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“Physiology Gone Wild”: The Neurally Plastic Subject in Oliver Sacks’s Clinical Tales, Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, and Catherine Malabou’s *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*

By Audrey Farley

Looking Forward, Looking Back: Afrofuturism and Black Histories in Neo-Slave Narration

By Danielle Fuentes Morgan

Darwin and the Nautical Gothic in William Hope Hodgson’s *The Boats of the ‘Glen-Carrig’*

By Luz Elena Ramirez



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## Letter from the Editor

Hello, readers!

In the past year, the JOSF has grown by many different measures: we've been added to EBSCO's Humanities Search Complete database, and we're receiving many more great submissions. Our first themed issue—issue 2.2, on Afrofuturism—was a definite success, and we have plans in the works for next year's special issue, which will focus on disability in science fiction. (A call for papers for that special issue will be forthcoming soon!) And the JOSF, particularly our assistant managing editor, Aisha Matthews, participated in this year's Escape Velocity convention; Aisha, who also serves as the director of programming for the literary track at Escape Velocity, put together an exciting slate of discussions and panels.

Overall, in fact, we've grown so much that we need to expand our staff. If you're interested in being part of the JOSF, please check out the Call for Volunteers included in this issue. If you want to contribute to the scholarly discourse about science fiction, we'd love to hear from you!

I have been thinking a great deal about the purpose of the JOSF and of science fiction more generally, partly because I was musing about one of the genre's foundational texts: Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. 2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the initial publication of *Frankenstein*, one of the most influential novels in the English language (and not just for sci-fi). Shelley's tale has been adapted into countless other forms, and it's still widely read today—a rare feat for a book of its vintage. What's the secret of its longevity? The always-relevant warning about hubris and lack of perspective? Successful horror? The bizarre narrative that mixes a bunch of different voices? Its sympathetic portrait of an alienated monster?

Predictably, it's all of those things.

The most obvious significance of the novel is its philosophical content. *Frankenstein* has a perpetual life as a meditation on the dangers of reckless science. Whether you've read it or not, you know the story: scientist creates something without sufficient thought, scientist realizes (usually only after catastrophe strikes) that it's a mistake, scientist discovers that it's too late to remedy. It's the foundation of countless other stories. That cautionary tale, retold over and over again, never loses its relevance, because our ability to discover things always outstrips our ability to fully understand them. *Frankenstein* spawned all kinds of other texts, from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to *Jurassic Park* and *Westworld*.

At the same time, the novel owes some of its eternal popularity to its ability to scare—or at least gross out—even today's comparatively jaded readers. I'm a college teacher, and my students read *Frankenstein* last year. One of them came to class and said, "This is the ickiest thing I've ever read." She added, "I couldn't stop reading it."

She has a point. Despite a certain vagueness in the scientific explanation of how Frankenstein brings the creature to life, Shelley spares no grotesque details about his composition. Victor Frankenstein assembles his creature from bits and pieces of corpses snatched from "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house."

The scientist reflects, "Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?...I collected bones from charnel-houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame."

The body horror isn't just window dressing. The visceral disgust reinforces the novel's sense of scope, making the reader feel the significance of those "tremendous secrets." The monster is born out of death, decay, and violation. It's hardly surprising that he's condemned to live apart from people, unable to reach them and build relationships. For a world of readers whose religious and moral sense was heavily rooted in the integrity of the body, it's difficult to imagine how deeply those details would resonate.

In my view, though, Mary Shelley's most important achievement in this novel is neither the horror nor the cautionary tale. The real genius of the book—the reason it still lives after two hundred years—comes in the middle, in the poignant narrative written by the monster himself. This "fiend" is an abandoned child, created by an irresponsible parent who then refuses to grant him the rights of a person. There's no concrete reason that the nameless wretch can't become part of human society. He's both intelligent and social—after all, he learns to speak solely by observing the people around him—and his inability to become part of a group causes him enormous grief. He eventually pours out that grief to his creator, but to no avail; the natural xenophobia of humans makes it impossible for him to find a place in the world.

As countless readers over the decades have observed, the real monster is Frankenstein himself, a sociopath who lacks even the most basic understanding of how other people think and feel. He creates his "demon" because he is seized by the "passion" of scientific discovery and cannot stop to consider the consequences. His short-sightedness is compounded by his refusal to face his creation. Once the fiend has been brought to life, Frankenstein flees *without saying a single word*. When the monster calls Frankenstein to account for his neglect, he accuses, "You had endowed me with perceptions and passions and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind." His complaint is just, and the reader's sympathy is entirely with the monster.

It's not difficult to understand why Frankenstein assumes that his creation is less important than a human being—he thinks that his ability to endow the creature with life means that his creation holds no mysteries, can do nothing without his intervention. Events prove this to be untrue; given the right capacities and tools, the "monster" can learn social rules, language, writing, self-awareness, and emotion. Frankenstein, however, cannot see those qualities. He's blind to the nature of his own creation.

This portrait has topical significance today, as science makes advances in artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. Thoughtful reflection on Shelley's narrative raises all kinds of questions about the way we live now. If we could create "strong AI," when—and how—would we have to acknowledge that our creations had rights, just as we do? When does a creation stop being our property and start to be its own self? And how do we know whether we'd be able to identify that when it happens?

Even closer to home: how does the plight of this creature speak about the ways that we treat other human beings? Reading about Frankenstein's monster can help readers grapple with ideas about alienation and



marginalization—ideas that have central importance in our current political landscape. What does it mean to deny a living, thinking creature the rights of a person, just because he looks different from us or was born under different circumstances from our own? What does it mean to turn our backs on a sensitive, intelligent being and to allow the other members of our society to be affected by the eventual consequences of that neglect?

Here at the MOSF, we believe that science fiction plays an essential role in thinking through our own presence in the world. The best sci-fi forces us to confront our ugly facets as well as the noble ones, in the hope that when the reality catches up to the fiction, we'll do better because we've had the chance to think about it.

*Frankenstein* has been prompting us to think about it for two hundred years. Thanks, Mary Shelley.

--Heather McHale, Ph.D.  
Managing Editor, MOSF Journal of Science Fiction

## "Physiology Gone Wild": The Neurally Plastic Subject in Oliver Sacks's Clinical Tales, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Catherine Malabou's *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*

By Audrey Farley, Ph.D.

**Abstract:** Oliver Sacks (1933-2015) had a prolific career as both a clinician and a popular science writer. His influence on the literary arts is apparent in the growing number of "neuronovels"—novels that centrally feature neurological disorder. However, literary critics have not acknowledged Sacks' impact on science fiction writers, such as Octavia Butler. In this essay, I analyze how Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) draws on themes from his clinical tales—in particular, the theme of neurological "excess"—to promote a postmodern ethics of change and becoming. While Butler's wider oeuvre reflects a sustained interest in physical permutation, *Parable of The Sower* more precisely attributes the propensity for self-transformation to the brain. This is because Sacks provides her with a storehouse of concepts with which to do so. Butler builds on Sacks' notion of "physiology gone wild" or neurological "excess" to demonstrate that the self is heterogeneous and unboundaried by virtue of the brain. Ultimately, the concept of neurological "excess" provides her with a means to challenge the dominant political rhetoric of individualism.

**Keywords:** brain, Octavia Butler, Catherine Malabou, neurology, Oliver Sacks, science fiction

Today, disciplines within the brain sciences acknowledge that the brain is not an isolated organ. Scientists—particularly those within the fields of social and affective neuroscience—stress that the brain is embedded in a certain social, physical, and technological environment. Because the brain is situated in a network of biological and social systems, its functions cannot be understood outside of those systems in which it is a part.<sup>1</sup> But this position is still in the process of being articulated. Thus, Oliver Sacks was somewhat of an outlier when he elaborated on the brain's sociality in his scientific writing in the 1980s. Sacks insisted that mental processes were relational, as well as mechanical, and he urged his peers to see

the brain as more than a mere machine.<sup>2</sup> His critique of classical neurology significantly influenced Octavia Butler's science fiction, which is the focus of this essay. I will demonstrate how Sacks's collection of neurological tales, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (1985), furnished Butler with an idiom with which to challenge both the dominant model of mind and the 1990s rhetoric of individualism.

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) depicts a post-apocalyptic California, which has deteriorated due to global warming, increased class divisions, and the rise of anti-government, rightwing politicians. In Butler's dystopia, multi-national corporations have unfettered control over



## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

the political sphere, rendering public officials too immobilized to redress the dire problems that communities face. *Sower* focuses on the particular struggles of a young black woman who lives in a neighborhood just outside Los Angeles. Lauren Olamina is a "sharer"—she shares others' sensory experience. She developed this neurological condition in utero due to her birth mother's abuse of prescription drugs. After a rampage by drug-addicted arsonists, Olamina's home is destroyed and her family members killed. She travels north to Canada, forming alliances with other travelers along the way. She and her companions eventually settle in an open landscape that she names Acorn. Here, she intends to practice and convert more individuals to her new religion, *Earthseed*. *Earthseed* has one basic tenet: God is Change.

*Sower* characterizes Butler's oeuvre insofar as it thematizes physical permutations. Butler's science fiction is full of symbiotic creatures, inspiring much criticism on the topic of the cyborg.<sup>3</sup> Generally, critics argue that Butler valorizes varied forms of becoming—becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-child—as modes that create new possibilities for political life. Some have even drawn on the philosophy of DeLeuze and Guattari to demonstrate that, in Butler's fiction, inter-personal and inter-species relations depict the self as a heterogeneous "assemblage that is merely one possible version amongst multiple possibilities" (Lacey, 2008).<sup>4</sup> However, Butler's critics have failed to acknowledge that, in contrast to her earlier novels, *Sower* specifically attributes the propensity for self-transformation to the brain, a move drawn directly from Sacks's clinical tales.

In his collection, Sacks uses the terms "neurological excess" and "physiology gone

wild" (1985) to describe neurological disorders such as Tourette syndrome and synesthesia, which are characterized by a surplus, rather than a deficit. For Sacks, disorders of excess challenge the classical (computational) model of mind that has prevailed in neurology. They reveal that the mind is social, as well as numerical. Butler expands on this notion, creating a protagonist whose extended brain dissolves the boundary between the self and the world. The concept of neurological excess sheds light on the relationship between nature and culture, which has long divided Butler's critics. I first position Butler's novel alongside Sacks's neurological tales to more fully illuminate how the brain, in particular, allows organisms to intervene in their biological evolution. Secondly, I argue that Butler takes the notion of "physiology gone wild" even further than does Sacks himself. Whereas Sacks merely describes the excessive brain's undoing of the Cartesian subject, Butler shows the excessive brain undoing the body politic. Thirdly, I argue that Butler's re-description of neurological excess anticipates recent work in contemporary philosophy, which celebrates the "plastic brain" for the model of subjectivity that it posits. Here, I suggest that Butler offers in advance an answer to the question that Malabou (2008) poses in the title of her book, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* Malabou, a student of Jacques Derrida, explores the implications of neuroscience—specifically, the concept of neural plasticity—for moral and political philosophy. Butler, by contrast, explores the implications of neural plasticity for biology. From this perspective, she posits that we should use "our brain" to remake our species.

### Part I: Sacks's Influence

Butler mentions Sacks in several interviews about the book,<sup>5</sup> although a close analysis of the

## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

novel readily reveals his influence. In *Sower's* first few pages, readers learn about the protagonist's peculiar neurological condition. When Olamina sees someone stabbed in the stomach, she doubles over herself. Olamina resembles a character from Sacks's collection, a woman with Tourette syndrome who imitates passers-by. In the chapter "The Possessed," Sacks relates the strange behaviors of a woman he observed in downtown New York, where he practices "street neurology." (Sacks insists that many neurological disorders can only be fully comprehended in the world, rather than the exam room; thus, he frequently takes his practice to the streets.<sup>6</sup>) At first, the woman appears to Sacks to be having a fit; but it soon becomes clear that, with each convulsion, she is "taking on" the expressions of those around her. Wanting to hide her involuntary imitations, the woman turns into an alley-way. Here, "she deliver[s] one vast pantomimic regurgitation, in which the engorged identifies of the last fifty people who had possessed her were spewed out" (Sacks, 1985). Like this woman from Sacks's collection, Olamina tries to conceal her hyperempathy. She knows that it makes her vulnerable: "Sharing is a weakness, a shameful secret. A person who knows what I am can hurt me, betray me, disable me with little effort" (Sacks, 1985). However, like the other patients that populate Sacks's collection, she is simultaneously *enabled* by her condition. Although her hyperempathy exposes her to others' pain, it also allows her to reshape the community in profound ways.

Sacks intuited that victimhood and agency were co-existing components of illness.<sup>7</sup> He often describes neurological disorder as both a "curse and a gift" (Sacks, 1985). Take, for instance, his patient "Witty Ticky Ray," a young man with

Tourette syndrome. On the one hand, Ray's tics can be very inhibitive. They interfere with romantic relationships, and they prevent him from maintaining a steady job. On the other hand, Ray's uncontrollable tics are advantageous for his musical abilities and other physical activities. Sacks describes how Tourette syndrome gives Ray a competitive edge in one of his favorite games, ping-pong: "he excel[s], partly in consequence of his abnormal quickness of reflex and reaction, but especially because of 'improvisations' 'very sudden nervous, frivolous shots' (in his own words), which were so unexpected and startling as to be virtually unanswerable" (Sacks, 1985). When Ray begins treatment with the drug Haldol, which controls his involuntary movements, "he comes to feel, increasingly, that something is missing" (Sacks, 1985). He finds that the medication dulls his musical abilities; without his tics, he has no "wild and creative surges" (Sacks, 1985). He becomes slow and deliberate in both thought and action. Even his dreams seem to have lost their spark—he characterizes his dreams as "'straight wish-fulfillment . . . with none of the elaborations, the extravaganzas of Tourette's'" (Sacks, 1985). Alas, Ray decides that he will only take his medication on the weekdays, when he must report to work. "So now," Sacks explains, "there are two Rays—on and off Haldol. There is the sober citizen, the calm deliberator, from Monday to Friday; and there is 'witty ticky Ray,' frivolous, frenetic, inspired, at weekends" (Sacks, 1985). Ray has many companions in Sacks's collection. There is also a nun whose migraine auras induce divine visions, a woman with musical seizures, and a woman with temporal lobe seizures that "transport" her to her childhood in India. By illuminating the proto-creative aspects of disease, Sacks suggests that

## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

neurological disorder can sometimes be profoundly empowering.

Butler clearly shares Sacks's sense that neurological illness and wellness are not so easily distinguished. Olamina recognizes the ethical advantage of her condition: "If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do [violent] things. ... if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help" (Butler, 1993). She desires for more people to share her genetic mutation, which she calls her "biological conscience" (Butler, 1993), because she believes that this would benefit the species. As this passage suggests, it is not simply by blurring the boundary between deficit and ability that Butler utilizes Sacks. She also leverages the neurologist's critique of the computational model of mind to re-imagine evolutionary processes.

### Part II: Brains Undoing the Body Politic

Sacks dislikes the computational model of mind because it fails to account for the patient's personhood, which is always an essential part of the patient's disease. The computational model reduces individuals to mechanical processes, when, in fact, they are "heroes, victims, martyrs, warriors . . . [and] more" (Sacks, 1985). The neurologist turns to classical fables to restore the patient's biography, as well as biology. In his own words, clinical tales serve as a "parable" for neurology. They give vitality to the person, creating a "'who' as well as a 'what,' a real person, a patient, in relation to disease" (Sacks, 1985). While there is certainly a humanist bent to this passage, it is also decidedly anti-Cartesian, insofar

as it denies the distinction between the material and immaterial aspects of personhood.

Butler elaborates on this critique by stressing the human brain's potential for recombination. Olamina's hyperempathy perpetually disembodies her, uniting her with others. This character is, in fact, constituted by others and held hostage to their pain. The following scene, in which Olamina is momentarily debilitated after shooting an attacker in self-defense, demonstrates this:

I heard shouting. The bald gang from the highway was almost on us—six, seven, eight people. I couldn't do anything while I was dealing with the pain, but I saw them. Instants later when the man I had shot lost consciousness or died, I was free—and needed. (Butler, 1993)

Here, Olamina perceives her body as a corpse. She only feels integrated in her body when the other person whose pain debilitates her dies or loses consciousness. While scenes such as this one suggest a Cartesian subjectivity (a "self" separate from the body), Butler challenges Cartesianism by blurring the barrier between the internal subject and the external world. Olamina's brain fuses her to external bodies. When her brain extends and externalizes her, she is sometimes confused about where her "self" ends and the environment begins. In another scene, Olamina notices she is bleeding, and she is unsure if the wound is originally hers. She reflects, "I was surprised. I tried to remember whether I'd been shot. Maybe I had just come down on a sharp piece of wood. I had no sense of my own body. I hurt, but I couldn't have said where—or even whether the pain was mine or someone else's" (Butler, 1993). She adds, "the pain was

## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

intense, yet defuse somehow. I felt... disembodied" (Butler, 1993). In this scene, belief comes from outside the body, and action precedes perception. Olamina's body responds to the world before she registers someone or something in pain. Here, Butler challenges the notion that thinking is "behind" behavior, suggesting instead that thinking extends with behavior.

Clark and Chalmers stress this idea when they describe "epistemic action," a concept that dovetails with "neurological excess." Clark and Chalmers borrow the term from David Kirsh and Paul Maglio (1994) to describe actions that "alter the world so as to aid and augment cognitive processes such as recognition and search" (1998). Examples of epistemic action include using scrap paper to work out a math problem, rearranging scrabble tiles to form certain words, or writing down an address to remember it. Epistemic action vividly depicts how humans act *with* the environment, rather than on it.<sup>8</sup> Epistemic action also depicts how engagement with the surrounding socio-technological matrix radically transforms cognitive processes. The brain perpetually merges the mind/self with the world, making humans "cyborgs without surgery, symbionts without sutures" (Clark, 2003). Although Clark and Chalmers describe the brain as "opportunistic," expertly exploiting "tools" in its surrounding matrix, they also describe the brain's incredible openness to difference. The brain is so innately flexible that it can be molded to complement external structures. This occurs with individual learning. Individuals' brains develop to correspond with the physical and computational artifacts in their environment. So, the brain is both *formable* and *formative*. The brain re-forms the environment, and the environment re-forms the

brain in perpetual loops between brain, body, and environment. Because it is such an "unusually plastic" organ, the brain makes humans "natural-born cyborgs" (Clark, 2003). Clark suggests the political potential of the brain, explaining that the brain/mind's extension to social and physical environments enables individuals to reconfigure their minds by reconfiguring their social physical environments.<sup>9</sup> Clark's extended mind theory has become widely accepted today, especially among neuroethicists, who consider the moral implications of extended mind/personhood. Wilson and Lenart (2014), for instance, analyze how extended mind theory confers the rights of personhood (namely personal identity) to subjects with non-typical cognitive capacities. According to Wilson and Lenart, the extended account of personal identity morally obliges individuals to actively support the integrity of others' personal narratives, since they are already implicated in those narratives.

Butler dramatizes this mutual process of activity and responsibility. Olamina's excessive brain demonstrates how individuals have the ability to influence the destiny of the species; at the same time, her excessive brain also demonstrates humans' responsibility to accept the changes effected by others. Explaining Earthseed's philosophy, Olamina declares, "Humans can rig the game in our own favor if we understand that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, with or without our intent" (Butler, 1993). By claiming that humans can "rig the game," she claims that humans can actively influence their biological evolution. They can build alternative communities or, in developmental terms, construct new "niches."<sup>10</sup> Earthseed's followers practice communitarian ethics to transform the human race. They base

## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

their community on an ethics of care and mutual respect, hoping that such an environment will adapt its members and future generations. Earthseed proclaims, "All that you touch/You Change./All that you Change/Changes you" (Butler, 1993) and "We shape God./ In the end, we yield to God./We adapt and endure" (Butler, 1993). These verses emphasize the interdependence of organism and environment, as well as the inevitability of adaptation based on this interdependence. Earthseed followers also aim to evolve the species via extra-solar expansion. They recognize that humans are destroying the planet with warfare and rampant ecological destruction. If humans fulfill Earthseed's destiny—"to take root among the stars" (Butler, 1993)—then they just might transform the human race. Olamina articulates this idea especially clearly in *Parable of the Talents* (1997):

Humans can do something no other animal species has ever had the option to do. We can choose: We can go on building and destroying until we either destroy ourselves or destroy the ability of our world to sustain us. Or we can make something more of ourselves. We can grow up. We can leave the nest. We can fulfill the Destiny, make homes for ourselves among the stars, and become some combination of what we want to become and whatever our new environments challenge us to become. Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them.

By describing how humans can become "some combination of what we want to become," Butler suggests that human intention cannot

guarantee a certain destiny for the race; it can only guarantee change (Butler, 1997).

Olamina struggles to accept this notion—that intention only assures adaptation—because of its ethical implications. She preaches "God is change," comparing God to the second law of thermodynamics, without fully acknowledging what this means for the belief system that she cherishes. She assumes that Earthseed will grow and attract more followers, but that its basic philosophies will endure. She discusses this vision with Bankole, a man she meets on her journey and eventually marries. When he observes that Earthseed's future followers will interpret the religion differently and reshape it, she is in denial: "Not around me they won't!" Bankole responds, "With you or without you, they will. All religions change... After all, if 'God is Change,' surely Earthseed can change, and if it lasts, it will" (Butler, 1993). This conversation profoundly unsettles Olamina. Bankole forces her to acknowledge that the intention most sacred to her—Earthseed—will transform beyond her control. She cannot maintain control over the ideas that she releases into the world. The same idea applies to biological adaptations. We cannot guarantee future versions of our biological selves. We can only guarantee change: "Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them" (Butler, 1997).

By emphasizing how beings and worlds are "remade" together, Butler refuses to recognize nature and culture as distinct spheres of influence. This same refusal, in fact, formed the basis for "romantic science"—the genre of clinical writing that Sacks favors. Sacks's clinical tales continue the legacy of Soviet neuropsychologist A.R. Luria. In the 1920s, Luria challenged the long-held notion that physical and experiential reality were separate. Perceiving a continuity between mind

**"Physiology Gone Wild," continued**

and body, Luria united neurology and psychology into one discipline ("neuropsychology"). Butler, too, suggests that individuals are agential and co-dependent; they can shape reality, but they are also shaped by it. This circular logic is expressed by the following Earthseed verse:

Self is.  
Self is body and bodily  
perception. Self is thought, memory,  
belief. Self creates. Self destroys. Self  
learns, discovers, becomes. Self  
shapes. Self adapts. Self invents its  
own reasons for being. To shape  
God, shape Self. (Butler, 1993)

Paradoxically, one of the self's "reasons for being" is to transform its being. Further, as the verse states, the self is both material and historical: "Self is body and bodily/perception. Self is thought, memory, belief" (Butler, 1993). Butler reduces being to matter, but, at the same time, acknowledges that matter is shaped by individual experience (memories, beliefs). Indeed, the protagonist's brain is not hardened at birth; rather, it transforms over time. In one of her first diary entries, Olamina claims that her neurological condition is permanent. She laments, "my neurotransmitters are scrambled, and they are going to stay scrambled" (Butler, 1993). Yet, her brain *does* adapt, as she develops ways to minimize her symptoms. She tricks her brain into responding alternatively to scenarios that trigger pain. As she ages, she becomes more resilient. Olamina reflects, "I can take a lot of pain without falling apart. I've learned to do that" (Butler, 1993). Here, Butler demonstrates how individual experience shapes her at a biological level.

This notion of the permeable brain is important because it sheds further light on the nature/culture relation, which has long divided Butler's critics. Some of her critics argue that Butler privileges nature, understanding human behavior in terms of biological functions honed by natural selection.<sup>11</sup> Others read Butler as a social constructionist.<sup>12</sup> However, Butler is neither "essentialist" nor "constructionist," since she incorporates biological thinking without endorsing biological determinism, just as Sacks did. In an interview about the book, she acknowledges that genes significantly influence human behavior and that we need to take this fact seriously. In fact, she references Sacks's collection to observe that "sometimes a small change in the brain, for instance—just a few cells—can completely alter the way a person or animal behaves" (Potts, 1996). But, like Sacks, she refuses to accept the reductivism of standard evolutionary theory. She elaborates, "I do think we need to accept that our behavior is controlled to some extent by biological forces . . . but I don't accept what I would call classical sociobiology. Sometimes we can work around our programming if we understand it" (Potts, 1996). This apparent conflict between biology and utopian thinking is one of the most central concerns in Butler's fiction. According to critic A. Johns, one of the most fundamental questions in Butler's work is: "How can we make a better world if we are determined by our genes?" (Johns, 2010). Johns answers this question by drawing on the genetist critique offered by Richard Lewontin, an evolutionary biologist associated with DST. While his "developmental" reading is useful, it overlooks the crucial role of the brain.

Developmental systems theorists, such as Lewontin, Oyama, and Griffiths and Gray, posit

## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

that DNA and non-DNA factors cannot be completely isolated from each other. In other words, there is no blueprint or program (genes) that epigenetic resources (environment) either facilitate or repress. DST challenges conventional evolutionary theories, which focus exclusively on the genetic level in analyses of the evolution of traits. Conventional evolutionary theories fail to appreciate that traits result from the organism's interaction with a wide range of developmental resources (Griffiths and Stotz, 2000).<sup>13</sup> DST is sometimes referred to as "cultural biology," since it unites Marxism and Darwinism. Marx famously proposed that human nature (or consciousness) changes according to the material conditions of social life.<sup>14</sup> For Marx, a revolution of the ensemble of social relations would produce a revolution in human nature. However, despite his fundamental belief in human malleability, Marx still distinguished between natural (biological) history and social (human) history. This is evidenced by Marx's conflicting attitudes toward Darwin, whose work he followed closely. While he believed *Origin of the Species* provided a "natural-scientific basis for the class struggle in human history" (Marx, 1862), Marx insisted that the implications of Darwinian theory be confined to anatomy and physiology. He refused Darwin's notions of an unending struggle for existence and "survival of the fittest." Rather than attributing human antagonism to biology, as Darwin did, he attributed human antagonism to the specific economic and social arrangements of capitalism (Singer, 1999). Contra Marx, DST acknowledges nature and culture as interdependent spheres of influence.

Johns astutely recognizes a similarity between Lewontin's framework and Butler's biological philosophy. He argues that for

Lewontin, as well as for Butler, "just because we cannot understand ourselves without reference to our genes, does not mean that changing our environment is either useless or hopeless, *especially* if we understand and acknowledge the interaction between the two" (Johns, 2010). Much to the contrary, attempts to shape the world can be substantial, particularly when those attempts are grounded in a "genetic" understanding of the world. The *Parable* novels demonstrate how a biological-material understanding of the world is actually quite compatible with utopian thought. Organisms are shaped by genes, which are, in turn, shaped by environment. Thus, to change biology, individuals have to change the environment: "[a] fully biological nature... is not an eternally fixed one, but an eternally malleable one" (Johns, 2010). Herein lies possibility for the future. If communitarian values cannot be adopted by culture, perhaps they can be integrated via natural selection (Johns, 2010).

Adams does not state that Butler was familiar with DST specifically, although her interviews suggest that perhaps she was. While she uses the idiom of the "program" to describe human behavior, Butler insists, as do developmental theorists, that there are no innate features or "genes for" certain behaviors. She asserts, "to whatever degree human behavior is genetically determined, it often isn't determined *specifically*; in other words, no one is programmed to do such and such" (McCaffery and McMenamin, 1990). Here, Butler reiterates the arguments made by Griffiths and Stotz, who argue that traits develop through a "cascade" of resources, both genetic and epigenetic (2000).

Importantly, Adams' "developmental" reading of the *Parable* novels emphasizes Butler's belief that humans are biosocial creatures—the products

## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

of co-evolutionary process involving biology and culture. However, by focusing on the genetic level, Adams suggests that biological adaptations are delayed until the offspring or a future generation. Butler's depictions of neurological excess suggest that individuals continuously transform—at a biological level—*within* the life course. This is why Sacks's influence matters: Butler demonstrates how the brain accelerates the expression of a trait to a phenotype that can be selected for or against. In this way, the brain has the potential to accelerate adaptations, perhaps at a greater rate than genetic mutations.

Adams overlooks that *Sower* also depicts *cognitive* niche constructions, which plainly demonstrate the extended-ness of the brain. Cognitive niche constructions are environmental interventions that embodied agents make to alter cognitive experiences. The concept of cognitive niche construction is firmly established in the cognitive sciences. For instance, cognitive scientists often cite language as a cognitive niche, since language assists individuals to process and engage with the surrounding world (Clark 2008). (This notion of language is anti-postmodern, since it recognizes language as an adaptation to the environment, rather than something opposed to or apart from reality.) *Sower* depicts written language as a form of cognitive niche construction. Writing externalizes thought, transforming cognition in the process. Olamina is an avid note-taker. One of her survival strategies is to exploit every available piece of reading material that she can get her hands on—encyclopedias, biographies, works of fiction—and record her thoughts, which help her to "remember better" (Butler, 1993) information that might one day save her life. The most overt example of cognitive niche construction is Olamina's diary. Diary-writing is not simply

expressive; it is also reflexive. Olamina frequently acknowledges the reflexive dimension of writing: "Sometimes I write to keep from going crazy" (Butler, 1993). She also explains, "[s]ometimes writing about a thing makes it easier to stand" (Butler, 1993). Writing provides stability because it clarifies her beliefs. This is one of the primary functions of diary fiction, according to H.P. Abbott. The diary "is a reflexive text—not simply in the sense of a self-reflecting or self-conscious text, but in the sense that the text exerts an effective influence on its writer" (1984). Abbott explains that the diary, simply by rendering events, can either move its writer to insight or "maintain him in blindness" (1984). In either case, the text influences the course of events. It plays an active role in the story. This is certainly the case with Olamina's diary, since the text profoundly shapes her thought processes. In one of her first entries, Olamina writes "I need to write about what I believe." But she confesses that her beliefs are not already formed inside her head. She has to use other tools to realize her beliefs: "It took me a lot of time to understand it, then a lot more time with a dictionary and a thesaurus to say it just right—just the way it has to be" (Butler, 1993). These passages recall the cognizing subject that Clark and Chalmers describe—the individual using scrap paper to work out a math problem, rearranging Scrabble tiles, or jotting down an address. They emphasize how cognition draws on surrounding objects, extending thought beyond the "skin-bag" (Clark's term).

Butler uses various techniques to reinforce how the diary externalizes cognition. For instance, she uses rhetorical questions. Olamina uses her journal to inquire, especially when she is grappling with the "big questions"—"Is there a God? If there is, does he (she? it?) care about us?" (Butler, 1993). She tentatively answers her



## “Physiology Gone Wild,” continued

own questions—“Maybe God is a big kid, playing with his toys” (Butler, 1993)—before asking further ones: “But what if all this is wrong? What if God is something else altogether?” (Butler, 1993). Such rhetorical questions foreground how the diary extends the mind to the page in an ongoing feedback loop. Butler also depicts the protagonist’s cognitive glitches to show how cognition unfolds *outside* the head. Olamina frequently revises her initial thoughts upon recording them on the page. For instance, she relates a neighbor’s death: “Mrs. Sims shot herself today—or rather, she shot herself a few days ago, and Cory and Dad found her today” (Butler, 1993). In another scene, she writes about her father’s severity towards her: “Dad thinks I need more humility. I think my particular biological humility—or humiliation—is more than enough” (Butler, 1993). In another scene, she speculates about God and whether or not God protects the down-trodden: “How will God—my father’s God—behave toward us when we’re poor” (Butler, 1993)? These glitches illuminate the immediacy of cognition. Olamina’s thoughts are events, not mere representations. The diary provides a useful format for emphasizing the event-like dimension of cognition. Abbott explains that the immediacy in diary fiction does not correspond with the events described. (This is because the diarist cannot write amidst the action, only after the fact.) The immediacy in diary fiction is the “*writing itself*”; the event in progress . . . is the writing itself” (1984). In the case of Butler’s diary fiction, though, writing does not occur *after* thought; writing *is* thought. The “event” in Olamina’s journals, then, is cognition. By formally modeling Olamina’s extended cognition and showing how the mind is always reassembling, *Sower* challenges notions of a stable and autonomous self.

## Part III: Contemporary Philosophy and the “Plastic Brain”

As I have discussed, Butler celebrates the excessive brain, since it assists individuals to form alternative communities and to build new worlds. However, Butler also embraces the excessive brain because it radically challenges neoliberal vocabularies of personhood. *Sower* portrays the political climate that favors such notions of an autonomous brain. In the narrative, corporations control nearly all aspects of political life, as a result of a shrunken federal government and deregulated markets. Privatization creates such a powerless state that even basic public agencies (schools, police departments, fire departments) no longer serve the community. Individuals have to rely on their own ingenuity to survive. This setting clearly critiques the political vision of the right-wing establishment under the Reagan administration, which debilitated public offices in the interest of free markets. (It also forewarns about the danger of fascist politicians who promise to build walls and “make America great again.”<sup>15</sup>) Olamina’s hometown of Robledo is a gated community secured by private police. The neighborhood watch group, which Olamina’s father manages, has one primary task: protect the cul-de-sac from poorer passersby.

Several critics have drawn comparisons between this setting and the city described in Davis’s “Fortress L.A.,” from his book of social history, *City of Quartz* (1990).<sup>16</sup> Davis describes the reorganization of the city after the powerful elite have destroyed accessible public space. Davis explains how middle to upper class communities increased demands for spatial and social separation from the urban poor, prompting city organizers to recolonize downtown spaces with architectural ramparts and walled enclosures.

## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

Davis also depicts increasing fortification of affluent suburban neighborhoods through erecting barricades and contracting with local police forces to patrol. Like Davis, Butler explores how the architectural environment is used to reinforce class divisions. Robledo once epitomized the sort of L.A. suburban neighborhoods that Davis describes, though it is no longer secure from outsiders. Since residents can no longer afford to pay police to patrol the streets or respond to crimes, the streets now abound with "squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general" (Butler, 1993). Everyone lives in fear of being robbed by a neighbor. Butler's dystopian setting conveys the fate of the minoritized poor under Reagan. Individualism, the core philosophy of the right-wing fundamentalists in power, does not enable poorer individuals to better themselves or their communities. Rather, it divides communities and causes discord by teaching citizens to look out only for themselves. In Robledo, individuals act violently even against friends and community members. Olamina's brother, Keith, joins a gang that ransacks the neighborhood. Keith demonstrates how the spirit of individualism enables callousness to one's fellow community members. Drug lords, pimps, and slave masters also pervade the neighborhood, treating individuals (typically minority women) as disposable. Butler suggests the danger of political visions that champion profit and individualism above all else.

Olamina's "excessive" brain poses a threat to individualism, since it binds her to others. Furthermore, her hyperempathy risks the integrity of the nuclear family. The Olaminas survive by barricading themselves inside their walled community and patrolling the neighborhood with firearms. They rely on her to keep her condition a secret. Olamina reflects, "I can do okay as long as

other people don't know about me. Inside our neighborhood walls I do fine" (Butler, 1993). But when outsiders learn of her condition, her family is endangered. Olamina recalls that her brother once feigned an injury in public to trigger her symptoms. Her father became enraged with his son for "putting 'family business' into the street" (Butler, 1993). Olamina's father, a Baptist minister and defendant of the nuclear family, is especially intolerant of her condition. He urges Olamina, "you can beat this thing. You don't have to give in to it" (Butler, 1993). Here, Olamina's father reiterates one of the patriarchal attitudes of modern medicine: that nervous illness is a matter of choice. Beginning in the 1880s, many clinicians believed that "if the patient decided to be well, she could be" (Herndl, 1993). Olamina's father, like many physicians who treated "hysterical women," intuits that nervous illness is socially transgressive. Indeed, Olamina's hyperempathy becomes a powerful form of resistance, since it exposes the myth of the autonomous individual. Butler emphasizes that the brain does not enclose the self; rather, the brain guarantees the self's endless adaptation. If we appreciate the brain's capacity to transform the self and the world, Butler suggests, then notions of a private, autonomous individual become truly untenable.

By recognizing the interdependence of the social and neural, Butler anticipates the arguments that philosopher C. Malabou makes in her 2008 book, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* Malabou distinguishes between contemporary notions of flexibility (the brain's ability to be formed) and plasticity (the brain's ability to form, as well as to be formed). She associates scientific concepts of the "flexible" or formable brain with neoliberal discourse of the "flexible" worker; she proposes plasticity to

## "Physiology Gone Wild," continued

counter this dominant rhetoric of flexibility. From her perspective, coming to terms with the brain's plasticity will allow individuals to challenge the models of capitalism that prevail today. Malabou explains that while neuroscientists use the term "plastic" to describe the brain, they continue to discuss the brain as if it were "inside" the head. (In other words, by "plastic," they mean "flexible.") Malabou calls upon neuroscientists to take seriously their claims that the brain is plastic, since doing so will allow them to finally let go of the ideological cliché of the brain as an internal processor. This, in turn, will lead contemporary individuals to recognize their capacity to act upon the world, not just to tolerate action.

Malabou claims that plasticity negotiates between "determinism and freedom" (2008), a claim that sounds a lot like an Earthseed verse. She also describes intention in terms very similar to Butler's. For instance, she discusses how intentional action's "biological function" in the central nervous system is to transition from homodynamism to self-generation. Drawing on the work of neuroscientists Damasio and Jeannerod, Malabou explains that the nervous system expends considerable energy to maintain a homodynamic state.<sup>17</sup> Such self-regulation requires the nervous system to respond to events from the outside that affect it. So, preservation is creative; the system generates new properties for the sake of constancy.<sup>18</sup> Malabou emphasizes that intentional movement is simply an interaction between organism and environment, which makes possible the subject's own representation of the real. Here, her explanation begins to falter, according to critics. Malabou claims that the biological processes of intentional agency produce a rupture between the neuronal (the brain) and the mental (the mind) and that this

rupture makes freedom possible (2008). Critics simply do not buy Malabou's "explosion" as explanation. Discussing how Malabou even tries to mine an association between the words "plasticity" and "plastique" (a moldable mixture of nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose), Mandik (1999) writes:

I must confess that I find a bit hard to swallow the suggestion that neuroscientific discourse is infected by a poetic association between "brain plasticity" and "plastic explosives." The "plastic" in "brain plasticity" doesn't mean "explosive." Not even the "plastic" in "plastic explosive" means "explosive." It's the "explosive" in "plastic explosive" that means "explosive."

For Mandik, the connection between brains and bombs is problematic because no neuroscientist describes the brain in these terms. Leys (2011) more clearly articulates the holes in the argument: "the very problem which is at the center of the mind/brain debate, namely, the nature of intentionality, is now being offered as the solution." In other words, according to Leys, Malabou is proposing that intentional agency simply *is* the biological process that is capable of creating the freedom-ensuing rupture ("On Catherine Malabou's *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*").

For these critics, Malabou is too vague in her description of the transition from the neuronal to the mental. Readers are expected to accept that, since neuronal tissue is discontinuous, the brain creates at the same time that it destroys. (There is a break between neurons, and nervous information crosses this void with each synapse.) Indeed, Malabou does not exactly solve the mind/body problem, as she herself readily admits.

## **“Physiology Gone Wild,” continued**

Nonetheless, she keenly recognizes that the brain is plural, contradictory, and always becoming—and further, that the brain connects individuals to each other. This notion is reinforced by her use of the first-person plural (“we”) in the title and throughout the book. By talking collectively about “our brain,” Malabou substantiates her claim that neither the brain nor the individual is isolated. While she sees her work as an extension of DeLeuze’s cognitive philosophy, it is clear that Malabou also continues the tradition of romantic science. Importantly, Luria, Sacks, Malabou, DeLeuze, and Butler all intuit that the brain is emancipatory, since it allows for “individual experience [to open] up, in the program itself, a dimension usually taken to be the very antithesis of the notion of a program: the historical dimension” (Malabou, 2008). For each of these thinkers, the brain guarantees possibility, and that is its promise. Such an ethics of the brain is radically different from neuroscientific notions, which often emphasize the brain’s defensive tendencies.

*Parable of the Sower* is prophetic not just for its insights about the future of the capitalist state, but for its insights about the full range of philosophical quandaries that the brain sciences pose today. Butler asks important questions about the brain’s role in the construction of a heterogeneous self and body politic, as well as about the relationship between ontology and epistemology. These questions continue to haunt fiction-writers in the twenty-first century, who write during an era in which the brain sciences have migrated out of the laboratory to occupy a prominent place in public life.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The term "social neuroscience" was first used by John T. Cacioppo and Gary G. Berntson (1992) in an *American Psychologist* article exploring how the brain is affected by social interactions. However, "social neuroscience" and its affiliate discipline—"affective neuroscience"—are still considered to be in their infancy.

<sup>2</sup> "Of course, the brain is a machine and a computer-everything in classical neurology is correct," writes Sacks. "But our mental processes . . . are not just abstract and mechanical, but personal as well—and as such, involve not just classifying and categorizing, but continual judging and feeling also."

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Donna Haraway (1991) celebrates Butler in her famous essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto."

<sup>4</sup> See Alison Tara Walker (2005), Ronald Bogue (2011), and Lauren Lacey (2008).

**“Physiology Gone Wild,” continued**

<sup>5</sup> See interviews with S. Potts (1996) and S. Rettburg (1998).

<sup>6</sup> According to Sacks, street neurology has respectable antecedents; he cites James Parkinson and Charles Dickens, two “inveterate walkers of the streets of London” (Sacks, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Sacks discusses the contradictory status of the neurological patient in his first book, *Migraine* (1970), published fifteen years prior to *Hat*. He describes how many migraine patients experience creative surges and increased energy immediately prior to an attack. He references the novelist George Eliot, who described in her diary that she felt “dangerously well” (Sacks, 1985) before the onset of headache. This theme of “illness as wellness” persists in his writing until his death.

<sup>8</sup> Clark and Chalmers’ “epistemic action” is similar to Gregory Bateson’s notion of “distributed cognition,” which significantly informs the work of many media scholars today. For instance, King (2011) and Hayles (2008) use Bateson’s notion of “distributed cognition” to explain the manifold processes—both material and immaterial—in which knowledge is enacted and produced.

<sup>9</sup> See also Wilson (2004) and Watson (1998) for optimistic analyses of the politics of the plastic brain.

<sup>10</sup> In Developmental Systems Theory, “niche construction” refers to the processes by which organisms alter their physical environments. I will more fully explain this theory momentarily.

<sup>11</sup> Zaki (1990), for instance, severely criticizes Butler for naturalizing gender differences, rather than questioning gender as a historical convention.

<sup>12</sup> Haraway, for example, praises Butler for demonstrating how human identities are fluid and indeterminate. See also Miller (1998) and Peppers (1995).

<sup>13</sup> Such theories also fail to appreciate that groups can select, as well. Groups select by determining the social practices that will reliably produce a certain trait. John Proveti (2000) offers the example of self-sacrificing behaviors. Standard evolutionary models explain fitness-sacrificing activities as an individual passing one’s “altruistic part” (401), but this overlooks that groups target social practices.

<sup>14</sup> He writes, “...the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” (Marx, 1848).

<sup>15</sup> See Gerry Canavan (2016), who discusses the novel as a cautionary tale on *Wired*.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see Madhu Dubey (2013) and Peter Stillman (2003).

<sup>17</sup> Actually, Malabou uses Damasio’s term (homeostasis), but this term is “one of most misleading terms in the biology student’s lexicon,” according to Steven Rose (2012), since it describes a process of dynamic response to maintain internal stability. Rose offers the term “homodynamics” to more aptly describe an organism’s ability to preserve itself by adapting its physiology.



## Looking Forward, Looking Back: Afrofuturism and Black Histories in Neo-Slave Narration

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**Abstract:** In this article, I argue that Afrofuturist neo-slave narratology imagines temporal simultaneity and, as a result, it is an especially productive space for thinking about the critical matter of black identity. If Afrofuturism considers black futurity in view of existing cultural frames, then Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives not only imagine what could be, but what might have been. These texts open space for remembering otherwise – not just counter-memory but the opening of a space where the black past still contains possibilities for black futures. I examine Amiri Baraka’s play, *The Slave* (1964), and Octavia Butler’s novel, *Kindred* (1979), two formative Afrofuturist texts that reveal black potentiality through the reclamation of the iconography of slavery, by remembering the past otherwise. These works underscore the continued relevance of slavery on the black experience and unveil the inadequacy of post-racialization in the 20th century and beyond into the blackness of black futures. Through their utilization of the past and weighty consideration of the present, both authors attempt to elevate the overlooked humanity of African Americans by connecting the black experience through the centuries and into the future. In this way, when these neo-slave narratives are engaged through Afrofuturism, they reestablish slavery not as an overdetermining facet of black life but instead as an inescapable reality of black existence within the national imaginary. Indeed, as these works demonstrate, there can be no black futurity without necessarily acknowledging slavery’s continued reach.

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism; Neo-Slave Narrative; African American Literature; Memory; Amiri Baraka; Octavia Butler

### Afrofuturism - Black Histories and Black Futures

Afrofuturism might be most simply defined as an aesthetic connecting science fiction, racialization, and the African diaspora with the aim of elucidating black futures. The broad imprecision of this description speaks to the difficulty that accompanies any attempt to definitively identify which texts should be classified as Afrofuturist. Yet, rather than reading its ostensible vagueness as a

weakness of the genre itself, we can understand this ambiguity as a potential strength. The term Afrofuturism offers ways of thinking about black identity within permeable spatial and temporal boundaries, and the term itself is malleable because it treats these traditional realms of time and space, of identity and context, as malleable – it practices what it preaches. Past experience is

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contextualized through future insights, the future holds the possibilities of the past, and both influence the present. I want to focus on the ways that this ostensibly forward-looking theory of black identity and black self-making glances backward to face the past and reframe it. In this sense, Afrofuturism not only constructs counter-memory, but also instantiates a nuanced engagement with overt methods of counter-remembering – the active act of remembering, recalling, and restating the past otherwise. It makes manifest the effect that the present has on our understanding of the past, and the ways that the present influences black futures and a sense of black futurity. The framework of Afrofuturity is comprised of notions that foreground the liminality and temporality of blackness and the black body, and so Afrofuturism is inherently fluid – it can operate as a genre, a frame, a mode, and a way of being and understanding one's own sociocultural positioning, both fragmented and simultaneous. In thinking about the inextricable relationship between the past, present, and future for the purposes of this essay, I limit the use of the term Afrofuturism to its meaning as *mode*, an approach to treating diasporic ideas of futurity as indissoluble from historicity.

Afrofuturist neo-slave narratology imagines temporal simultaneity, and so it is an especially productive space for thinking about black identity within historicity. Is this speculative reconstitution of slavery the necessary reappropriation of the ancestors, honoring them by doing the work of reclamation, or is it the exploitation of the traumas of the past? When analyzed through the lens of contemporaneity, these neo-slave narratives encourage our remembering the past otherwise with an emphasis on the humanity of the slave – no longer mere theoretical idea but living, breathing flesh and blood – to purposefully reclaim black

identity. If Afrofuturism allows its practitioners to consider black futurity within existing cultural frameworks, then these neo-slave narratives reimagine the figure of the slave through the lens of the postmodern, through a post-soul aesthetic<sup>1</sup> free from limited or limiting didactic obligation. This reclamation asserts significant rights to blackness through the articulation of a self-defined black identity, or what Reynaldo Anderson (2016) explains as “future-looking Black scholars, artists, and activists... not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about others, past, present and future—and challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures” (n.p.). Indeed, then, Afrofuturism not only imagines what could be but also what might have been in traditionally silenced stories of black identity. It is this sense of remembering otherwise – not just a counter-memory but, instead, the opening of a space in which the black past still contains possibilities for black futures. I want to examine, in particular, Amiri Baraka's<sup>2</sup> play, *The Slave* (1964), and Octavia Butler's novel, *Kindred* (1979), as two formative Afrofuturist texts that help establish and underscore the continued trajectory of Afrofuturist inquiry to the present day. These two narratives reveal black potentiality through the reclamation of the iconography of slavery, by remembering the past otherwise – they underscore the continued relevance of slavery on the black experience and unveil the inadequacy of post-racialization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond into *black* futures.

### Neo-Slave Narratology and Afrofuturism

Lisa Yaszek (2013) explains, “In early Afrofuturist stories, slavery produces misery, but it also produces technoscientific genius. In later stories, the stories of slavery and colonization – the

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story of modernity's bad past – becomes the source of inspiration for imagining what might be truly new and at least slightly better futures" (p. 10). Indeed, both Baraka's and Butler's Afrofuturity overtly imagines slavery as a site of productive space and energy, emblematic of the *repetition with a difference* characteristic of African American literature and cultural production throughout history. This "repetition with a difference," as enacted in Afrofuturism, rearticulates narratives from the historical past and reshapes them within new temporal frameworks. In doing so, it acknowledges that slavery, rather than being an *overdetermining* factor of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century African American experiences, is an *unavoidable* factor – a communal experience that offers context for African Americanness as the history of slavery informs blackness in the nation and explains the structure and function of the nation itself. I think here of Sherley Anne Williams's explanation for why she was inspired to write *Dessa Rose* (1986), a neo-slave novel based on the fictionalized encounter of two historical figures – a pregnant black woman in Kentucky who helped lead an uprising and was subsequently sentenced to death and a white woman living on a secluded farm who offered protection to runaway slaves. The fictional relationship presented in *Dessa Rose* represents a reimagining of the past, and this imagining – this remembering otherwise – forms the crux of the novel. In her author's note, Williams (1986) explains that she found it "sad" that these two women never met (p. 5). It is from a desire to understand how these two women, separated across time and space and by race and social mobility – one a slave, one a former plantation mistress – engaged in dangerous abolition exercises that she began to write *Dessa Rose*. Afrofuturist neo-slave narratology offers reparative justice through seeming foreknowledge that widens the frame of historical slave narratives, thereby giving new

postmodern import to the Transatlantic slave trade and the chattel slave system. These texts refuse the comforting and comfortable historical distance contemporary audiences generally adopt in view of slavery, where slaves are relegated to the realm of relics from a distant past and where empathy becomes nearly impossible, leaving only sympathy which often emerges as condescension.

Alongside their many other interpretative possibilities, these Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives occupy what can be termed a literary funereal space. Funerals fulfill an immediate desire to honor the deceased and to provide a sanctioned, cathartic space for the living to appropriately express grief at the loss of a loved one; they also serve to celebrate life and legacy – what has been left behind and what is pledged to continue on in perpetuity. Functioning in much the same way as an obituary – literarily constructed as a commemorative space surrounding the dead to systematically articulate legacy – these narratives commemorate not the experience of *slavery* but the personhood and humanity of the slave as both a figure and as a person. When constituted through an Afrofuturist mode, these neo-slave narratives look ahead and refuse the liminality of time or prescriptions of space, shifting the focus of these stories from the past and of the slaves themselves from the realm of legacy to that of actual lived experience. These texts, then, are not constructed simply for the purpose of mourning or to serve as reminders of the destructive nature of chattel slavery, but so that 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers can actively identify with the slave, recognize the humanity of the slave, and, in doing so, come to understand the often understated but omnipresent ways in which black bodies have *always* naturally fought against their own destruction – showing that ideas of black resistance in theory and in practice did not emerge *only* after

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emancipation. Unlike the slave narratives of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, these postmodern authors write with comparative impunity - there are no friends or co-conspirators in the South to protect, no fear of violent retribution if one's identity is revealed - and so the modes of resistance that have *always* existed are now more clearly articulated. This contemporary resistance allows for the unveiling of the black interior, the valid and self-affirming articulation of blackness separate from the white gaze.

Through this revelation of the black interior, neo-slave narrators recenter the slave experience to foreground active and unmasked dissent. An inclination toward revolution and freedom was seldom overtly present in historical narratives, not because it didn't exist, but rather because it could not be included due to censorship, a potentially-unreceptive readership, or the looming threat of violence against the author or the author's family who often remained in the South. This general absence of what postmodern audiences view as radical and overt resistance in many 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century texts breeds a sense of undefined possibility for Afrofuturist reconstructions. Williams (1986) continues to frame her work, explaining the reconstructive nature of the neo-slave narrative by stating, "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth - and made of that process a high art - remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us. I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free. I now know that slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expression" (p. 5-6). Resultantly, these neo-slave narratives offer repetition with necessary difference from the master narrative to present the trauma of the past for a new audience; the author's revisions make

connections and allusions necessary to provide greater relevance for willfully-resistant and stultified 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers.

## *The Slave and Afrofuturistic Revolution*

Amiri Baraka's 1964 play, *The Slave*, is an existential neo-slave narrative performance that utilizes the absurdity of satire as it disrupts historical distance and passivity surrounding slavery. The play offers a proto-Afrofuturist sensibility through the use of magical elements, blurred temporality, and engagements with the past that overlap with present and future - what could perhaps be termed an Afrofuturist-inspired magical realism, in which magical realism takes on specific conversations surrounding blackness and black bodies. During the course of the play, the protagonist, Walker Vessels, shifts between subject positions as a slave and as a 1960s revolutionary - assumed tropes of resignation and radicalism respectively - without a change in actor, costume, or name. As a performative black radical - his motivations and inclinations are marked entirely by a compulsory revolutionary impulse - Vessels returns to his white ex-wife, Grace, and her new white husband in some near-future temporality to take their biracial children away as a race riot continues to erupt in the streets outside their home. Baraka focuses this neo-slave performance on the permanence of slavery not only as an American institution, but also as part and parcel of an understanding of Americanness more broadly. In doing so, he reasserts that the legacy *is* lived experience as slavery continues to shape contemporary relationships between blacks and whites. Because blackness is othered and becomes synonymous with racial difference, whiteness is naturally normalized as the absence of racial difference - blackness is what whiteness is not. *The Slave* is an especially interesting narrative not only

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because it sees so clearly into the past but because of its apparent prescience – it anticipates the continued utility of Afrofuturity as it interrogates the possibility of black survival within the frame of revolution. In this play, it is this sense of the anticipatory within Afrofuturity that opens up space for the nuances of the black interior that were veiled and devalued during slavery.

Afrofuturism underscores that this inward articulation of blackness existed before the more public assertions that “black is beautiful” in the 1960s and 1970s. What is especially interesting about this emphasis is that *The Slave* was published in 1964. If Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965 is viewed, often too casually, as a critical moment when African Americans began to more seriously consider means of resistance other than non-violent protest, Baraka anticipates that this more forceful revolution will occur even without this assassination as catalyst. Baraka, then, indicates that Black Nationalism doesn’t emerge as retaliation or grief over preeminent figureheads and leaders lost, but instead out of mourning for the loss of Emmett Till, the loss of the nameless thousands lynched, millions enslaved – a much broader sense of collectively lost humanity and the significant loss of black futures and black potentiality. Here, there is a sense of possibility, to be sure, but also a simultaneous acknowledgement of both death and revolution as inevitable occurrences. These Afrofuturist frameworks do not necessarily beget optimism or the revelation of a black utopia, but instead open up space for the potential recognition of, and sites for, black autonomy within these futures through a reexamination of the past.

It is this Afrofuturist re-vision of the past that supplies neo-slave narration with its peculiar temporality – it is simultaneously of the time in

which it was written, and yet out of step with its prescribed parameters. *The Slave* begins with a prologue told in the voice of the black protagonist. Walker Vessels thus contextualizes himself, “I am much older than I look... or maybe much younger. Whatever I am or seem [significant pause] to you, then let that rest. But figure, still, that you might not be right. Figure, still, that you might be lying... to save yourself” (Baraka, 1964, p. 44). This strange articulation of selfhood seems thus to explicate a new form autonomy that dwells within black ambiguity. Here autonomy emerges in Vessels’s assertion of his own outward imperceptibility, in his idea that “[w]e seek nothing but ourselves” (Baraka, 1964, p. 43). Vessels describes himself in shifting language that initially refuses race itself. How can a slave exist in defiance of racial essentialism? He makes no moves toward an overt description of his color until later in this prologue, explaining, “Brown is not brown except when used as an intimate description of personal phenomenological fields” (Baraka, 1964, p. 45). The language moves from avoiding a concrete depiction of race to describing it in non-traditional, although quite literal terms – his skin color is in fact “brown,” but the meaning of this brown, similar to his explanation of what he is or seems, differs based on the viewer; it cannot be located within the traditional confines of mere race or even deliberate phenotypic classification. Even as Vessels’s language implies a vague sense of racial plurality, he signals through these linguistic shifts his awareness that his consciousness – his own personal constellation of phenomenological fields – emerges in view of the demarcation of the color line. This is not, however, the double consciousness DuBois experiences, marked by the anxiety surrounding the twoness of his very existence as black and American. Instead, the trauma of the play emerges in negotiating the shift from the past to the present to an unstable intermediate form –

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from slave to revolutionary and back again, remaining in the midst of a race riot as the eponymous slave.

In the last moments of this introductory monologue, he speaks of “Discovering racially the funds of the universe. Discovering the last image of the thing” (Baraka, 1964, p. 45). It is in this brief phrase that Vessels finally overtly acknowledges the possibility of racial difference, concisely articulating that not only is there racial difference, but that this difference is exemplified through a racialized system of value and capitalism, the allotted “funds” of mobility and opportunity provided through a race-based pseudo-meritocracy. He acknowledges and refuses the thingness that attempts to attach itself to his consciousness, an Afrofuturist rejection of the continued objectification and commodification of the image of the black body, of blackness as symbol. Here the monologue becomes a disjointed and emotionally-driven stream of consciousness – is this an intimate description of personal phenomenological fields, or a failure to effectively describe? – as if while acknowledging “the thing” Vessels becomes enraged by the inherent inequality and his place(lessness) within the system. He moves quickly to what he describes as “old, old blues people moaning in their sleep, singing, man, oh, nigger, nigger, you still here, as hard as nails, and takin’ no shit from nobody” (Baraka, 1964, p. 45). The syntax here is confusing – it is unclear if the “old blues people” are “niggers,” or separately moaning and singing about the “niggers” they are not. Does it matter? For Baraka, here, the possible distinction is irrelevant through time and space, an anticipatory articulation of Jay-Z’s (2017) assertion, “Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga/ Still nigga” (n.p.). Through Vessels’s monologue Baraka indicates that race and racism remain unavoidable

and any denials change nothing – a particularly important concept in a play that foreshadows the inadequacy of post-racialization. Even as Walker-as-slave refuses the labels of his brownness, he is inevitably called to acknowledge its connection to his consciousness and then sent through time, becoming Walker-as-revolutionary only to return once again to Walker-as-slave – the men are literally indistinguishable. Although race may be a social construct, its impact on racialized bodies exists in reality and the language of race is loaded and evocative. There is room for both of these truths within the realm of Afrofuturity – this blackness or brownness may not mean *everything*, but arguing it doesn’t mean everything must not imply that it means *nothing*.

Signaling once again this use of figurative time travel – the textual liminality allows time to change without Vessels ever leaving the space in which he exists – Baraka’s (1964) brief stage directions at the end of the play indicate that Vessels “is now the old man at the beginning of the play” (p. 88). One is left to wonder if any change has actually occurred for this man – Vessels as revolutionary takes up the heart of the performance, but the return to his origin as slave is the last image on the stage. As a result, the slave itself is not only the play’s title or context but also its unexpected revenant. Vessels—as embodied black form, slave or revolutionary—is the most consistent presence on the stage. By introducing him as the eponymous slave, this condition haunts the rest of the plot and serves as the obvious undertone for the revolutionary action, bookending his revolutionary futurity with the funereal mourning of the past. His sudden and unexpected reappearance at the end, transformed as slave, adds a paranormal, ghostly and ghastly atmosphere to the play, which is particularly appropriate as slavery becomes the lingering

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phantasm that directs race relations in the 20th-century context and continues to inform the ideologies of Afrofuturity. It utilizes the roots of slavery, alongside both antebellum and postbellum accountability, to decentralize race while elucidating the circuitous and lasting nature of slavery and racialization in America.

In view of this racialization, Vessels' ex-wife, Grace, reminds him, "Walker, you were preaching the murder of all white people. Walker, I was, am, white. What do you think was going through my mind every time you were at some rally or meeting whose sole purpose was to bring about the destruction of white people?" (Baraka, 1964, p. 72). Vessels's angry response speaks to the inherent impossibility of post-racialization, where race is imagined to be meaningless. He explodes, "Oh, goddamn it, Grace, are you so stupid? You were my wife... I loved you. You mean because I loved you and was married to you... had had children by you, I wasn't supposed to say the things I felt. I was crying out against three hundred years of oppression; not against individuals" (Baraka, 1964, p. 72). And herein lies the difficulty with which Baraka grapples. The revolution is the fight either for racial justice or the preservation of the status quo. And it is the continued necessity of revolutionary action that emphasizes to us that a post-racial world cannot exist. Post-racialization never means that race no longer exists, but instead that blackness disappears; blackness is subsumed into whiteness. For Baraka, the problem of the post-racial lies in the concept's inherent necessity of assimilation, both the personalized loss of self and a much broader racial death. Is it possible to both assimilate and self-actualize? The notions are incompatible. Indeed, even in his *Dutchman* (1964), Clay - Baraka's prototypical assimilated black man - is ultimately killed.

At the end, it is uncertain whether or not Vessels' and Grace's children live. However, even this initial question becomes ultimately irrelevant as the audience is left wondering if these children *can* live. Does it matter if their deaths are literal or figurative? The children of Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement have no respite from a racialized society - a society that only reifies their sense of placelessness and nonbelonging. Ambiguity engulfs these children, even surrounding life and death as Vessels tells Grace that their daughters are dead. The audience is later privy, at denouement, to a child's cry off-stage. This child's cry, the symbolic birth of the meta-language Vessels calls into being at the outset, is a haunting echo that ties together the antebellum and postbellum periods. And, as Richard Wright (1940) states in his explanation of *Native Son*, this narrative likewise allows no "consolation of tears" (p. 454). This cry is no catharsis. It is a howl of indignation that marks the beginning of racial realization. If, as Grace asserts, Vessels "is playing the mad scene from *Native Son*. A second-rate Bigger Thomas" (Baraka, 1964, p. 57), the difference between the two men is that Vessels acts not out of fear or the impassioned realization of his lack of options, but because the revolution is the only way he can save his own black body rather than acquiesce to an assimilationist self that disallows his own actualization. Assuming a confessional tone, Vessels states that, "I, Walker Vessels, single-handedly, and with no other adviser except my own ego, promoted a bloody situation where white and black people are killing each other; despite the fact that I know that this is at best a war that will only change, ha, the complexion of tyranny..." (Baraka, 1964, p. 66). He fully acknowledges here that post-racialization, or *any* racialized utopia, is a myth. For Vessels, the only possibilities are a society that remains white over black - or an inversion that creates black over

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white. This is no “all power for all people,” but a mere reversal of supremacy. Vessels seeks a tenuous form of self-actualization, which in this revolution can only take the form of self-preservation through annihilation of all others because it is the only frame with which he is familiar.

As the play ends, there is no explanation given for Vessels’s change from slave to revolutionary, nor for his reversion back to being a slave. Certainly this transformation might imply that Black Nationalism is in itself humanizing, but why then the return to his former slave state? Despite the play’s existentialism and absurdity – indeed, its forward-looking *blackness* – it is ultimately a look at modern race relations grounded in an Afrofuturistic realism that emphasizes *realism* despite its temporal liminality. Regardless of Vessels’s efforts to agitate and enact social change, he cannot unmoor himself from the trappings of his past or of the national history. He can instead only hope to incorporate them into his current emancipatory efforts. In this way, the Afrofuturist mode reanimates ideas of rebellion as individual/collective and contemporary/ancestral spheres of being.

### Afrofuturist Reinventions, Black Womanhood, and *Kindred*

Even within this pessimistic sense of (im)probable black futurity, for Baraka there seems to be no need for black female centrality, or even presence, either in *The Slave* or more broadly in his oeuvre. Many of Baraka’s most prominent works show this marked lack of black female perspective, again signaling the phallogentrism of the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism, an artistic echo of Stokely Carmichael’s assertion, as cited by Mary King (1987), that the “position of women in SNCC

is prone.” Is the phallogentrism of Vessels’s failed revolution its cause, or its effect? Baraka notably does not engage this question—the absence of black women seems mere happenstance, as if black women are a distraction from or superfluous to the revolution’s articulation of black identity. Octavia Butler, the author of *Kindred*, is particularly conscious of both the historical and contemporary reduction of the black woman, and she approaches a remedy in her own work. Her 1979 novel introduces Dana, a 26-year-old African American woman living in 1976 who is transported from her home in California to her enslaved ancestors in antebellum Maryland (the mechanism by which she is transported is unexplained and seemingly irrelevant to the plot). *Kindred* responds to *The Slave*’s lack of black female perspective and the popular ideology of the figure of “the slave” as masculine by concentrating the text on Dana’s very personal, expressly female experience, reasserting the centrality of black womanhood for black futures. Although Butler’s work includes black male characters, none are particularly developed, and none appear in Dana’s contemporary society – her husband, in an inversion of Baraka’s earlier interest in 20th-century interraciality, is white. *The Slave* and *Kindred* are both concerned with the lasting, generational impact of the trauma of slavery and how these remnants of slavery continue to shape identity. However, while Baraka demonstrates the humanizing effect of the revolution for black men and the ways in which the revolution moved black liberation from theory to practice, Butler uses science fictional Afrofuturistic frameworks to respond to the masculinist nature of Black Nationalism in the popular imagination by instead privileging the female experience and demonstrating the myriad and important ways in which black women have always exercised resistance in America.



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For this reason, when examined as the emblems of the Afrofuturist mode that they are, *The Slave* and *Kindred* are especially interesting narratives not only because they are able to see so clearly into the past but also because of their anticipatory logic. *Kindred* was written at a time when slave narratives were beginning to be examined as their own discrete genre within African American literature, but it also emerged at the cusp of a period of critical black female literary contributions in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of these works began a new literary tradition of de-objectifying black femininity through the heightening of a fully-realized female experience - black women such as Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison, and Butler herself were writing themselves into history. What would it mean for the language of the slave to include women, not as niche *slave women*, but as an integral part of the central experience of slavery? It might naturally shift our language of black history, black futures, and black freedom. Certainly, Butler's *Kindred* is responding to the masculinized nature of much of the more famous work of the Black Arts Movement, but, like Baraka, she also seems to anticipate the future and the failures of "post-racialization" in identity formation. Indeed, even within the fantasy of the post-racial utopia, it is necessary to concede the reality of not only ancestral trauma but of interracial ancestral memory - not only who our ancestors were but who the ancestors of those we encounter were, who they bring with them when they enter a room across temporality and spatiality. Dana's narrative begins "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm" (Butler, 1976, p. 9). Dana has experienced a trauma that resulted in amputation. Presumably the pain is gone - save the phantom limb pain that may exist where nothing physically remains - but the arm is lost forever. As people encounter Dana, they wonder if her husband is responsible for her injury; he is not, but

the suspicions and doubts linger. The suggestion Butler makes here is twofold; the trauma of slavery is very real and lasting, and it is difficult to explain and assign blame in a contemporary context - Dana's husband is *not* responsible in any literal sense, but as a white man who benefited from white male privilege in their time travels *and* in the present, who benefited both literally and figuratively from slavery, does he bear some responsibility? Butler expands on this dynamic by bringing it into the 20th century and broadening the scope of interracial engagements. When considering Tom Weylin, the plantation master, Dana muses 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 the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper. But I had seen no particular fairness in him. He did as he pleased" (Butler, 1976, p. 134). Yet despite the fact that Weylin was not the worst of all slave masters, and despite the fact that he was certainly, to use an ever-present and unsatisfying explanation, *a product of his time*, Weylin was still guilty of doing "as he pleased." Indeed, it is this pushback against the simplistic notion that one can be a discrete product of one's time that marks Afrofuturism - there is no clear sense of timeliness to offer pardon within a historical frame. Instead, time is not only circular but overlaps - Dana travels from 1976 to the antebellum past and back without experiencing any spatial difference, and her arm, trapped and ultimately severed by the plaster of her reappearing home makes this lack of distance evident. Similarly, just because Weylin was not the most violent master, he is also not absolved of the sin of slavery - it becomes clear that a comparative frame cannot obscure the view of the immensity of the trauma of slavery.

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Dana's baptism into slavery comes quickly as she is held at gunpoint when first encountering Weylin. In this moment, all of Dana's preconceptions about the nature of chattel slavery are unceremoniously removed. She becomes a slave although she is literally free, despite having no personal experiences to give shape to her new circumstances. This is the reverse chiasmic moment experienced by Frederick Douglass. Instead of learning how a slave becomes a man, the audience witnesses how a 20th-century woman instantly becomes a slave without preamble. It is at this moment that Dana is fortunately jolted back into 1976. Butler uses the frame of time travel to indicate that, while modern sensibilities may temporarily allow individuals to eschew engagement with slavery, this avoidance tactic cannot permanently protect; the repercussions of slavery linger and shape an understanding of race and racialization in the postmodern era. Indeed, as Dana is ultimately a descendant of the Weylin line, this assault reminds that there is no white-adjacency that can ever protect black futures. Encounters with slavery and its effects are inescapable. Dana survives this near-death experience, but is summoned back to Maryland and the Weylin plantation multiple times at intervals outside of her own discretion. It is through this lack of choosing, and through the assertion that points on a timeline may be moveable and overlapping, that Afrofuturist inquiry emphasizes the immediacy of the past and its influence on black futurity.

On her second trip, Dana witnesses the whipping of a male slave. Butler again evokes Frederick Douglass as this moment parallels the iconic incident of Aunt Hester's scream. In Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* (1845), he describes the whipping of his Aunt Hester and her resultant screams – the first “bloody scene” to

which he bears personal witness on the plantation. It is this moment that fully elucidates for Douglass the horrors of slavery, as he was never privy to physical violence before. Suddenly, the full potential of the brutality of slavery becomes inescapable. For Dana, this is more than “seeing is believing”; now the act of witnessing becomes a rebirth all its own. It is the moment in which she is fully immersed in the terror of slavery – she is baptized in someone else's odor, blood, sweat. This scene also exemplifies Butler's important privileging of the female experience. In most literary recollections, autobiographical or otherwise, the male subject is witness to the abuse of a woman-as-object or woman-as-lesson, but now Dana is fully subjected to the trauma of the (male) object of brutalization; she gazes and is shaped and informed by the scene. Butler's decision to engage intertextually with Douglass is especially important because his experiences form the quintessential account of slavery although bereft of black female subjectivity. By locking a whipped, male slave in Dana's female gaze, Butler reverses the traditionally gendered roles and endows Dana with an ironic modicum of power within the context of slavery and imagines what black female centrality might mean for black futures as a more dynamic articulation of the black experience within Afrofuturity.

Butler continues in her examination of the stereotypes surrounding slavery by addressing Dana's interactions with Sarah. Dana describes this older slave on the Weylin plantation, saying,

She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief head, the female Uncle Tom – the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and

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who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone even less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. (Butler, 1976, p. 145).

The term "Mammy" has been used to designate a subservient performance of blackness by African Americans in the 20th century and beyond - a way to stratify and quantify blackness and black pride ideology. Dana learns soon enough that Sarah's seemingly small methods of resisting the slave system are noble, and that Sarah is, in fact, quite brave - indeed, braver than Dana herself. She performs her racialized role - just as Dana performs her role both in antebellum Maryland and in 1976. Yet Butler seeks a necessary reclamation of the mammy trope by fleshing out Sarah's character and disallowing a static portrayal - the "mammy," as such, is a fabrication. Butler reveals the private thoughts of slaves with impunity, rather than resting on safer stereotypes or maintaining critical distance to promote an abolitionist message as inoffensively as possible. Not only this, but Butler illuminates the complicated nature of the mammy trope and puts into question what specifically defines "the mammy" by describing in detail Dana's hesitant although undeniably affectionate relationship with Rufus, the master's young son. It is the insidious nature of expectations at the intersection of race and gender, emphasized by the fact that Dana returns home when she has a physiological response to fear, and she begins to return fewer and fewer times the longer she stays on the plantation. Dana becomes socialized and acclimated to the slave system, and this blurring of the line between acquiescence and revolution-between "the mammy" and resistance-is so significant within this Afrofuturist mode, as it

attempts to destratify blackness and defies simplistic and erroneous feelings of moral or mental superiority within contemporary frames.

In an effort to continue to disturb contemporary notions of black progress and selfhood, Butler's Dana is likewise judged, both in and out of time, for her relationship with Kevin. In Kevin's absence, one of Dana's ancestors, Alice, angrily tells her, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, whining and crying after some poor white trash of a man, black as you are. You always try to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people!" (Butler, 1976, p. 165). Dana's paradigm is shattered. While she had the luxury of considering herself the modern, intellectual superior, she begins to see how her behaviors are interpreted when she is - quite literally - out of time with her companions. Alice's comment shows that Dana is not without fault in the slave community and that her modern perspective does not shield her. In the 20th century, her relationship was condemned by members of both Kevin's and Dana's families, and they are viewed with the same suspicion and condemnation in the 19th century - perhaps for many of the same reasons. In her incredible *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman (1997) explains that, "The intimacy of the master and the slave purportedly operated as an internal regulator of power and ameliorated the terror indispensable to unlimited dominion. The wedding of intimacy and violent domination as regulatory norms exemplifies the logic through which violence is displaced as mutual and reciprocal desire" (p. 92). Thus Dana's relationship with Kevin as transported to the 19th century is not just problematic, it is a betrayal - willing acquiescence to a subservient, gendered role that overshadows any potential black pride.

## Looking Forward, Looking Back, continued

Likewise, Dana returns home suddenly without Kevin, while Kevin remains in antebellum Maryland for five years – a period much longer than any Dana experiences, perhaps because Kevin experiences no sense of impending danger in any temporal sphere. When they are both able to return to the present, their relationship has been dramatically altered. Kevin is uncomfortable and distant, needing time to adjust again. What is particularly troubling about this change is that Kevin has lived his entire life in the 20th century, and it only took a scant five years for him to begin to subscribe fully to the national consciousness of the 19th century. Dana explains, “He pulled away from me and walked out of the room. The expression on his face was like something I’d seen, something I was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly” (Butler, 1976, p. 194). Despite living in a society where slavery does not exist – indeed, despite having a black wife – he is as susceptible as others to the social context he is provided. Despite the fact that Kevin helped slaves escape, he cannot immediately shake the conventions that trail him back to the 20th century and, indeed, those conventions that underlie and inform his contemporary era, despite his presumable protestations. Butler indicts readers in this way, demonstrating that they cannot accept a comfortable cultural amnesia that argues that we could never be slaves and that *this* could never happen to *us* because it happens to Kevin and Dana – and it is, ultimately, unsurprising when it does. The players in the antebellum period were products of their time, *as are we all*. Butler and Baraka both view post-racialization as an impossibility. While it undeniably exists as a useful theoretical framework, even rhetorically it only functions to highlight race and to contextualize resultant social inequities, exemplified through an Afrofuturistic analysis of the lingering effects of slavery in intraracial and interracial contexts.

## Remembering Otherwise and Fluidity of Time

Both *The Slave* and *Kindred* begin with a prologue spoken in the voice of the black protagonist. This convention is especially significant because it revamps and reimagines the traditional “preface to blackness” found in slave narratives where the story is validated through the words of a white abolitionist who speaks to the legitimacy of the text and the decency of its author. In *The Slave* and *Kindred*, however, the expected “preface to blackness” becomes “blackness as preface.” Blackness now has the opportunity to stand alone and validate itself – it need not be situated in anything other than itself. Likewise, Baraka and Butler implicate their readers as they wonder how personal slavery must be for its impact to be recognized in the present. Dana ultimately kills Rufus as he – no longer the little boy she nurtured, helped to raise, and saved countless times – attempts to rape her on her last trip to antebellum Maryland. As he falls on her while she suddenly travels back to 1976, her arm is caught within the plaster of her own home as it rematerializes. She is literally and figuratively forever scarred by her engagement with slavery – the weight of slavery and the slave master lingering forever as acute trauma – and she struggles to understand what she has experienced. As she and Kevin travel to Maryland in their present day to research her ancestry, she nervously ponders why she is interested. Kevin gently posits, “You probably needed to come for the same reason I did... To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane” (Butler, 1976, p. 264). His assertion holds echoes of the white male supremacy he has come to more overtly embody – the idea that Dana, who will bear a lost arm as remnants of her time in the antebellum period, needs concrete evidence is not only absurd but

### Looking Forward, Looking Back, continued

damning evidence of his inability to empathize with Dana's experience in any effectual way. He finishes both his statement and the novel itself by saying, "And now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way" (Butler, 1976, p. 264). This is certainly a statement about slavery, but also a statement about living in a society with slavery couched in its past. It is telling that the novel ends with Kevin's certainty that they may now remain sane because Rufus's death seems to insure that Dana won't be summoned back against her will. Yet Dana never articulates this same comfort in predicted sanity, or even the possibility of sanity. As a black woman, she has been forever changed by slavery. Her scars are notable and distracting - what further "evidence" might she need? While Kevin bears a scar on his forehead, Dana loses an arm, retains the scars from whippings on her back, and suffers from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome in the most literal sense. For Kevin, this is mere inconvenience. He forgets that in their 20<sup>th</sup> century context, "the boy" has always been dead, and they've still had no chance of moving past this racialized trauma, on either ancestral or national levels, whether they physically return to the present or not.

Ultimately, the Afrofuturist mode reasserts humanity through neo-slave narratology by depicting a not-so-distant past that isn't, in fact, even past. The connection to slavery and the necessity of remembering it, and remembering it *otherwise*, grows more insistent and more acute as a response to the neoliberal impulse to be rid of race, thereby somehow eradicating racism - as if it is race, rather than racism, that merits our condemnation. Afrofuturism posits the permanence of race while refusing race itself as an inherent social ill. Instead, it acknowledges racism as an inherent evil and opens up space for black autonomy that pushes the boundaries of the

present day parameters of racialization. For this reason, the slave remains a necessary context for considering black personhood in a variety of evolving art forms. I am reminded here of Janelle Monáe's album and subsequent performances as *The Electric Lady* (2013), the pure embodiment of black liberatory spirit in both human and mechanical form. Grace D. Gipson (2016) argues that when Monáe takes on the persona of Cindi Mayweather, an android sent from the distant future to our near future to emancipate the citizens from a society without love - because aren't these conversations about emancipation and liberation and liberatory love tantamount to the black experience itself? - it is the Afrofuturist mode itself that allows her "to present new and innovative perspectives and pose questions that are not typically addressed in canonical works" (p. 92). In Monáe's articulation, futurity closely resembles the past and present, where there is no utopic sense of post-racialization or inherent equality. Ultimately, the figure of the android stands in for new neoliberal ways to marginalize beyond overt declarations of race and racism and new realms for the Other to emerge; it also represents new possibilities for revolution and freedom in the changing same of black identity. Indeed, this Afrofuturist mode opens up a space for Monáe to imagine, like Baraka, how the articulated black self might beget revolution and, like Butler, what it might mean to embrace intersectional narratives and dwell in the interstices of blackness and womanhood as revolution begins.

Saidiya Hartman (1997) argues convincingly that after emancipation,

On one hand, the constraints of race were formally negated by the stipulation of sovereign individuality and abstract equality, and on the other, racial

**Looking Forward, Looking Back, continued**

discriminations and predilections were cherished and protected as beyond the scope of law. Even more unsettling was the instrumental role of equality in constructing a measure of man or descending scale of humanity that legitimated and naturalized subordination (p. 121).

With abolition, American society ostensibly embraced notions of comparative and tacit equality while systematically marginalizing blackness and criminalizing black bodies. As society moved further away from the chattel system, the roots of this marginalization were lost and replaced by a comfortable cultural amnesia that instead suggests that a distantly sympathetic perspective will suffice in consideration of slavery – no one is accountable, no one presently benefits, and no one need consider any lasting ramifications or significance. These works seek to redeem

traditionally marginalized blackness through an Afrofuturistic mode that overtly parallels slavery with black experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond – in this way, they emphasize that slaves resisted and had a sense of black pride that is often overlooked contemporarily. Through their utilization of the past and weighty consideration of the present, both authors are attempting to elevate the overlooked humanity of African Americans by connecting the black experience through the centuries. In this way, when these neo-slave narratives are engaged through Afrofuturism, they reestablish slavery not as an overdetermining facet of black life, but instead as an inescapable reality of black existence within the national imaginary. Indeed, as these works demonstrate, there can be no black futurity *without* necessarily acknowledging slavery's impact and continued reach.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I define the post-soul aesthetic here as a new way of thinking about and engaging with both black art and black identity, temporally located in the sociocultural productions of artists who came of age *after* the Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to call the playwright Amiri Baraka rather than his former name, LeRoi Jones, in honor of the name he chose for himself, one year after the publication of *The Slave*, in response to the assassination of Malcolm X.

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic in William Hope Hodgson's *The Boats of the 'Glen-Carrig'*

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**Abstract:** William Hope Hodgson's *Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* takes the form of the 1757 travelogue of John Winterstraw who recounts his peregrinations of the wastes of the 'land of lonesomeness' and the suffocating confines of the 'weed continent'. Hodgson's early contribution to science fiction is, I propose, embodied by Winterstraw's documentation of monstrous organisms that have adapted to life in remote marine ecologies - murky, transitional spaces between land and sea. There are depths to plumb in the *Boats of the 'Glen Carrig.'* Winterstraw pens his 1757 account at the height of global exploration and in the age of scientific observation. With its characterization of the gentleman naturalist, I argue that *Boats* "anticipates" moments of discovery in Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* (1845), *Insectivorous Plants* (1875) and *Origin of the Species* (1859).

**Keywords:** Literature; Nautical Gothic; Science Fiction; Charles Darwin; William Hope Hodgson; natural philosophy

"The writer about the sea has a wealth of archetypes to draw from: the initiation; the voyage; the ship as microcosm; the phenomenal beast; a cosmology of constant flux; the uneasy division between order and chaos . . . the conflict between human and nonhuman."

From Patricia Carlson, *Literature and Lore of the Sea*

### I. Introduction

Set in far-away southern seas, *Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* (1907) takes the form of protagonist John Winterstraw's 1757 chronicle, which recounts his perilous journey to the 'land of lonesomeness' and the suffocating confines of the 'weed continent.' *Bookshelf's* 1907 review contends William Hope Hodgson's novel is "so entirely unlike any existing and popular class of fiction. . . we doubt whether, since Edgar Allen Poe wrote his famous tales, there has been a stronger achievement in the line of mystery and

horror" (81-2).<sup>1</sup> The claim of *Boats* being "unlike any existing and popular class of fiction" arises from Hodgson's contribution to a genre that is recognizable to us now, but was only incipient in the early 1900s: science fiction. Though the foundational moment continues to be debated by scholars, Stephen R. L. Clarke sees science fiction as having emerged from Enlightenment thought, a period when Western thinkers insisted on evidence-based reasoning and the collection of data, which combined to make our natural world both known and new (96). What Clarke helps us appreciate is how the impulses to explore and quantify



## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

features of the earth—as in, for example, Linnaeus’s botanical research in the eighteenth century and Darwin’s theories of evolution and adaptation in the nineteenth century—get replayed in the literary imagination.<sup>ii</sup> Winterstraw’s 1757 cataloging of peculiar marine, botanical, and terrestrial forms of life seems to signal Hodgson’s awareness of the eighteenth

-century influence on science fiction; this self-referential move is, I would say, a key feature of science fiction generally and, even more specifically, of what Dennis Berthold and Emily Alder call the nautical gothic.<sup>iii</sup> Following their critiques, I see the nautical gothic as encompassing stories set in transitional spaces between land and sea, as expressing cross-species encounters taking place on or below the water’s surface, or narrating spectacular contests that pit human technologies and our ability to think analytically against the uncannily familiar, highly adaptive and monstrous ‘other.’ But this self-referential act of writing, the liminality between land and sea, and the cross-species contest could apply to many kinds of science fiction and don’t characterize the “gothic.” For this reason, Kelly Hurley’s oft-cited analysis of the abhuman and of the influence of naturalist Charles Darwin on writers like Hodgson is invaluable.<sup>iv</sup> Hurley recognizes that Darwin explained processes and deeply described nature in ways that were incorporated in the modernist gothic writer. She writes:

Theories of the evolution of the species meant that any combination of morphic traits, any transmutation of bodily form, was possible. . . . The modernist Gothic thus stands in an opportunistic relation to the nineteenth-century sciences that while demolishing the idea of a stable human identity yet gave imaginative warrant to the richly loathsome variety of abhuman

abominations that the Gothic went on to produce. (p. 205)

Hurley’s insight allows us to understand the gothic character of Hodgson’s weed men, slug-like creatures who are familiar to us with their pale, humanoid faces, ability to stand upright, and removal of dead from scenes of battle, but sinister and otherworldly in their consumption of human blood. So from Hurley we have a clear line of inquiry from Darwin to the gothic imagination of science fiction writers like Hodgson.

Having outlined the nautical gothic as the context into which we can place *Boats of the Glen Carrig*, in what follows I seek to illustrate how Winterstraw’s eighteenth-century travelogue fictionally “anticipates” moments of discovery in Charles Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle* (1845), *Insectivorous Plants* (1875), and *Origin of the Species* (1859). In juxtaposing Darwin’s naturalist writing and Hodgson’s rendering of the weed continent, I’m struck by the shared vision and vocabulary, a point on which I shall elaborate. But, briefly, we can readily compare the four-foot-long black lizards Darwin observed in the Galapagos and writes about in *Voyage of the Beagle*—lizards that swim in the ocean and dive down among the weeds—with the amphibious webbed-feet weed-men in *The Boats of the ‘Glen-Carrig’*.<sup>v</sup> Or, similarly, we can see parallels in the predatory *Drosera* Darwin studies in *Insectivorous Plants* and the ambulatory “cabbage heads” of Hodgson’s mudflats. These are only two of many correlations that reveal Hodgson’s entry into a conversation with Darwin in his imagination of the weed continent as an alienating, surreal, and terrifying transitional marine ecology. There are depths to plumb in the *Boats of the ‘Glen Carrig’*, a masterpiece inspired not only by conventions of the mariner tale and the gothic, but by aspects of the author’s life.

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

One of Lissie Brown and Samuel Hodgson's twelve children, William Hope Hodgson (1877-1918) grew up in an educated family with limited financial resources, which may explain his gravitation to the merchant marine as an adolescent.<sup>vi</sup> Arguably the most formative moment in the author's youth was his four-year apprenticeship and certification as a mate, both of which exposed him to the expanse and profundity of the world's oceans and gave him ample knowledge of ships, their quarters, masts, lines, and devices as well as the specialized tasks of the crew. Biographers such as Alain Everts have commented on the connection between Hodgson's experiences at sea—as when he saved one of his compatriots from being taken down in the shark-infested waters of Australia—and his fiction. We find numerous episodes in which humans are snagged by mysterious adversaries of the deep in *Ghost Pirates*, *From the Tideless Sea*, "The Thing in the Weeds," and other stories in the Sargasso Sea cycle. In *Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'*, tenacious predators include colossal crabs, menacing devil-fish, and tentacled, amphibious weed men, all of which express Hodgson's equal measure of fascination with and antipathy toward the sea.<sup>vii</sup> Another important aspect of Hodgson's early life was growing up as the son of a clergyman and reckoning with the great Victorian divide between Creationism and Darwinism's theory of evolution. We might wonder, as science fiction historian Brian Stableford does, whether Hodgson's vision of antagonistic ecologies may stem from being, like Darwin, a free thinker who used writing and the study of nature to challenge fundamentalist conceptions of human life on an earth believed to be six thousand years old.<sup>viii</sup> Darwin and Hodgson express curiosity about the natural world and convey with spectacle and suspense the struggle of diverse organisms inhabiting the transitional zone between land and sea, and both acknowledge adaptation, inter-species communication and co-

operation as essential to the preservation of life. In what follows, I'd like to correlate Darwin's writing with Hodgson's, keeping in mind the concept of the nautical gothic.

## II. Voyage of the Beagle

*Voyage of the Beagle*, *Insectivorous Plants*, and *Origin of the Species* work as a canon to show how organisms are related to one another in a complex web of life; the naturalist observes adaptations that take place in the animal and vegetable world in the epic and daily struggle for survival. Darwin teaches us that careful investigation of aquatic and terrestrial environments leads to understanding of the synergies and confrontations that take place between species. Each book is based on the naturalist's tireless observation of phenomena and years devoted to collection of data. Darwin made our natural world real, quantifiable, and strange. As a collection, Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* (1851), *Insectivorous Plants* (1875) and *Origin of the Species* (1859) sensationalize hybridity, the idea of being neither this nor that, marine nor terrestrial, botanical nor zoological, but at the same time both. With its elegant prose, rich imagery, and lucid arguments, Darwin's study of nature is at the same time a triumph of scientific inquiry, a library of ideas, and fertile ground for the imagination of fiction writers. In the passage below from *Voyage of the Beagle*, Darwin reflects on what impressed him the most in circumnavigating the globe for five years.

In calling up images of the past, I find that the plains of Patagonia frequently cross before my eyes; yet these plains are pronounced by all wretched and useless. They can be described only by negative characters; without habitations, without water, without trees, without mountains, they support merely a few dwarf plants. *Why*

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

*then, and the case is not peculiar to myself, have these arid wastes taken so firm a hold on my memory? . . . I can scarcely analyze these feelings: but it must be partly owing to the free scope given to the imagination. The plains of Patagonia are boundless, for they are scarcely passable, and hence unknown: they bear the stamp of having lasted, as they are now, for ages, and there appears no limit to their duration through future time. If, as the ancients supposed, the flat earth was surrounded by an impassable breadth of water, or by deserts heated to an intolerable excess, who would not look at these last boundaries to man's knowledge with deep but ill-defined sensations?*

In this moment, Darwin compares the unfolding of human time, which can be parceled out in the notations of a journal, with the vast, nearly incomprehensible passage of geological time manifest in the "arid wastes" and "boundless" plains of Patagonia. He imagines the earth as it was perceived by the ancients—flat and surrounded by water—and yet assures us through his own voyage that the terrain can be navigated, ecosystems studied, strange new organisms classified. Does Darwin foresee his own role in inspiring future writing about nature—whether real or imagined? I would say he does - for what is Hodgson's work if not an examination of remote boundaries that fill the reader with "deep but ill-defined sensations"? Let us probe how, specifically, *Boats and Voyage of the Beagle* can be read in conversation with one another.

After his astounding journey on the *Beagle* in 1831, Darwin imparted a perspective that helped readers to understand humankind's place in the natural order. He shared with his readers a curiosity, scientific vocabulary, and explanation of ani-

mal, marine, and vegetable organisms that made more visible the highly differentiated and remarkable life forms of earth. It is this inquisitiveness that unites Darwin and Winterstraw as narrators of their respective voyages. In the land of loneliness—which has much in common with Darwin's Patagonia—Winterstraw pauses to observe an odd excrescence on a tree, and he is tempted to cut it off as a "curio." Similarly, when a weed man dies in battle, Winterstraw is curious about its anatomy and tries to get a closer look at the pale, maimed, floating body. This impulse to inspect "anticipates" Darwin's extensive collecting of fish, coral, animals, birds, insects on his voyage from 1831-1835—the hundreds if not thousands of unfortunate specimens that were fished, bottled, shot, or pinned, transported to England, and housed in the Darwin Centre of the Natural History Museum.<sup>ix</sup>

So too does Winterstraw's description of the weed continent offer a striking parallel to Darwin's writing about kelp beds. In his systematic and careful way, Darwin looks with a broad perspective at the great islands of seaweed before examining more minutely the ecosystem they sustain. He writes "The number of living creatures of all orders, whose existence intimately depends on the kelp, is wonderful. *A great volume might be written describing the inhabitants of one of those beds of seaweed*" (Darwin *Voyage of the Beagle*, 169). This is followed by description of the leaves and a view of the roots, which reveals:

a pile of small fish, shells, cuttlefish, crabs of all orders, sea eggs, starfish, beautiful Holothuridae, Planariae, and crawling nereidous animals of a multitude of forms all fall out together. Often as I recurred to a branch of the kelp, I never failed to discover animals of new and curious structures." (*Voyage* 169, italics mine).

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

Hodgson has written that “great volume” with *Boats of the ‘Glen Carrig.’* As Darwin notes, kelp islands give rise to a variety of marine organisms such as crabs and cuttlefish, both of which appear as predators in *Boats*. Hodgson adds to the mix the perplexingly familiar yet bizarre weed man, which shares traits of two notable species mentioned in *Voyage of the Beagle*: the leech of Argentina and the aquatic lizard of the Galapagos. Like the leech, which engorges itself to spectacular proportions, the weed men suck the blood out of their prey and leave suction marks. Like the four-foot-long black lizards that Darwin observed in the Galapagos diving down into the ocean, Hodgson gives readers the amphibious webbed-foot weed men. Darwin writes of this aquatic lizard: “When in the water this lizard swims with perfect ease and quickness, by a serpentine movement of its body and flattened tail—the legs being motionless and closely collapsed on its sides” (386). While *Journey of Voyage of the Beagle* correlates with many aspects of the weed continent in Hodgson’s work, the hybrid organisms of the land of lonesomeness—sentient, mobile, botanical creatures—resonate with the findings of Darwin’s *Insectivorous Plants*.

### III. Hybridity, Mobility, and Sentience in *Insectivorous Plants*

Along with the transitional ecologies and weed islands surveyed in *Voyage of the Beagle*, I contend that processes explained in *Insectivorous Plants* get reworked in the mudflats of the land of lonesomeness in *Boats of the ‘Glen Carrig.’*<sup>x</sup> It is these transitional zones that give life to creatures indeterminate in structure, neither wholly vegetable nor mammalian. Such hybridity is disturbing, and it emerges on three occasions. First, Winterstraw, the bo’sun, and crew find themselves navigating a wasteland of primordial mud and stop to explore an abandoned derelict. They

board the vessel and appropriate its stores to replenish their own; sated on rum and a good meal, they prepare to sleep when they hear sounds of invasion. An amorphous creature tries to gain entry into their cabin and the ever-capable bo’sun jumps into action:

Then, even as he made sure of the fastenings, there came a cry of fear from some of the men; for there had come at the glass of the unbroken window, a reddish mass, which plunged up against it, sucking upon it, as it were. Then Josh, who was nearest to the table, caught up the candle, and held it towards the Thing; thus I saw that it had the appearance of a many-flapped thing shaped as it might be, out of raw beef—but *it was alive.* (Hodgson p. 19)

While we might think of this “many-flapped thing” that searches with sucking appendages and an unwavering appetite for human flesh as marine or mammalian, it is most likely a spongy tree that invades and probes the openings of the vessel<sup>xi</sup>. Winterstraw figures out the habits of this predator by observing, collecting and putting into order clues on the ship: gold coins that no one would willingly leave behind, the broken shuttle, and notes written by a young English lady who embarked on a journey with her fiancé only to be left marooned. He assesses these traces of human existence to figure out that the fleshy, many-flapped creature is a “monster after the fashion of trees.” What Winterstraw expresses here is the idea of botanical organisms that are mobile and predatory, a conclusion that offers a parallel to the intricate studies of plants Linnaeus conducted at this time and predates—according to the 1750s setting—Darwin’s study of protein-eating plants.

The idea of mobility and consumption of protein are key concepts in Darwin’s *Insectivorous*

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

*Plants*, which focuses primarily on species of the sundew, pictured in Figure 1. Published in 1875, the volume begins with Darwin's reflection on what led him to this research: "During the summer of 1860, I was surprised how large a number of insects were caught by the leaves of the common sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*). I had heard that insects were thus caught, but knew nothing further on the subject" (p. 2). In the following chapters, Darwin goes on to study the number and kinds of insects caught in various species of the sundew; how plants trap prey, how their tentacles move, and how they break down and absorb nourishment. He explains that owing to the consumption of insect protein rather than absorption of nutrients in the soil, these plants can thrive where other botanicals cannot. My proposition is that Hodgson elaborates on the idea of a protein-eating plant in the attack of the cabbage-head episode and in the encounter with the two faced tree.

In the land of lonesomeness--where botanical growths are largely stunted--the bo'sun directs the crew to mount a riverbank to search for a spring of fresh water. This is accomplished. While return-

ing to the lifeboat, the adventurous apprentice, George, leaves the safety of the crew to retrieve a sword that has been left behind. On his way back to the boat, George is pursued by a cabbage-headed shrub, a monstrous vegetable that has a lot in common with the fly trap and sundew that Darwin studies in *Insectivorous Plants*. In his botanical study, Darwin acknowledges the challenge of writing about the Sundew and the Venus Fly Trap. The challenge lay in the kinds of words to use to describe these species, to convey accurately their movement and appearance. Of the structure of the seemingly innocuous Sundew, Darwin writes: "Several eminent physiologists have discussed the homological nature of these appendages or tentacles, that is, whether they ought to be considered as hairs (trichomes) or prolongations of the leaf" (*Insectivorous Plants*, p. 5). Here, Darwin uses the words "appendage" and "hair," which are mammalian, as well as 'tentacle,' which is associated with marine organisms, and 'leaf,' which is botanical. A similar problem surfaces when Darwin describes the processes and movements of the Venus flytrap in Chapter XII (Figure 1):

Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

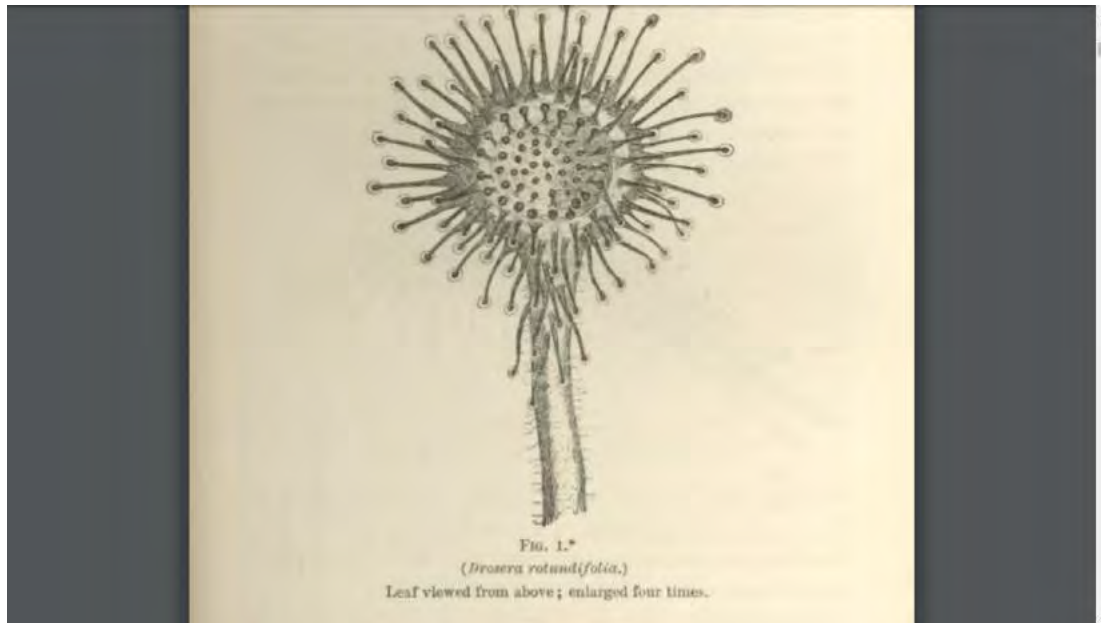


Figure 1: Drawing of a Sundew from Darwin's "Insectivorous Plants," p. 3

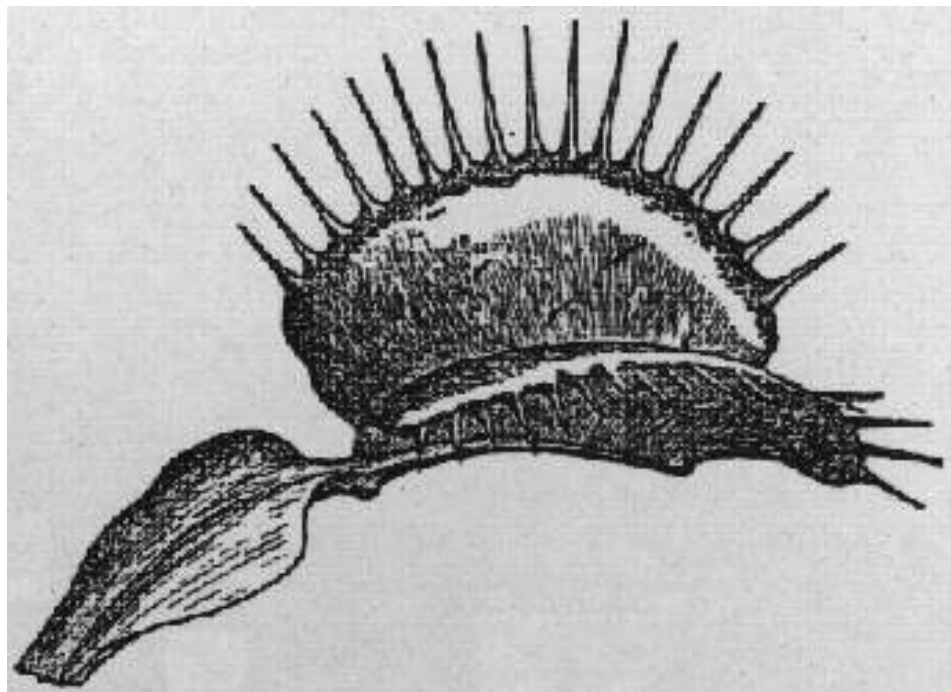


Figure 2: *Dionaea muscipula* (Darwin, *Insectivorous Plants* 287)

Darwin elaborates on the "rapid movement of the lobes caused by irritation of the filaments" as

well as "slow movement caused by the absorption of animal matter" in the flytrap (Figure 2; *Insectiv-*

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

orous *Plants*, p. 287; 297). Like the sundew, the flytrap snares its prey and absorbs the insect protein.<sup>xii</sup> Similarly, Hodgson's cabbage-headed plants thrive in mudflats; they are mobile and able to readily identify and pursue their prey, in this case the apprentice: ". . . George cried out, and ran around upon my side of the bo'sun, and I saw that one of the great cabbage-like things pursued him upon its stem, even as an evil serpent; and very dreadful it was, for it had become blood red in colour" (25). The cabbage heads are sentient *and* communicative; they halloo to their vegetable kin, in preparation for a concerted attack.<sup>xiii</sup> Along with the cabbage-headed plants in the land of lonesomeness is the equally mobile, sentient, and two-faced tree which Winterstraw describes below:

We made out a tree some twenty yards away, which had all its branches wrapped about its trunk, much as the lash of a whip is wound about its stock. . . we. . . walked each of us around the tree, and were more astonished, after our circumnavigation of the great vegetable than before. Now, suddenly, and in the distance, I caught the far wailing that came before the night, and abruptly, as it seemed to me, the tree wailed at us. . . .At that I was vastly astonished and frightened; yet, though I retreated, I could not withdraw my gaze from the tree; but scanned it the more intently; and suddenly, I saw a brown, human face peering at us from beneath the wrapped branches. At this, I stood very still, being seized with that fear which renders one shortly incapable of movement. Then, before I had possession of myself, I saw that it was of a part with the trunk of the tree; for I

could not tell where it ended and the tree began. (p. 15-16)

Intelligent with sentience and mobility, the tree is a synthesis of mammalian and botanical features. Hodgson imagines a tree that moves—as plants can in nature—as a botanical-zoological hybrid. At this moment, we might remember the lady passenger who was the last survivor of the abandoned vessel. The lady's note Winterstraw references earlier—one of many she leaves in the ship—states: "But I hear my lover's voice wailing in the night, and I go to find him; for my loneliness is not to be borne. May God have mercy upon me!" (Hodgson 26). It is her face embedded within the tree—a compelling example of how Hodgson repurposes myth of Baucis and Philemon and modifies it with the fabulous detail of the naturalist. In so doing, Hodgson poses for us the problem of scientific classification: is the tree botanical or mammalian? Is it a male or female, victim or predator?

With this spectacle of the tentacle, which unites the botanical and zoological, Hodgson enters into a rich literary conversation with his contemporaries. His compatriots George Griffith, H.G. Wells, and Frank Aubrey all rewrite, to varying extents, Darwin's ideas into their botanical and mammalian hybrids, dramatizing the human fear of the tentacle.<sup>xiv</sup> Wells uses the invasive, sensing tentacle to characterize the alien creatures in *War of the Worlds*; Griffith uses it in *Honeymoon in Space*, where lagoon-dwelling predators with long tentacles seize humanoid Martians. Similarly, Aubrey uses the tentacle in his vegetable nightmare, *Devil Tree of El Dorado*. All of the writers tap into a fear of being grabbed, squeezed, and devoured.

Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued



Figure 3: On the left, Lawrence Sterne Sterling's illustration for Hodgson's *Boats of the 'Glen-Carrig.'* Right: plate from F. Aubrey's *The Devil Tree of El Dorado.*

In the image illustrating Hodgson's novel on the left, we see Lawrence Sterne Sterling's interpretation of the hybrid tree with its aggressive, phallic tentacles entrapping the naked, female figure. A similar scene, on the right, can be found in Aubrey's novel, one in which the devil tree catches its prey with tentacle-like branches, depositing the blood-drained corpses into its gaping "mouth." Once in its clutches, no creature can escape—the tree is used as a form of execution/sacrifice as cruel priests order human victims to be directed into its aperture. In *Boats of the 'Glen Carrig,'* nature is impartial, the same perspective that Darwin conveys in his body of work. In both Darwin and Hodgson, those who think quickly and adapt to the hazards of their environments survive while others perish.

**IV. The Origin of the Species**

In *Origin of the Species*, Darwin argues that survival depends on an organism's ability to adapt to its terrain, its climate, and its relation to other organisms. In *Boats*, Winterstraw points out several instances in which humans fail to meet the challenges posed by nature. First, the unseen casualties associated with the "ship cemetery"; then the ordinary seaman Job is attacked by a devil-fish and later "be-bled" by the weed men; later Tompkins disappears in the fray with the weed men; and finally the captain's wife on the *Seabird* is snatched by the weed men. These casualties reveal the individual inability to anticipate, fend off, or adapt to predators.



## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

With the gaze of the naturalist and very much in concert with Darwin's chapter on Natural Selection in *Origin of the Species*, Winterstraw chronicles the way that organisms adapt and evolve in ways that are favorable to their survival. He describes the humongous crabs that deploy their strong claws to grab prey and the devil-fish that senses movement and light above the surface of the water in its quest for food. The weed men are another horrifying adaptation, moving easily between the subterranean caverns that give entry into the volcanic island and the beds of sea kelp in the weed continent. Hodgson makes it deliberately unclear if weed men represent an evolutionary ancestor or a terrifying future. When fending off these hybrid creatures, Winterstraw has a "clear vision of many white, hideous faces stretched out towards me, and brown, champing mandibles which had the upper beak shutting into the lower". . . "the clumped, wriggling tentacles were all a-flutter." They could easily represent the obscure origins of life on earth as translucent, tentacled, amphibious creatures. So too could they represent the future of the human race with the evolutionary loss of hands and feet and the acquisition of appendages useful in a marine, transitional ecology.

In *Boats*, humans learn to adapt too, and that is the triumph of this epic adventure. Winterstraw and his companions learn from the mistakes of others and are resourceful in removing provisions from the derelict vessel. When the mariners establish camp on the volcanic island, they fend off colossal crabs by poking their eyes out and catch some of the smaller ones to eat. Botanical abominations sprout throughout the land, but the bo'sun and Winterstraw learn to manage these extraordinary growths. For example, the seaweed, though pervasive and menacing in the sea—as it traps ships and camouflages predators—can be dried and burnt as fuel. Reeds growing on the island are cut and fashioned into weapons—as cut

and thrusts. Even the gigantic odiferous mushrooms can be burnt as a deterrent to the advances of weed men. The bo'sun figures out that the weed men dwell in the murky depths of the valley, and he therefore finds safety on higher ground:

Presently, we were come to the top, and here we found a spacious place, nicely level save that in one or two parts it was crossed by deepish cracks...but apart from these and some great boulders it was, as I have mentioned, a spacious place; moreover it was bone dry and pleasantly firm under one's feet, after so long upon the sand.

I think, even thus early, I had some notion of the bo'sun's design; for I went to the edge that overlooked the valley, and peered down, and finding it nigh a sheer precipice, found myself nodding my head, as though it were in accordance with some part formed wish...Then I put it straight to the bo'sun that here would make indeed a very secure camping place, with nothing to come us upon our sides or back; and our front, where was the slope, could be watched with ease. (Hodgson 66)

This adaptation to a hostile environment represents the human ascension in the evolutionary ladder, for by establishing camp on a hill, the crew is able to survey the land and sea and fight off predators. Most importantly, their ascension allows them to view and establish communication with the *Seabird*, a ship engulfed by weeds.

Darwin points out in *Origin of the Species* that cooperation between members of the same species—notably ants and bees—is critical to its survival.<sup>xv</sup> Reworking this idea, Hodgson shows

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

how the crew of the *Glen Carrig* and *Seabird*, an English vessel that has been wedged in the weed continent for seven years, instinctively regard each other as allies. They recognize each other through the trademark technology of humankind: a light on the ship made from distilling fish oil and fires on the hill, fueled by dried weed. The mission to rescue the party of the *Seabird* is accomplished through the casting of a line between the boats and the correspondence that develops between Mary Madison, the *Seabird's* scribe, and Winterstraw. Working together, the two crews defy the fate of the vessels that we see earlier in the narrative, the ones that make up the "ship cemetery." They communicate effectively and share resources and strategies.

The *Seabird* has resisted attack for seven years because its passengers understand that the devil-fish associate light and movement with prey; consequently, its crew erects a great superstructure of canvas to prevent the creature from monitoring human movement. This tango of mutual adaptation represents the genius of Hodgson's novel, which ends after passengers from both boats combine forces to free the ship from the weeds, to enjoy each other's company, and to prepare for the voyage home to England. Moments such as eating biscuits or being fortified with rum as well as letter writing allow for humans to pause, reflect, and develop relationships—as with the friendship between Winterstraw and the Bo' sun; and romance between Maid Mary Madison and Winterstraw. This romance—and eventual marriage and son—could be considered a triumph of natural selection where two humans who skillfully adapt and survive become parents to the next generation. The young couple overcome nature's fierce obstacles, and their union creates a readership for the story itself, passed on as it is to their son and a wider audience.<sup>xvi</sup> Thus writing be-

comes another—though different—legacy to be enjoyed by future audiences.

Writing as a cultural inheritance plays out in Hodgson's own life. After his untimely death in WWI—in Ypres in 1918 at the young age of 40—Hodgson's work might have fallen into obscurity. As noted by Jeremy Jessen in a recent edition of *Boats*, it was Mrs. Hodgson who struggled for the next twenty-five years to keep his work in print. By the 1930s, Hodgson's fiction earned the praise and attention of H.P. Lovecraft, who could be considered the master of the weird with the—now familiar—monstrous creature of *Call of Cthulhu* or the tentacled hybridity of the Old Ones in *At the Mountains of Madness*. While it is outside the scope of this paper to excavate the artistic vision uniting Hodgson and Lovecraft, it would not be controversial to say that Lovecraft succeeded in promoting his work, while Hodgson fell into relative obscurity. A mere twenty years between them accounts for the difference, and in this time, we find the publication of magazines such as *Amazing Stories*, which provided an outlet for science fiction writers. These, in turn, have been excavated and studied by genre historians Everett Bleiler, Richard Bleiler, Sam Moskowitz, and Brian Stableford. More recently, we can find parallels between Hodgson and the botanical attack on humans in John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* and with New Weird writer China Mièville's publication of *Kracken*, an absurdly weird novel centered—if there is a center—around the disappearance of a giant squid from the Darwin center of the Natural History Museum. Given the scientific discourses that Hodgson engages and his likely influence on other writers—not yet fully revealed—there is certainly much more critical work to be done with *Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'*. It is this novel that understands the origins of the classic mariner tale and offers a twist with the nautical gothic; it is this novel that pays tribute to the eighteenth-century origins of

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

science fiction and elaborates on the newly sub-genre of the nautical gothic by playfully “anticipat-

ing” Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*, *Origin of the Species* and *Insectivorous Plants*.

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## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

### Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Praise of Hodgson's work—notably *Boats of the 'Glen Carrig,' Ghost Pirates, and House on the Borderland*—is reiterated in 1919 by C.S. Evans in "The Lure of The Occult," in *Bookman* (vol. 57). In his study of the ghost story, Evans provides one literary context for Hodgson's work, including stories by E.A. Poe, H. James, E. Bulwer-Lytton, and M.R. James.
- <sup>ii</sup> Linnaeus's work is probably a point of departure for Darwin's research of insect eating plants. Linnaeus sent out a number of "apostles," many of whom never returned. Along with Linnaeus, Alexander Humboldt is probably the most important naturalist and explorer of the eighteenth century in the Southern hemisphere. La Condamine is also important; see M.L. Pratt's account of the ill-fated La Condamine expedition in South America in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992).
- <sup>iii</sup> D. Berthold seems to have coined the phrase "nautical gothic" in his essay about stories of adventure and discovery set around Cape Horn, in P. Carlson's edited volume *Literature and Lore of the Sea*. More recently, E. Alder adopts the concept of the nautical gothic in her reading of the role of the ship the *Demeter* in Stoker's *Dracula* (in *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*).
- <sup>iv</sup> A. Camera and E. Alder recognize, as does K. Hurley, the Darwinian elements of Hodgson's fiction. See E. Alder's "Always Sea and Sea: *The Night Land* as Sea-scape". See also A. Camera's "We who had been human became—? Some Dark Ecological Thoughts on William Hope Hodgson's 'The Voice in the Night.'" In this brilliant study, Camera uses his training as a biologist to explain the perplexing relation between fungus and humans in Hodgson's short story.
- <sup>v</sup> Thanks to Victorian scholar J. Arnold for pointing out the connection between *Voyage of the Beagle* and Hodgson while reading a draft of this essay.
- <sup>vi</sup> An Anglican clergyman, Samuel Hodgson faced the herculean task of supporting his large family, which accompanied him on his missions throughout England and Ireland; he died in middle age (Everts). Hodgson's mother, Lissie Brown, attended finishing school in Belgium and was the daughter of a prosperous engineer. She advocated for the education of her sons and daughters, especially after her husband died.
- <sup>vii</sup> The connection between Hodgson's time spent asea and his writing is manifest in the only critical journal devoted to Hodgson's work, *Sargasso*.
- <sup>viii</sup> Brian Stableford makes this connection between Darwin and Hodgson in *Science Fact and Science Fiction*. Yet while Hodgson and Darwin embrace scientific thought, both writers express their vision within a narrative which calls on God for deliverance or acknowledges the infinite majesty of nature as divine creation.
- <sup>ix</sup> Many of these specimens can be viewed at the Darwin Centre in the National History Museum in London, which the author of this essay has had the privilege to view.

## Darwin and the Nautical Gothic, continued

<sup>x</sup> In her analysis of Ursula LeGuin's "Vaster than Empires and More Slow," L. Schneekloth argues, rightly, that "Plants are the ultimate alien." C.B. Price examines the imagery of carnivorous plants in "Vegetable monsters: Man-eating trees in fin de siècle fiction."

<sup>xi</sup> Thanks to the reviewer of this essay for pointing this out.

<sup>xii</sup> See, again, C.B. Price. Price uses Darwin's *Insectivorous Plants* to inform a reading of, among other texts, F. Aubrey's *Devil Tree of El Dorado*.

Hodgson's cabbage-headed plants anticipate, by forty-four years, J. Wyndham's 1951 masterpiece of science fiction, *Day of the Triffids*.<sup>xiii</sup> In Wyndham's novel, made into classic film, the English grow Triffids as a food source and allay fears about being able to feed an increasingly growing population. The tall, spikey plants rebel and launch a deadly and effective full-scale counterattack made possible by the fact that they communicate with each other, are ambulatory, and use their stingers to deadly effect.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Boats's* weed men and devil-fish precede the tentacles of H.P. Lovecraft's "Call of Cthulhu" (1928) and China Mièville's *Kraken* (2010). Lovecraft and Mièville admired Hodgson's fiction.

<sup>xv</sup> See Darwin's discussion of mistletoe and woodpecker in Chapter 3 and interspecies cooperation (albeit hierarchical) in bees and ants in Chapter 7 of *Origin of the Species*.

<sup>xvi</sup> I thank M. Popescu for pointing out that romance is the ultimate expression of survival of the human species, what she calls 'triumphant adaptation.'

## Calls for Volunteers

The JOSF has grown by leaps and bounds, and we're now receiving a consistent stream of scholarly submissions. Our special issue on Afrofuturism, in particular, drew a large number of high-quality pieces. We expect to see similar response to our next special issue on disability in science fiction, slated for early 2019. The journal's reception has been gratifying, as well: in the past year, the JOSF has been added to EBSCO's holdings, which is an acknowledgment of the journal's scholarly quality.

All of that good news creates a significant challenge: we need more staff! If you're interested in being part of the JOSF, please contact us and get involved. Working with the JOSF is a great opportunity to help shape a young, exciting publication and see the scholarly process in all of its stages. We welcome applications from experienced scholars, early-career scholars, and advanced graduate students, as well as scholarly readers from outside academia.

If you're interested in volunteering with us, please read the descriptions of the different roles and let us know which job(s) you're interested in! Send an email to Heather McHale, managing editor, at [heather.mchale@museumofsciencefiction.org](mailto:heather.mchale@museumofsciencefiction.org), specifying what job you wish to apply for and including some details about your qualifications and/or a copy of your current CV.

### Peer Review Coordinator

This person manages and oversees the process of peer review for the JOSF—a process that is central to our mission and purpose. The Peer Review Coordinator will work closely with the managing editor.

The peer review coordinator's duties include:

- Tracking manuscripts through the stages of peer review, using the OJS system. (No experience with OJS is necessary, as long as you're willing to invest a bit of time learning to use it!)
- Emailing the journal's editors to request their votes about whether to send an article to peer review.
- Identifying, contacting, and securing appropriate peer reviewers for each manuscript that the editors vote to send to review.
- Guiding reviewers through the process.
- Following up, if necessary, to make sure that reviewers complete their reviews in a timely fashion.
- Emailing the editors of the journal with the reviewers' comments to ask for votes on whether the JOSF should accept an article.
- Contacting the authors of declined articles to offer constructive feedback (based on the reviewer's comments and the editors' remarks).
- Notifying the Managing Editor when the editorial group votes to accept an article.

Many of these functions will be assumed by the managing editor for the annual themed issue of the journal; for that issue, the peer review coordinator will serve as a support person for the managing editor.

These functions are the core of an academic journal's work, and it is essential that the JOSF's peer review coordinator understands and respects the confidentiality and purpose of peer review. This is an excellent position for an advanced graduate student or early-career scholar who wishes to get some experience with the scholarly publication process.

Because the JOSF accepts submissions all year long, this person should be able to dedicate time each week to the journal and be prepared to contact the Managing Editor if they will be out of contact for more than a week. The amount of time required for this position varies widely, depending on how many submissions we receive.

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This person transforms the copy for the journal into a readable, visually appealing final product. The layout editor's duties include:

- working with the final, copyedited text for each article to produce PDF and EPUB versions consistent with the journal's visual identity;
- Collating these into a complete issue of the journal for download from the website;
- Creating the cover of the journal (using artwork provided by the managing editor).

The JOSF is published three times per year; layout work would mostly be needed in the month leading up to publication of each issue. The JOSF usually contains 3-6 articles per issue, plus front matter, author bios, and the cover, totaling somewhere in the vicinity of 60-90 pages.

We are particularly interested in finding a volunteer for this position who has knowledge or prior experience with improving accessibility for screen readers and other assistive technology; however, any volunteer with layout experience is welcome to apply.

### **General Editorial Staff**

As the number of submissions to the JOSF grows, our general editorial staff must also grow—so we're looking for more editors to join our team!

Editors should have some experience with scholarly publication, at least as readers. Writing experience—either for scholarly publication or for graduate coursework/dissertation—also desired.

Core duties, expected of all JOSF editors, include:

- Reading incoming submissions and voting on whether or not articles are sent to peer review;
- Once an article has been through peer review, reading the reviewer's report and casting a vote on whether the JOSF should publish the article;
- Providing substantive, constructive feedback to article authors—combining tact with intellectual rigor.

JOSF editors may also participate in other functions of the journal, such as helping to plan themed issues; however, their most important tasks are evaluating the incoming submissions and working directly with

authors to guide revisions. We accept and edit submissions year round, so editors should be available at least weekly to read and vote on submissions. Each editor should expect to provide substantive editorial feedback on at least three articles per year.

In other words: join our team and help shape the future of science fiction criticism. The JOSF is growing, but we're still a small enough publication to provide supportive, detailed feedback to our authors. You can be part of the reason that the JOSF is a great place to publish!

### Copy Editors

The JOSF's copy editors carry out a variety of tasks, working with the final version of an article:

- Correct errors of grammar, spelling, usage, etc.;
- Make judicious edits to improve clarity, readability, and style;
- Catch errors (or ambiguities) of fact or attribution and request clarification from the author if needed;
- Ensure that all citations are correct and complete in APA style.

A copy editor should be an expert at sentence-level revision, with a good eye for clear, concise expression. The JOSF also requires APA style expertise and familiarity with the conventions of scholarly writing. We do not administer a copy editing test—instead, the managing editor may send a sample article for you to copy edit to give us an idea of your style and experience.

Copy editors are needed leading up to the publication of each issue. This is a great role for a grad student or scholar who wants to contribute to the JOSF, but doesn't want to commit time to the journal every single week.

### Peer Reviewers

Peer reviewers are the unsung heroes of the scholarly process: they dedicate their time and intellectual effort to providing useful, detailed feedback on manuscripts, some of which will never be published. Many of our JOSF readers already serve as peer reviewers, and we are very grateful for your support!

If you are not a peer reviewer and you'd like to be, email Aisha Matthews at [aisha.matthews@museumofsciencefiction.org](mailto:aisha.matthews@museumofsciencefiction.org). Please include a description of your area(s) of scholarly expertise and attach a copy of your CV. You can also go into the journal's [website](#) and make sure that you have a) checked "reviewer" in your subscriber bio and b) included a description of your areas of study. We can't invite you review a submission if we don't know what area you study!

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The *Journal of Science Fiction* is always on the lookout for reviews of science-fiction works, both academic and fiction, and welcomes submissions and book review requests from all scholars.

Our current list of Books Available for Review is as follows:



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- *Codex Orfeo: A Novel*, by Michael Charles Tobias (2017)
- *The Dark Arrow of Time*, by Massima Villata (2018)
- *Excavating the Future: archaeology and geopolitics in contemporary North American science fiction film and television*, by Shawn Malley (2018)
- *Hollyweird Science: The Next Generation - From Spaceships to Microchips*, by Kevin R. Grazier & Stephen Cass (2017)
- *The Hunt for FOXP5: A Genomic Mystery Novel*, by Wallace Kaufman & David Deamer (2016)
- *J.G. Ballard (Modern Masters of Science Fiction)*, by D. Harlan Wilson (2017)
- *Lingua Cosmica: science fiction from around the world*, by Dale Knickerbocker (ed.) (2018)
- *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*, by Anita Tarr and Donna R. White (eds.) (2018)
- *Rarity from the Hollow*, by Robert Eggleton (2017)
- *Science Fiction by Scientists: An Anthology of Short Stories*, by Michael Brotherton, ed. (2017)
- *Zion's Fiction: a treasury of Israeli speculative literature*, by Sheli Teitelbaum, Emanuel Lottem and Avi Katz, eds. (2018)
- *Zombies in Western Culture: a twenty-first century crisis*, by John Vervaeke, Christopher Mastropietro and Filip Miscevic (2018)

This list is updated regularly, and can also be viewed [here](#). Alternatively, if you have a **specific SF/F work that you would like to review**—whether a scholarly work, novel, story collection, TV show, film, or video game—we would be very happy to hear from you. Contact Thomas Connolly at [thomas.connolly@museumofsciencefiction.org](mailto:thomas.connolly@museumofsciencefiction.org).

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### Editors

**Heather McHale** (Managing Editor) holds a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Maryland (USA). She is a teacher and advisor for the University of Maryland's Institute of Applied Agriculture. Her current work in progress is a book about the television series *Doctor Who*; her research interests range from science fiction and detective fiction to Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope. She is also one of the co-editors of the MOSF's recent takehome exhibit, *Catalysts, Explorers, and Secret Keepers: Women of Science Fiction*.

**Aisha Matthews** (Assistant Managing Editor) is also the Director of Literary Programming for the MOSF's annual *Escape Velocity* conference. She is a doctoral student in English at Southern Methodist University, where she studies 20th and 21st Century American Literature, African-American Literature, Women's and Gender Studies, and Postmodern theory. Her personal research interests include science and speculative fictions, Afrofuturism, disability literature, young adult science fiction, and Potter studies.

**Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay** (Editor) holds a Ph.D. in Literature—with a focus on science fiction from the late 19th to mid-20th century Britain and Bengal—from the University of Oslo (Norway), where he is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the history of science (medicine). He employs science studies approaches to the study of science fiction, with an emphasis on medicine, health and race discourses.



**Thomas Connolly** (Editor) holds a Ph.D. from Maynooth University in Kildare, Ireland. His research examines the concept of the 'human' in Anglo-American sf using posthumanist and spatio-temporal theories. He completed both his BA in English and Mathematical Physics and his MA in twentieth-century Irish literature and cultural theory in Maynooth University, and was the recipient in 2012 of the John and Pat Hume Doctoral Scholarship.

**Jandy Hanna** (Editor) holds a Ph.D. in anthropology and anatomy and is a faculty member at West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine (USA), where she is also the chair of the biomedical sciences department. She is a comparative anatomist and functional morphologist by trade, and she recently completed a master's thesis in research bioethics on cognition in great apes as evidence for personhood.

**Barbara Jasny** (Editor) holds a Ph.D. from Rockefeller University (USA) and her career has been science-first, performing research in molecular biology and virology and then becoming a research Editor and Deputy Editor for Science magazine. She has communicated science through books, articles, posters, art displays, virtual presentations, meetings, digital media, and podcasts.

**Melanie Marotta** (Editor) holds a Ph.D. in English from Morgan State University (USA), where she is currently a Lecturer in the Department of English and Language Arts. She is originally from the province of Ontario in Canada, and her research focuses on science fiction, the American West, contemporary American Literature, and Ecocriticism.