



## **Power and Vulnerability: BlackGirlMagic in Black Women’s Science Fiction**

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**Abstract:** #Blackgirlmagic has become a mode of digital resistance against the devaluation of black women and girls. But it has also provoked criticism by black feminists who question the movement’s political potential given its propensity towards foregrounding the beautiful and the able bodied. Further, such critics have interrogated its reinscription of a “strong black woman” narrative that trivializes black women’s pain and demands their labor rather than addressing the conditions that necessitate their allegedly superhuman strength (Hobson, 2016). This analysis of Black women’s science fiction proposes a different perspective on both Black girls and their magic, which attributes power to positions of vulnerability and ‘otherhuman’ possibility.

**Keywords:** #blackgirlmagic, Afrofuturism, Octavia Butler, Harriet Tubman, disability studies, Nalo Hopkinson

Black feminism is a long, powerful, and plural tradition of theory, activism, and artistic expression currently experiencing a higher public presence than perhaps ever before through its proliferation in contemporary entertainment and digital cultures. Social media activism, Black Twitter, and online spaces such as the Crunk Feminist Collective (Barner, 2016) have collectively helped to increase the diverse visibility of the black female body and voice while providing new spaces for the negotiation and development of Black feminist politics in the popular sphere. Much of the digital activity surrounding black femininity has been centered on the contestation of the stereotypes that embody and exemplify black exclusion from the normative categories of beauty, humanity, and citizenship. There are good reasons, both psychic and political, for such a focus. Though

contemporary mass media demonstrates more instances than ever of representation and celebration of black women, it also circulates images—of aggression, hypersexuality, anger—that at least partly underlie the extraordinary amounts of violence, surveillance, discrimination, and deprivation that black women face in their daily lives. Some critics (Hobson, 2016) have observed how the visual politics of digital black feminism and black femininity seem to rely too heavily upon beauty and glamour, centering the pretty, abled, slender body in a politics of celebration easily co-opted by the neoliberal capitalist project and failing to critique the conditions and violence that most virulently attack the most vulnerable of black lives. Critics (Chavers, 2016) also suggests that this idea of “magic” reinscribes a “strong black woman” narrative that trivializes black women’s pain and demands their labor rather than addressing



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the conditions that necessitate their allegedly superhuman strength.

With these factors in mind, I wonder if, perhaps, *BlackGirlMagic* could serve other purposes. As black women's science fiction does not limit itself to the Western construct of science alone, frequently incorporating what many call magic, the genre provides an opportunity to see, literally, a different notion of *BlackGirlMagic*, in action. Black women writers (Coleman, 2008) transgress the science fiction institution's old boundaries between fantasy and "hard" science fiction through their infusion of dystopias and future worlds with the myths and ritual practices of African-based religions. In their use of Africana forms of medicine and technology (Coleman 2008; Jones 2015), Black women science fiction writers reveal the constructed and narrative nature of the Western sciences that have worked to create different genres of humanity. According to Jones (2015), "While mythmaking has traditionally been relegated to the ancient and so-called primitive cultures, it remains present in contemporary Western culture, under the guise of rationalism and factual 'truth' as presented in science. It is, in short, a mode of knowledge production" (p. 103). One of the most intriguing aspects of black women's science fiction arises in opposition to the superhero images heralded by the popular celebratory politics of strength and resistance present within many Afrofuturistic projects. Rather than the superhuman, *BlackGirlMagic* in black women's science fiction is indelibly connected to, even dependent upon, the otherhuman. The

otherhuman position is marked by ontologies and capacities which exceed the narrow representations of humanity that the more easily celebrated images of black superheroes merely amplify and extend (instead of challenge).

Critical humanist Sylvia Wynter (2003) describes the ways in which European intellectuals, scientists, and states made and remade the figure of Man (a white, male, straight, bourgeois, able-bodied, rational individual subject) through the modern era. According to Wynter, Man is an overrepresentation, only one genre within a diverse array of humanity that would include those excluded by the Western liberal humanist project, a project that centered whiteness, masculinity, able-bodiedness, rationalism, and individualist self-determination. Recognizing the exclusivity of this humanism, many critical theorists turn towards the posthuman (Braddiotti, 2013) However, building on the work of critical humanists such as Sylvia Wynter, Aime Cesaire, and Frantz Fanon, Black feminist critics such as Zakiyah Jackson and Alexander Welheliye call for caution in the rush towards the posthuman. Jackson (2013) argues that by equating the Western "Man" with human, posthumanist theory neglects the diverse engagements with humanity, humanism, and concepts of the human by those most subjected to the violence of Western liberal humanism. Alexander Welheliye (2008) asks, "what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of 'man' as the master-subject but focus



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on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain" (p. 321)? My notion of otherhuman is a response to this query. Unlike the superhuman, which exaggerates the capacities of Man, or the posthuman, which overlooks the ways of being that preexisted and coexist with Man, the term otherhuman describes the being of non-white, non-male, non-property owning, and/or differently abled individuals. The otherhuman is marked by vulnerability—not only negative vulnerability to the violence exacted on non-white, non-male, or non-property-owning peoples, but also positive vulnerability in terms of exposure or openness to alternative sources of experience, affect, and knowledge beyond that of Western rationality. In Black women's science fiction, we frequently see such vulnerability in the young heroines' access to the spirit worlds of African and African diaspora cosmologies. The African concept of spirit (O' Murchu, 2012) "transcends the dualistic emphasis that places soul over body, spirituality over physicality, mind over matter, culture over nature, intention over performance, and inner over outer" (p. 104). By using the insights from their existence at the nexus of oppressions and training themselves to recognize and harness rather than refuse their spiritual gifts, these girls transform vulnerability into power. As a piece positioned within the field of critical Afrofuturist studies, this paper intersects black feminist, black girlhood, SF, and disability studies to argue for an alternative conceptualization of BlackGirlMagic which reaches beyond digital celebrations of black female beauty and sparkle. I contend that

black women's science fiction serves as an alternative archive for BlackGirlMagic—one that retains the concept's psychic power while calling attention to the intersecting forms of oppression that cannot be battled against by independent excellence, beauty, or success within a neoliberal state. The young female heroines of several black women's science fiction novels access their magic not through superhuman gifts, but through otherhuman ontologies, communal resources, and exclusion from other forms of power. Their magic is indelibly connected to their vulnerability, the same vulnerability that positions these young black girls as constant rhetorical threats to society. However, a dichotomy emerges as this vulnerability also appears to empower said women to function as disruptions to such unjust social systems engrained within their respective societies. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) gives us an early example of a black girl heroine whose vulnerability proves to be the very source of her power. Set in an eerily familiar near-future California, *Parable of the Sower* envisions the collapse of the American economy and public infrastructure, resulting from increasing socioeconomic inequity, privatization of public resources, and environmental degradation. All of this has led to a chaotic, dangerous society plagued with violence and deprivation. A large portion of the population is homeless, diseased, and struggling on the streets for basic survival, while a few families living inside once middle-class, now crumbling walled communities pool their meager resources and attempt to maintain some facets of normal life. Lauren



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Olamina is born in one such community, Robledo, to a Christian minister father and a mother suffering from a type of substance addiction which causes babies to be born with hyperempathy syndrome—a condition that causes them to believe that they feel the pain of others.

Through the creation of a protagonist born to a drug-addicted mother, Butler (Roberts, 1997) comments on the public hysteria surrounding “crack baby” discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, with crack, in particular, more likely to be abused by black women. Media and policymakers so demonized cocaine-addicted women and their children that numerous policies, including harsh prison sentences and mandatory sterilization, were proposed and implemented across the country—despite little evidence of long term behavioral effects in cocaine-addicted babies. In Lauren’s case, however, her mother’s addiction does have lasting effects—Lauren cannot move through life without experiencing the pain of others around her. Although Lauren points out that her “sharing,” as she calls it, is a delusion, it is a sensory delusion with enormous power over her body and emotions. This condition is disabling in various ways; she cannot defend herself in a fight without also feeling the pain she causes. Her brother tricks her into bleeding by pretending to bleed. Lauren’s father demands that the family keep her condition a secret, both because of the social stigma of being a sharer and the risks it presents in a dangerous world where people know that they can incapacitate her only by pretending to be hurt themselves. Lauren

concurr with this demand for secrecy: “A first wife who was a drug addict and a daughter who is drug-damaged is not something he wants to brag about. Lucky for me. Being the most vulnerable person I know is damned sure not something I want to boast about” (Butler p. 12). Lauren finds it extremely difficult to function in the world outside of her walled community, because she also feels the chaos and agony that people endure in that world. Here, Butler points to a key intervention of disability activism and studies (Kafer, 2013; Bell, 2011): it is the environment that “disabled” people occupy, rather than their particular cognitive or bodily difference, that actually creates disability. Lauren would not have such difficulty in the outside world if the outside world were less rife with violence and suffering.

Traumatic as it may be, however, Lauren’s capacity to feel what others feel, an inability to separate herself from others, ultimately becomes a source of her strength as a leader. According to Jones, “the shared vulnerabilities created by social disorganization and the special role Olamina’s hyperempathy syndrome plays, both highlight an alternative ethics” (p. 114). We begin to see an association developing between Lauren’s sharing and Earthseed early in the novel:

But this thing (This idea? Philosophy? New religion?) won’t let me alone, won’t let me forget it, won’t let me go. Maybe...maybe it’s like my sharing: One more weirdness, one more crazy, deep-rooted delusion that



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I'm stuck with. And in time, I'll have to do something about it. (Butler 26)

Earthseed, which reflects similarity to Buddhism, New Thought, Womanist theology, and West African traditional religions, is less a faith of worship and ritual and more one of praxis (Coleman 2008). Every chapter of the novel opens with one of Lauren's Earthseed verses, showing the steady development of a complex spiritual philosophy:

A victim of God may,  
Through learning adaption,  
Become a partner of God (p. 31)

We are all Godseed, but no more or less  
So than any other aspect of the universe,  
Godseed is all there is—all that  
Changes. Earthseed is all that spreads  
Earthlife to new earths. The universe is  
Godseed. Only we are Earthseed. And the  
Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among  
The stars. (p. 77)

To get along with God,  
Consider the consequences of your  
behavior. (p. 86)

In order to rise  
From its ashes  
A phoenix  
First  
Must  
Burn. (p. 153)

Kindness eases Change. (p. 167)

Honoring God as change and change as a necessary, rather than benevolent or malevolent, force, Earthseed focuses on community and harmony with the Earth. Rather than an idea of human exceptionalism, it defines humanity as only part of all existence, growing and adapting to their constantly changing environment. Rather than a figure in the image of Man to be pleaded with and entreated to, God is a force to be gotten along with through kindness, generosity, and care of the Earth and of others. Lauren's Earthseed verses do not promise anything to its followers; there is no transactional relationship between prayer and protection or good deeds and good fortune. Rather, in connection with Lauren's prophetic dreams of the fire that eventually destroys Robledo, Earthseed acknowledges, accepts the inevitability of, and prepares believers for agony and destruction. I argue that this important facet of Earthseed—its lack of dualities and its emphasis on adaptability through pain and loss—is a direct outcome of Lauren's sensory sensitivity to the harrowing world in which she lives. The constant experience of such senseless pain challenges her adherence to her father's Christian faith, a faith that would construct suffering as an outcome of sin. Earthseed accepts the reality of pain and, rather than attempting to explain it in terms of good or evil, provides a way to use it when it comes. According to Jones, in her depiction of Lauren, Butler "dismantles the illusion of inviolability and mastery over the body" (p. 114), which is essential to the liberal humanist project.



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However, *Earthseed* is not a passive philosophy. Lauren conceives of humanity as being in a stage of infancy, occupied with petty jealousies, rivalries, and wars. Her verses frequently speak to the need to unify people with a common purpose. Lauren decides, unilaterally, that this purpose is “to take root among the stars,” and the sequel to *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents* (1998), departs from the task of community-building to Lauren’s more individualist (and colonialist) pursuit of funding space travel and settlement. The more revolutionary potential of *Earthseed* is best demonstrated in the first novel—in *Earthseed*’s nascent growth among a straggling band of exiles that Lauren, like a young Harriet Tubman, leads north to found the community of Acorn.

The parallels between Lauren Olamina and Harriet Tubman are many and appear to be intentional. The style in which Lauren’s journal is written evokes the conventions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave narratives and frequently describes the economic exploitation that people face in this 2024 United States, ruled by multinational corporations in terms of masters and slaves. Some of those that join her group (Thaler, 2010) speak of asking their masters for permission to marry, being punished for reading, and fleeing sexual harassment by employers. Lauren’s group follows the ‘Big Dipper’ asterism north to a land where they can experience some limited degree of freedom from the violence and deprivation that plagues the ‘South’ (the slave states for Tubman, Southern California for Lauren). While individual motives, fears, and

capacities often threaten the cohesion of the group, Lauren insists on the need to work together as a community. Similarly, Harriet Tubman (Sernett, 2007) rejected the idea of staying safe and alone in Philadelphia after her escape, instead returning south for her husband, family, friends, and whoever else was ready to run. Perhaps most suggestively, both Tubman’s and Olamina’s spiritual visions, their capacity to imagine a different world, seems irrevocably tied to disability. *Parable of the Sower* opens with Lauren’s prophetic dream of the destruction of her neighborhood and her thoughts that connect her hyperempathy syndrome and her emerging spiritual philosophy. Tubman (Sernett, 2007) became narcoleptic (a neurological disorder affecting the ability to regulate sleep cycles) after being struck on the head with a metal weight as a teenager (p. 16). Christopher Bell references this lifelong impairment in asking why historical figures such as Harriet Tubman are not often read in the context of disability studies:

A disability perspective (re)positions Tubman’s instantaneous disabling alongside of her subsequent actions of attaining her own freedom and then returning South on numerous trips to liberate other slaves. Such daring action would be unremittingly dangerous for any individual; only if we factor in Tubman’s bouts of illness, our understanding of her actions as her corporeality become fully accurate” (p. 2).



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In media as well as in African American political discourse, disability (Bell, 2011) has tended to be erased, as many articles people prefer to represent race singularly, particularly (Hobson, 2014) in such a heroic and symbolic figure as Harriet Tubman. While I entirely agree with Bell that attentiveness to Tubman through a framework of disability allows us to better realize the risk of her actions, I also want to call attention to her own interpretations of her injury and its lifelong consequences.

Documentation of Tubman's childhood is scant, and it is difficult to determine whether this experience of visions actually onset with the brain injury. Yet the lasting effects of this injury seems to be at least one prominent way that Tubman accessed a spirit world. Tubman and several witnesses (Gumbs, 2014; Sernett, 2007; Humez, 2003) spoke of her experiencing visions, insights, and prophecies as she dreamt during her narcoleptic spells and of reporting these revelations with ecstatic emotion. Contemporaries and biographers sympathetic to Harriet's causes would deemphasize this dimension of her life (Sernett, 2007; Humez, 2003), fearing that it would detract from what I would call her 'superhuman' persona: her greatness, her reputation as a rational, self-determining heroine. Alice Brickler, a favorite great-niece of Tubman's, criticizes Earl Conrad's determination to de-emphasize religion and visions in his 1942 biography of her aunt (Sernett, 2007):

"I may be wrong but I believe that every age, every country and every race, especially during the darkest history, has had its unusual Souls who were in touch

with some mysterious central originating Force, a comprehensive stupendous Unity for which we have no adequate name. Aunt Harriet was one of those unusual souls. Her religion, her dreams and visions were so bonded together that nobody, and I certainly should not attempt it, could separate them." Brickler reminded Conrad that her great-aunt had been "a member of an oppressed race" and, as such, she depended on "the inspiration of the mystic as well as sagacity. "It was her dreams which saved her life very often," Brickler observed, "and it was a superhuman courage and beliefs that gave her the power to accomplish what she had undertaken" (p. 142).

Though Brickler uses the term "superhuman" in this description of her aunt's power, I argue that Tubman's visions, and her interpretation of these visions as revelations from God, is an example of the otherhuman. It is a vulnerability, an openness to knowledge from invisible sources, and a belief in the veracity of these sources that reflects (Chireau, 2003; Bostic, 2013; Marsh-Locket & West, 2013) the retention of African worldviews and spiritual practices within enslaved people's cultures. This vulnerability and belief is also tied to Tubman's positionality outside of the Western genre of human, a point (Sernett, 2007) that Brickler articulates when she claims that members "of an oppressed race" are more likely to draw from "inspiration of the mystic as well as sagacity" (p. 142). With this statement, Brickler rejects a duality that would juxtapose spirituality against practicality, supernatural



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against the material, faith-led action against careful discernment. Tubman is not the “exotic,” irrational conjurer that Conrad feared he would portray if he included her faith and her visions in his biography; rather, the supernatural, however significant, is only one dimension of her intellectual process. Enabled by a disability that was incurred by violence, but only accessed by her willingness to assemble the otherhuman with other forms of knowledge, Harriet Tubman’s use of her visions can be read as BlackGirlMagic. It is not magic in the usual sense of superhuman power; it requires labor and discernment.

Lauren’s hyperempathy syndrome functions similarly to Tubman’s narcolepsy in *Parable of the Sower*. The condition proves dangerous for her and her companions on the journey North from the destroyed Robledo, as she can be incapacitated even as she wins a fight. When their camp is attacked while Lauren is on watch, she falls unconscious in the process of shooting one of the thieves. This prompts her to confess to her travel companions that she is a ‘sharer’ (the popular term for someone with hyperempathy syndrome), fully expecting them to be disgusted or to see her as a liability. However, though they do have questions and concerns, her tentative new allies do not reject her. This moment of revelation becomes significant in the novel, not for marking Lauren as disabled and unwanted, but for facilitating her dissemination of *Earthseed* (Butler, 1993):

“So...you faked everyone out. You must be a hell of an actor.”

“I had to learn to pretend to be normal. My father kept trying to convince me that I was normal. He was wrong about that, but I’m glad he taught me the way he did.”  
“Maybe you are normal. I mean, if the pain isn’t real, then maybe—”  
“Maybe this sharing thing is all in my head? Of course it is! And I can’t get it out. Believe me, I’d love to.”  
There was a long silence. Then he asked, “What do you write in your book every night?” Interesting shift (p. 194).

This shift is indeed interesting, as the moment that Lauren begins to tell the truth about her powers, deepening her vulnerability to the companions with whom she is building a fragile trust, is also the moment that she begins to share her *Earthseed* verses. Though Lauren claims she would love to be rid of her sharing, this heightened susceptibility to pain also fosters the search for a spiritual worldview—a worldview which can process and make room for pain beyond the afterlife-centered logics of Christianity to which her father adhered, a worldview that can reconcile the existence of senseless pain and suffering with the existence of some kind of divine force. Lauren studies the Bible closely, but she cannot reconcile its narratives with her developing ethical worldview:

In the book of Job, God says he made everything and he knows everything so no one has the right to question what he does with any of it. Okay. That works. That Old



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Testament God doesn't violate the way things are now. But that God sounds a lot like Zeus—a super-powerful man, playing with his toys the way my youngest brothers play with toy soldiers...Maybe God is kind of a big kid, playing with his toys. If he does, what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane—or if seven kids go to church and get dipped in a big tank of expensive water? But what if all that is wrong? What if God is something else altogether (p. 16)?

This passage demonstrates Lauren's frustration with the figure of a patriarchal, judgmental, all-knowing God in Man's form that was also supposed to somehow be benevolent and caring. It also shows a recurring critique of the superhuman: "We give lip service to acceptance, as though acceptance was enough. Then we go on to create super-people—super-parents, super-kings and queens, super cops—to be our gods and to look after us—to stand between us and God"(26). Lauren's critique of superhuman is in alignment with my own critique of Afrofuturism studies' emphasis upon superhero characters. *Parable of the Sower* articulates the otherhuman, another mode of humanity and another mode of divinity, that envisions humans and God as collaborating in the creation and recreation of the world. Though Lauren is not specifically referring to disabled people in this passage, her argument that we must go beyond acceptance of difference is strikingly akin to scholars and activists (Kafer, 2013; Withers, 2012) who argue for a language beyond acceptance, tolerance,

individual intervention, or even individual rights in the treatment of disability. Rather, disability is political, and disability, like other forms of socially constructed identity and oppression, can become the basis for movements for collective transformation. The revelation of Lauren's personal vulnerability provides an opportunity for the organic explanation of her belief system. *Earthseed* anchors and coheres this diverse community and allows them to enact some small level of collective transformation within a chaotic and unjust world.

At first glance, Butler's work in general, and *Parable of the Sower* more specifically, does not seem to incorporate African-based spirituality in the ways that those ideas appear in the work of other Black women science fiction writers. The dystopian future is the sole speculative element of the *Parables*; there is no divining, no magic. However, a close reading, with knowledge of Ifa (a Yoruban traditional African religious system), reveals the depth to which African spirituality actually infuses the novel. Monica A. Coleman (2008) calls attention to Lauren's middle name, Oya, which is the name of a Yoruba-based orisha. The orishas are lesser deities, intermediaries that take messengers from their devotees to an all-powerful Creator and spiritual force. Oya is a neutral power, the orisha of change, who can be appealed to for good or for ill. She is represented in the world by the elements of wind, fire, and rain, elements that constantly accompany Lauren's movements in the novel (p. 133-135). God as change, God as a neutral force that can be destructive or nurturing, and



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an idea of God that resists the dualities of good and evil, innocence and sin, are all present both in *Ifa* and in *Earthseed*. Several religious and literary scholars (Montgomery 2008; Coleman 2008; Marsh-Locket & West, 2013) attest to the frequency in which *Ifa* cosmology and symbolism appears in African Diaspora, particularly in women's literature, and assert that Yoruba religion is the basis of many of the syncretized African religions in the Americas. African spirituality is a connective tissue, a key method through which Black women science fiction authors depict a way of being outside of Western liberal humanism, a model of leadership outside of the superhuman, and a representation of *BlackGirlMagic* outside of pure celebration.

Coleman's definition of "Making a way out of no way" is quite similar to the way that I conceptualize *BlackGirlMagic*: "It is a weaving of the past, future, and possibilities offered by God; a weaving that leads to survival, quality of life, and liberating activity on the part of black women" (Coleman, 33). *BlackGirlMagic*, like "Making a way out of no way" does not come from nowhere—it is an activation of different sources of knowledge, experience, power than what is validated within the narrow genre of *Man*. Octavia Butler (Kenan, 1991), developed her craft very specifically within a mainstream science fiction institution and was more beholden to the boundaries between the fantastic and "hard" sci-fi. This distinguishes her work from writers such as Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, and Tananarive Due, who more explicitly portray African cosmologies, spirituality, folklore, and magic. Like Butler,

they center young, black, female protagonist-heroines, whose power is tied to an additional level of marginalization within already marginalized communities and to other human vulnerabilities.

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) presents readers with a heroine, Ti-Jeanne, who is located at multiple intersecting forms of marginalization; she is a young, black, poor, single teenage mother living with her grandmother in a disinvested city center where, as in *Parable of the Sower*, the economy and public infrastructure has broken down. Though the story takes place in an Afro-Caribbean community in an area of near-future Toronto called the Burn, the setting was inspired by Hopkinson's skepticism of popular representations of Detroit (Hopkinson, 2013; DeGraw 2014)—of media narratives that were depicting the city as a blighted and empty black hole. Hopkinson counters these representations and provides a very different vision of an urban dystopia than Butler does in *Parable of the Sower*. Though the Burn is indeed dangerous, crime-ridden, and lacking in basic modern infrastructure, it is also a vibrant and close-knit Afro-Caribbean community that has ingeniously adapted and updated pre-capitalist forms of exchange and survival: bartering, growing food, and midwifery. Ti-Jeanne is the granddaughter of the community's healer, Ma-Jeanne, a former nurse who incorporates herbalism and spirituality into her medical practice. As they challenge medical science through the use of African-based healing practices within a matriarchal, interdependent, multi-generational household, Ti-Jeanne's family



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counters both the genre of Man and the neoliberal and heteronormative order in which Man dominates. As a teen mother, Ti-Jeanne embodies moral panics, both national and intraracial, similar to those of the “crack baby” discourse of the 1980s that Butler evokes with Lauryn’s hyperempathy syndrome. Children of drug addict mothers and of teenage mothers (Roberts 1997; Williamson 2017) are imagined as potential predators and lifelong drains on the state. According to Jones, “Since the criteria for citizenship, the primary narrative of belonging within the body politic, are implicitly located in race, the role played by the racial/ethnic Other in black girls’ reproductive capacities are purported to require vigilant monitoring” (p. 64). Yet, Ti-Jeanne is also impacted by disability through the ever-present threat of mental illness due to her vulnerability to the spirit world.

The spirituality and the magic that we see in the novel is a syncretism, not only of African and European religion of folklore, but of beliefs, myths, and practices from different parts of the Caribbean. Yet it shows commonalities that are reflected across many African and African-based spiritual systems (Mbiti, 1969; Coleman, 2008; Coleman, 2009; Chireau, 2003): an acknowledgment of the ancestors or living-dead, the use of herbs and objects in both healing and in ritual, and communication with the spirit world through divining (the manipulation of objects and words to activate spiritual forces), visions, dreams, and spirit possession. Ti-Jeanne’s first point-of-view chapter opens with an account of her terrifying visions:

Ti-Jeanne could see with more than sight. Sometimes she saw how people were going to die. When she closed her eyes, the childhood songs her grandmother had sung to her replayed in her mind, and dancing to their music were images: this one’s body jerking in a spray of gunfire and blood, that one writhing as cramps turned her bowels to liquid. Never the peaceful deaths. Ti-Jeanne hated the visions (p. 9).

Ti-Jeanne, like her mother and grandmother before her, is a seer, a woman who can communicate with the spirit realm. However, Ti-Jeanne’s skepticism and her refusal to learn to properly harness her ability make it seem more like a curse than a blessing. Her grandmother warns her, “Girl child, you know better than to call it obeah. Stupidness. Is a gift from God father. Is a good thing, not a evil thing. But child, if you don’t learn how to use it, it will use you, just like it take your mother” (p. 47). Mami rejects the term obeah to refer to seer and rootworking skills; she sees the term only as referring to evil magic. The term is used most often by characters such as Ti-Jeanne and Tony, a younger generation more oriented to Western medicine, who both distrust and fear the supernatural. Mami’s rejection of her work being described as obeah, and Tony and Ti-Jeanne’s fear of it, all emerge from a historical context (Coleman, 2009) in which Caribbean governments and missionaries viewed all magic and remnants of African religions on the same continuum. Such views, and the ability of colonial governments and churches to exact strict penalties, drove the practice underground. While white flight



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from the Burn has removed the colonial gaze (if not the colonial conditions) from the lives of these Afro-Caribbean characters, obeah, or what is called obeah, is still just emerging from secrecy. As Mami says, "From since slavery days, we people get in the habit of hiding we business from we own children, even, in case a child open his mouth and tell somebody story and get them in trouble. Secrecy was survival, oui? Is a hard habit to break" (p. 50). The legacy of forced secrecy under colonial governments disrupts the generational transmission of the knowledge needed to navigate their seer abilities. By "take your mother," Mami Gros-Jeanne is referring to her daughter Mi-Jeanne's mental incapacitation and subsequent disappearance because of her inability to distinguish the visions from material reality. Later we discover that Mi-Jeanne is a homeless woman well-known in the community for her raving prophecies, called Crazy Betty by the people of the Burn. Mami resolves immediately to save Ti-Jeanne from a similar fate by training her to control her gift.

On one hand, the representation of Crazy Betty, Ti-Jeanne's intense fear of "madness," and Mami's resolve to protect her granddaughter from madness through training could be seen as a negative discourse of psychological disability. The social model of disability studies suggests that impairment is distinct from disability itself, which is created through the social environment. According to this social model, Mami's intervention to protect Ti-Jeanne might be seen as individual "fixing" and a further stigmatization of the

unique processes of Ti-Jeanne's mind. However, Kafer (2013) calls attention to the fact that people with disabilities may both argue for destigmatization of their bodies and transformation of the environments in which they live and also want to be healed. Mami does not want to remove Ti-Jeanne's "gift"; she wants to teach her how to overcome its debilitating effects. The impairment is not Ti-Jeanne's power in itself, it is in the Western context in which Ti-Jeanne rejects the knowledge needed to understand her power. The impact of these visions on Mi-Jeanne, and the threat that they present to Ti-Jeanne, exemplify how the same Western culture and epistemological violence that shapes the oppressive conditions of Black women's lives also denies their specific ways of knowing the world, with catastrophic consequences for their health. Mami Gros-Jeanne's preservation of these ways of knowing, her combination of Western science and indigenous spirituality, points the way to the otherhuman. According to Jones, "for many of the so-called subaltern cultures of non-European origins, the divide that took place during the Enlightenment, which elevated the secular and the scientific, did not occur. For Ti-Jeanne, her dual heritage as an Afro-Caribbean young woman born and reared in the West provides her with a dichotomous philosophy that must be resolved if she is to survive" (p. 107-108). Fortunately, Ti-Jeanne does learn to channel her abilities, ultimately defeating the malevolent drug lord and obeah man (also her grandfather) that wreaked both physical and metaphysical havoc in their community. The novel closes on Ti-Jeanne taking on her



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grandmother's role when Mami Gros-Jeanne is killed, welcoming Burn residents to her home for a meal. Like Lauren, Ti-Jeanne rebuilds a rich, mutually dependent community of marginalized individuals, who adapt to the breakdown of the economy and public services through collective and spirit-based forms of living and thriving. *BlackGirlMagic* is present not only in the actual magic that Ti-Jeanne uses to defeat the drug lord Rudy; it is in the way she synthesizes the knowledge, skills, and perspectives of multiple generations and cultures to ground her own philosophy for leadership going forward.

Onyesonwu of Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010) resembles Ti-Jeanne in some ways. Her power is also spiritual and metaphysical. She also can manipulate forces and matter, particularly the matter of her own body; she is a shapeshifter. She also is tormented by her abilities until she learns to control them. Yet the cultural context of *Who Fears Death* is very different from either the United States setting of *Parable of the Sower* or Caribbean-Canadian setting of *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Onyesonwu is not racialized as black according to the modern Western concept of race because the novel is set in a fictional, futurist land, the Seven Rivers kingdom. Yet she is racialized as a member of a minority, ostracized group, the Ewe, the children of rape between the dark-skinned, full featured Okeke and light-skinned, thin-featured Nuru, the kingdom's warring ethnic groups. Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor hints at New World concepts of racialization in her worldbuilding, but she primarily uses this

fictional kingdom to highlight the gendered and sexual vulnerability of women and girls in Africa, not only in the midst of genocidal conflicts, but in their everyday lives.

Okorafor uses the character of Onyesonwu to comment on a form of ethnic cleansing that particularly targets women and girls (Jones, 2015): the attempt to eliminate an ethnic group through systematic mass rapes, aimed at creating babies that will inherit the targeted group's lands. Onyesonwu's mother, Najeeba (Okorafor, 2010), an Okeke woman, is raped during a mass attack of the Nuru on her village. Rejected by her husband, Najeeba goes into the desert to die, until she realizes that she is pregnant. She names her daughter Onyesonwu, meaning, *Who Fears Death* (p. 19-27). In the Seven Rivers world, children born of rape between the Okeke and Nuru wear the violence and shame of rape on their bodies; they all have the same sandy skin and hair, freckles, and gold-brown eyes. Onyesonwu is ostracized by a community that already constrains the possibilities of girls, that insists that they stay virginal, marry, and remain subordinate to men. Along with her particular appearance, the rape act that creates Onyesonwu also endows her with power, as both her mother and biological father possess great metaphysical gifts. Onyesonwu's loss of control over this power, such as when she makes her stepfather's body breathe at his funeral, provokes additional fear and distrust from the community (p. 5).

Because it is so distinctive and carries such stigma, Onyesonwu's appearance can be



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considered a form of physical disfigurement, which, along with her inability to control her shapeshifting and other powers, can be read in a disability context. Like Lauren in *Parables*, Onyesonwu is constantly aware of her difference and fearful of other's perceptions, but unlike Lauren, she has no option for secrecy or selective disclosure. Highly aware of her own marginalization and of the shame that it brings to her parents, Onyesonwu chooses to participate in the Eleventh Year Rite, a rite of passage ceremony that includes female genital mutilation. The ceremony is required for girls to be considered adults in the community and good candidates for marriage. While this ritual indelibly bonds the girls who go through the ordeal together, and gains them recognition as adults, it does so at great physical risk to their health and their capacity for sexual pleasure. Onyesonwu eventually learns that her clitoris has been mutilated through this ritual and uses her powers, which she is finally harnessing through tutelage from the town sorcerer, to regrow it, as well as those of her friends. We see *BlackGirlMagic* here used to counter the sexualized violence exacted against girls in the name of tradition.

Okorafor's treatment of magic and female genital mutilation brings to mind a distinction that I want to make between African-based cultures as they inform the otherhuman and an Afrocentric retrieval of tradition that refuses to critique forms of patriarchy, hierarchy, and violence in both precolonial and contemporary African cultures (White, 1990; Collins 2009). In African American fiction and popular intellectual thought, Africa is often

imagined as an idealized utopia (Gruesser, 2000; Moses, 1998). It can be difficult to reconcile the desire to combat pernicious imagery of African countries, cultures, and peoples with the need to also deal honestly with contemporary issues. At a keynote lecture for the Science Fiction Research Association in 2017, Okorafor described an experience in which two African Americans confronted her at a reading of the rites of passage scene of *Who Fears Death*. They felt that her description of female genital mutilation was an airing of dirty laundry, an unfair portrayal of something that should be de-emphasized in favor of positive imagery of African. Yet analyses and narratives that center black girls and African girls cannot do so honestly without engaging the specific forms of vulnerability that expose them to pain, constraint, and violence in their particular communities. As Okorafor portrays it, the Eleventh Year Rite is not without benefits; it deeply bonds these four girls and gives them voice in the community. When one girl confesses during the ritual that she has been raped repeatedly by her father, the women of the village intervene to have him sanctioned (p. 50). However, Onyesonwu's use of her magic to heal the girls' bodies and restore their capacity for sexual desire and satisfaction demonstrates that the harm done to them during the ritual was not necessary to forge their bond and mark their passage to adulthood.

Similar to Ti-Jeanne's battle with her grandfather in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, *Who Fears Death* concludes with a magical faceoff between Onyesonwu and a paternal relative,



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the biological father who raped her mother and is bent on the destruction of the Okeke. It is interesting that the major antagonists of both *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Who Fears Death* are powerful magic men who are paternally related to the protagonists. We also see a troubling paternal relationship in Nalo Hopkinson's novel *Midnight Robber* (2000), in which the teenage heroine, Tan Tan, is raped and impregnated by her father. Like Ti-Jeanne, Tan Tan is a young black female mother who becomes a leader. She stands up for the marginalized under the banner of the folkloric hero, the Robber Queen. Though Tan Tan does not have the metaphysical powers of Ti-Jeanne and Onyesonwu, her power (which she deploys to protect others), is also located in her vulnerability within the patriarchal, nuclear family. The Robber Queen persona is an outcome of her trauma, a dissociative strategy that she adopted to cope with years of sexual abuse. The consistent presence of abusive paternal figures populating these narratives is arguably a representation of patriarchy and a commentary on the violence, sexual violence in particular, faced by girls and women within their own homes and communities. This violence demands a different kind of intra-cultural critique (Cohen, 2010) than exhausted narratives of respectability politics and black-on-black violence that can only view youth as wayward and in need of discipline, rather than as the vanguard of social movements. Yet, from the role of young people in rejuvenating and sustaining Civil Rights Movement demonstrations to the queer Black female

founders of today's Black Lives Matter movement, we see black girls well-positioned to observe the workings of intersectional oppressions and quite willing to act out against these oppressions. While these real-world black girls are not armed with magical powers, their willingness to insert themselves as agents in a world where their lives are so devalued is an imaginative act, an expression of the otherhuman.

The work of Black women science fiction writers constructs a new kind of feminine bildungsroman, where the narrative arc shows girls coming to leadership within a community and competence in accessing an otherhuman, spiritual world, often through some kind of loss or tragedy that dramatizes their already vulnerable position. While the protagonists are certainly not invincible, they accomplish incredible tasks, with the support of a community from which they win respect. These works create much-needed models of black girlhood as valuable and empowered, yet they do so without dismissing the structural conditions that black girls face. Rather, an understanding of the heroines' particular vulnerabilities, and of the communal and cultural resources that they draw upon, is needed to appreciate their journeys, and to challenge both black politics and Afrofuturism studies to a more critical analysis of heroism, leadership, magic, and multiple ways of being human.



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