonage, unaware that he had already found it. Thus, their lack of treats like a green mango was “but a drink of water to what [they had] already suffered.” She pushes them away so they can truly embrace joy because they could not find it with her. Bola spreads “her children around so that all would never be gathered in the same place to come to the same harm” (*Moon* 198), “a dispersal that recalls and subverts the initial formation of the African Diaspora through the slave trade [. . .] [l]ocated between the past, namely, her genealogical history and inheritance, and the future, represented by the procreative and diasporic contributions she makes to the future in the form of her children” (Grandison 776). Bola creates the Black West, expanding the Black Atlantic from cultural production to literal production of Blackness as a site of potential futurity. But her descendants, bound up in the insidious re-formations of the plantation system and racist ideology in the Diaspora, which “Brand highlights [through] the racializing violence of the late twentieth century, for instance, in presenting characters whose movement is at least partially mapped by a continued commodification of black bodies” (Moynagh 2008, 69), are unable to re-orient themselves to safety. This re-commodification, absent the legal encoding of Black as property, calls for a reiteration of the sublimated fugitivity and maroonage in the “mortuary” of the archive.

Marie Ursule's descendants remain lost in the Diaspora because most do not have the memory of Bola's "mother ma[king] the preparation to take everyone to the heavens and to rid them of the wicked world of slavery" (*Moon* 296). Therefore, in my act of intellectual marronage, I extend Marie Ursule and Bola's genealogy of Black woman resistance to Octavia Butler's Lauren Olamina. She represents a figure of future fugitivity and maroonage we urgently need in the contemporary moment of white regimes of terror that replicate the sadism of the past, regimes that are too often misread as something new, rather than something old returning to turn the potential of a Black West into another "mortuary" of lost lives.

By creating a genealogy of Black women's resistance from Dionne Brand's Marie Ursule to Octavia Butler's Lauren Olamina, I position Black women as sources of fugitive and maroon practices that are often elided in the traditional conceptualization of maroonage. As I have argued, Marie Ursule enacts Robert's four pillars of maroonage –distance, movement, property, and purpose –through the ritual mass suicide of the Sans Peur. The Sans Peur's movement from the plantation system required a fantastic act of reclaiming their bodies and souls from the category of property, an act that purposefully devastated de Lambert's plantation, turning it into his sorrow, at the same time that it freed them from a dystopic site of dehumanization and brutalization. Marie Ursule's daughter, Bola, in creating her own diaspora attempted to shield her children from the vestiges of slavery. While unsuccessful, her purpose was a clear act of maroonage in that she believed distance and movement would ensure her children safety from being re-cycled into new forms of slavery.

In contrast, in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Olamina creates a fixed maroon society in Acorn, operating outside the bounds of the renewed plantation systems of the United States. However, *Parable of the Talents* shows how Acorn's fixity draws attention from the

government, with disastrous results. *Talents* follows Olamina's daughter's reading of Olamina's journals. Through her daughter's perspective, vis a vis her own journals, readers are presented with what happens following the destruction of Acorn: Olamina and her Earthseed community's enslavement by Christian American (CA) Crusaders and their enactment of maroonage in a future, but very present, context. Butler does not leave us with a ruined Acorn. Rather, she engages with fugitivity and maroonage to present us with possibilities for the future. Also, she shifts from Olamina's singular perspective in *Sower* to a polyvocal text in *Talents*, specifically with the inclusion of Olamina's daughter, Larkin/Asha Vere,⁷⁶ and Olamina's long-lost brother, Marcus. In doing so, Butler shows how reading, not only writing, is a political act by providing us with (mis)readers of fugitivity and maroonage. The text compels the novel's readers to see how the engagement with the mortuary of the archive can lead to complacency (Larkin) and complicity (Marcus).

If the *Parable* novels are read only as "speculative neo-slave fictions that constantly repeat a cycle of imprisonment and escape, resisting the idea that any escape in this world can be permanent" (Wanzo 78), then we are Larkins. While Butler "does not recreate a verisimilitude of the past, but rather reveals how this long history of slavery and oppression constitutes an integral part of the contemporary moment" (Joo 291), she goes further than some scholars recognize by remapping successful Black fugitivity and maroonage onto American geography, specifically California. To put it another way, Butler's neo-slave narrative reminds us that traditional slave narratives were centered on the invisible spaces of Black liberation and the networks that were produced to obtain freedom. As I discussed earlier, Olamina is a Harriet Tubman figure, a fugitive Black woman who saves others at the risk of her own life and safety. Furthermore, in

⁷⁶ In the novel, Larkin adopts the name Asha Vere as a pseudonym. I have chosen to use Olamina's name for her daughter.

this novel, Butler stresses the importance of Olamina’s full name: Lauren *Oya* Olamina, thereby drawing attention to Olamina’s Africanness as a source of radical potential. Oya is a “Nigerian Orisha—goddess—of the Yoruba people. In fact, the original Oya was the goddess of the Niger River, a dynamic, dangerous entity. She was also the goddess of the wind, fire, and death, more bringers of great change” (*Talents* 48). Like Brand’s decision to signify the African derived pantheon of Vodun through Marie Ursule to highlight enslaved Africans’ theological and spiritual resistance to slavery, Butler performs a similar act with Oya as Olamina’s middle name. Like Marie Ursule, Olamina wants to bring about devastating change, expansive in its scope and dangerous (to late capitalist reformations of the plantation system) in its purpose. In her 1994 essay following the L.A. uprising, “N.H.I: Knowledge for the 21st Century,”⁷⁷ Sylvia Wynter asks, “What are we, specifically as Black intellectuals, to do?” (Wynter 1994, 56). Butler, through Olamina, shows us exactly what we must do, perform acts of fugitivity and maroonage that can secure a future liberated from this dystopia we call the United States of America. As I have done earlier in this chapter in discussing Brand’s novel, I engage with not only traditional forms of maroonage, but expand its epistemological frame and invoke Robert’s heuristic device of freedom as maroonage.

To begin, I must note that throughout the *Parable* series, Olamina functions as not only Haraway’s conception of the woman of color writer as cyborg but also as a “grammarian,” “well-versed in the ‘techniques of ordering a select body of facts within a framework that is completely consistent with the system of values, [. . .] and, above all, the *cognitive model* of the society to which they belong [Riceur, 1979; Legesse, 1973]” (Wynter 1994, 55). Olamina examines and

⁷⁷ Los Angeles police referred to crimes, including murders, committed against Black people as “No Humans Involved,” and Wynter uses the acronym in her essay to challenge Black academics to engage with the lived experiences of Black people living in “poverty archipelagos” as more than just an academic and theoretical exercise (Wynter 1979, 65).

makes visible the fault lines in the illusion of a post-emancipation U.S. She shows how freedom can only be gained by challenging the unfreedom(s) produced in the aftermath of the Civil War because the “Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments—the ones abolishing slavery and guaranteeing citizenship rights—still exist, but they’ve been so weakened by custom, by Congress and various state legislatures, and by recent Supreme Court decisions that they don’t much matter” (*Talents* 40). Therefore, like her Black ancestors before her, and keeping in mind my insertion of Marie Ursule and Bola into her ‘family,’ Olamina must perform acts of fugitivity and maroonage that undermine the post-emancipation U.S. dystopian plantocracy.

Butler’s “dystopia is created by continuing current trends, such as global warming or radicalizing Christian fundamentalism, to their logical extremes, without sudden transitions, as no definitive cataclysm is ever experienced” (Johns 401). In *Talents*, Olamina’s early journal entries are written within the shelter of Acorn, a utopian space carved out to ensure the safety of Olamina’s Earthseed community. Although Acorn is a refuge for Olamina, her husband, Bankole, urges her to move away to a more stable location when she becomes pregnant. As a doctor, Bankole is useful to not only Acorn, but other communities as well. However, Olamina refuses to leave Acorn, which has disastrous results. In ignoring the current trends, even as she writes about them extensively in her journals, Olamina is lulled into a false sense of security that recalls Robledo’s older members’ belief that walls can protect them. In showing Olamina’s mistake, I argue, Butler challenges readers to ponder their own false sense of security and how our “potential for self-deception and the dysfunctionality of human world views could spell disaster in the context of humans’ increasing mastery over the environment” (Wynter 2003, 25) and continuation of racist capitalism. By destroying Acorn, Butler does not destroy the potential of a Black utopic vision; she draws attention to the ways in which it must mirror earlier Black

utopic projects, such as the Black Panther Party's community projects and the Philadelphia-based liberation group MOVE's commune. Further, "utopian spaces no longer present perfection and ideal, but emphasize constant change, renegotiation, imperfection, and process" (Mohr 1996, 4). As I stated earlier, if you can map and chart it, its potential as a maroon space is weakened because of white responses –rage, terrorism, and sadism –to a potential Black future.⁷⁸

Acorn is destroyed and reformed into a plantation by the Crusaders, a Christian fundamentalist vigilante group, called into action by their president's call to "Make America Great Again." Since America's "greatness" is literally built on the genocide, removal, and incarceration of indigenous peoples and the labor of enslaved Africans, this call necessitates reviving these atrocities. Importantly, Butler includes the subjugation of other racial groups to show how if these trends continue, it will not only be Black and indigenous lives at stake because "human beings seem always to have found it comforting to have someone to look down on—a bottom level of fellow creatures who are very vulnerable, but who can somehow be blamed and punished for all or any troubles" (*Talents* 81). As a community with an alternative religion, the Earthseed community becomes part of the vulnerable bottom level, "the racialized and gendered subject[s]—particularly those who occupy what Sylvia Wynter calls 'poverty archipelagos' (the underdeveloped, the jobless, the homeless, the throwaways), those who laboriously build, work, maintain, clean, protect, re-imagine, and resist landscapes of racial differentiation and denial—[. . .]who are at stake in the production of space" (McKittrick 13-4). While it must be noted that the Earthseed community is not economically impoverished, it is a site of throwaways and the underdeveloped because the inhabitants do not adhere to the state's vision of the American ideal.

⁷⁸ For a startling, but unsurprising example of this, see Karen Beckman's "Black Media Matters: Remembering *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1987)," chronicling Philadelphia's police raid and aerial bombing of a Black neighborhood inhabited by members of MOVE.

The Earthseed community's imprisonment and enslavement by the Crusaders, though brief, is extremely important to understanding how slavery continues within the United States. It makes legible how "[neo]slavery conceal[s] a black sense of place and the possibility of 'black geographers' through punishment, dehumanization, and racist discourses, which undermine[s] (but [does] not prevent) black knowledges" (McKittrick 9). A short time before the destruction of Acorn, Olamina buys her believed-to-be-dead long-lost brother, Marcus, from a slaveowner. As we saw in *Sower*, slavery has returned without the unnecessary prefix "neo" to mark its distinction from antebellum slavery. Rather than whips, biotechnology has offered a new weapon, the collar, to maintain order. This collar "makes you turn traitor against your kind, [and] against your freedom" (*Talents* 131). It is with these collars that the Crusaders maintain order in the newly formed CA camp, Camp Christian. It is also important to note that they use chemical warfare as part of their assault on Acorn, reminiscent of Columbus and early conquistadors' use of disease warfare to enslave and decimate indigenous populations.⁷⁹ The brutality of the camp recalls the dystopian element of the plantation, as well as the Nazi concentration camps. Furthermore, the children, including the then infant, Larkin, are stolen and placed with CA families to reeducate them, which recalls the coerced, and sometimes forced, placement of indigenous children into boarding schools to "educate" and "civilize" them vis-à-vis white Christian indoctrination.⁸⁰

It is important to note that the Earthseed community attempts to fight back during the assault but cannot, due to the use of neurotoxins that incapacitate them. These toxins prove deadly to some members because of their size or age. Sadly, Bankole is murdered during the

⁷⁹ For more on this subject, see Luther Standing Bear's *My People, the Sioux* (1975).

⁸⁰ For more on the experiences of Native American children in the boarding schools, see Zitkála-Šá's *American Indian Stories* (1921).

assault. Like her Black radical ancestors, Olamina fights back and is “lashed into unconsciousness for trying to kill [her] bearded keeper with a pickax [because] [i]t would have been worth any amount of pain if only [she] could have succeeded” (*Talents* 205). Another community member, Emory Mora also takes revenge, cutting the throat of a “Crusader sleeping in her [stolen] daughters’ room” and “[a]fter that, she lay down in her bed beside her first victim and cut her own wrists” (*Talents* 209-10). I note these two acts of counter-violence to underscore Butler’s engagement with violent rebellious acts rather than less unsettling forms of resistance: she presents a “counter-intuitively and unsentimentally compelling [. . .] exploration of the inevitability of violence” (Outterson 434) in the face of unrepentant sadism and terror. Butler also includes an attempted slave rebellion that mirrors Nat Turner’s failed slave rebellion. Although Olamina and her Earthseed community do not participate, this episode draws attention to the fact that subjugated people will not go silently. In fact, Crystal Blair, a woman brought into the camp for the crime of ‘vagrancy,’ “ripped [her rapist] guard’s throat out with her teeth” (*Talents* 240). Butler also draws attention to nonviolent forms of resistance through Olamina’s response to repeated rapes in which she “decided to stink like a corpse [. . .; she] decided that [she] would rather get a disease from being filthy than go on attracting the attentions of these men [. . .; she] must do this, or [she] will kill [her]self” (*Talents* 234). When they secure their freedom from the Crusaders, they burned Acorn, or rather the community members “burned Camp Christian so that it couldn’t be used as Camp Christian anymore” (*Talents* 261). This act is reminiscent of Haitian revolutionaries who burned down white plantations so they could never be used for the subjugation of Black people again.⁸¹

⁸¹ See C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938).

Ultimately, Olamina and her community find comfort in Earthseed. In *Talents*, “Lauren’s difficulty in characterizing what Earthseed is –religion? philosophy? way of life? –resolves itself when she understands that it is an *embodied* curricula (not curriculum, as it is inherently plural) educating for the endlessly contingent events of entangled histories” (original emphasis, Wagner-Lawlor 40). But even more than this, Earthseed becomes a maroon philosophy, which “perform[s] the task of generalizing aspects of experience, and not just for the sake of generalizing” (Angela Davis qtd. in Roberts 55), but for the purpose of envisioning a radical future completely removed from the dystopian reality of the United States. Olamina’s embodied curricula of maroonage is a “response to the environmental, social, and political breakdown in the world” (Wanzo 81). The Earthseed community’s radical future has an interstellar trajectory; thus “Olamina does not believe in a new Jerusalem or in a spiritual realm, but in a material heaven: the achievement of unity, purpose, and advancement through space travel (called Destiny)” (Johns 405). Earthseed’s “Destiny is important for the lessons it forces us to learn while we’re here on Earth, for the people it encourages us to become” (*Talents* 156). Olamina’s desired flight from Earth highlights some of the impossibilities for sustained maroonage as her “liberation is haunted by continued bodily threats and limited political power for the newly-liberated” (Wanzo 78). Through Earthseed’s journey to the stars, Olamina can perform “sovereign marronage”: “its goal is emancipation, its scope is social-structural, its spatialization is polity-wide, its metaphysics includes the individual and community, and its medium the lawgiver”⁸² (Roberts 103). It is Olamina’s fixation on Earthseed that produces her daughter, Larkin’s (as well as her brother, Marcus’), misreading of Olamina’s journals as that of a cult leader and negligent mother. It also does not help that Marcus initially lied to Larkin about her

⁸² Olamina successfully sues Christian America and uses the money from the settlement to build the first Earthseed ships.

parents being dead. While Larkin reads the journals as just an archive of her mother's past, as readers we are attuned to how they function as Butler's performance as a grammarian warning us of the remnants slavery in our contemporary moment. Although Larkin reads her mother's fugitive slave narrative at a time when legal enslavement no longer exists, the prison-industrial complex functions in its place. Camp Christian, while not recognized as having enslaved people, functions as a plantation site in the novel and draws attention to slavery's continuation by another name. By framing the novel through Larkin's narrative voice, "Butler invokes the kind of critical literacy that [Olamina] wishes to cultivate with her religion" (Ruffin 98), but shows how that literacy cannot be shaped by white indoctrination.

In part, Larkin's resistance to *Earthseed* stems from her traumatic experience with Christianity in her adopted CA home. She can only read *Earthseed* through the lens of CA's misuse of Christian doctrine. She "filter[s] the external through the mediation of what he/she is socialized to experience with reference to his/her culture-specific identity as 'good' or 'bad'" (Wynter 2001, 49). Rather than accounting for its radical possibilities, Larkin views *Earthseed* as her mother's obsession, and part of her "abandonment" of her. But throughout her journal entries following her escape from Camp Christian, Olamina is concerned with finding her daughter, even turning to her brother, Marcus, for aid, knowing he has become a spokesperson for Christian America. Like Harriet Tubman, Olamina endangers herself by entering Christian America sites to seek information about her daughter and the other stolen children. She recreates an Underground Railroad, this time through the spreading of the *Earthseed* philosophy, offering a Black geography rooted in fugitivity and maroonage.

Ultimately, Larkin "overlooks how Olamina's followers gain a sense of agency and empowerment through their religion, their religious discussions, and their attempts to live their

religion” (Stillman 31-2). Her misreading and misunderstanding of Olamina’s purpose serve as a reminder of how narratives of enslavement, fugitivity, and maroonage must not be read through traditional frameworks. Rather, she, with the implied we, must look for other critical methodologies to understand the choices we must make to secure a liberated future. For according to Earthseed, “we are ‘potential’ (*Talents* 361), with all the openness and possibility that word implies [. . .] Earthseed breaks [standard differentiating attributes –race, age, class, sex, religion, marital and familial status, sexual preference, personal history] down, ignores them, reshapes them, and breaks them down again” (Stillman 28). Larkin’s attachment to a traditional reading of a Black mother’s neglect, rather than to the forces that create those conditions, serves as a warning to us to rethink our discussions of such things as incarcerated mothers’ relationships with their children. For, “by depriving the reader of the family reconciliation romance Butler emphasizes the ways that slavery is a trauma marking both future and past relationships” (Wanzo 79). Like Marie Ursule’s descendants, Larkin is haunted by her mother’s rebellion against white regimes of terror. Unlike those descendants, she has her mother’s journals as an archive that attests to her mother’s multiple attempts to break free, as well as to find her daughter. It is Larkin’s misreading that upsets Earthseed’s utopic vision the most. If we are not attuned to the necessity for acts of fugitivity and maroonage, “cultivating freedom on their own terms within a demarcated social space that allows for the enactment of subversive speech acts, gestures, and social practices antithetical to the ideals of enslaving agents” (Roberts 5), sometimes at the expense of conventional familial bonds, we are not going to succeed in unsettling the dystopian landscape of the United States.

What is needed is a “sociogenic marronage” that “denotes a revolutionary process of naming and attaining individual and collective agency, non-sovereignty, liberation,

constitutionalism, and the cultivation of a community that aligns civil society with political society” (Roberts 11). For “if, [as Stafford] Beer concluded, ‘we are to understand a newer and still evolving world; if we are to educate people to live in that world; if we are to abandon categories and institutions that belong to a vanished world as it [is] well nigh desperate that we should. . .then knowledge must be rewritten’” (Wynter 1994, 69). This rewriting and the turn to sociogenic marronage are the focus of my next chapter, which considers Butler’s *Dawn* and sections of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*. In it I show that “freedom is not a place; it is a state of being” (Roberts 11), and it is this state of being that terrifies white regimes, but can embolden those who recognize the necessity of a Black future. That is, if history repeats itself, let maroonage repeat itself. Let us realize that we are not free until all of us are free. If history repeats itself, let us remind ourselves that thousands of Black fugitives existed, as both Dionne Brand in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and Octavia Butler in the *Parable* series insist. If history repeats itself, let us remind ourselves of Erzulie, Oya, Harriet Tubman, and Nat Turner. If history repeats itself, let us not go silently, Brand and Butler declare. If we must die, let it be a direct challenge to this dystopia we call the Americas. Let us recognize a genealogy of resistance in the branded and the disfigured, the witnesses, the ones left behind who could not make the journey to freedom. Brand and Butler write –and so must we –for the ancestors who did whatever it took to survive so that their descendants can have a future marooned from the white regimes of terror that brought, and are bringing, an apocalypse.

Chapter Four—Future Terrains in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* and Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood*

*Most things are colorful things—the sky, earth, and sea.
Black men are most men; but the white men are free!
White things are rare things; so rare, so rare
They stole from out a silvered/world—somewhere.
Finding earth-plains fair plains, save greenly grassed,
They strewed white feathers of cowardice, as they passed;
 The golden stars with lances fine,
 The hills all red and darkened pine,
They blanched with their want of power;
And turned the blood in a ruby rose
To a poor white poppy-flower.*

*They pyred a race of black, black men,
And burned them to ashes white; then,
Laughing, a young one claimed a skull,
For the skull of a black is white, not dull,
 But a glistening awful thing
 Made, it seems, for this ghoul to swing
In the face of God with all his might,
And swear by the hell that sired him:
“Man-maker, make white!”*

—Ann Spencer, “White Things”⁸³

I begin this chapter with Anne Spencer’s early twentieth-century poem, “White Things” (1923), concerning white men’s horrific lynchings of Black men. In poetic form, Spencer continues the work of Black women activists such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett who documented white terrorism unleashed on Black Americans. Reading Spencer’s poem through its use of the science fiction trope of monstrous aliens, I argue that it serves as an example of a Black writer’s literary work that challenges notions of white racial superiority. Spencer positions white Americans as unnatural, “rare,” alien things that maintain power through devastating actions,

⁸³ Anne Spencer’s poem was originally published in *The Crisis*, March 1923.

such as blanching the colorful world with “their lance of power.”⁸⁴ Her description of white things who “stole from out a silvered world” suggests that white settlers are alien invaders who devastated the land by stripping it of its natural resources and attempted to turn Black people white through spectacular acts of violence, specifically lynching. Spencer’s poem reflects a radical Black tradition of subverting expectations about who should be considered ‘alien’ since the reality is that vis-à-vis the transatlantic slave trade, Black Americans “are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien *abductees*” (my emphasis, Dery qtd. in Y. Womack 32). Spencer’s poem is also an early critique of how white settler invasion produced ecological changes. She links white supremacy to the destruction of the Earth; white settler colonialism has transformed the Earth’s colorful abundance (“the blood in a ruby rose”) into blanched scarcity (“poor white poppy-flower”). Ultimately, while not science fiction writing, I think that Spencer’s poem can be read in conversation with that tradition, for she subverts traditional science fiction writing that positions people of color as the alien ‘other’; as Jessica Langer notes, “conquered aliens in so many of these [science fiction] stories correspond closely to the historical dehumanization of indigenous colorized people” (*Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* 84). Spencer’s poem is just one example of how writers of color use science/speculative fiction tropes to highlight the real consequences of the genocidal logic of white supremacy.

In this chapter, I focus on two much more recent American writers of color, Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko and African American writer Octavia Butler, whose speculative narratives challenge the inevitability of white supremacy by imagining worlds in

⁸⁴ Another stunning example of this is David Walker’s *Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of American* (1830) in which he writes: “They [white people] think because they hold us in their infernal chains of slavery, that we wish to be white or of their color—but they are dreadfully deceived—we wish to be just as it pleased our Creator to have made us, and no avaricious and unmerciful wretches, have any business to make slaves of, or hold us in slavery” (32).

which Native lands are reclaimed and Black and Indigenous peoples achieve the liberated futures that they deserve. In *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and *Lilith's Brood* (2000),⁸⁵ Silko and Butler un-construct the Americas by reclaiming dystopic sites of racial terror and ecological disaster and reshaping them into spaces of healing. In their novels, I consider what the possibilities for liberation are in the face of continued white settler colonialism. What are the complexities of white supremacy that make complete liberation of oppressed people of color seem to be a fantastic idea, both figuratively and literally? How are Native and Black liberation intrinsically tied to one another? How does liberation become a conceptually different idea than freedom, given the extent of the extreme horrors of Indigenous removal and the transatlantic slave trade? Can Indigenous and Black Americans ever be truly free without the complete eradication of white settler colonialism?

This chapter departs from my engagement with dystopia in previous chapters because in different ways Silko and Butler's texts, I argue, stress that there will be an end to the dystopic world of white supremacy, heterosexism, patriarchy, and xenophobia. I use world instead of Earth because it is important to separate the two. The modern world as we know it is constructed through cartographies of exclusion maintained by racial capitalism. In the end, Silko and Butler maintain, these fictional boundaries will disappear, but the Earth, the actual land, will not. I focus on both authors' unrestrained indictment of five hundred dystopic years of white supremacy, heterosexism, patriarchy, exploitation, and xenophobia. For both, one oppressed group's

⁸⁵ The trilogy was originally titled *Xenogenesis* (1989, which more clearly reflects the titular character's "brood" as "generation[s] of offspring completely and permanently unlike the parent" (OED). However, following the publisher's lead, I will refer to the trilogy as *Lilith's Brood* or by the titles of the individual novels.

liberation cannot come at the expense of the other. Native sovereignty⁸⁶ and Black liberation are, to borrow from Silko's text, twin brothers who will transform this dystopic world, "a world in which the movement (or more broadly the socio-political possibility of movement) of oppressed persons is hindered by racism" (Delgado 151). As with the preceding chapters, I examine these narratives for the historical dystopian realities that each author embeds in her speculative work and her strategies for ensuring that the future will not be a replication of the dystopic American past and present. I begin with a close reading of Silko's *Almanac* to address the Americas' past and present and gesture towards a decolonized future. I close the chapter with Butler's *Lilith's Brood* to show an example of what a future can look like free of structures of oppression. Although Butler uses aliens to bring about this future, I stress that Butler intends for this future to take place without the intervention of an alien species.

In "'A structure, not an event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," Native Hawaiian scholar, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui builds on Patrick Wolfe's assertion that settlers eliminate Indigenous peoples to replace them as the "native" people. Kauanui argues,

Understanding settler colonialism as a structure exposes the fact that colonialism cannot be relegated to the past, even though the past-present should be historicized. The notion that colonialism is something that ends with the dissolving of the British colonies when the original thirteen became the early US

⁸⁶ As stressed by Frank Wilderson in *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), Indigenous "sovereignty qua land is distinguished from Settlerism in how it imagines *dominion* and *use*. Indigenous dominion is characterized by the idea of 'stewardship' rather than the idea of ownership" of the land (original emphasis, 176).

states has its counterpart narrative in the myth that indigenous peoples ended when colonialism ended. (Kauanui)⁸⁷

Almanac highlights how white settler colonialism is a dystopic structure not a historical moment of encounter between Europeans and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, and colonialism did not end with white Americans' independence from the British monarchy. Furthermore, as historian Bill Donovan suggests in his introduction to Bartolomé De Las Casas' *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account*, an extensive chronicle of Spanish brutalities against Indigenous peoples, accounts from early explorers "raise the profound question whether something intrinsically immoral in the West's ethos has underlain all Western/non-Western relations from the earliest voyages of discovery" (La Casas 1992, 23). Silko answers Donovan's question with a narrative that shows in no uncertain terms that immorality is at the center of the dystopic relationship between white settlers and nonwhite people, as well as the Earth. Although much of the novel concerns the illegal drug trade and gun trafficking in the late twentieth century, Silko makes clear that the true crime committed in the Americas was the formation and continuation of white supremacist nations, as well as the criminalization of Indigenous and Black liberation struggles against extermination. The novel's multiracial polyvocality emphasizes the different, but not competing, stakes for Indigenous sovereignty⁸⁸ and Black liberation. The novel emphasizes that white settler colonialism is not merely a singular event of encounter and conquest, but a dystopic structure that continues, and will continue, to devastate both land and

⁸⁷ J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's essay can be accessed on the *Journal of the Cultural Studies* website: <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.7>.

⁸⁸ It must be also noted that Indigenous scholars "do not compartmentalize or separate the various elements of sovereignty: land, religion, kinship, and governance," but they "often treat these elements separately" (Wilderson 162).

people until land is restored to the Indigenous peoples of the American continents and complete liberation of Native and Black American is achieved.

Almanac is a sweeping speculative work set in contemporary North America that details the dystopia of five hundred years of white settler contamination of the land and terrorism against people of color, specifically Indigenous people and Black Americans. *Almanac* shows how “Native literature [...] written by Native authors, is part of sovereignty: Indian people exercising the right to present images of themselves and to discuss those images [...] and a] key component of nationhood is a people’s idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are” (C. Womack 14). Silko’s imaginative work simultaneously underscores the real dystopic underpinnings of white settler nations in the Americas and challenges the idea that the war for Native sovereignty has ended. In *Open Veins of Latin America* (1997), Uruguayan political journalist, Eduardo Galeano “tell[s] a non-specialized public about certain facts that official history, history as told by conquerors, hides or lies about” (265). Archiving five hundred years of European theft, greed, and ecological destruction in the Americas, Galeano presents pages and pages detailing white European settlers’ devastating impact on Indigenous populations, African-descended people, and the environment on the American continents and Caribbean islands. He notes:

Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything, from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European—or later United States—capital, and as such has accumulated in distant centers of power. Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral-rich depths, the people and their capacity to work and to consume, natural resources and human resources. (Galeano 2)

His assertion that “Latin America is the region of open veins” is integral to my reading of Silko’s text. The modern man-made geopolitical borders in the Americas are products of earlier invasions, as well as wars to maintain clear lines of demarcation between different white settler nations. The “New World” was first considered by European powers, through papal decree, to be the *terra nullius*, a veritable utopic “no place,” on which Spain and Portugal could expand their empires. In our present state, “in the geopolitical concept of imperialism, Central America is no more than a natural appendage of the United States. Not even Abraham Lincoln, who also contemplated annexation, could resist the ‘manifest destiny’ of the great power to dictate to its contiguous areas” (Galeano 107). Galeano’s straightforward assessment of Latin America’s past and present speaks to what Silko works against as a viable future for the Americas. Silko’s *Almanac* makes clear that the dystopic structure of white settler colonialism may be the past and present, but it will not be in the future of the Americas and the Caribbean.

Before *Almanac* begins, Silko charts the “500 Hundred Year Map” that disrupts white settler demarcations between the United States and Mexico through arrows marking her characters’ movements between the two countries. The map “recalls the role of cartography in European expansion and initiates the novel’s critique of colonialism” (Huhndorf 140). Silko’s description of Tucson, Arizona, as “home to an assortment of speculators, confidence men, embezzlers, lawyers, judges, police, *and* other criminals, as well as addicts and pushers, since the 1880s and the Apache Wars” (my emphasis, *Almanac*: map legend) critiques the illegitimate white inhabitants of stolen Native lands. The “and” underscores that lawyers, judges, and police participate in the creation of dystopias on Native American land. As Huhndorf argues, “[w]hereas the depiction of the “New World” as “virgin land” erased Indigenous peoples to create the illusion of uncontested European possession, the five hundred–year map depicts the human

histories that shape American geography, while the narrative emphasizes an enduring indigenous presence that supports tribal land claims” (Hundorf 155). Through her description, Silko begins the narrative’s anti-colonial project and performs a radical literary act of decolonization by reframing how we look at white authority within colonized spaces and delegitimizes white European claims of land ownership.

On the “500 Hundred Year Map,” Silko’s use of Native symbols such as the giant stone snake and Native prophecy “foretell[ing] the disappearance of all things European” (*Almanac*: map legend) alerts readers that her map is drawn with the end of white settler colonialism in mind because “the future is encoded in arcane symbols and old narratives” (*Almanac*: map legend). Silko’s inclusion of Haiti as the island of the “First Black Indians”⁸⁹ acknowledges the significance of Indigenous and African relationships, particularly maroonage, that challenge white supremacy; thus, she “conjoins colonialism and slavery, [...and also] foreshadows revolt” (Huhndorf 142). With the map and its legends, Silko reminds readers that the “Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas” because “the return of all tribal lands” has not occurred (*Almanac*:

⁸⁹ See Gregory Smithers and Brooke Newman’s *Native Diasporas: Indigenous Identities and Settler Colonialism in the Americas* (2014). It is important to note that recognition of Black and Indigenous mixed-race identity has not often been acknowledged by both white power structures and some Native nations. There are Black Indigenous Americans, such as the Black Seminoles in Florida, who struggle to be formally recognized as Black Indians. See also Barbara Krauthamer’s extensive research on the enslavement of Africans by Choctaw and Chickasaw communities in *Black Slaves, Indian Masters: Slavery, Emancipation, and Citizenship in the Native American South* (2015). Krauthamer argues that “analyses that either emphasize the demise of indigenous culture and the concomitant rise of Indians’ dependency on the market or foreground the durability of indigenous beliefs and adaptability of indigenous practices do not adequately account for the emergence of chattel slavery within Choctaw and Chickasaw communities. In both cases, slavery is presented as an inevitable and unremarkable outcome of Indians’ participation in the American market. Buying and selling enslaved people, however, was not like other forms of property accumulation and circulation but marked a dramatic shift in Choctaw and Chickasaw ideas and practices of property, race, and gender” (4). Taking this into consideration, Silko’s gesture of acceptance of Black Indians is significant, but it is also one of the fantastic elements of the novel.

map legend). Importantly, Silko charts Native and Black liberation before the novel even begins to assert that the end of white settler colonialism is coming, and the signs are there for those who can read them.

By setting her novel in both the southern United States and Mexico, Silko draws attention to not only the man-made, and therefore fictional, boundaries between the two nations, but also how Mexico's white settler history mirrors the U.S.'s white settler history. In the context of the novel, Mexico's government is a continuation, not a disruption, of Spanish colonialism. In Mexico's past, Spanish settlers meted out unspeakable horrors on Indigenous and African peoples in Mexico, a territory that was nearly three times what it is today, making "revolution against European domination inevitable" (*Almanac* 290). In its present, Mexico remains a white settler nation that warrants critical attention as a real dystopic site of racial terror against Indigenous and Black people, as well as one subject to ecological disasters resulting from over-extraction of natural resources. Ironically, "from the first moment Spanish ships scraped against the shore, they had depended on native Americans. The so-called explorers and 'conquistadors' had explored and conquered nothing" (*Almanac* 220).⁹⁰ Moreover, Indigenous

ancestors had called Europeans 'the orphan people' and had noted that as with orphans taken in by selfish or coldhearted clanspeople, few Europeans had remained whole. They failed to recognize the earth was their mother. Europeans

⁹⁰ In fact, "[m]ost colonists planted Native American foods. New World crops [even] altered the lives of Europeans who never migrated to America. Potatoes became a mainstay in Poland, Russia, Ireland, and elsewhere in Northern Europe. Tomatoes added color to Italian cuisine. Corn, squash, beans, pumpkins, and many other foods enhanced Europeans' diets and lives. These Native American contributions and others decisively changed European history" (Martin 43-4).

were like their first parents, Adam and Eve, wandering aimlessly because the insane God who had sired them had abandoned them. (*Almanac* 258)

Like Anne Spencer, Silko subverts the imposed racial hierarchy by casting European settlers as lost children who, raised by the insane God of white supremacy, have become fragmented humans. They are in the same Fallen state as the “first” abandoned humans. White settlers may have charted the world, but they are ultimately lost on Earth due to their exploitative relationship to it and nonwhite people.

Following the “500 Year Map,” *Almanac* is divided into six parts: “The United States of America,” “Mexico,” “Africa,” “The Americas,” “The Fifth World,” and “One World, Many Tribes.” In each part, Silko details white settler crimes against humanity. The majority of Silko’s white characters⁹¹ represent the “violent inversion of the pan-Native ethic of respect for and valuation of all living things” (Breu 165). Many of the white male characters evoke the early Spanish conquistadors, men who “Overrunning Cities and Villages [sic] [...] spar[ing] no sex or age; neither would their cruelty pty Women [sic] with childe [sic]” (Las Casas 1992, 8).⁹² Like Atwood’s depiction of Crake in *Oryx and Crake*, Silko’s portrayal of white male Americans as the main participants in “the black market in biomaterials, the transnational drug trade, and the hemispheric traffic in torture films and in torture itself” (Breu 153) shows the way these are contemporary articulations of their obsession with perfecting the natural world and their sadistic

⁹¹ The white characters include Lecha and Zeta’s geologist father, Seese, David, Beaufrey, Eric, Paulie, Bartolomeo (white Cuban), Max Blue, Leah, Trigg, Rambo-Roy, Sonny Blue, Green Lee, Bingo, Angelo, Marilyn, Peaches, and Judge Arne. With the exception of Rambo-Roy (and his army of the homeless) and Seese, the white characters embody the description of the early European settlers by Indigenous ancestors.

⁹² The relationship between Seese, Eric, David, and Beaufrey and the kidnapping (and murder) of Seese and David’s child, Monte, are prime examples of this.

voyeurism into the devastation that they create.⁹³ Through the numerous white characters, who often overwhelm the novel with their white supremacist violence, Silko shows how “no one colonizes innocently, [and] no one colonizes with impunity either [, and] that nation which colonizes, that civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased” (Césaire 39).⁹⁴ Like Anne Spencer’s “white things,” Silko’s white characters show “x”; importantly, both literary texts show the reality of the immoral nature of white settlers who propagate horror. In *Almanac*, unlike the white characters’ participation in the illegal gun and drug trades, the Indigenous characters’ “smuggling flattens the differences between the nations by ending all differentiations imposed by colonialist rule via borderlines” (Delgado 153). In addition, Silko also offers a warning to people of color who would dare to participate in white settlers’ contamination of the land. At the beginning of the novel, Sterling’s Laguna Tribal Council, a byproduct of white settlers’ gestures of redress (by way of the reservation system), “became the first of the Pueblos to realize wealth from something terrible done to the earth” with the uranium mine (*Almanac* 34). It is this betrayal of Indigenous relations to the Earth that leads to the reappearance of the snake; furthermore, “the snake, in choosing to appear so near to the degraded, mined landscape, reaffirms for Sterling (and for Silko) that the earth is inviolable and will outlast human desecration” (Bladlow 19). This episode, I argue, exists in the novel to show that complicity in creating devastating ecological change, even for monetary survival, is not only a betrayal of traditions built on respect for the Earth but the foreclosing of an opportunity to survive white settler colonialism.

⁹³ For this chapter, it is important to keep in mind that Mexicans are also American. My use of white Americans here refers to both white U.S. citizens and white-identified/identifying Mexicans.

⁹⁴ In his powerful analysis of European and American colonialism, Aimée Césaire emphasizes that white people’s “progressi[on] from one consequence to another, one denial to another” will result in more Hitlers; fascism is a natural result of white supremacy.

Throughout *Almanac*, Silko demonstrates the radical potential for Native speculative literature to disrupt notions of the disappeared Native by producing a forward-facing narrative revolved around Indigenous futurity. She counters the narrative of the disappearing Native by focusing on the continuous of Native culture and traditions, especially through the almanac within *Almanac*, which “Yoeme and other [Native Americans] believed [...] had living power within it, a power that would bring all the tribal people of the Americas together to retake the land” (*Almanac* 569). For Silko:

[Indigenous Americans’] spirit is unbroken because of the oral tradition. [...] 500 years, that is how long Europeans are in the Americas, is not a very long time. Because for 18,000 years there is evidence, and perhaps longer, of the Pueblo people being in that land. [...] The interpretation of the old stories remains the same because of the oral tradition. It goes back through time so that the immediacy is now. It is very important how time is seen. The Pueblo people and the Indigenous people of the Americas see time as round, not as a long linear string. [...] I grew up among people whose experience of time is a bit different. In their sense of time 500 years is not a far distance and that’s why there is no need for the reinterpretation. (Silko qtd. in Reed 28)

Thus, the circulation and circular nature of the almanac reflect the continuous presence of and future for Indigenous people in the Americas. Fragmented, generational, and polyvocal, the almanac records a living history, not in the sense of past time but an accumulation of past, present, and future time. The almanac articulates how “Indian resistance (to physical attack, environmental degradation, urbanization, forced migration, disease, and individual and cultural denigration) required survival first and the maintenance, often against terrific odds, of the web of

social, familial, political, and cultural platforms that make such resistance possible” (Porter 274). By being passed down through a matrilineal line, Silko reaffirms women of color’s significance in (re)shaping the world in direct opposition to the dystopic one we live in today. As an artifact, it challenges us, non-Indigenous scholars, to un-educate ourselves about white settler histories that sublimate the dystopic formation of the Americas. Silko also urges us to remember that Indigenous resistance, as well as Black resistance, is the true American history of revolution, and if white settler colonialism is a dystopic structure of unrelenting violence, resistance by communities of color is a structure of counter-violence to the totalizing effects of its regime of terror. In particular, unlike the white characters’ illegal activities, the Indigenous characters’ investment in illegal trades not only disrupts white supremacy’s dystopic cartography and devaluation of nonwhite life, but it also funds their continued struggle for liberation. The role of female Yaqui twins Lecha and Zeta as guardians of the almanac emphasizes Indigenous women’s participation in Native liberation movements. The twins mirror the twin brothers of Native and Black liberation through their strategizing for the reclamation of Indigenous lands. Before turning to the twin brothers through the characters of Clinton, the Barefoot Hopi, and Wilson Weasel Tail, another Indigenous female freedom fighter, Maya Angelita La Escapia, deserves close attention.

Through Angelita La Escapia, Silko highlights Indigenous resistance throughout the Americas’ dystopic past and present in the section aptly entitled “On Trial for Crimes Against Tribal Histories.” La Escapia puts a white Cuban, Bartolomeo, on trial “for crimes against [Indigenous] people’s history” (*Almanac* 525).⁹⁵ Although Bartolomeo believes himself to be

⁹⁵ With a stroke of her pen, Silko also performs an act of solidarity with Black people by naming this white Latino character Bartolomeo. Silko provides a literary catharsis to Black people whose ancestors suffered because his historical namesake, Bartolomé De Las Casas, provided the case

above reproach because he secures weapons for the Committee for Justice and Land Redistribution, he is in fact a perpetrator of the sublimation of the “great mass of Native American history that [he] and other white men, so-called Marxists, had tried to omit and destroy” (*Almanac* 527). Bartolomeo’s repeated defense for this omission and destruction is predicated on his belief that “jungle monkeys and savages have no history” (*Almanac* 525). His views echo how “colonized peoples were seen by the colonizers to exist in what [Anne McClintock] has termed ‘anachronistic space’: colonised people...do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency –the living embodiment of the archaic ‘primitive’” (McClintock qtd. in Langer 129). Silko’s *Almanac* serves as a powerful example of Indigenous cultural production, and, through the four pages of Angelita’s testimony, Silko confronts white settlers’ disavowal of colonized people’s history with numerous accounts of Indigenous resistance. Silko commands her readers to “listen to the history [of resistance] that Europeans, even Marxists, hope” oppressed people of color forget (*Almanac* 527). Angelita’s recounting of this history ends with the numerical record of the Native American holocaust—the decimation of Indigenous populations which was integral to white utopia building, and this

for enslaving Africans, thereby initiating the dystopic experience for Black people in the Western hemisphere. In his defense of Indigenous peoples’ humanity, Las Casas argued that Africans should replace Indigenous people as slaves because they are nonhumans without the capacity for redemption like Indigenous people. His suggestion, which he later regretted, led to the suffering of tens of millions of Africans and their descendants (hundreds of millions if you consider the Africans who did not survive the oceanic journey and the continental Africans who were made vulnerable by the transatlantic slave trade). See Las Casas’ *The Tears of the Indians: Being an Historical and True Account of the Cruel Massacres and Slaughters of above Twenty Millions of Innocent People Committed by the Spaniards in the Islands of Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica, Etc. As Also in the Continent of Mexico, Peru, and Other Places of the West Indies, to the Total Destruction of Those Countries* (1953) and *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account* (1992). His writings further illustrate my argument that white settler colonialism in the Americas was apocalyptically designed.

holocaust has yet to be redressed by any white settler nation. However, Bartolomeo's execution stands in as a figurative redress for white settlers' crime against humanity. His trial also shows that Angelita, like Lecha and Zeta, is a "powerful force of political and cultural change" and "keeper of culture and memory" (Waterman et al 31). All three Indigenous women "emphasize the links between memory, history, identity and education, and highlight the significance of the educational and cultural roles traditionally undertaken by women in indigenous societies" (Waterman et al 31). In addition to their roles as guardians of history, the women are also at the forefront at the literal movement for the liberation of oppressed peoples highlighting that women of color have also been integral to the physical counter-violence against white settler colonialism. Just as Black women physically resisted enslavement, Indigenous women, such as Crow Pine Leaf, Apache Lozen (who fought alongside Geronimo), and Sioux Moving Robe, physically took part in the struggles against the lived dystopia of white settler colonialism.⁹⁶ Silko draws on the history of Indigenous women's resistance to place women at the center of the struggle against the continuation of the white settler utopia vis-à-vis Native removal and genocide.

Importantly, The Native American holocaust (genocide and forced relocation) and African holocaust (transatlantic slavery) were concomitant dystopic experiences that occurred due to the invasion by white settlers. In *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens* (2003), Ward Churchill reminds us that "the lucrative trade in African flesh—that, and extraction of discount labor from such flesh—were, after all ingredients nearly as vital to forming the U.S. economy as

⁹⁶ For more on Indigenous women's struggles white settler colonialism, see Lilian A. Ackerman and Laura F. Klein's *Women and Power in Native North America* (1995), John Canfield Ewers' *Plains Indian History and Culture: Essays on Continuity and Change* (1997), Beverly Hungry Wolf's *The Ways of My Grandmothers* (1998), Kimberly Buchanan's *Apache Women Warriors* (2000), and Peter Aleshire's *Warrior Woman: The Story of Lozen, Apache Warrior and Shaman* (2001).

‘clearing’ and expropriation of native land” (13). Therefore, any demand for Indigenous sovereignty in the Americas (and Caribbean) requires the accompanying call for Black liberation. In *Almanac*, Silko presents a figure of Black liberation, Clinton, to meet this necessity. Clinton “want[s] Black Americans to know how deeply African blood had watered the soil of the Americas for five hundred years” (*Almanac* 416) after educating himself on the long history of white settlers’ racial terrorism and Black resistance to said terrorism. His desire to educate Black Americans of this history parallels the older Indigenous Mexicans, who after hearing Angelita, urge their children to “never forget the identities of the days or the years because they shall *all* return to bring bitterness and regret to those who do not recognize the dangerous days or murderous epochs” (original emphasis, *Almanac* 532). Through Clinton’s education in Black American history, Silko shows how “the libidinal economy of modernity and its attendant cartography (the Western hemisphere, the United States, or [white] civil society as a construct) achieves its structures of unconscious exchange by way of a ‘thanatology’ in which Blackness overdetermines the embodiment of impossibility, incoherence, and incapacity” (Wilderson 44). To put it simply, the transatlantic slave trade resulted in the encoding of Blackness as the marker of racial inferiority due to the white supremacist belief that Black people are unable to be fully human. The United States remains a dystopic site in which Black life is devalued, even with the election of its first Black president and claims of a post-racial society. Thus, it is impossible to have a truly liberated future without both holocausts being fully redressed through a reclamation of American lands and full emancipation for Black Americans—no more mass incarceration, no more state-sanctioned murders of unarmed Black people, no more over-policed neighborhoods, and no more accelerated deaths due to environmental

racism.⁹⁷ Like Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Silko's selections for Clinton's broadcasts, particularly the decision to have his first broadcast concern the Haitian Revolution, foregrounds the practice of maroonage as a praxis of resistance.⁹⁸

Furthermore, like the Indigenous characters' maintenance of pre-Columbian religions, Clinton (re)turns to an African cosmology⁹⁹ as a source of protection and inspiration to create a radical future. In *Almanac*, the alliance for a decolonized future does not only draw from the living; Indigenous and African "[s]pirits are equally responsible for the revolution" (Bladlow 14). Clinton enshrines a knife and the remnant of its handle as a sacred exhibition for Ogun, the Ironmaker and "guerilla warrior of hit-and-run scorched earth and no prisoners" (*Almanac* 417); the "gentleman-warrior and doctor," Ogun, had transformed into an avenging loa (god) due to the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. Through Clinton, Silko shows that "the gods of Africa remained alive [...], as did the nostalgia-nourished legends and myths of [Black people's] lost fatherlands [and in] their ceremonies, dances, and incantations the blacks clearly expressed the need to affirm a cultural identity that Christianity denied" (Galeano 85). However, while Ogun

⁹⁷ In their statement discussing the relationship between the desecration of Native lands with the installation of oil pipelines and its effect on Black communities, BLM writes: "Environmental racism is not limited to pipelines on Indigenous land, because we know that the chemicals used for fracking and the materials used to build pipelines are also used in water containment and sanitation plants in Black communities like Flint, Michigan. The same companies that build pipelines are the same companies that build factories that emit carcinogenic chemicals into Black communities, leading to some of the highest rates of cancer, hysterectomies, miscarriages, and asthma in the country" (Streeby 47).

⁹⁸ *Almanac* can also be read of a novel of maroonage that takes very seriously multiracial solidarity.

⁹⁹ Like the Native American continents, "the African continent is extremely complex—historically, culturally, religiously, socially, and linguistically. It is home to many indigenous religions that, despite their diversity, share common affinities in their core ideas, rituals, and worldviews" (Adogame and Spickard 2). In addition, the "importance of the Yoruba orishas and African water deities to enslaved African cultures in the Americas resound with descendants and continental Africa today" (Y. Womack 80).

is important, it is the African serpent loa, Damballah the Creator of Life, who is put forth as the twin brother to the feathered-serpent Aztec God of Creation, Quetzalcoatl; both will bring about radical change which is stressed as the novel ends.

At The International Holistic Healers Convention, where a number of the radical characters in the novel converge, Wilson Weasel Tail and the Barefoot Hopi link the African independence movements that disrupted European colonialism with the Indigenous American movement to reclaim stolen lands. Wilson Weasel Tail's poetic denunciation of white settler colonialism, "We say 'Adios, white man' to/Five hundred years of/Criminals and pretenders/Illicit and unlawful governments/*Res accident lumina rebus*/One thing throws light on another" (original emphasis, *Almanac* 715), and the Barefoot Hopi's prophecy that "[m]illions will move instinctively; unarmed and unguarded, they begin walking steadily north, following the twin brothers" (*Almanac* 735) declare the coming of a decolonized world. Silko's *Almanac* "calls us ceaselessly and comprehensively to create a decolonizing environmentalist criticism embedded in a global justice movement in the name of the dead, who are still with us, and for the sake of those yet to be born" (Reed 39). While an articulation of beliefs is an integral part of the global justice movement, *Almanac*'s radical potential is in envisioning a multiracial alliance of liberation fighters decolonizing the dystopic American lands. The novel closes with Clinton deciding to go to Haiti for more freedom fighters and Sterling recognizing that "the snake didn't care if people were believers or not; the work of the spirits and prophecies went on regardless. [...] Burned and radioactive, with all humans dead, the earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her" (*Almanac* 762).

Almanac prophesizes the end of the white settler world through the reclamation of Native lands by a unified solidarity movement of marginalized people. *Almanac*'s record of Native and

Black resistance to European invasion and enslavement, as well as its prophecy of Native and Black victory collapses time and space to show the longevity and continuation of Native and Black resistance, physical and otherwise. Silko recognizes that “if the history of [white] settler colonialism in the Americas is presented as one long example of indigenous peoples succumbing to the onslaught of colonialism, we run the risk of presenting a tidy narrative in which ‘natives’ are essentially eliminated” (Smithers 6). Therefore, we must be reminded that resistance to white settler invasion is part of the past and present, but hopefully will not have to be the future for people of color. Silko predicts that, like the independence movements in Africa and Asia that returned lands to Africans and Asians, Indigenous Americans will have their own liberation from white settler colonialism through a united movement of people of color. Notably, however, “there is nothing remotely sentimental in *Almanac*’s vision of indigenous people leading a multi-ethnic alliance to resist and reverse this ecological, economic, and social devastation” (Reed 31). *Almanac* leaves us at the edge of time, positioned at the brink of eradicating these white supremacist nations in the Americas and the Caribbean, with a promise that man is too insignificant to desecrate the Earth.

I conclude this chapter with the end of the world, specifically the end of the dystopian structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, imperialism, and capitalism, in Octavia Butler’s trilogy *Lilith’s Brood*, comprised of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). In the trilogy, she imagines a future in which human survivors of a nuclear holocaust caused by two white supremacist nations, the United States and the former Soviet Union,¹⁰⁰ are rescued and

¹⁰⁰ In reality, although the former Soviet Union and the U.S. did not engage in nuclear war, the two nations’ proxy wars in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean have caused devastation that several nations are still recovering from. In addition, Butler “was thinking seriously about a “third” form of colonialism in the 1980s, in the wake of Ronald Reagan’s arms race with the Soviet Union: the colonization of nuclear weapons and the potential self-destruction of humanity” (Nanda 774).

transformed by an alien species, the Oankali. Like the *Parable* series, *Brood* is a Black feminist “critical dystopia motivated out of a utopian pessimism [...that] force[s] us to confront the dystopian elements of postmodern culture so that we can work through them and begin again” (Miller qtd. in Baccolini and Moylan 4). Throughout the trilogy, Butler shows how “the potential for self-deception and the dysfunctionality of human world views could spell disaster in the context of humans’ increasing mastery over the environment” (Wynter 1984, 25). The trilogy emphasizes that adhering to hierarchal systems that devalue difference will result in the world’s destruction. But Butler offers hope for a radically different Earth and “decolonize[s] the imagination by using speculative fiction to break with mainstream stories that center white settlers and fail[s] to imagine deep change” (Streeby 31). While I recognize that the inclusion of an alien invasion may call white settler colonialism to mind,¹⁰¹ I argue that in *Brood*, the Oankali present a very different alien encounter than the one presented in Spencer’s “White Things” and the violent history of white settler colonialism whereby Black people “inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done to them; and technology, be it branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, or Tasers, is too often brought to bear upon black bodies” (Dery 8). Through the Oankali, Butler envisions radical possibilities for a new Earth, one without the violence of white supremacy and its attendant structures of oppression—capitalism, heterosexism, patriarchy, classism, xenophobia, and environmental racism. I focus on Butler’s description of the Oankali and Lilith’s children to show that Butler is challenging us to consider something new, or rather something old and pre-colonial, for the future.

¹⁰¹ See Sandra M. Grayson’s *Visions of the Third Millennium: Black Science Fiction Novelists Write the Future* (2003), and Aparajita Nanda’s “Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire in Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood*” (2013) for discussions of the Oankali as representative of white settlers.

In *Dawn*, Butler (re)constructs the Judeo-Christian creation story against the backdrop of a nuclear holocaust. Over a period of two hundred and fifty years, the Oankali awaken Lilith Iyapo,¹⁰² an African-American woman, multiple times. Each time she is awakened, Lilith becomes more aware of her surroundings, but it is not until her final Awakening that she is introduced to the Oankali, who are male, female, or ooloi (genderless). Lilith is chosen as the leader for other Awakened humans who will start a new colony on Earth. Through Lilith's early interactions with Oankali, Butler introduces readers to humans' genetic contradiction, which is the "mismatched pair of genetic characteristics" of hierarchal behavior and intelligence (*Dawn* 38). Historically, this contradiction has been in the service of the "pseudoscientific discourse of race [...that...] has been (and continues in neocolonial projects) to be used as an active tool of colonialism" (Langer 83). Butler warns us that ignoring humans' deadly use of intelligence to maintain hierarchy is like ignoring cancer.¹⁰³ Even with the perceived threat from the Oankali, human aggression and racism are the real threats to human survival, which is evident throughout the novel by Lilith's interactions with other Awakened humans.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Butler's name choice for *Dawn*'s protagonist is important. In Hebrew folklore, Lilith is Adam's first wife who "insisted on equality and flew away when Adam tried to tell her what to do" (Neitz 5), thereby foreclosing her inclusion in Eden and humanity. Lilith challenges Judeo-Christian patriarchy because as Adam's first wife, she "was unsatisfactory because she would not obey him" (Butler in McCaffery, "Interview with Octavia E. Butler" 68). Lilith's surname, Iyapo, is Yoruba for "many hard situations." Thus, by naming her protagonist Lilith Iyapo, Butler immediately alerts her readers that her narrative challenges patriarchal systems, and she also stresses that challenging these systems will be difficult.

¹⁰³ In the novel, the Oankali ooloi, Nikanj, tells Lilith that "when human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took *pride* in it or did not notice it at all... [and t]hat was like ignoring cancer" (my emphasis, *Dawn* 39).

¹⁰⁴ Although she does specifically name capitalism as one consequence of the fatal contradiction, I find Walter Rodney's argument in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) to be particularly useful for elucidating the connection between capitalism and racial hierarchies. Rodney argues, "Capitalism has created its own irrationalities such as vicious white racism, the tremendous waste associated with advertising, and the irrationality of incredible poverty in the

Rather than replicate the dystopia of white settler colonialism's parasitic relationship, in which "Whiteness [monumentalized] its subjective capacity, its lush cartography, in direct proportion to the wasteland of Black incapacity" (Wilderson 45), Butler has the Oankali desire symbiotic relationships with humans, as they have done with other life forms.¹⁰⁵ Due to humans' fatal contradiction,¹⁰⁶ the Oankali will not allow the humans to reproduce unless they are willing to trade genetic material to mitigate the contradiction. One description of the Oankali requires special attention to underscore their difference from the white settlers. The

Oankali did not suggest violence. Humans said violence was against Oankali beliefs. Actually, it was against their flesh and bone, against every cell of them. Humans had evolved from hierarchal life, dominating, often killing other life. Oankali had evolved from acquisitive life, collecting and combining with other life. To kill was not simply wasteful to the Oankali. It was as acceptable as slicing off their own healthy limbs. They fought only to save their lives and the lives of others. Even then, they sought to subdue, not to kill. If they were forced to kill, they resorted to biological weapons collected genetically on thousands of worlds. They could be utterly deadly, but they paid for it later. It cost them so dearly that they had no history at all of striking out in anger, frustration, jealousy, or any

midst of wealth and wastage even inside the biggest capitalist economies, such as that of the United States of America. Above all, capitalism has intensified its own political contradictions in trying to subjugate nations and continents outside of Europe, so that workers and peasants in every part of the globe have become self-conscious and are determined to take their destiny into their own hands" (10).

¹⁰⁵ In an interview about the trilogy, Butler states, "What I was looking at was [humans], shall I call it, *natural* competitiveness and xenophobia [...] so I thought what kind of people would xenophilic be?" (Butler qtd. in Tucker, 179).

¹⁰⁶ See Jeffrey Tucker's "'The Human Contradiction': Identity and/as Essence in Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy."

other emotion, no matter how keenly they felt it. When they killed even to save life, they died a little themselves. (*Imago* 564)¹⁰⁷

Unlike the historical alien invaders that produced the dystopian reality for marginalized people the world over, the Oankali are not destroyers. It is not through the subjugation of the humans that the Oankali constitute themselves. They share life. The symbiosis of Oankali and human genes means that the Oankali will also be fundamentally changed, a change they welcome as a necessary evolutionary step for their survival. The Oankali's insertion biologically into the human genome is Butler challenging us to be self-reflective of our insistence on the human "since paradigms elaborated in the very terms of the descriptive statement of the human, in whose logic the non-Western, nonwhite peoples can only, at best, be assimilated as honorary humans (as is the case of the 'developed' Japanese and other light-skinned Asians) and, at worst, must (as in the case of Nas's 'black and latino faces') forcibly be proscribed from human status" (Wynter 2003, 329). Through *Lilith*, Butler has a paradigm shift whereby the future of humanity relies on "a distinctively [Black] feminine world view" (Sandra Harding qtd. in Gomel 2014, 136).

Furthermore, Butler foregrounds the significance of Black women's bodies, such as Henrietta Lacks,¹⁰⁸ in uncovering truths about who we are as humans. In the trilogy, along with the contradiction, the Oankali are also fascinated by humans' cancerous cells. *Lilith* initially

¹⁰⁷ Although this description is found in the last book of the trilogy, it provides a clear idea of what the Oankali are as a species.

¹⁰⁸ In *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2015), Esther Jones argues that Henrietta Lacks "affirms our common humanity, as cancerous cells were harvested from her cervix without her consent and utilized to develop the first immortal cell line culture. Her cells were used to revolutionize and radically advance knowledge of cell biology leading to a number of medical breakthroughs" (7). See also Howard W. Jones's article "Record of the first physician to see Henrietta Lacks: History of the beginning of the HeLa cell line" (1997).

recalls the human history of experimentation and wonders if she will suffer this fate at the hands of the Oankali:

Human biologists had done that before the war –used a few captive members of an endangered animal species to breed more for the wild population. Was that what she was headed for? Forced artificial insemination. Surrogate motherhood? Fertility drugs and forced ‘donations’ of eggs? Implantation of unrelated fertilized eggs. Removal of children from mothers at birth...Humans had done these things to captive breeders –all for a higher good, of course. (*Dawn* 60)

However, Butler immediately makes clear that the Oankali’s desire to share genetic material with Lilith is not for the same reason as the aforementioned white Western medical experimentation; “it was not that kind of [sacrificial] experiment (*Dawn* 60). It is important to differentiate how white Western medicine has treated Black people from the Oankali’s desire for reproduction with Lilith. The Oankali do not want Lilith to merely serve as their guinea pig; they want her, and other humans, to begin a new species, a hybridization of Oankali and human genes. Because of humans’ fatal contradiction of hierarchally-driven intelligence, the Oankali “*know to the bone* that it’s wrong to help the Human species regenerate unchanged because it *will* destroy itself again. To [the Oankali] it’s like deliberately causing the conception of a child who is so defective that it must die in infancy” (original emphasis, *Imago* 532).¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, due to human violence, Lilith is impregnated without verbal consent with her partner’s sperm.¹¹⁰ *Dawn* ends

¹⁰⁹ While this quote comes from the third book in the trilogy, it is Butler’s most succinct articulation as to why the Oankali would not initially let humans reproduce.

¹¹⁰ Towards the end of *Dawn*, tensions increase between Lilith’s group, which includes her Chinese male partner, Joseph, who has also been enhanced for his protection due to antagonisms by a predominantly white group of Awakened humans. Joseph is murdered, and an Oankali impregnates Lilith with his sperm because they know she would like a part of him. The Oankali “refrain from interacting with human beings without consent, but their definition of consent does

with Lilith “pregnant with the child of five progenitors, who come from two species, at least three genders, two sexes, and an indeterminate number of races” (Haraway 1989, 378).

Although Lilith is unable to return to Earth because of the other awakened humans’ hatred, she carries the future of humanity in her unborn Chinese-African-American-Oankali child.

Butler continues the disruption of the dystopic old-world order in *Adulthood Rites*. The novel follows Lilith’s first human-born male child, Akin (Ah-keen, Yoruba for “hero”). As a child, Akin is kidnapped by a group of human resistors to the Oankali’s genetic trade and sold to Phoenix, a town populated by humans whom Lilith awakened in the first novel. His experience with the human resistors both affirms (in their continuance of “racism and discrimination common on prewar Earth” [Grayson 52]), and challenges (Akin is also protected by humans on several occasions) his assumptions about humans. After one of his metamorphoses, he strives to understand the human experience better and wanders around to get to know humans better. Due to his relationships with the people in Phoenix, especially Tate who had once been his mother’s ally, Akin later advocates for the return of humans’ fertility without the addition of Oankali genetic material. Through Akin, Butler demonstrates that “the alien stranger is [...] not beyond human, but a mechanism *for allowing us to face that which we have already designated as the beyond*” (original emphasis, Ahmed qtd. in Küchler et al 3). His human appearance offers the human resistors comfort, but his alienness forces them to question what it is about their humanity that they are holding on to. In the novel, their humanity is symbolized through “the presence of weapons used for raiding other villages and useless currency [and] invocations of humanist concepts of freedom [that] easily slip into resonances of the neoliberal tendency to equate all forms of liberty with structures of ownership” (Smith 556). Even with the violence that he

not imply conscious acquiescence; rather, they read bodily impulses and ignore the conscious will” (Wald 1909).

witnesses among the resisters (kidnappings of children, murder, arson, and rape), Akin still advocates for humanity's ability to determine their own fate. Although the Oankali agree to restore their fertility, the humans must leave Earth because the Oankali fear that without Oankali genes, humans will remain genocidal and destroy themselves. *Adulthood Rites* ends with Akin preparing a group of humans for their migration to a terraformed Mars. However, Akin wonders if “even Mars [could] distract them long enough for them to breed their way out to of their Contradiction?” (*Adulthood Rites* 497). Furthermore, he recognizes that, although Mars will be a human world, it will never be Earth (*Adulthood Rites* 513).

Imago, the final book and the only first-person novel in the trilogy, is narrated by Lilith's first ooloi child, Jodahs Iyapo Leal Kaalnikanjlo,¹¹¹ who even more than Akin, feels a connection to humans. Through Jodahs, like Akin, Butler shows how “one's ability to act as a bridge between the two (or more) distinct identities suggests a new way of thinking about the figure of multiple referenced identity” (Hampton 67). Jodahs is Mexican,¹¹² African-American, and Oankali. Unlike Akin, Jodahs is an entirely new configuration of possibility because they are ooloi, a “treasured stranger,” “bridge,” “life trader,” “weaver,” and “magnet” (*Imago* 526). These descriptions for ooloi, more fully fleshed out than in the other novel, challenge our readings of the Oankali as a representation of early colonizers.¹¹³ Furthermore, rather than their Oankali identity, Jodahs' racial identity is really important to my reading of *Imago*. Jodahs, as well as their siblings, do not represent the historical treatment of mixed-race Black children whereby

¹¹¹ As an ooloi, Jodahs is genderless, so I will use the third person to discuss their narrative.

¹¹² Unlike Akin, whose human father is Chinese-Canadian, Jodahs' human father is Tino, a former human resister, who is brutally attacked while attempting to rescue Akin in *Adulthood Rites* and later mates with Lilith and Nikanj. Akin notes that he resembles the original inhabitants of the American continents suggesting that Tino is of Indigenous descent.

¹¹³ In *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule* (2014), Elana Gomel also argues that the Oankali are “not genuine aliens but a figure for a non-violent, maternal, communalist utopia” (137).

Blackness becomes a source of anxiety and despair. Their mixed-identity is a source of radical potential, but not in the way some imagine the increase of multiethnic children will create a post-racial society. Furthermore, as Butler has shown throughout the trilogy, “the inability to embrace that which is multidimensional and ambiguous as normative is the [...] explanation for humanity’s failure in its potential future” (Hampton 72). Butler’s choice to have Jodahs be of Indigenous and African-descent, I argue, relates back to Silko’s *Almanac* where a decolonized future relies on the joining of Indigenous sovereignty and Black liberation.

As an ooloi, Jodahs can serve as a bridge between humans for reproduction.¹¹⁴ During one of their wanderings, Jodahs finds their mates, Indigenous Latino siblings who have retained their fertility because they lived in a community that distanced themselves from colonial centers, which helped them escape the nuclear holocaust and maintain their fertility. Their fertility has made them invisible to the Oankali. However, they suffer from visible cancerous tumors because of nuclear radiation and, without the Oankali’s healing, their rate of cancer has risen exponentially. Jodahs convinces their mates’ village to let them heal them, and many want to migrate to Mars to continue reproducing. Importantly, however, in *Imago*, Butler has the Oankali offer another option than relocation to Mars as the reproductive future. The people of this village, as well as other fertile people who survived the nuclear holocaust in Africa, Asia, and parts of the Americas because they were away from colonial centers, will be allowed to remain on Earth as long as it exists. Thus, Butler ends the trilogy with the Earth returning to people who have been most impacted by the dystopic reality of white settle colonialism. The last line of the trilogy has Jodahs witness “independent life” grow on Earth without Oankali aid. Like the

¹¹⁴ Jodahs and their twin, Aoor, borne of their Oankali mother, are extremely attracted to humans, even transforming into something unrecognizable (even to the Oankali) before they are mated. This leads them to wander away from their family often.

uranium mine in *Almanac*, humans are not powerful enough to desecrate the Earth with nuclear war.

In “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” (2003), Wynter states:

[A]ll our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources (20 percent of the world’s peoples own 80 percent of its resources, consume two-thirds of its food, and are responsible for 75 percent of its ongoing pollution, with this leading to two billion of earth’s peoples living relatively affluent lives while four billion still live on the edge of hunger and immiseration, to the dynamic of overconsumption on the part of the rich techno-industrial North paralleled by that of overpopulation on the part of the dispossessed poor, still partly agrarian worlds of the South)—these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle. (260-1)

While I have not used the language of Man/Human in my analysis of Butler’s trilogy, the Man/Human dichotomy is the fatal contradiction. In the West’s overrepresentation of Man as white, heterosexual, Christian, capitalist, and master of Nature and its subsequent positioning of people of color as the Human Other, the evolutionary dysselected, we have arrived at a geopolitical and ecological crisis. At this moment, oppression is no longer an adequate word. White settler neocolonialism is making the world unlivable, a realized dystopia for billions. It is displacing generations of people of color. Throughout her canon, Butler “created entire alternative worlds that uncannily reflect reality and deflect and undermine it at the same time by generating subjects who improve on the available human models” (Spillers 2008, 4). As Wynter’s formulation shows that the present models foreclose difference, Butler demands that

humans embrace difference, adapt, and change. In *Brood*, Butler presents Lilith as the new human, and her children—Black, Asian, Indigenous Latino, and Oankali—are the future of humanity. Her children's hybridity challenges us to consider new ways to live. The Oankali aspect of their identity, I argue, eliminates our incessant need to categorize and reject difference. The Oankali admixture proposes an alternative relationship to the Earth and other human beings. Butler is not asking for humans to be perfect; she is asking us to adapt our way out of our reliance on hierarchally-driven intelligence before it is too late.

Through their speculative texts, both Silko and Butler stress that it will take a concerted effort of people invested in creating a new world that is free of the mistakes of the dystopic past and present of white settler colonialism. And they both claim that it will not be easy. If the prophecy is to come true, if we are to escape disaster, humans must confront their fatal contradiction. I can find no other way to say this than that we must start over. What human beings have done to each other and the Earth calls for an end to the dystopic world as we know it. The novels highlight that even in the face of ecological disaster or alien invasion, humans will continue their genocidal patterns. It will take an intervention to make us alter our fatal contradiction, whether it is through Silko's prophecy derived from Indigenous religion or something akin to Butler's science fiction narrative of an alien invasion. At the end, the Earth will remain, even if humans do not.

Conclusion

Octavia Butler lives on through the activism of Black women activists such as Bree Newsome¹¹⁵ and adrienne maree brown,¹¹⁶ who invoke her name when asked why they are committed to changing the white supremacist dystopia known as the United States of America. The other writers I have discussed, Toni Morrison, Dionne Brand, Margaret Atwood, and Leslie Marmon Silko, are still alive and calling for change in their literary work and activism. Stressing the importance of their art to envisioning new possibilities for shaping our future, I have focused on texts that reveal the Americas' dystopic past and present to insist on a truly utopic future, one in which white people are not the only ones regarded as human.

Given the contemporaneous escalation of the transatlantic slave trade and white settlers' independence from European monarchies and subsequent installation of white settler nations in the Americas, it is no surprise that “throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a variety of [literary] utopias appeared, ranging from those which were no more than a list of rules governing a society, to ones that more fully imagined the lands, culture, and history of their inhabitants” (Wolf 89). White writers of utopias¹¹⁷ presented their white readers with limitless possibilities for domination in new worlds; white settlers' real “New World” became a dystopic space to engage in horrific acts of violence against Black and Indigenous Americans. In this dystopic place, “Black Americans are the only population of the post-1492 Americas who had

¹¹⁵ In an interview following her heroic removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state house, Newsome discusses the significance of Butler's work to her activism and on having hope that there will be change. See “Bree Newsome Speaking on Art, Activism, Science Fiction and Horror”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tg4aOLu1xTI>.

¹¹⁶ In *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2007), brown acknowledges Butler's importance to climate change activists. She writes, “Octavia Butler appeals to me because she wanted to prepare us for the changes that are now inevitable: ‘Change is coming—what do we need to imagine as we prepare for it?’” (adrienne maree brown qtd. in Streeby, 101)

¹¹⁷ “Despite some positive advances, [Thomas] More's Utopia still had slavery, and many other utopias of the time also had aspects that would be considered dystopic today” (Wolf 88).

been legitimately owned, i.e. enslaved, over several centuries. Their owned and enslaved status has been systematically perceived within the ‘inner eyes’¹¹⁸ and the classificatory logic of their earlier *episteme*, its hegemonic political categories and behavior-orienting political ethic, to be legitimate and *just*” (original emphasis, Wynter 1994, 62). In this dystopic place, Indigenous Americans must constantly assert that they are still here and have a right to the land of their ancestors. In this dystopic place, white Americans must be asked:

Are [you] witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are [you] voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of black sentience or the inhumanity of the ‘peculiar institution’? Or does the pain of the other merely provide [you] with the opportunity for self-reflection? (Hartman 1997, 3)

The ‘peculiar institution’ of chattel slavery and genocide of Native Americans in the United States may be situated in the past, but as Hartman points out, that past must be confronted in the present. Further, our present persists as a dystopian reality of mass incarceration, continued desecration of Indigenous lands (especially burial and religious sites), disproportionate rates of violence against Native and Black Americans, and the continuation of white supremacist terrorism in general.

Because “contemporary speculative fictions have proven themselves powerful formal tools for revis(ion)ing [sic] the shape of history and revaluing the role of imagination” (Wagner-

¹¹⁸ See Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

Lawlor 2), I have focused on writers whose fictional works depart from traditional dystopias are instead, what can be considered critical dystopias: “by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective ‘ex-centric’ subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule” (Baccolini and Moylan 7). But even more than this, in their portrayals of the reality of the Americas as a dystopic space of white settler violence, they stress that we can survive through collective resistance. Throughout my dissertation, I have emphasized their recognition of how Indigenous resistance and “frequent slave revolts [...], together with the Haitian Revolution [...], fundamentally broke the military power which had sustained [the] perception” of white supremacist domination (Wynter 1994, 62).

Importantly, many of the narratives I have discussed center a feminist standpoint. As Donna Haraway notes:

A [feminist] standpoint is not an empirical appeal to or by ‘the oppressed’ but a cognitive, psychological, and political tool for more adequate knowledge judged by the nonessentialist, historically contingent, situated standard of strong objectivity. Such a standpoint is the fraught but necessary fruit of the practice of oppositional and differential consciousness. A feminist standpoint is a practical technology rooted in yearning, not an abstract philosophical foundation.

(Haraway qtd. in Wagner-Lawlor, 11)

As a technology of resistance, the feminist standpoint broadens our conceptions of liberation and freedom, thus compelling us to apply new ways of relating to one another, both human and nonhuman beings. The feminist standpoint expresses our desire to see a decolonized world that

is not divided into utopias for white settlers and dystopias for the dysselected. The feminist standpoint, especially as expressed by women of color, invites us to disrupt dystopic societies that position the dysselected as the “wretched of the earth.” If “our struggle [...] has to do with the destruction of the genre; with the displacement of the genre of the human as ‘Man’” (Wynter qtd. in Weheliye, 22),¹¹⁹ then we must engage in intellectual maroonage, as well as other practical forms of maroonage that destabilize oppressive structures. In academia, some educators like Native Hawaiian scholar Hokulani Aiku speak of “asking our students and pushing ourselves to go beyond the *why* of settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and heteropaternalism to the *how* of decolonization. This includes envisioning alternative *preferred futures* for the generations yet to be born” (original emphasis, “Indigenous Roundtable,” 87). How do we create a future vastly different from our dystopian present? How do we provide students with an alternative framework for how to live? One answer I believe is to show the possibilities through science/speculative fiction, especially texts written by women of color or centered on women of color.

While academia slowly recognizes the power of science/speculative fiction to help students think critically about the world around them, Hollywood is also beginning to wake up to the fact that science fiction/fantasy films with actors of color are not only commercially successful but also culturally significant. Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* (2018) is one example of an Afro-Futurist film that resonates with audiences, educators, and critics alike. Departing from other superhero films in several ways, Coogler’s film, while part of the Marvel superhero universe, is a celebration of Africa that imagines the possibilities for African nations if they had

¹¹⁹ Sylvia Wynter specified Black women, but this must be everyone’s task to create a liberated future.

never been colonized by Europe.¹²⁰ The film's protagonist is an African king, T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), of an African nation, Wakanda, more technologically advanced and peaceful than the rest of the world because it has never been colonized by Europeans. But more important to my discussion of Afro-Futurism and Black women's roles in shaping the future, the Black female characters in *Black Panther* refute reductionist representations of Black womanhood and emphasize their role as active change agents much as the female characters do in the literary narratives discussed throughout my dissertation. T'Challa's sister, Shuri (Letitia Wright), is a sixteen-year old Afrofeminist technoscientist and the smartest person in the Marvel universe. An all-female warrior army, the Dora Milaje, protects Wakanda under the direction of their general, Okoye (Danai Gurira), and T'Challa's love interest, Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o), commits herself to aiding other African people, rather than isolating herself within Wakanda as T'Challa wishes her to do. Like Nakia, the film's antagonist, Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), critiques Wakanda's isolationist policies, reminding them that two billion Black people suffer due to white supremacist regimes while Wakandans live in luxury, and his last words, "Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from ships because they knew death was better than bondage," speak to the sacrifices that Africans made to free themselves from the dystopic horrors of the transatlantic slave trade. Filled with powerful Black women, *Black Panther*, which is more than a commercially successful superhero film, is an Afro-Futurist critique of white settler colonialism and a call for Pan-Africanism to disrupt the dystopic systems of oppression created in the aftermath of Columbus' 1492 expedition. It is a glimpse of what

¹²⁰ See Lyndsey Chutel and Yomi Kazeem's "Marvel's 'Black Panther' is a broad mix of African cultures—here are some of them" (2018). Ruth Carter and Hannah Beachler, the film's costume and production designers, drew inspiration from multiple existing African ethnic groups—Surma and Mursi (Ethiopia), Zulu (South Africa), Masai (Kenya and Tanzania), Igbo (Nigeria), Sesotho and Lesotho (Southern Africa), Ndebele (Zimbabwe and South Africa), Himba (Namibia), and Dogon (Mali). Indigenous Filipino culture inspired the Dora Milaje's warrior outfits.

Africa could have been without the *Maafa* and who Black people could be in a decolonized future.¹²¹

During her journey in Ghana, Saidiya Hartman sees this desire for change in the words of revolutionary pan-Africanist and former President of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara: “We must have the courage to invent the future. All that comes from man’s imagination is realizable [...] We are backed up against the wall in our destitution like bald and mangy dogs whose lamentations and cries disturb the quiet peace of the manufacturers and merchants of misery” (Hartman 2006, 25). While science/speculative fiction in general provides a literary space to invent futures, it is writers of color who use it to provide guidebooks for creating decolonized futures. If white “utopian fiction is often characterized by a certain *prescriptive* quality, suggesting, not simply that things might be otherwise, but that they *ought* to conform to a specific vision” (original emphasis, Ferns 4),¹²² then speculative fiction by writers of color envisions solutions for ending the real dystopian reality for oppressed people, a fundamental aspect of both literary and actual white utopias. If white people “had forgotten, not needing to remember” (*Moon* 20) the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade and Native American genocide, then writers of color must remind people of color of how our ancestors ensured that we exist in the future: as Dana acknowledges in *Kindred*, “Strength. Endurance. To survive, my ancestors had to put up with more than I ever could” (51). But we can and must persist, as Butler and other writers of color stress, even if “survival is not necessarily the same thing as defeating your

¹²¹ It is possible that the future is now. Recently white farmers have been commanded to return land to Black South Africans.

¹²² In “Sci-Fi Visions: An Interview with Octavia Butler,” Butler states: “I am pessimistic about our real future. I see so many books about the future, both science fiction and popular science, telling us about the wonderful technological breakthroughs that will make our lives so much better. But I never see anything about the sociological aspects of our future lives” (Butler and Francis 8).

enemy, or even fighting back or standing up for yourself, but simply means that you (and, crucially, your children) have continued into the future” (Caravan 59). For we are not a people of yesterday¹²³ but of infinite tomorrows.

¹²³ “We are not a people of yesterday” begins Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kweh Armah’s speculative historical work, *Two Thousand Seasons: A Novel* (1973), recounting African history.

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