



## Tricknology: Theorizing the Trickster in Afrofuturism

By Amandine Faucheux and Isiah Lavender III

Louisiana State University

**Abstract:** The antithetical convergences of myth and science, nature and technology, male and female, and even human and animal create the liminal spaces from which the technological trickster emerges in Afrofuturism. Borrowing ideas from critical race, cyborg, and feminist theories, along with thinking from animal studies, this essay outlines a few of the many possibilities of a trickster technology where this mutable and mythic figure triggers the breakdown of race and gender anxieties, leading to the end of these interlocking oppressions in one kind of Afrofuture. Trickster technology may be defined as a black character's pragmatic application of biopolitical knowledge to manipulate the environment to his or her own benefit. Blackness itself effectively counteracts the "racializing assemblages" of the white world that produced "a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (Weheliye, 2014, p. 3). Put simply, we explore types of shape-shifting as a trickster technology which revises ideologies of difference with respect to race, gender, and class to actualize Afrofuturism's promise of freedom in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980), and Nalo Hopkinson's "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" (2001) and *Midnight Robber* (2000).

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, cyborg, shape-shifting, tricknology, trickster

In her novel *Midnight Robber* (2000), Nalo Hopkinson reinvents the mythical trickster figure of Anansi the Spider as an all-powerful AI named Granny Nanny ("Grande Nanotech Sentient Intelligence"). As Michelle Reid remarks in "Postcolonial Science Fiction" (2010), the slippage of the syllable "nan" in Anansi, nanotech, and the historical Maroon leader Granny Nanny is significant as it highlights Hopkinson's intentional connections between specific historical moments, technology, and myths. We base our image of the AI on representations from classical science fiction (SF) such as Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) or the

Wachowski sisters' *The Matrix* (1999). As a current concept, we understand the AI as a post-racial, disembodied being with more or less human-like emotions and intentions. In any case, the AI strictly represents the future and without any ties to history. On the contrary, Hopkinson playfully re-writes this science fictional trope as very much a part of history and culture, and furthermore a history and culture that a Eurocentric perspective associates with rigorous non-modernity, uncivilized history, and oral traditions. Hopkinson's oxymoronic AI represents of the many uses of the trickster in Afrofuturism, a trope that we delimitate in this essay as a



potentially productive figure to the aims of Afrofuturism. We believe that tricksterism plays an important role in Afrofuturism's provocative disruptions at the level of genre (with distinct science fictional conventions) and at the political level (notably in terms of race and gender).

In the cult classic essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985/1990), Donna J. Haraway creates a mythical, monstrous cyborg creature as a figure that forbids essentialism, clear-cut binaries, and political factions in favor of contradictions, partial identities, and unexpected associations. Our discussion of the trickster and its technology in this essay very much inscribes itself on Haraway's vision. We seek to highlight how the trickster, a mythical creature itself who exists in countless literary traditions across nation lines and ethnicities, transforms and is transformed within the specific context of Afrofuturism. Haraway's mythical cyborg has been such a potent signifier across fields because it seems to demarcate the crises of postmodernism, notably what it means to be human and the possibilities of giving that question any satisfying and essential answer. Although Haraway purposefully uses the words myth and fiction to deconstruct in form as well as content the presumed objective truth of scientific (academic) discourse, her cyborg resonates strongly in SF. It is not just because SF is riddled with literal cyborgs, but because the genre, perhaps more than any other, persistently pushes the boundaries of

the human with creative uses of machine and animal chimeras.

The type of SF that Afrofuturism represents precisely positions itself on contradictions, as Afrofuturist writers challenge the very concepts of progressive modernity, the myth of a post-racial world, and the impartial nature of technology. Since Mark Dery's pivotal definition of Afrofuturism in "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose" (1993), a growing body of scholarship has distinguished the subtleties of the genre. In his definition of the movement in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction* (2014), De Witt Douglas Kilgore writes that "Afrofuturism can be viewed as less a marker of black authenticity and more of a cultural force, an episteme that betokens a shift in our largely unthought assumptions about what histories matter and how they may serve as a precondition for any future we might imagine" (p. 564). Afrofuturist writers' use of history—and especially histories told from the perspective of oppressed peoples rather than a Eurocentric point of view—represents Afrofuturism's disruption of linearity and concern with how the past informs the present and the future. Many women writers within Afrofuturism, as Julia Hoydis (2015) argues, tend to be "more concerned with speculation and disturbing notions of reality than with scientific-technological ideas and ... they often maintain a concern with history despite a distinctly futurist orientation" (p. 71). The superimposition of oxymoronic elements in Afrofuturism (AIs in the jungle, epidemiology, and shape-shifting) highlights the



uncomfortable binarism associated with Western white reading practices. Similarly, the trickster technology we identify here maintains the elements of the trickster, such as insolent humor, eroticism, ambiguity, deception, and subversive behavior within science fictional tropes. Trickster technology or “tricknology”—to borrow from James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963/1993, p.66)—includes shape-shifting, bioengineering, and complex forms of machinery that transforms the body, usually to humorous or witty ends (as in Nalo Hopkinson’s “Ganger (Ball Lightning)” [2001]) or as a specific power to challenge more serious systemic issues (as in Octavia E. Butler’s *Wild Seed* [1980] and Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*).

Since the first comprehensive study of this amorphous figure, Paul Radin’s *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956), no consensus exists on a generalized definition of the trickster, although a list of cross-cultural commonalities has been compiled by anthropologists, philosophers, historians, literary theorists, folklorists, and religious studies scholars. “For centuries, perhaps, millennia, and in the widest variety of cultural and religious belief systems, humans have told and retold tales of tricksters, figures who are usually comical, yet serve to highlight important social values” according to William G. Doty and William J. Hynes (1993, pp. 1-2). In her recent book *The Trickster Figure in American Literature* (2013), Winifred Morgan describes the trickster figure as a creature who may as well trick and deceive as it would save the day. But the trickster is not random or

irrational; he/she/it purposefully deranges the established order and challenges those in power.

We recognize that the trickster figure does not exist as such across multiple cultures or traditions; to claim to study “one” trickster figure would be to simultaneously simplify it and make a generalization. Although some African American writers take as their inspiration West African traditions (Esu-Elegbara) as well as the Signifying Monkey, this essay remains resolutely non-specific because we seek to identify a trope rather than a given figure. What we analyze here, rather, is tricksterism, or an array of tropes, themes, and symbols that broadly refer to some characteristics of the trickster. We argue that some Afrofuturist texts both integrate and reimagine the characteristics of the trickster through the lens of SF. While traditional trickster tales may rely on magic or spiritualism, Afrofuturism is primarily an African American science fictional lens, relying on its appropriate technological and futuristic conventions. In this way Afrofuturist texts do not necessarily include one trickster (though some do explicitly, like the character Eshu in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*) but rather use tricksterism as a form of technology itself.

Although this essay concerns contemporary Afrofuturist texts, proto-science-fictional tropes can already be found in slave narratives of the nineteenth century. If we think in terms of a black body, a raced and gendered material form performs as an unconventional technology, where the black body is figured as



“a natural machine” with race understood “as a labor-based technology” (Lavender, 2011, p. 54). In fact, Harriet Jacobs asserts this selfsame analogy in her 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, calling slaves “God-breathing machines” (1988, p. 16). This strange and prescient cyborg metaphor used by Jacobs creates a point of convergence, where culture and technology yield a technological trickster. In respect to this convergence point, Haraway’s metaphoric cyborg can be identified as a trickster because of its “potent fusions” of human/animal/machine that enable it to “transgress boundaries” that alter how we comprehend American slavery (1985/1991, p. 154).

Frederick Douglass realizes the power of transformation by exploiting a “joint kinship with animals and machines” (Haraway, 1985/1991, p. 154). While the white slave breaker Edward Covey successfully breaks down Douglass and we see “a man transformed into a brute,” Douglass amazingly surmounts his own damaged spirit, decides to fight, and frees himself mentally through physical resistance to the slave-breaker (1845/2005, p. 73). This metaphoric transformation from brute to man displays how a trickster survives by using resistance and disruption to offset a system dependent on the near universal victimization of blacks. “Partial identities as contradictory standpoints” befit a cyborg trickster capable of changing its shape metaphorically (Haraway, 1985/1991, p. 154). An Afrofuturistic understanding of body politics in Douglass’s account demonstrates how a figuratively organic technology can

overcome enslavement—that is the trick in itself.

Such deliberate intersections of human/animal/machine raise identity issues that SF’s literal metaphors best answer. We can better imagine shape-shifting as a trickster technology through “the imaginative space of the subjunctive,” where “what if? becomes when” (Easterbrook, 2013, p. 199). Samuel R. Delany’s (1977/2009) line-by-line corrective reading process known as subjunctivity offers useful insight on shape-shifting because of how it measures the probabilities of fictional events between reportage, naturalistic fiction, fantasy, and SF. Delany uses two words, “winged dog,” to make his point about the possibilities of SF (1977/2009, p. 12). The phrase “winged dog” suggests “an entire track of evolution: whether the dog has forelegs or not...modification of breastbone and musculature if the wings are to be functional, as well as a whole slew of other factors from hollow bones to heart rate” (Delany, 1977/2009, p. 12). Visual image corrections offer the key to moving up and down the subjunctive scale. With respect to Delany’s specific zoological example, subjunctivity allows for the possibility of shape-shifting as a matter of biology, biotechnology, and engineering. These fields establish a trickster technology “when biology is practiced as a radically situational discourse” to disrupt manmade systems of oppression like race or gender (Haraway, 1989, p. 375). Once race, gender, and sex become mutable through technology or a fluid biology—which would constitute it as SF—the trickster has license to



effect societal change, release humanity from the constraints of identity, and practice being human from a standpoint that differs from the white male default. Afrofuturism provides this alternate perspective.

In Octavia E. Butler's novel *Wild Seed*, we read the protagonist's shape-shifting abilities as representing trickster technology. Throughout her own diaspora from Africa to pre-Civil War America, Anyanwu defies the limits of identity by changing her sex, race, age, and sensory abilities, and even at times transforming into animals to survive extreme conditions of violence. Against scholars who would see these abilities as magic or witchcraft, we argue Anyanwu uses shape-shifting as a form of bioengineering. In her short story "Ganger (Ball Lightning)," Hopkinson facetiously invents an electro-sex suit that transforms into a trickster figure with the ability to challenge the two protagonists' identities. Finally, in Hopkinson's novel *Midnight Robber*, we argue that both in the form and content of the story, language operates as a form of trickster technology.

### **Organic-engineering in Butler's *Wild Seed***

Butler's fourth Patternist novel *Wild Seed* offers an example of shape-shifting to think about as a trickster technology. The shape-shifting protagonist, Anyanwu, emerges as a trickster from the specific social and cultural contexts of colonialism and slavery. Her ability to adapt as the contexts change from Africa to colonial America to the pre-Civil War United States displays her capacities to resist oppression

and to survive. *Wild Seed* recounts the beginning of the long relationship between Anyanwu and Doro, both immortal, from the interior of Africa to the antebellum South over the course of 150 years as well as their joint and separate attempts to build a race of long-lived people. At the time of their meeting in 1690, Anyanwu is nearly 300 years old while Doro has seen nearly four millennia pass. Anyanwu is a gifted healer with absolute mastery of her physiology, which enables her to transform her body in myriad ways. She is thought to practice witchcraft by the local African communities, many of them filled with her descendants. Doro's greatest gift is the ability to wear other people's bodies, consume them, and then transfer to another one nearby. Simply put, he steals bodies, he trades bodies, and he breeds bodies. Doro can also track people with special abilities as well as those with psionic (psychic) potential. He convinces Anyanwu to leave her African surroundings and she goes along with him for America for two reasons: first, she wants immortal children and, second, she wants to protect her children from Doro's veiled menace.

After being married off to his telekinetic son Isaac, who happens to be white, 50 years pass with Anyanwu and Doro now enemies. Doro ensures her cooperation by using her children against her exactly as she feared. Following Isaac's violent death in 1741, Anyanwu escapes from Doro, fleeing in various animal forms to the ocean and living as a dolphin for a time. Nearly 100 years pass before Doro crosses paths with Anyanwu again. This time, they face off on an 1840 Louisiana plantation. There, he



sees that she has been successfully operating her own eugenic program by gathering people with extra sensory abilities and building a family. Although Doro decides not to kill her, Anyanwu resolves "to shut herself off" and die (Butler, 1980, p. 276). She is tired of the duress caused by constantly evading Doro in order to protect herself and her offspring. In desperation, Doro breaks down in tears and begs her to go on living because he finally grasps that he does not have to experience the slow passage of time alone. He convinces her to live and they compromise on how to proceed together into the future.

An unrecognized trickster narrative permeates the historical backdrop of *Wild Seed*. Anyanwu does what she must to survive by utilizing her unparalleled biological knowledge to enhance her hearing, sight, and physical strength. In other circumstances, she reverses aging or grows old. Sometimes she modifies her height, skin color, or gender. She has both fathered children and given birth to children. Likewise, she repairs her own bodily injuries or cures others of their sicknesses. In the most extreme situations, Anyanwu transforms herself into other creatures like leopards, eagles, dolphins, and dogs in order to fight or flee to safety. She also occasionally shape-shifts for the pure pleasure of change. She fully controls this trickster technology.

Many prominent scholars have identified Anyanwu as a witch. For instance, Madhu Dubey characterizes Anyanwu "as a witch possessing magical powers" (2008, p. 40). Likewise, Haraway thinks of Anyanwu as "an

African sorceress [with] powers of transformation" (1985/1991, p. 179). Even Gerry Canavan remarks on how Anyanwu uses "shapeshifting powers" for a variety of reasons from flying to communing with animals to escaping Doro (2016, p. 71). They seemingly prefer to think of Anyanwu as a practitioner of a "discredited knowledge" because magic is not a masculinized form of information like science (Morrison, 1984, p. 342). In 32 years of scholarship, not many scholars have deviated from this sorcery viewpoint. However, we see her as a medical scientist who uses her own body as a laboratory to experiment and to manufacture life-saving medicines. Though she has no name for bacteria, she heals Doro's current sickened body while walking through an African jungle by biting his infected hand, caressing it with her tongue, and administering medicine through her saliva. Anyanwu explains to a rapidly-improving Doro that "there were things in your hand that should not have been there...living things too small to see" that only she "can feel...and know" by taking "them into [her] body" in order to "kill them" (Butler, 1980, p. 29). She then shares the medicine she produces in her saliva. This practice is clearly not magic, but science because she understands her own organic being as well as other organisms on a microscopic scale. As Haraway suggests, "laboratories are the material and mythic space of modern science" (1989, p. 368). Clearly, Anyanwu's ability to concoct and distribute medicine to others functions as an example of biotechnology. As Rebecca J. Holden rightfully claims, "Butler plays with varying hybrid identities, bioengineering, and genetic



technologies to figure out how her protagonists can survive and have agency in the futures she imagines while remaining true to themselves as African-American women" (2013, p. 26).

With her shape-shifting as a form of bioengineering, Anyanwu has no problem with crossing the species boundary since it magnifies her chance to survive the dangerous social and physical climates the changing world. As Joan Gordon terms it, Anyanwu "sees everything in a dynamic state moving in flows, inhabiting zones without boundaries, so male and female exist along a continuum and human and animal are not divisible into separate categories" (2009, p. 337). Ironically, black people in America have had to deal with questions of animality since at least the late 1700s, where Thomas Jefferson in Query 14 of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* directly compares "horses, dogs, and other domestic animals" to slaves on the question of beauty (1785/1998, p. 145). Blacks have been used and defined as animals in a factual sense, so Butler intentionally subverts the human/animal boundary with Anyanwu's shape-shifting to simultaneously undermine the scientific rationale for slavery and to authenticate female power. In Afrofuturist terms, we see connections between the past and present where real and imagined slaves overcome their white-encoded limitations via the trickster technology embodied in Anyanwu.

Two particular animal moments come to mind when thinking of Anyanwu's trickster shape-shifting power. Both examples occur during

the middle passage onboard Doro's ship. In self-defense, a terrified Anyanwu swiftly transforms into a "razor-clawed" leopard when Doro's telepathic son, Lale Sachs, makes her see him as "a great, horned, scaly lizard-thing of vaguely human shape...with a thick lashing tail and a scaly dog head with huge teeth" (Butler, 1980, p. 73). She rips out Lale's throat and starts eating him before Doro can stop her. The second transformation occurs when Anyanwu eats dolphin flesh and wants to experience swimming in the ocean as a sleek powerful marine animal. Through ingestion, we learn that Anyanwu can read the "flesh-messages" of any life form and become that animal entirely while maintaining her own consciousness (Butler, p. 80). She genetically engineers the "physical structure" of the dolphin (Butler, p. 79) and supplies herself with a future avenue of escape from Doro who cannot use his mental tracking system to find her in animal forms. Even he does not "know the full extent of her power" until conditions force her to use it to its full extent; she had previously hid it from others throughout her life (Butler, p. 11). In fact, she prefers life as a dolphin because she can obviate the human problems of sexism and racism, if not violence, by crossing the "species boundary" (Vint, 2005, p. 285). This exceptional trickster technology enables her to hide in plain sight and to fight or flee when it is absolutely necessary for survival.

Anyanwu's transformation into a wealthy old white man, the slaveholding Edward Warrick of Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, is the most potent example of trickster technology in *Wild Seed*



because it offers her the perfect cover for living in the Deep South while gathering, raising, and protecting her special family. She crosses this final human boundary to take full advantage of the white patriarchal structure dominant in the United States at that time. Anyanwu overcomes the triple restrictions of class, race, and gender because of this trickster technology, but fears being “white for too long” when ignoring chained slaves passing in front of her while thinking about diving for gold as a dolphin (Butler, p. 211). Though she has the power of transformation and the power to break various containments, her trickster agency still depends on her default identity as a black woman doing what she must to survive.

Anyanwu’s trickster technology allows her to cross over both man-made limits (transcending the racialized and sexed body) and species-ism in order to adapt to and evade conditions that would ground her to those identities. In this character’s shape-shifting abilities, Butler calls attention to the “animality” of slaves and black people in the U.S. context in a way reminiscent of Alexander Weheliye’s recent theory of “racializing assemblages,” whereby he argues that racialization fractions subjects with lesser degrees of humanity (2014, p. 12). Weheliye writes, “The idea of racializing assemblages... construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans” (2014, p. 12). Butler plays on this idea and pushes it to its ironical limit, making

the white male slave-owner a character that embodies at the same level as a dolphin or a tiger. In this classical Afrofuturist fashion, then, she disrupts the logics of race (and sex) in profoundly unsettling ways.

### **Sex and the Technological Monster in Hopkinson’s “Ganger (Ball Lightning)”**

The most technical example of a trickster technology that we discuss in this essay appears in Hopkinson’s “Ganger (Ball Lightning),” where electro-sex suits demonstrate the inherent dangers of dissolving various identity constructions, notably sex and race. In this story Cleve and Issy attempt to fix their relationship by purchasing sex toys. Their sexual connection is their only means of communication since they cannot share their feelings for each other in any other way and continually grow apart. In short, these suits represent a last effort to save their relationship. A week after purchasing them, the couple decide to experiment with their stimulation suits, trading them to intensify their physical experience and to satisfy their curiosity about the feel of sex for the biological other. Technology creates this transformational moment of body swapping where Issy swears “she could feel Cleve’s tight hot cunt closing around her dick” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 225) and Cleve declares, “my dick had been peeled and it was inside out, and you [Issy]...you were fucking my inside-out dick” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 226). In the aftermath of the sexual experience, Cleve forgets to properly discharge and store the suits. They simply peel them off and leave them on the floor before



falling asleep. The unthinking electrostatic s/he fuck monster, a doppelgänger of Cleve and Issy, born from the electrical imbalance built-up as these suits merge together overnight, nearly kills the couple by eliciting multiple orgasms in quick succession by repeatedly touching them. Cleve and Issy fool themselves in thinking hot, kinky sex will solve their problems. At the end, they traverse the emotional chasm that exists between them by learning to talk to each other again.

The unwary couple bring this thoughtless trickster to life in their desire for intimacy by not heeding the warning label on the suits and by trading skins. The packaging clearly states that a coronal discharge, known as the “Kirlian phenomenon,” will occur with mishandled suits as they energize each other (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 237). However, manufacturer boasts about not being able to distinguish between “the microthin layer of the wetsuits and bare skin” drive Cleve and Issy to test the marketing ploy of the suits as “consensual aids to full body aura alignment” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 223; p. 224). Issy does not deny initially having fun with the suits, but ironically recognizes that they wear “rubber body bags” (Hopkinson, 2001, 229). This moment of dark humor underscores how Cleve’s and Issy’s problems are not physical, that they are deceiving themselves about their compatibility because of their unconventional sex play. Rather, they need mental and emotional attunement to rekindle the love between them. They need to talk about their insecurities and this hermaphroditic “ghost-thing” in the form of “ball lightning” provides their opportunity for a

genuine closeness (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 236; p. 237). Still, their engagement in seemingly subversive behavior leads them near death. Because this thing desires sensation with its unwilling partners, it has “breasts” and “a dick” although “a pattern of coloured lights flickered in it, limning where spine, heart, and brain would have been” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 236). This lifeless bit of tricknology jolts their hearts into a vital need for affectionate friendship.

Conversations about personal emotions such as fears and hopes immobilize the ganger. Before they notice that such conversation freezes the thing in its tracks, the monster reduces them to quivering masses of flesh with each caress. Cleve and Issy are literally on the floor of their bathroom repeatedly climaxing and close to death until they realize that their communication is the key to negating the electricity. In fact, “Hopkinson’s story follows a similar, if saucier pattern” established in *I, Robot* (1950) that Lisa Yaszek smartly identifies as an update on “Isaac Asimov’s classic robot puzzle stories” because Cleve and Issy have to figure out the technology’s weakness before it kills them (2006, N. pag). Issy tells the story of how she broke a light bulb preparing a tin of homemade chocolate fudge and how Cleve held in his anger while cleaning up her mess with her pouting on the side talking “around stuff” like “racist insult[s]” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 243). She wants Cleve to share his feelings with her and his buying the suits in the first place is a misguided attempt to do so. They really talk and touch each other’s minds while grasping hands through the ganger, and, as a result, it pops out of existence. Physical,



emotional, and mental pleasure, really “touch[ing] each other” defuse it (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 244). For just a moment the erotic power on display breaks the gender division between Cleve and Issy, fusing male and female into one being, where their unguarded thoughts become the necessary weapon to defeat their electric monster. Afterward, Cleve explains his emotional distance as his fear of being stereotyped as an angry black man stating, “I ‘fraid to use harsh words...look at the size of me, the blackness of me. You know what it is to see people cringe for fear when you shout?” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 245). Issy, herself, expresses how she wants “sweet, hot talk” from Cleve (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 245). While the gender division temporarily collapses, the tricknology in play here hinges on race. Racial anxieties nearly end their relationship, but without Cleve and Issy sharing their everyday experiences as black people with each other, their newfound intimacy would not have developed.

“Ganger (Ball Lightning)” functions as a curious metaphor whereby her two black characters are forced into an absurd hypersexualized play. Hopkinson has talked in interviews about the necessity to depict black people, in particular Caribbean people, as engaging in sexy, kinky, and queer contexts to re-appropriate their humanity (Johnston, 2008). However, to represent such scenes as positive and even empowering—as Hopkinson does in several of her other works, including her novel *The Salt Roads* (2003)—is complex. The history of hypersexualization and exotification of black slaves in the Caribbean and in the U.S. still

participates in the racialized process of dehumanization. Women Afrofuturist writers such as Hopkinson, N. K. Jemisin, and Nnedi Okorafor include positive and female-oriented sex scenes in their novels for the purpose of reclaiming that humanity, and so scholars should consider the role that explicit sexuality plays in Afrofuturism. This story’s dark humor in portraying a technology that threatens characters with repeated orgasms until death could be read as a satirical take on the science fictional theme of the dangers of technology and as a jab at the reader’s voyeuristic appraisal of the exotic black body. In the end it is Cleve’s and Issy’s work on their relationship which overcomes the danger of becoming literally oversexualized.

### **Tricknology as Language: Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber***

Hopkinson’s novel *Midnight Robber* (2000) takes place on the futuristic pan-Caribbean colonized planet of Toussaint, a clear reference to the Haitian Revolution leader General Toussaint Louverture, in which an all-powerful AI by the name of Granny Nanny (or Grande ‘Nansi Web) is connected to all citizens and ensures perfect peace. In this respect, criminals get sent to the parallel shadow planet of New Half-Way Tree, where they are condemned to live “headblind,” without AI support, and perform hard labor (Hopkinson, 2001, p.4). The protagonist Tan-Tan, a little girl at the beginning of the story, ends up there after her father, Antonio, accidentally kills his wife’s lover. When Tan-Tan reaches the age of nine, Antonio starts to sexually abuse her.



Eventually, Tan-Tan kills him as he brutally rapes her, and begins another life of exile in the bush while pregnant with his fetus. The unnamed narrator, revealed at the end of the book to be the house “eshu” or artificially intelligent butler, interspaces mythical stories about Tan-Tan the Robber Queen’s (a carnivalesque character) exploits; they sometimes mirror the events of the framing narrative (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 5). At the end of the novel, her vengeful step-mother, Janisette, catches up to Tan-Tan and confronts her for the murder of Antonio. In a final Robber Queen speech, Tan-Tan eventually earns a communal pardon by revealing her sexual abuse. The novel ends when Tan-Tan gives birth to the child she names Tubman, honoring the fugitive slave and underground railroad conductor Harriet Tubman. Tubman in the novel represents the “human bridge from slavery to freedom” (Hopkinson, 2000, p. 329).

The inhabitants of Toussaint are connected to Granny Nanny and other AIs through an earbug implanted into their head from birth. The earbug (literally the receptacle of language) represents the connection between language and technology in Hopkinson’s mythology. It is no coincidence that in the world of *Midnight Robber*, the computer coding that generated Granny Nanny and through which it is possible to control her is called “nannysong,” a reference to calypsos, or the songs sung by Caribbean slaves (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 5). Marlene D. Allen writes that the pedicab runners—the only Toussaint inhabitants to do hard physical work—represent an ironic twist on the slaves of the

past because they can manipulate Granny Nanny with their control of nannysong (2012, p. 79). In a complacent society where AIs do all the hard labor, Hopkinson’s hackers ironically turn out to be the disconnected ones who prefer the toil of manual labor.

The emphasis on oral “code” as opposed to typing on a computer underlines communication and an oral tradition, both of which dispute the image of technology as grounded in materialism. Contrary to the traditional representations of omnipotent AIs as symbols for surveillance and totalitarianism, Granny Nanny illustrates the connection between the individual and the community, where the technology of the earbug represents integration. In the novel, the real punishment imposed on criminals is not so much their exile from the physical place of Toussaint, but their disconnection from Granny Nanny as they become “headblind.” This exile represents their disconnection from the social realm. In this figure, Hopkinson deconstructs the representation of technology as futuristically remote, urban, post-race. Instead, she grounds technology in the history and culture of the community. As Jillana Enteen argues, the character of Granny Nanny also has implications to the purpose and political function of technology. Enteen writes, “The Marryshow Corporation and Granny Nanny constitute and are constituted by their community. They cannot evolve into machines that no longer respond to the populations with whom they intersect. Communication and play, rather than corporate capitalism and accumulation, are their aims” (2007, p. 265).



Hopkinson untangles technology from its roots within capitalism by replacing its actors and the meaning associated with technological progress.

In the structure of the novel itself, language-as-technology serves to trick the reader, deconstructs the apparent linearity of the story, and blurs the lines between myth and reality. At the beginning of the novel, the unnamed narrator tells us it is a “master weaver. I spin the threads. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth, I weaving you my story, oui?...Maybe is same way so I weave my way through the dimensions to land up here” (3). Enteen contends that the use of the figure of Anansi the Spider (the ultimate trickster) interpellates the reader to the particular form of the novel: “By invoking this trickster and his web, Hopkinson’s storyteller informs the reader that meaning will be multiple, competing, and contradictory, Hopkinson’s hacking further implicates the reader by requiring her to interpret this new poetics...” (2007, p. 270). The connection between storytelling and traveling through time and space is also not incidental, since in the end the narrator is finally revealed to be the house eshu (or AI servant), talking to Tan-Tan’s fetus, soon-to-be baby Tubman.

The eshu’s narrative symbolizes a technology that is both disembodied (since the eshu is an AI) and timeless. The eshu only appears to be a character from Toussaint, that is to say Tan-Tan’s past, when in fact he is present throughout the story, unbeknownst to the reader, and he is talking to the future in the

form of the unborn fetus. Furthermore, the eshu weaves the Tan-Tan myths into the body of the framing story, refusing to ascertain the veracity of these myths or their position in time, and disrupting the expected linearity of the novel in classic Hopkinson style. Thus, the eshu proves the ultimate trickster within the novel.

The technology of the novel is both remote and disembodied, and at the same time indistinguishable from the human characters because it is part of their biology. The eshu explains, “When Granny Nanny realise how Antonio kidnap Tan-Tan, she hunt he through the dimension veils, with me riding she back like Dry Bone. Only a quantum computer coulda trace she through infinite dimensions like that, only Granny Nanny and me, a house eshu. And only because Tan-Tan’s earbug never dead yet” (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 327). The earbug here represents the trans-dimensional communication between the AIs and Tan-Tan; it is literally the thread which connects the characters while simultaneously closing the story into a circle. The earbug is the mechanism through which Granny Nanny can communicate to unborn life and transform it, shaping it into a cyborg by directing the “nanomites” so that nannysong becomes a biological—not merely added—sixth sense to Tubman (Hopkinson, 2001, p. 10). Through the manipulation of language-as-technology, that is to say through the passage from the earbug (receptor of language) to the womb, Granny Nanny also reconnects with Tan-Tan and reintegrates her into her own narrative told until now by the disembodied AI. The creation



of Tubman as a full cyborg, one literally created by an AI manipulating the biology of a human, finalizes to merge the historical with the technological, the past with the future, the disembodied with the flesh thereby demonstrating Afrofuturism at work.

### Tricksterism as a Technology

Afrofuturist writers uses the trope of tricksterism as a technology in their texts. In Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu's shape-shifting and bioengineering abilities allow her to transcend the limits of race and sex, and even to cross over to different species. In so doing, she deconstructs the racialized classifications of human beings according to violent systems and ironically embodies the white male slave-owner. In Nalo Hopkinson's story "Ganger (Ball Lightning)", tricknology makes a satirical play on the hypersexualization and exotification of the black body, while in her novel *Midnight Robber*, language itself becomes the tool to trick within the diegesis and at the structural level. Conversely, the representation of tricksterism as a form of technology also participates in the Afrofuturist tradition of deconstructing the themes and tropes of SF, and by extent discourses surrounding the

ideals of modernity, progress, technology, and futurity.

In all three narratives examined in this essay, the authors represent technology in a way that profoundly contradicts its objectiveness, remoteness, and modernity. Anyanwu's ability to analyze bacteria with her tongue, or study complex organisms via ingestion brings the fleshiness of the body into what is supposed to be rigorously sterile, removed from touch. Hopkinson channels Asimov's Laws of Robotics in an explicit and absurd erotic play in "Ganger (Ball Lightning)," inventing electro-sex suits that disrupt the meaning of the sexed body, and creating a tale in which genial connection between black characters defeats the technological monster. In *Midnight Robber*, descendants from slaves are the only ones who can code a mega-AI by singing in a fast tongue, while an AI-trickster tricks the reader and disrupt the composition of the novel. Past and future, primitiveness and futurity, the bodied and the disembodied, mix in these Afrofuturist tales. Trickster technology thus offers perhaps a concise image of the essence of Afrofuturist texts: the gleeful arrangement of oxymorons, the satirical power of inversion, and the happy disruption of established rules.

**Tricknology (continued)****References**

- Allen, M. D. (2012). Tricksterism, masquerades, and the legacy of the African diasporic past. In M. D. Allen & S. D. Williams (Eds.), *Afterimages of slavery: Essays on appearances in recent American films, literature, television and other media* (pp. 76-88). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Asimov, I. (1950). *I, robot*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Baldwin, J. (1963/1993). *The fire next time*. New York, NY: Vintage International.
- Butler, O. E. (1978). *Survivor*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Butler, O. E. (1977). *Mind of my mind*. New York, NY: Warner.
- Butler, O. E. (1976). *Patternmaster*. New York, NY: Warner.
- Butler, O. E. (1980). *Wild seed*. New York, NY: Warner.
- Butler, O. E. (1984). *Clay's ark*. New York, NY: Warner.
- Canavan, G. (2016). *Octavia E. Butler*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press
- Clarke, A. C. (1968). *2001: A space odyssey*. New York, NY: New American Library.
- Delany, S. R. (2009). *The Jewel-hinged jaw: Notes on the language of science fiction* (revised edition). Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. (Original work published 1977)
- Dery, M. (1993). Black to the future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 92(4), 735-778.
- Doty, W. G., & Hynes, W. J. (1993). *Mythical trickster figures: Contours, contexts, and criticisms*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Douglass, F. (1845/2005). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*. New York, NY: Signet Classics.
- Dubey, M. (2008). Becoming Animal in Black Women's Science Fiction. In M. S. Barr (Ed.), *Afro-future females: Black writers chart science fiction's newest new-wave trajectory* (pp. 31-51). Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Enteen, J. (2007). "On the receiving end of colonization": Nalo Hopkinson's 'Nansi Web'. *Science Fiction Studies*, 34(2), 262-282.
- Easterbrook, N. (2013). Not if, when: Ian McDonald's African unsafari. *Paradoxa*, 25, 191-208.
- Faucheux, A. (2017). Race and sexuality in Nalo Hopkinson's Oeuvre; or, queer Afrofuturism. *Science Fiction Studies*, 44 (3), 563-580.
- Gordon, J. (2009). Animal studies. In M. Bould, A. M. Butler, A. Roberts, & S. Vint (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to science fiction* (pp. 331-340). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Haraway, D. J. (1985/1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp. 149-182). New York, NY: Routledge Press.

**Tricknology (continued)**

- Haraway, D. J. (1989). *Primate visions: Gender, race, and nature in the world of modern science*. New York, NY: Routledge Press.
- Holden, R. J. (2013). "I began writing about power because I had so little": The impact of Octavia Butler's early work on feminist science fiction as a whole (and on one feminist science fiction scholar in particular). In R. J. Holden & N. Shawl (Eds.), *Strange matings: Science fiction, feminism, African American voices, and Octavia E. Butler* (pp. 17-44). Seattle, WA: Aqueduct.
- Hopkinson, N. (2000). *Midnight robber*. New York, NY: Warner.
- Hopkinson, N. (2001). Ganger (ball lightning). In *Skin folk* (pp. 221-246). New York, NY: Warner.
- Hopkinson, N. (2003). *The salt roads*. New York, NY: Warner.
- Hoydis, J. (2015). Fantastically hybrid: Race, gender, and genre in black female speculative fiction. *Aglistik: International Journal of English Studies*, 26 (2), 71-88.
- Jacobs, H. (1861/1988). *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Jefferson, T. (1785/1998). *Notes on the state of Virginia*. New York, NY: Penguin Classics.
- Jemisin, N. K. (2015). *The fifth season*. New York, NY: Orbit.
- Johnston, N. (2008). "Happy That It's Here": An interview with Nalo Hopkinson. In W. G. Pearson (Ed.), *Queer universes: Sexualities in science fiction* (pp. 200-215). Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press.
- Kilgore, D. D. (2014). Afrofuturism. In R. Latham (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of science fiction* (pp. 561-572). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Lavender, I. (2011). *Race in American Science Fiction*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Morgan, W. (2013). *The trickster figure in American literature* [Kindle Paperwhite version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- Morrison, T. (1984). Rootedness: The ancestor as foundation. In M. Evans (Ed.), *Black women writers (1950-1980): A critical evaluation* (pp. 339-345). New York, NY: Anchor.
- Okorafor, N. (2010). *Who fears death*. New York, NY: DAW.
- Radin, Paul. (1956). *The trickster: A study in American Indian mythology*. New York, NY: Schocken.
- Reid, M. (2010). Postcolonial science fiction. *The Science Fiction Foundation*. Retrieved from <http://www.sf-foundation.org/publications/essays/reid.html>.
- Silver, J. (Producer), & L. Wachowski, & L. Wachowski (Directors). (1999). *The matrix* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.
- Vint, S. (2005). Becoming other: Animals, kinship, and Butler's *Clay's Ark*. *Science Fiction Studies*, 32 (2), 281-300.
- Weheliye, A. 2014. *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Yaszek, Lisa. (2006). Afrofuturism, science fiction, and the history of the future. *Socialism and Democracy*, 20 (3) 40-61.



**Tricknology (continued)**

Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08854300600950236?journalCode=csad20>