CRISES OF IN/HUMANITY: POSTHUMANISM, AFROFUTURISM, AND SCIENCE AS/AND FICTION

by

Avery Rose Everhart

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Abstract

This thesis engages black critical thought on the human and its contemporary iterations in posthumanism and transhumanism. It articulates five categories of analysis: displace, interrupt, disrupt, expand, and wither. Each is meant to allude to the generative potential in different iterations of black thought that engages the human. Working through Sylvia Wynter's theories of the rise of Man-as-human in particular, the project highlights how black thought on the human displaces the uncritical whiteness of posthumanist thought. It argues that Afrofuturism has the potential to interrupt the linear progression from human to posthuman and that Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* proffers a narrative of race as a technology that disrupts the presumed post-raciality of posthumanism and transhumanism. It then contends that Katherine McKittrick's rearticulation of the Promise of Science can be extended to incorporate the promise of science fiction. In so doing, it avers that a more curated conversation between McKittrick and Wynter, one already ongoing, and Octavia Butler, through *Mind of My Mind* from her *Patternist* series, expands our notions of the human as a category even at the risk of seeing it wither as a politic or praxis. It ends on a speculative note meant to imagine the possibilities within the promise of science fiction.

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Chapter 1

Introduction - Displace: Situating the Human in Black Critical Thought and Interrogating the Racial Underpinnings of Science and Posthumanism

Displace: *(v.) cause (something) to move from its proper or usual place*

If racialization is understood not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans, then blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot.
Alexander Weheliye *Habeas Viscus*

Some transhumanists boldly claim that by 2045, humans will officially merge with machines. Ironic, I thought, because that same decade is predicted to mark the beginning of the majority-minority America.
Ytasha Womack *Afrofuturism*

It is the goal of this thesis to displace the unspoken white supremacy of transhumanism, to interrupt and disrupt the current model for being human couched in White Western masculinist standards and expectations, and to expand upon that model for being human at the risk of letting it wither. To achieve these goals of displacement, interruption, disruption, expansion, and withering I center black critical thought for its particular genealogy of thinking through "the human" as a category, a figure, a construct,

and even as a praxis. These categories, displacement, interruption, disruption, expansion, and withering; emerge from my own readings of black studies as the potential effects that black thought can have on posthumanism and transhumanism.

I center black critical thought over and against contemporary modes of humanism, or thinking about the human and the future of humanity, not to serve as a corrective or an addendum to that "genre," to use Sylvia Wynter's term, of the human. Rather, as Alexander Weheliye argues in his recent monograph *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human,* I center black critical thought because "Afro-diasporic cultures provide singular, mutable, and contingent figurations of the human, and thus do not represent mere bids for inclusion in or critiques of the shortcomings of western liberal humanism."[1] Thus, this thesis will seek to contextualize what I've called the unspoken white supremacy of transhumanism in order to displace it in favor of a prolonged engagement with black critical thought. I wager that a better and more interesting conversation about who, and what, constitutes the human ensues when the multiple, mutable, and contingent figurations of the human that black cultures produce do more of the talking than the white masculinist subject of liberal personhood that Sylvia Wynter argues, and Weheliye echoes, has come to stand in as *the* human.

As a white interlocutor with black critical thought, I do not purport to advance the field but rather I hope to use what I've gleaned from it to point to what a rigorous

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1. Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 136.

engagement with black thought on the human can offer to anyone concerned with or by the future of humanity. Further, as a white *transgender* interlocutor I am invited to become posthuman and/or transhuman in ways that emphasize my trans-ness and that are predicated upon my non-blackness. It is for that reason, of which I grant some readers may be skeptical, that I speak to transhumanism as a mode of thinking the human, even though it is not one that I espouse. I hope to speak to transhumanism as a kind of invited guest and ask that the people within that school of thought begin to take quite seriously black critical thought on the human, and any potential critiques proceeding from the work of the "human enhancement" that transhumanism champions.

As with this chapter, the definitions of the verbs that delineate the remaining chapters will feature as epigraphs alongside the guide quotes. Ideally, the definitions themselves will work in tandem with the guide quotes to inform the readers' thought processes as they engage with each chapter. These verbs encapsulate the focus of each chapter while, hopefully, also calling upon the goals of the project as a whole. Therefore, while each verb is separable and serves as a kind of bookend between the chapters, each builds upon those that precede it and anticipates where it might go from that point. In other words, this first chapter displaces uncritically white thought on the human by honing in on black thought on humanity *in order to set up* the work of interruption and disruption that chapter two illustrates as present within Octavia Butler's body of work. The second chapter then interrupts the anti-blackness implicit in some transhumanist and posthumanist work by way of taking up Afrofuturism in order to posit that black studies,

and black cultural producers, have always already been engaged with posthumanism. It further takes up Octavia Butler's tremendous work *Fledgling* alongside Beth Coleman's "Race as Technology" as a means to illustrate the work of disruption that Butler exemplifies. Finally, the third chapter expands upon the limited and Eurocentric exemplar Man, through the work of Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter on discourses of science, its promises, and its pitfalls. It ends with the conjecture that, when read alongside Octavia Butler's works from the *Patternist* series, expanding upon the human, that is giving it a fuller account, may risk allowing the human to wither, or lose its vitality and force as a category of analysis. I hope that by moving through different verbs, this narrative architecture will articulate different iterations of black critical thought and creative-intellectual work to portray black thought on the human as not limited by its specificity but rather as proffering new genres of humanity that are relational and sustainable.

This introductory chapter is guided by the work of disclosure and displacement. The following sections; "Modernity/Coloniality/Man," "Race/Science/Fiction," "Post/Trans/Humanism," are geared firstly toward the work of disclosing the racializing processes that allow for the mutation of humanism into posthumanism and/or transhumanism. Their secondary goal is to displace the uncritically white supremacist and anti-black underpinnings of some of these projects geared toward evolving the human. The sections proceed in this order because to understand the rise of the formation Sylvia Wynter calls Man, and its subsequent overrepresentation as if it were the only way to be

human, one must understand the colonial encounter and the consequences of modernity which require black abjection. One can then better understand the simultaneity of the scientific revolution in the eighteenth century and the rise of a modern formation of race as not coincidental, but correlated. On this basis I entertain both science and race as formations that are rooted in myths. Like many other myths however, both hold powerful cultural sway and can produce material effects that make them *appear* factual, or "natural" despite their invention within a self-preserving, colonizing, Euro-descended society. From this basis I then explain the violently white supremacist stakes of articulating a future evolution "past" or "beyond" the human, which both posthumanism and transhumanism posit as inevitable and desirable, when those iterations of evolution "past" or "beyond" reiterate anti-blackness upon which the original formation of human relies.

Modernity/Coloniality/Man

Sylvia Wynter has theorized the "overrepresentation of Man as human" as a key product of coloniality and modernity.[2] Her project displaces the liberal "monohumanist" construction of Man that maintains a hegemonic stranglehold on human subjectivity. Wynter considers 1492 her turning point: for her, the moment of the departure of Columbus from Spain and his arrival in the Caribbean congeals prior violences into the

2. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260.

violently global and modern future to come. Post-1492, the colonization of the Americas and the African and Asian continents, the transatlantic slave trade, and the subsequent (economic, political, philosophical) crises facing Europe and Europeans become the methods and means by which Man arises and presents as if it were the singular model for humanity over and against any indigenous or autochthonous mode of being human already in existence. For Wynter and therefore for this thesis, 1492 signifies the beginning of the modern era just as it is the beginning of the colonial one.

To establish the ways in which "modernity" twins with "coloniality," Wynter's theory interrogates the rise of Man as a philosophical construct and mode of subjectivity, and its over-representation as if it were *the* human. Wynter traces a series of shifts in worldview that by gaining momentum in Europe from the early modern period onwards permitted the rise of Man. "Man1" begins with the Renaissance humanists' work to redefine the human per his capacity for rational thought and his relationship to the political state. Wynter signals this as the "degodding/desupernaturalizing of our modes of being human" which came about "on the basis of their invention of Man in the reoccupied place of their earlier matrix theocentric identity, Christian."[3] For Wynter, Man1 rises as a direct result of a dissolution, albeit a gradual one, of the power that the Roman Catholic Church held over definitions of human subjectivity, which begin to shift towards a "secular" basis rather than a supernatural relationship to God mediated by the clergy. However, that division between the then ruling class of the clergy and the then-

3. Ibid., 273.

laypeople is quickly replaced by an emphasis on nobility. Wynter notes as well that part of the initial motivation for explorers in Spanish employ, like Christopher Columbus, was a chance at an acquired status of nobility.[4] Thus at a moment of paradigmatic shift, the promise of upward mobility by way of participation in the violent acquisition of land and people as resources motivated colonial travel to the Americas.

For Wynter, the original paradigmatic shift begotten by the influential Renaissance humanists forms what she terms Man1. She notes that the initial "triadic formal model of the Judeo-Christian perception of non-Christians" constituted "Christians (who had heard and accepted the new word of the gospel), infidels like the Muslims and Jews, who, although monotheists, had refused the Word after having been preached the Word (and who were therefore *inimici Christi*) enemies of Christ, and *idolators,* those pagan polytheistic peoples who had either ignored or had not as yet been preached the Word."[5] Yet, she clarifies, the shift of these modes of thinking into a global theory of humanity "were to be processes made possible only on the basis of the dynamics of a colonizer/colonized relation that the West was to discursively constitute and empirically institutionalize on the islands of the Caribbean, and, later, on the

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4. Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View,* ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995): 5-57.

5. Ibid., 29.

mainlands of the Americas."[6] Spanish and Portuguese colonizers' assignment of "idolators" to the indigenous peoples they encountered in the Caribbean and the Americas justified their legitimate enslavement. Yet the genocidal decimation of indigenous peoples from enslavement, starvation, and introduced disease also conditioned the emergence of the transatlantic enslavement of Africans in new European colonies in the Americas. Wynter marks an early turn in these relations by citing the Valladolid Debate of 1550 when the increasing pace and violence of indigenous death at the hands of conquerors and colonial authorities led representatives of the Church and Spain to debate the humanity or inhumanity—and, hence, the salvability—of indigenous peoples of the Americas. Wynter indicates that the debate's conclusion "would not only serve to free the indigenous peoples from the outright slavery to which many had been reduced in the immediate decades after 1492"[7] but also that black Africans then became understood—not merely in New Spain, but in the emergent Atlantic world—as not only enslavable, and justifiably so on both theological and juridical levels, but also as *necessarily* born into slavery and bondage.

Extrapolating from Wynter's arguments, if Man, as political and rational subject of the nation-state or empire, only comes to be simultaneous to these ongoing colonial encounters, then Man does not exist *except* as defined against the "legitimately enslavable" black African. It also appears to be the case that if Man successfully

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6. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 264.

represents himself as the legitimate subject, the standard against which all other modes of life are measured—presumed, as they were, to be non-homogenous, inherently different—then as discourses of the human species begin to appear, so does an attempt to push the black African out of the realm of the human species. It is for this reason that a project that interrogates the human through an engagement with black studies must also necessarily contend with the rise of racial science. Scientific racism emerges out of the simultaneity of the formation of science as a discourse, and an ideology of race that begins to form as a result of these colonial encounters. Through these encounters and transformations that became predicated on the "rightful" subjugation of both indigenous peoples and, later, the enslaved Africans brought to their territories to labor for colonial rulers, another paradigmatic shift takes place. Wynter avers "it was here that the modern phenomenon of race, as a new, extrahumanly determined classificatory principle and mechanism of domination, was first invented, if still in its first religio-secular form." She indicates that with Columbus's "discovery" of lands to the West, coupled with the Copernican leap to understanding the Sun rather than the Earth to be at the center of our solar system, a new "space of Otherness" arises. She contends that in this moment, "the projected 'space of Otherness' was now to be mapped on phenotypical and religio-cultural differences between human variations and/or population groups, while the new idea of order was now to be defined in terms of degrees of rational perfection/imperfection"[8] Further, she points to how this shift that gives rise to Man2,

8. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the

and to the biological sciences, specifically affects black populations and white European perceptions thereof. She argues "where before the 'Negro' had been projected, within the terms of the Judeo-Christian imaginary, as the 'figure' of the human made degenerate by sin, and therefore supernaturally determined (through the mediation of Noah's curse laid upon the descendants of Ham) to be nearest of all peoples to the ape, now he/she will be projected as the by-nature determined (i.e. caused) missing link between true (because rational) humans and the irrational figure of the ape."[9]

Race/Science/Fiction

Sylvia Wynter's theory of the rise of Man2 alongside the biological sciences elucidates the interconnectedness of "race" and "science" both as categories and ideologies. For Wynter, the rise of a biological notion of what it means to be human inherently relies upon and can only be imagined through "race" as a category used to explain phenotypic differences by imbuing them with meaning and power. Further, for Wynter, science and its revolutionary rise necessitates the above-mentioned projection of a "space of Otherness" onto already subjugated and distinct populations, and notably onto black peoples. Because, once coded as phenotypic difference, that "space of Otherness" was presumed to be clearly visible in and on the body, those differences came to be understood as *natural,* or as operating in "cursus solitus naturae (in the accustomed or

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Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 296.

9. Ibid, 304.

ordinary course of nature)" and "as the explanatory model that underlay the scientific revolution, both with respect to the physical sciences and, if more slowly so, to the rise of modern medicine."[10] As Wynter and others note, those socially powerful differences came to signify predominantly in and through the aforementioned figure of the "Negro," which Wynter notes presented the "missing link between the two sides of the rational/irrational divide," one that would "inevitably come to be represented in the first 'scientific' taxonomy of human populations, that of Linnaeus, as the population that, in contrast to the European (which is governed by laws), is governed by caprice. So irrational that it will have to be governed by others."[11]

During the eighteenth century, a split among so-called lovers of natural history as to whether or not all "races" of people came from a singular ancestral origin, a theory called *monogeny*, or were created separately from distinct ancestors, the theory of *polygeny*. Many of the words we use to describe different "races" of human beings and many of the racial epithets used to demean and degrade based on these distinctions stem from the botanist and naturalist Carl Linnaeus, whom Wynter references above. Linnaeus invented a four-race schema to categorize humans according to the geographic origins posited by the theory. His 1735 treatise *Systema Naturae*, at the time in only its first of many editions, introduced this schema based on skin color and continent of origin. That schema divided human beings into "Europæus albus" (white European), "Americanus

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10. Ibid, 306.

11. Ibid.

rubescens" (red American), "Asiaticus fuscus" (brown Asian) and "Africanus Niger" (black African). Interestingly enough, Linnaeus is responsible for naming our common species homo sapiens,[12] despite claiming on many occasions that if push came to shove he would align himself with the polygenists over the monogenists. The man responsible, then, for unifying us as a species by name also is arguably responsible for the trickle-down effects of systemic racism stemming from his eighteenth century writings on species that inform our continued delineations of human differences along racial lines. A successor of Linnaeus, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, expanded the four-race model to a five-race model in 1775, but he specifically noted that it was quite difficult and arbitrary to solidly delineate between them.

As Anne McClintock notes of Linnaeus's influence in her book *Imperial Leather: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities*, "inspired by [Linnaeus], hosts of explorers, botanists, natural historians and geographers set out with the vocation of ordering the world's forms into a global science of the surface and an optics of truth."[13] His influence, then, can be seen beyond either his life's work of categorizing the species of plants autochthonous to the Americas, or his pet project of proffering racial differences as "natural" and later scientifically observable and accurate. With his dream of cataloguing the world's living organisms, he became the catalyst for a project of ordering the world according to discrete, observable categories and what McClintock calls a

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12. Originally the lectotype for human beings was homo sapiens Linnaeus.

13. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.

"global science of the surface" or "an optics of truth."[14] In turn, his original four-race schema attached a "humor" to each of the categories.[15] In this way, his category system arguably represents at least one mechanism by which Man1 shifts to Man2: by imbuing essences within categories he "observed" in different populations, he gave language to many of the racial stereotypes that began to inform the crystallization of his proposed racial schema. Following Linnaeus, other naturalists latched onto this schema to posit race as primordial and natural and moved on to attach further meaning to its proposed distinctions. They argued for the inferiority of Africans to Europeans, to justify the continued enslavement, with its attendant atrocities, of the former by the latter.[16] It is perhaps because of these extrapolations that McClintock further argues that because all manner of Linnaeus's contemporaries set out to form such a global science of the surface, "the Enlightenment project coincided with the Imperial project."[17] However, despite the success of the imperial project, McClintock further contends that their "ambition far outran effect for quite some time" because "the project was fissured with intellectual

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14. Ibid.

15. These humors he took from Ancient Greek thought on human health and they are: melancholic, choleric, sanguine, and phlegmatic. Each of these was associated with a natural element (fire, water, etc.) and also a temperament, or really a personality type. It is from these humors and his read of them onto his four race schema that Linnaeus concluded that black Africans were ruled by 'caprice' and therefore better off enslaved and being told what to do.

16. For more on this notion of racial inferiority and superiority as it pertained to black people and indigenous people as separate species, see Stephen Jay Gould, "American Polygeny and Craniometry Before Darwin: Blacks and Indians as Separate, Inferior Species," in *The Racial Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 84-115.

17. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.

paradox, incompletion, and ignorance."[18]

Linnaeus writes during an age when Enlightenment ideals defined humanity and notably relied upon black abjection. Contemporaneously, pro-slavery thinkers, politicians, plantation masters and the like sought ways to justify their continued enslavement of black people. This collusion of a search for ways to taxonomize the world, Enlightenment ideals of reason and empiricism or objectivity, and white desire for control of black bodies (and minds, and personhood) was (following Wynter's schema, and McClintock's reading) the spark that lit the fire of scientific racism. Throughout the Enlightenment era, as common people and those with authority and power alike began to shift toward more secular modes of governance, science and its emphasis on objective observation and empiricism became a discourse informing all manner of political, philosophical, and cultural debates. As faith in science promulgated, at least among those whom white men with legal authority defined *as* people rather than property, theories backed by science could be deployed to combat antislavery sentiments.[19] Thus the rise of an ideology of race, especially as used to empirically "prove" black African inferiority and White European superiority, conspired with the scientific revolution and natural history to produce scientific racism. Wynter argues "that it was in the context of the humanists' redescribing of the Christian definition of the human – in new, revalorizing, and (so to speak) propter nos homines and/or Man-centric terms – that the series of

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18. Ibid.

19. It is perhaps worth nothing that, in contrast, antislavery or abolition arguments tended toward emotional appeals to one's sense of morals or ethics.

fifteenth-century voyages on whose basis the West began its global expansion voyages…together with Copernicus's new astronomy…were to initiate the rupture that would lead to the rise of the physical sciences." We can then see that the confluence of the colonial encounter, European imperialism, and profound shifts in thinking *that resulted from* colonial encounters begat the modern physical sciences.

Science took shape as a socially powerful discourse in two crucial ways. As scientific writing became understood as its own genre for conveying information and ideas, it emphasized empiricism and its own objectivity per Enlightenment ideals of "pure reason." This emphasis amounted, initially, to science writing its own self-importance into its genre conventions and steadfastly holding onto it. This created a highly specialized genre of writing to which only those trained by other scientists could aspire. In turn, those ideas of racial superiority and inferiority promulgated within or as a result of science become entrenched within white self-understanding. Or, in Wynterian terms, the White European-descended "genre" of humanity, regardless of class or gender or sexuality, became dependent on its distance from blackness, its own "racial purity," and its supposed inherent superiority.

Historians and theorists of race broadly establish that these notions, of racial purity and the superiority or inferiority of any race, are pseudoscientific, or, as I my account emphasizes, mythic. Even while upheld by law, as with "one drop" rule policing blackness and whiteness within the 19th and 20th century United States, false ideas that biologize race remained mythic while carrying serious material effects. By that I mean,

even though they are empirically untrue, race thinking operated through myth-making in ways that, according to Wynter, form the foundation for what she calls "interaltruism."[20] Thus for Wynter, part of how we form our respective self-understandings as linked to others "like us", so to speak, is through a recognition of and shared investment in the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. That is the "inter" of "interaltruism". Now, I want to suggest that it is perhaps generative to consider both "race" and "science" as myths alongside another genre of narration: fiction. I want to consider race and science as mythic, in the sense that they need not be grounded in empirically observable reality, but rather hold sway because the stories thereof continue to be told. We need only look to recent iterations of scientific racism, such as Richard Herrnstein and Charles A. Murray's 1994 book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* or even Nicholas Wade's 2014 monograph *A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race, and Human History,*[21] to see the lasting influence of scientific racism. By this I mean that Herrnstein and Murray's analysis has been criticized as racially motivated because they argue that genetics or heritability, and by their own extrapolation race, are predictors for

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20. Ibid, 27.

21. Murray and Herrnstein's work was controversial not just because it argued that IQ was a better predictor for 'success' in life than socioeconomic status, but also because it dealt heavily with racial differences in IQ distribution. Intelligence Quotients (IQ) have long been critiqued as couched in white (supremacist) notions of what constitutes intelligence, much like standardized testing used in public schools in North America. Wade's *A Troublesome Inheritance* argues that different races have different genetic predispositions to different faculties *and personality traits* such as Chinese obedience or sub-Saharan African impulsivity. The other version of this argument that does not take correlation as causation appears in Wynter's own work, which I take up in chapter 3, wherein she argues that the supposedly 'natural' order of things becomes embedded not just in our culture but also in our psyches and our brains themselves because of how our neurochemistry is set up much like a reward-punishment system.

intelligence. In turn, Wade's monograph argues that economic disparities among racial and ethnic groups stem from genetic differences amplified by culture that reinforces them, an age-old argument that ultimately equates systemic oppression and lack of opportunity with a supposed natural order.

This history, that is the history of the rise of science as necessarily tethered to the rise of race, elucidates the power of myth. I submit that a myth, like scientific racism, in which a society or a culture invests, can influence the unfolding of history and the future of social relations. Colonial encounters produced an ideology of race that justified the continued mode of master-slave relationality between those born "inherently free" and those born legitimately enslavable. Investment in this myth's continued social power begat successive scientifically fictional measures to uphold it, such as craniometry, anthropometry, and even the natural history museum. But what interests me in this thesis is the possibility for fictions that take up science in creative ways to displace the racism that adheres to science. Given continued investment in the fictions of race and science, and the potential for fictions of science to do something else with both, I take up science fiction as a (para)literary genre in both chapters two and three.[22]

This thesis project contextualizes science, as a discourse or even a methodology, in and alongside histories of race and racialization through a lens of "fiction." Put another way, in taking up science fiction, I seek to treat science *as* a fiction, as a method and form

22. Here I am saying (para)literary because Samuel Delany, noted science fiction theorist and science fiction author, has called SF paraliterary and has actually contended that its power and its relevance and its generative potential lies in its paraliterary, rather than truly literary, status. For more see Samuel Delany, *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary,* (Rochester: Wesleyan, 2009).

of narration, or a descriptive statement of the ruling ethnoclass, following Sylvia Wynter. In doing so, I seek to continue my analysis of this category "the human" for its racialized-gendered underpinnings and ultimately look to an author of science fiction who disrupts these racially scientific/scientifically racialized narratives. I therefore choose to work with Octavia Butler, a Pasadena-born black woman who published primarily from the 1970s through the 1990s. In her disruptive works Butler demonstrates that she is keenly aware of a collusion among race, science, and fiction, but that her imaginings and creative capacities for world-making and writing are far from limited by it. Butler's work is foundational to this project because she proffers new modes of human relationality while paying particular attention to African-American women through a self-proclaimed feminist perspective. I take great interest in the contradictions and critical problematics within her work that force an interrogation of the human as a stable (or even potentially stable) species, much less as a stable category. I therefore am interested in chapter two in thinking through how her work disrupts attempts to categorize it as either necessarily feminist or Afro-centric (or even Afrofuturist), but perhaps functions instead as a creative text that could be linked to the distinct genealogy of black feminism that scholars central to this thesis articulate. Because her work speaks far beyond the specificity of either of these, at times overlapping, perspectives, that is "feminist" or "Afrofuturist," some scholars, like Susana Morris, posit instead that she operates at an intersection Morris articulates as "Afrofuturist feminism" that exceeds either perspective on its own.[23]

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23. Susana M. Morris, "Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E.

Instead, using a decidedly U.S.-based perspective, she constructs dramas of scientific innovations as simultaneous with eroding and evolving race relations and the specificity of black experience to tell an altogether unique story of humanity's future. In chapter three I am interested in what a curated conversation between Octavia Butler, Sylvia Wynter, and Katherine McKittrick might reveal about the work of science in both critical theory and literature as twinned genres that hold the potential to influence popular culture. Taking inspiration from Wynter's call for a more holistically human experience – one that responds to the "sociosystemic 'interrelatedness' of our contemporary situation [to] put forward a new world view of 1492 from the perspective of the species, and with reference to the interests of its well-being"[24] – I suggest this curated conversation might generate new ways of thinking the human *as a species,* rather than in the genre-specific terms to which Wynter points.

Often science fiction is deployed as a kind of rhetorical scare tactic to make scientific and technological innovation seem frightening or immoral. But there is an underlying assumption within that kind of "technophobic" rhetoric that science and science fiction are not necessarily in conversation with one another. That it to say, it is assumed that while technologies meant to replicate human intelligence or microscopic digital antibodies are like science fiction made reality, there appears to be a general cultural assumption that science innovates on its own, that scientists don't read science

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Butler's *Fledgling*," in *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 & 4, 146-166.

24. Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View,* ed. Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995): 8.

fiction for inspiration. However, this link between imagination and innovation through creative works and scientific developments may appear to have been limited to the gadgets themselves. In fact, a *Smithsonian* article penned by Eileen Gunn in May of 2014 contends that all that is changing. The divisions between the creative industries that produce science fiction writing and the scientific industries that produce the technologies we rely upon are blurry, and purposefully so. Citing, "design fiction", a technology for prototype development wherein companies developing new technologies hire authors to write stories about the potential user experiences, Gunn points out that now the connections between the fictional and the real world applications of not just the technologies themselves, but also the technologies of and for world-making have become more overt and intentional.

And yet, Science has not learned as much from the world-making aspects of science fiction, and certainly not from those works which escape what Samuel Delany, sci-fi and literary critic as well as SF author, has called the Utopia/Dystopia dichotomy. Delany notes that "Modern SF has gone beyond this irreconcilable Utopian/Dystopian conflict to produce a more fruitful model against which to compare human development."[25] Upon illustrating the imaginative and distinct differences between the worlds of modern SciFi and the Victorian utopian novel, he concludes "within these worlds, the impossible relieves the probable, and the possible illuminates the improbable.

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25. Samuel Delany, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction,* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 25.

And the author's aim is neither to condemn nor to condone, but to explore both the worlds and their behaviors for the sake of the exploration."[26] Even further, Delany avers that "it is much more fruitful if modern works are examined in terms of what they contain of all these mythic views of the world."[27] Even while the development processes for new technologies have embraced the influence of science fiction and its authors, those influences continue to be limited by notions of utility and user experience, often over and against the world-making aspects of science fiction relevant to this thesis.

Given that Delany argues it generative to consider what SciFi can offer the real world, that is the world outside of fiction, within the worlds that SciFi authors create, I focus on Octavia Butler's work. I focus on her work for her ambivalence toward the potential future of human relationality and sociality. She imagines worlds that could exist in the present day and that the only thing keeping them from being a present reality are one or two events or premises that she skillfully imagines and convinces us to accept as real within her fictional worlds. In these imaginings, or reimaginings, she neither refutes the possibility of prolonged violence and continued social hierarchy, nor does she write characters who are incapable or unwilling to be flexible in their humanity in order to survive personally and, often, help the species to survive. As I will also explain, in her ambivalence toward humanity's future, her deployment of scientific innovation to grapple with decidedly human problems, and her teaching about how to be human even

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26. Ibid., 26.

27. Ibid., 27.

as humanity's future is threatened or unsure, Butler provides a bridge to understanding the shortcomings within posthumanism and transhumanism that become apparent in light of a prolonged engagement with black thought and black creative texts.

Post/Trans/Humanism

This thesis displaces both the white supremacist origins of the human as a category and its contemporary mutations in post- and transhumanism: two modes of thought that are related, but at times opposed, and both of which delve into the bridging of science fiction and real-world scientific innovation. As such, post- and transhumanism may be better understood in and through a prolonged engagement with black studies and its interventions into the category "human." I argue, however, that a more prolonged engagement with black studies would either cause a radical shift within, or the dissolution of these positions. To demonstrate this point, we can read the works of posthumanists and transhumanists to see blackness as an absented presence in their own words.

Both the use of prefixes and claims made by some of the foundational thinkers in each camp position each project as an evolution of humanism. For example, Donna Haraway's now classic essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" takes up the figure of the cyborg – in her words, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social

reality as well as a creature of fiction"[28] – and makes it focal point of a feminist manifesto. For Haraway, the cyborg is indeed "post" or "after" the human because it is a product of three "leaky boundaries" that enable its rise and grant it its generative potential.[29] First, she notes that "the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached."[30] The second leaky boundary is "between animal-human (organism) and machine."[31] Lastly, she observes that "the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us."[32] Originally imagined to be the means by which a human being's consciousness could explore space without risking its physical form, following the originators of the term and concept Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline,[33] Haraway's cyborg is now imagined as a "post-gender"[34] phenomenon, "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self."[35]

In this essay Haraway does not actually outline who or what constitutes the post-human, although she implies its connection to the cyborg as a feminist potentiality. That

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28. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

29. *Ibid,* 151-52.

30. Ibid, 151.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid, 153.

33. Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, "Cyborgs and Space," in *Astronautics,* September 1960, 26-27, 74-76.

34. Ibid., 150.

35. Ibid., 160.

is to say that she sees a generative potential in becoming post-gender that is necessarily linked to becoming post-human, even if she evades a strict definition of the post-human. Elsewhere she rails against the interpretations of her work that do away with its post-gender aspects, or that, as she says, "drop the feminism."[36] In an interview published decades after the "Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway says "I've stopped using it" when asked about the meaning and potential of the concept "post-human."[37] Even further, just after aligning herself with Katherine Hayles' project in *How We Became Posthuman,* Haraway states "Still, human/posthuman is much too easily appropriated by the blissed-out, 'Let's all be posthumanists and find our next teleological evolutionary stage in some kind of transhumanist techno-enhancement.' Posthumanism is too easily appropriated to those kinds of projects for my taste."[38]

Haraway's disavowal of certain iterations of the posthuman demonstrates that for her, the social critique aspect of her theory, the feminism, is the first piece to be dropped when others extrapolate upon an idea with generative potential for change. For Haraway, it seems, posthumanism may be more generative than the posthuman as a figure. That is to say that the interpretation of "leaky boundaries" mentioned above between animals and machines and between the physical and the non-physical offers better ways of thinking the immaterially material – the "gender-in-place" which "post-gender" could move past –

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36. Nicholas Gane, "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done? : An Interview with Donna Haraway," in *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 7-8 (2006): 136.

37. Ibid., 140.

38. Ibid

than figurations that cohere this to an object, or subject. It seems to be the action, or the potential for action, that matters more than the subject or the object that could act. Following Haraway, whose work remains foundational to this mode of thought even as she attempts to distance herself from it, it appears that posthumanism loses its radical potential once it invests in a radical future over and against fleshly, material, social critiques, or change in the moment. I submit that posthumanism further displaces itself from its more generative origins – as in Haraway's responsiveness to black and women-of-color feminist theorists in her initial writing – when it loses the possibility and the capability, or even the interest in theorizing the colonized, and particularly black embodiment and subjectivity under the conditions of modernity.

I engage with black studies on the human/humanism precisely to displace this "transhumanist techno-enhancement" against which Haraway positions herself and her work. To begin, I first discuss the work of the "first female philosopher of transhumanism," Dr. Natasha Vita More. More is considered an authority on transhumanism; building from her doctoral dissertation on human enhancement and radical life extension, her approach to transhumanism is deeply influenced by her extensive background in media art, design, and immersive technologies. For her, transhumanism is simply a worldview[39] that at its most basic level works towards

39. Singularity Weblog, "Transhumanism 101 with Natasha Vita More," *YouTube* video, 56:10, Sep. 5th 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lr9X6RuvjY

"elevating the human condition."[40] As she argues, "Transhuman is an evolution from being exclusively human, in our biology, and therefore in our consciousness, to becoming trans-biological, to merging with technology (i.e. machines) and improving the physiological performance of our bodies."[41] For More, transhumanism represents a threat to postmodernism, "an opportunity to break through the postmodernist wall,"[42] which motivates her to tell her audience "rather than complaining about the future, let's get in there and do something about it."[43]

Following More's transhumanist perspective, transhumanism takes human evolution very seriously in both literal and figurative ways and seeks to intervene into that narration of human progress to usher in the next stages of evolution at a more rapid pace. One such intervention takes up aging as a hindrance to human evolution, or at least the potential for individual human beings to have a more active role in it. Aging neither needs to remain natural or inevitable, nor is it a simple process of getting older but is rather an accumulation of damage in the body. When asked about the controversies surrounding transhumanism, such as whether or not it respects biology, Vita More responds, "Of course I respect my biology, but the point is that our biology is dying off.

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40. *Ibid*

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

Every day after puberty we start degenerating."[44] Thus, transhumanism isn't simply a *thinking through* the human and its potential futures. Rather, transhumanism makes human beings active agents in our own evolutionary process. That active, agential role may manifest in such forms as consciousness downloading, designer bodies, or rendering death optional. The only constant among them is that transhumanism is deeply concerned with the potential dying off of both the human species and the individuals that comprise it, and purports to extend beyond the limitations of human biology.

I am, to a certain extent, making an argument that the addition of this prefix 'trans' to 'human' or 'humanism' operates alongside the rhetorical move of rendering trans a verb. More specifically, out of its proximity to queer theory, trans studies (or transgender studies) has begun to offer 'trans' as a verb wherein 'to trans' something means to complicate it by way of acknowledging its movement 'beyond' or 'across' boundaries.[45] It runs parallel to the way that 'queer' is also used as a verb within queer theory. I therefore am suggesting that like the "trans" in "transgender" the "trans" in "transhumanism" holds the potential for intervention, and often a necessary and timely one. It appears though that the intervention is not one that attempts to change the myths of biology that structure Western cultures and our thoughts on the human, but rather one that intervenes in the myth to simply rewrite its codes rather than developing new programming or language with which to be human.

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44. Ibid.

45. See Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" in *Women's Studies Quarterly,* vol. 36, no. 3 & 4 (2008): 11-22.

The potential repercussions for such an active role in human evolution are not new. An active role in human evolution appears immediately within any serious reading of the history of eugenic medicine, and its uses of medicine and science to determine which people are worthy of life or death based on assigning social value to anatomical difference. As a result, the potential ramifications for tampering with evolution also are not new. Having said that, I argue not that transhumanism is another iteration of eugenics but that new ground for eugenic "medicine" is imminently possible if some of the goals of transhumanist research are achieved. As well, the coupling of transhumanism as a mode of thought with the wealth, resources, and knowledge needed to create innovations in biological science create the groundwork for enabling a reiteration of eugenics. Thus, without a critical engagement with the Coloniality of how we, (and in this instance, we most immediately means white people, but can also mean the species as a whole), are taught to view one another, transhumanism does indeed pose a dangerous threat. It poses a threat not to the continued existence of the species as a whole, as purported by scientists like Aubrey de Grey who seeks to end aging, but rather to those already disenfranchised populations to whom science has, historically, violently subjugated.

Ultimately, posthumanism and transhumanism both argue that either humanity as a species has changed already or that it will change as both our environment and technological capabilities react to continued human existence on Earth. For example, N. Katherine Hayles's work *How We Became Posthuman* goes so far as to argue that information has lost its body and that this simple fact makes us, in one fell swoop it

seems, into something more than or beyond human. However, she argues against the move to render information bodiless and, like Haraway, questions the usefulness of popular iterations of the posthuman. From the transhumanist camp, Aubrey de Grey is fond of using statistics about lives lost to aging, or about the sheer fact of human mortality, to characterize the fact that we die at all as the most important crisis humanity faces. De Grey's research into bringing an end to aging never takes into account an unequal distribution of power. By that I mean, his work considers aging as a universal phenomenon that unfolds in universal and predictable ways. He certainly accounts for the science of aging, but does not account for the social structuring required to allow certain people to have better chances of aging, like white wealthy people, over and against others who may be predisposed to certain health risks either by social or geographic location. As Wynter and other historians and theorists show, the unequal distribution of power produced and reproduced by the colonial encounter and its paradigmatic shifts made certain people, based on race or gender or class or disability or geographic location, less likely than others to die of natural causes related to aging. Further, in his entire work *Ending Aging: The Rejuvenation Breakthroughs That Could Reverse Human Aging in Our Lifetime* neither "race" nor "social determinants of health" make any appearance in the index, even though there are references to unproven theories such as "the suicide gene." It is then clear that what emerges in at least these core examples of posthumanism and transhumanism, is an assumption of whiteness. It is that assumption of whiteness, as a prerequisite for either becoming posthuman or becoming transhuman, that I seek to

displace by way of engaging with black studies to unearth the absented presence of blackness in white thought on the human.

What then do we make of a form of humanism, or an evolution thereof like transhumanism, where de Grey's work into "super-longevity" (a term used to describe radical life extension, or ending aging as de Grey would have it) is taken up, that argues we should or are thoroughly changing or moving past the human? That we should become active agents in our evolution, but that refuses to give new responses to the unanswered questions of humanism, especially with regards to race? What is at stake when two developments upon liberal humanism purport to contend with human evolution and our relationship to technology without a tenable response to questions of humanism at its origins, *of the human at its origins,* that an engagement with black studies raises? What is most immediately at stake is the continued investment in an assumption of whiteness as a prerequisite for belonging in the category of either posthuman or transhuman, much less human in the first place. If we do not become more active agents in undoing the white supremacy that adheres to the human as a category, then we can only hope to "evolve" beyond the necessity of relating across lines of racial difference, rather than beyond race itself, as some transhumanist and posthumanist thought implies as generative.

Put another way, I want to take seriously both Wynter's vast intellectual project of situating "the human" as a category alongside the historical rupture that 1492 represents, toward a displacement of the human that comes out of posthumanism and

transhumanism. Post- and trans-humanism are both concerned with the current limitations of humanity and seek to change them, even if the intention is not to do away with the racist, masculinist, essentialist, and disabling notions of who and what constitutes the human. Similarly, Wynter, among other notable black intellectuals, is interested in, at the very least, asserting that, as Walter D. Mignolo paraphrases, "the human is…the product of a particular epistemology" even though it "appears to be (and is accepted as) a naturally independent entity existing in the world."[46] Simultaneous to this overlap between post/trans-humanism and Wynter's intellectual project, that is the assertion that the human is a limited category, Mignolo further reminds us that "Wynter's work has consistently called into question whether the 'post' – in poststructural, postmodernity, postcolonial – is a useful conceptual frame," and here I may even add the "posthuman" to that list, "thus putting it aside in order to understand, instead, how particular epistemologies are unthinkable and/or unarticulated within hegemonic Western categories of knowledge and philosophy of knowing."[47] This tension, I hypothesize, will be generative, at least toward the end of pushing posthumanist and transhumanist thought to contend with the unanswered questions of race, especially blackness, that we could argue are the detritus and debris of a bankrupt paradigm shift away from the human, but for other than decolonial reasons.

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46. Walter D. Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?" in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 108.

47. *Ibid.* 106.

Towards the Human Project

This thesis project is primarily concerned with displacing the white supremacist origins of the human as a category, and with urging contemporary mutations of the human, represented by post- and transhumanism, to engage more deeply with black thought on the human in order to displace those origins in contemporary critical theory. As a white, transgender scholar myself I am called upon both to uphold and maintain the white supremacy and anti-blackness that made the construction of the human possible and to become "post-gender" along with posthuman and transhuman. I am interested in neither. Therefore, as a white interlocutor within black studies, as an outsider concerned by the process of racialization and colonization that make my invitation to become more than human possible, I am accountable to the black thinkers in the field. Even as I am accountable to them, my audience remains broad. This thesis is for anyone who wonders about the possible future modes of human embodiment and relationality that posthumanism and transhumanism laud. It is especially for other white folks, and for white transgender folks, to recognize that our freedom to evolve or to take an active role in our evolution cannot be predicated on the continued subjugation of others.

The chapter "Interrupt//Disrupt" takes up the complicated genealogies of Afrofuturism, following their divergent threads from Alondra Nelson to Kodwo Eshun to Ytasha Womack, as they pertain to Octavia Butler, a prominent 20th and 21st century SciFi author and black creative-intellectual, and the ways in which she is claimed as or claimed by Afrofuturists. Working with Beth Coleman's "Race as Technology," I will

illustrate the ways in which race manifests as a technology in Butler's work. I seek to demonstrate how Afrofuturism interrupts, or "stops the continuous process of," limited notions of the human as necessarily progressing upon a linear path of evolution. Further, I seek to illustrate how Butler disrupts, "drastically alters or destroys the structure of," teleological notions of humanity that emerge from trans- and post-humanism. For this chapter I look to how black critical thought engages with not only the human as a category, but also with posthumanism itself as exemplified by Alexander Weheliye's critique of N. Katherine Hayles. In so doing, I hope to illustrate the interruptions and disruptions that both Afrofuturist works and Octavia Butler's SF worlds offer in order to complicate our central problematic of who and what constitutes the human. I query the extent to which the specificity of Afrofuturism's goals, as outlined by Eshun, and the limits of the human as a category popularly imagined in posthumanist thought may collide to offer at least the beginning of what might be called a black posthumanism. I center Octavia Butler because, as Hortense Spillers argues, "there is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women." This is to say that while discussions of what makes us human or what will make us post- or trans-human might not directly address black women, and in fact many iterations of that discussion eschew questions of raced and gendered specificity, a better conversation about who and what is human must engage and *center* black women.

The third chapter, "Expand//Wither," engages Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick, and Octavia E. Butler in a curated conversation. That conversation hinges upon the preexisting conversation between McKittrick and Wynter that is ongoing, but has been published in one iteration in the anthology *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* which McKittrick edited and compiled. It hinges there because McKittrick has already done the work for us of making us as unacquainted readers into more informed ones who are then capable of reading Butler through Wynter and vice versa. The central logic, or the biggest "knot" as McKittrick might call it, of this curated conversation is the use of science and biologism in all three women's work. While Science, (big "S" to imply the discourses of Science more so than the technologies, methodologies, or "facts" thereof), manifests differently in each creative-intellectuals' work, pulling taut this common thread may reveal if not answers, then at least better and more nuanced questions about what makes us (differently) human. Therefore, Wynter and McKittrick in particular expand for us as readers, that is "give us a fuller version or account of," being human. Butler reappears in this chapter for reasons personal and pragmatic. Her vast, scientifically-fictional corpus of novels, trilogies and quadrilogies has reminded me how to be human even as I, a white/non-black transfeminine person, am invited to become either "post" or "trans" human precisely *because* I am trans and *not black.* Pragmatically, Butler illustrates with great force and grace how dangerously close to withering, (losing our vitality, force, or freshness, *or* being made speechless or incapable of action), we really are as a species. In a fortuitous, if not serendipitous, confluence of cautioning,

Wynter, too, warns us of an "unparalleled catastrophe for our species" in her conversation with McKittrick published under that same title in the above mentioned anthology. Yet that unparalleled catastrophe need not remain one. The stakes may be the continued existence of the species, but if we expand upon our definitions of the human to account for a wider range of human genres, human experiences, then the human as it really is need not wither. Only Man and iterations of it as if it were the model for being human need necessarily lose their vitality, force, and freshness. And that is not a terrible thing. The human as a concept, and as a species, isn't inherently bankrupt. It needs only be rescued from the vice grip under which Man holds it.

Chapter 2

Interrupt/Disrupt: Black Studies and Futurism, Posthumanity, and Technology

Interrupt: *(v.) to stop the continuous process of*

Disrupt: *(v.) to drastically alter or destroy the structure*

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 on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?

Alexander Weheliye "After Man"

And I think the best way to do something else is to go someplace else where the demands on us will be different. Not because we are going to go someplace else and change ourselves, but because we will go someplace else and be forced to change.

Octavia Butler "We Keep Playing the Same Record"

In the first half of this chapter, my goal is to consider potential responses to posthumanism or transhumanism that emerge from a primary engagement with black studies and some of its scholars' thoughts on the human. In so doing, I will consider black thought that engages posthumanism directly, notably the work of Alexander Weheliye, and Afrofuturism as a potential counter-narrative that interrupts the flow from "human" to "post-human." As outlined in my previous chapter, posthumanism engages with the unraveling of the category "human" that follows from increasingly complex

modes of relationality between human and animal, and human and machine. Transhumanism takes an active role in the evolution of the human to "move beyond" or "cross over from" it by way of technologically-mediated enhancement. I have suggested that this trans-ing of the human, in and of itself, represents a teleology in that it introduces a universal directive principle to the human where none previously existed. The goal of humanity, its telos, then becomes to evolve past human limitations. Likewise, the prefix "post" within posthumanist thought implies another move beyond the human when it posits the human's successor. However, such formulations are interrupted by black critical thought on the human, which moves beyond proposed trajectories for humanity to consider those subjects deemed inhuman by the violent racial regimes of modernity and their techniques for creating human life. Rather than using black thought as a mere corrective to the unexamined whiteness of much of transhumanism, or other modes of humanism for that matter, I deploy its capacity to begin to displace white constructs of the human and to *interrupt* their supposed teleologies for enhancing the human or evolving beyond it. I hope to urgently illustrate for the reader the ways in which black critical thought theorizes blackness not merely as an embodied subject position, but as an analytical tool that can and does push anyone willing to engage with it to pause, to hesitate before continuing. Or, if possible, I seek to demonstrate how black critical thought on the human, the posthuman, and the future of black life interrupts the unchecked white supremacy of either moving beyond the human or taking an active, agential role in its evolutionary progress.

Having emphasized the lack of serious engagement with either black studies or black popular culture in much of posthumanism and transhumanism, my goal in this chapter is to query what a black response to posthumanism may be. I examine theoretical and cultural works where I perceive a direct correlation or overlap between posthumanism and blackness to then consider what posthumanist and transhumanist scholars might learn if they confronted those works. Specifically, I look to the ways in which Alexander Weheliye engages with posthumanism and the category of the human itself through technology, and especially sound. From this basis I consider how black cultural productions that take up technology both undermine the presumed definition of technology and interrupt any notion that black American popular culture is "technophobic." It would be impossible to engage with black works that either take up or speak back to posthumanism and transhumanism without contending with Afrofuturism. Thus, I will provide a kind of genealogy of Afrofuturism, despite the rally against linear, chronological record-keeping and storytelling that is common in Afrofuturist work. If, when Mark Dery coined the term in his seminal essay "Black to the Future" in the early 1990s, he was merely posing a question, rather than offering a definition, then I intend to follow suite. I pose a question. And the question is whether or not and to what extent Afrofuturism may constitute a decidedly and specifically black version of posthumanism and/or transhumanism.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis project to definitively answer such a question, I do hope to curate a conversation that, if it is indeed already taking place in

some way, is a bit one-sided at present. By that I mean, I hope to put the purportedly post-racial modes of rethinking the human that are posthumanism and transhumanism in more direct conversation with Afrofuturism and black studies of the (post-)human. I query whether Afrofuturist thought and black engagements with technology interrupt – whether they stop the continuous process of – the unexamined whiteness of posthumanism and transhumanism. I considering the extent to which a black engagement with technology and critique of posthumanism stops the continuous process of (white) movement beyond a humanity in which not all people have been counted.

The Future of and the Future in AfroFuturism

I open with a brief genealogy of the term "Afrofuturism" that I hope will elucidate what black thinkers and cultural producers have already been saying about the future of humanity through a decidedly black lens *outside of* though not necessarily out of conversation with posthumanism and transhumanism. Mark Dery first coined the term in his 1993 essay "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." Appearing in Dery's edited volume *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* which traced the rise of "cybercultures" or subcultures and cultural shifts begotten by the Internet Age, this article honed in on the particularity of black-authored speculative fiction, and drew parallels between "the sublegitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre" and "the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated

throughout American history."[48]. Dery notices a discourse taking shape, the Digital Divide, which imagines black people and especially black Americans as "technophobes." Over and against that discourse, he recognizes, with the help of Samuel Delany, the distinctive uses of technology in black vernacular cultures with respect to mainstream white culture, such as that which "comes in matte-black plastic boxes. From the beepers, the Walkmen, the Diskmen, through the biggest ghetto blaster – the stuff put forward as portable is not chromium. It's black."[49] Noticing that pattern prods him to ask whether the term he offers, Afrofuturism, could describe "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."[50]

Dery's offer of the term proved to be generative, as evidenced by the following two decades of scholarship that have taken it up and deployed it. One of the most noted among those scholars to run with the term is Kodwo Eshun. His seminal 1998 text *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* is considered a cornerstone of Afrofuturist thought due to the ways in which he traces a genealogy of sound from Sun Ra onward to think through the intersections of black music and science fiction. In his 2003 article "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" Eshun explicitly tackles the

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48. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 180.

49. Ibid., 192.

50. Ibid., 180.

evolution, limitations, and potential of the concept by examining the power of the future, and the goals of science fiction, which he argues are linked. He contends that

> science fiction might be better understood, in Samuel Delany's statement, as "offering a significant distortion of the present." To be more precise, science fiction is neither forward-looking nor utopian … Looking back at the genre, it becomes apparent that science fiction was never concerned with the future, but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present. [51]

Eshun then clarifies that what is at stake in science fiction for Afrofuturism is "the possibilities of intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional" – and, I would add, the speculative.[52] More plainly, "Afrofuturism studies the appeals that black artists, musicians, critics, and writers have made to the future, in moments where any future was made difficult for them to imagine."[53] But even Eshun resists the push to nail down Afrofuturism, finally stating that it "may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic

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51. Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review,* 3, no. 2, 2003, 290.

52. Ibid., 293.

53. Ibid., 294.

projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken."[54]

A decade after the term's initial appearance, Kodwo Eshun felt the need both to clarify the impetus for Afrofuturist thinking as a twinned battle over access to the archive (counter-memories) and the proposition of possible futures (speculation). In clarifying, he still refuses to denotatively lay out precisely what Afrofuturism is. Even when he attempts to delineate what it is not, he merely cautions against the "reactionary Manicheanism of the Nation of Islam, the regressive compensation mechanisms of Egyptology, Dogonesque cosmology, and the totalizing reversals of Stolen Legacy-style Afrocentricity," in order to remind that "Afrofuturism is by no means naively celebratory."[55] In the context of a project concerned with constructions of the human Eshun productively theorizes within Afrofuturism a function of (a)temporality that he lauds as a radical and powerful mechanism. He posits that Afrofuturist work necessarily interrupts linear notions of chronological progression by excavating not only counter-memories, but also counter-futures. I submit then that, in Eshun's formulation, Afrofuturism does the work of interruption. Afrofuturist work, or any work that takes blackness and speculation seriously in simultaneity, necessarily stops the continuous process of progress through time, space, and evolution.

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54. Ibid., 301.

55. Ibid., 297.

Between Mark Dery's initial offering of the term and Eshun's clarification of its purpose and potential, Alondra Nelson as a graduate student established an online message board "afrofuturism.net" in 1998 which by 2002 migrated to a Yahoo group to which users could subscribe. During this time she invited guest moderators such as DJ Spooky, Nalo Hopkinson, and Alexander Weheliye and she drew its contents and contributors into a guest-edited issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism. In her editor's introduction she sets up debate by pointing to "the promise of a placeless, raceless, bodiless near future enabled by technological progress" that would enable both a "utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide," which for her "are the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere."[56] Reading the work of "technoevangelist" Timothy Leary, Nelson concludes that, for him, "technology offered a future of wholly new human beings – unfettered not only from the physical body but from past human experience as well."[57] After reading another contemporary, Allucquère Roseanne Stone, she concludes that "what falls by the wayside in Stone's analysis – and neocriticism more generally – is an appraisal of identity that does not simply look to what is seemingly new about the self in the 'virtual age' but looks forward *and* backward in seeking to provide insights about identity, one that asks what was *and* what if."[58] Nelson offers Ishmael Reeds 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* as an

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56. Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text* 71, Volume 20, no. 2 (2002): 1.

57. Ibid, 2.

58. Ibid, 3-4.

example of a text that asks both of these questions. On her account, he asks what was through synchronizing, which could be described as an anachronistic deployment of technologies toward liberatory projects, and what if with the conclusion that future generations will write the text to replace the lost one, "Jes Grew," written as the origin of viral African diasporic vernacular cultures. She then suggests that the other works featured in the *Social Text* issue could serve as those future texts, in that they "offer takes on digital culture that do not fall into the traps of the neocritics or the futurists of one hundred years past," even as they "represent new directions in the study of African diasporic culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them."[59]

Contemporary iterations of Afrofuturist thought continue to uphold these tenets of thinking through the past in order to read the future. Whether one looks to *Black(s) to the Future,* a self-described "afrofuturist transmedia platform,"[60] or to *The Afrofuturist Affair,* a website and "community formed to celebrate, strengthen, and promote Afrofuturistic and black SciFi culture through creative events and creative writing" – calling for "anything that one could use as a tool to survive yesterday, today, and tomorrow"[61] – it seems that a new generation of Afrofuturists are upholding the initial

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59. Ibid, 9.

60. Mawena Yehouessi and Lamine Dramé, "About," *Black(s) to the Future,* accessed July 13th 2014, http://blackstothefuture.com/en/about/.

61. Rasheedah Phillips, "About," *Afrofuturist Affair,* accessed July 13th 2016, http://www.afrofuturistaffair.com/#!about/cjg9.

design without letting it limit them. Yet the non-black-authored theoretical counterparts to Afrofuturism still lack actual engagement with, or often even acknowledgement of the intersections of blackness, technology, science, and culture developed in black critical thought. There do exist, however, iterations of futurism centered in Chican@, Latinx, and Indigenous creative thought which operate outside of either the black-centered and black-authored critiques of and engagements with futurity or the uncritically white ones. For example, Indigenous cosmo-visions have been articulated in creative intellectual projects like the work of A Tribe Called Red, new DJ and artist collectives like Revolutions Per Minute (www.RPM.fm), and in anthologies like *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction.* Further, non-black women of color feminists like Gloria Anzaldua have paved the way for futurist thinking within Chican@ and Latinx thought,[6263] including work by micha cardenas and Cathryn Merla-Watson,[64] just to name a few. It is worth mentioning as well that many of these iterations of futurist thinking

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62. Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is certainly a "classic" within Chicana feminism and its many speculative elements are often taken up for how she engages with Chicana mythologies. Chapter 7 "Enter the Serpent Woman" is of particular note for thinking about the category human, futurity, and embodiment and its limitations.

63. Both the "@" in "Chican@" and the "x" in "Latinx" have been adapted as gender-neutral iterations of Chicano/a and Latino/a meant to allude to the plurality of genders that exist even within a language, Spanish in this instance, presumed to be fiercely grounded in a gender binary of either masculinity or femininity.

64. I have elsewhere already alluded to micha cardenas's work, especially in "The Shift", but other works of hers like *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities* come to mind in this context of thinking futurity coming from non-black people of color. Cathryn Merla-Watson's "(Trans)Mission Possible: The Coloniality of Gender, Speculative Rasquachismo, and Altermundos in Luis Valdera's Chican@futurist Visual Art" is also of note for more explicitly taking up Chican@futurist thought and locating in particular creative intellectual projects. In particular, her concept of "altermundos" which for her are "a collective visionary politics that both dislodges and peers beyond binaries buttressing the architecture of colonial epistemologies," is useful for thinking through Chican@ world-making as speculative acts running counter to hegemonic, white iterations of (the future of) the human.

outside of Afrofuturism are both borrowing from and in conversation with black thought on futurity and even the category human. While they are important social, creative, and intellectual movements that do further complicate the question of who and what counts as (post/trans-)human, they are beyond the scope of this thesis project. They are still worth mentioning to at least briefly paint a broader portrait of futuristic thinking that resists being anchored in white supremacist (mis)understandings of the human.

What's Black About Posthumanity? What's Posthuman about Blackness? Alexander Weheliye's essay "Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music" presents blackness and black critique as analytical interruptions in the "natural" progression toward the transhuman or posthuman. In this piece, Weheliye takes Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* as a foundation to contemporaneous posthumanist thought. Acknowledging that "Hayles's own formulations are on the way to becoming hegemonic, at least in the discrepant disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that make up the postdiscipline of cultural studies,"[65] Weheliye's engagement with Hayles is simultaneously generous and demanding. He works to make apparent the unexamined, or uncritical whiteness of much of cybertheory and cultural studies of technocultures while also using what he terms New World black cultures to launch a necessary critique of

65. Alexander Weheliye, "Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music". *Social Text* 71, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2002): 21.

posthumanism.[66] To do so, he hones in on the necessity of the very liberal version of personhood or humanity against which Hayles rails. In Weheliye's words, "Hayles needs the hegemonic Western conception of humanity as a heuristic category against which to position her theory of posthumanism, in the process recapitulating the ways in which the Western liberal theory of the "human," instantiated in the eighteenth century, came to represent humanity sui generis."[67]

For Hayles, the way that "we became posthuman"—without ever stating outright who she considers "we" to be—is through a series of cultural shifts that made information lose its body. Weheliye frames Hayles' argument as tracing "the manifold ways in which information is thought to transcend materiality, continuing the Cartesian tradition of placing mind over matter, only in this framework the content of techno-information flows replaces the 'human' mind."[68] He argues that this reinstantiation of the Cartesian split fails because Hayles emphasizes white masculinist posthumanist avatars (for example, Robocop and the Six Million Dollar Man) and thereby "reinscribes white masculinity as the (human) point of origin from which to progress to a posthuman state."[69] The white masculinist construction of a continuous process from human to posthuman remains rooted in post-Enlightenment, liberal personhood that, in itself,

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66. Ibid.

67. Ibid, 23.

68. Ibid, 22.

69. Ibid, 22.

depends on the subjugation of black people. For Weheliye, "it seems that one has to be always already 'free from the will of others' (or think that one is) in order to mutate into the fusion of heterogeneous agents comprising the posthuman state of being, thereby excluding all cultural and political formations in which the history of subjectivity is necessarily yoked to the will – and/or the whips and chains – of others."[70]

Weheliye goes on to interrogate the differential meaning of the category "human" in black culture as compared to the meanings of humanity circulating within mainstream discourses. He contends that it is possible that this difference could be extrapolated through a prolonged and rigorous engagement with "the histories of sound technologies and their interaction with twentieth-century black cultural practices."[71] The first of these sound technologies is the phonograph, which Weheliye argues "gesture[s] toward a more complex interaction between embodiment and disembodiment, the human and posthuman." Because the phonograph becomes popular during the 1920s, the Jazz Age in the United States, it introduced not only pre-recorded music into the cultural mainstream, but also a proliferation of disembodied black voices. Weheliye notes "paradoxically, black voices are materially disembodied by the phonograph and other sound technologies, while black subjects are inscribed as the epitome of embodiment through a multitude of U.S. cultural discourses."[72] Working through other sound scholars' works,

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70. Ibid., 23-24.

71. Ibid., 25.

72. Ibid., 26.

notably Lindon Barrett,[73] Ronald Radano,[74] and Jon Cruz,[75] Weheliye contends that the proliferation of black spirituals that preceded the invention of the phonograph brought about a conflation of "the souls of black folk" with their bodies. This is to say that the black singing voice came to stand in as the aural sign for black humanity. As Weheliye points out, "black subjectivity appears as the antithesis to the Enlightenment subject by virtue of not only having a body but by being a body—within Enlightenment discourses blackness is the body and nothing else."[76] This notion of blackness as embodied, and only embodied, carries over into contemporary conceptions of black people as technophobic. If information is losing its body, according to Hayles, then blackness becomes simultaneously fungible and available to others, while individual black people continue to be imagined as anti-Modern for an assumed aversion to (certain) technological innovations. The result is then a dissonance between a posthumanist imagination in which information has lost its body, because it once possessed one, and another genre of being that is conflated with simply being a (black) body.

Weheliye's engagement with Hayles reveals that a continued investment in the white, masculinist terms of modernity and its conception of the human continues to

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73. For more see: Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

74. For more see: Ronald Radano, "Denoting Difference: The writing of Slave Spirituals," *Critical Inquiry,* 22 (1996): 506-44.

75. For more see: Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1999).

76. Weheliye, "Feenin'," 28.

overshadow conditions of modernity for nonwhite, and especially black, peoples. If the human, with its reliance on black abjection, is a condition of modernity, then posthumanism is an extension of postmodernity. But as Weheliye's analysis reveals, posthumanism as a system of thought cannot attend to the realities of black life, much less black technologies, even as it inherently relies upon (white) subjectivity rooted in black subjection. Taken in context with the genealogy of Afrofuturism that I've offered above, it is useful to keep in mind that black thought on the future of black humanity interrupts the presumption of the possibility of a posthuman thought that disengages blackness.

In summation, Afrofuturist thought disengages the presumed whiteness, or post-raciality, of the future in favor of a kind of Afrocentrism. In so doing, Afrofuturist thought has the potential to interrupt the progression from human, an already fraught category founded upon black subjection, to posthuman. Kodwo Eshun points to this generative potential of speculation and pushes the project of Afrofuturism into new territorties enabled by the rise of the Internet and its attendant cultures and subcultures. In a more direct engagement, Alexander Weheliye names and articulates the white supremacist assumptions and premises within posthumanist thought, as exemplified by Katherine Hayles's work, and offers a black studies critique thereof. He locates black technologies, a phrase perhaps imagined as oxymoronic or paradoxical within the unchecked anti-black discourses of science and technology studies, within sound and the aural. For him, black posthumanism could arguably be traced all the way back to the

phonograph as a technology of disembodied yet embodied, present yet absent, black aural spectrality. But a contemporary iteration of Afrofuturism could also be located, and often is by many thinkers (Ytasha Womack and her primer on Afrofuturism among them), in the work of Octavia Butler. The next section builds upon this work of interruption to illustrate the work of disruption within the scientifically fictional worlds of Butler's design. While Weheliye may locate a potential for black posthumanism within the realm of sound, one might also find that potential in the marginal, paraliterary genre of SF and most certainly in Octavia Butler's vast oeuvre.

Disruption

If Afrofuturism and black technology studies, (or black studies of and on technology), interrupt and simultaneously eschew "the human" as a figure and offer new ways of imagining how to be human, then Butler does the work of disruption. She drastically alters, if not outright destroys, the very structures that make "human" a legible category to think with. In the *Patternist* series she imagines the ramifications of an invasive extraterrestrial parasite that alters the human species alongside the evolution of another portion of the species when a non-human, ghost-like entity forcibly breeds them to develop psionic capabilities. In *Kindred* she rewrites the classic SciFi trope of time travel by portraying a black American woman in the 1970s having to help her ancestors' slavemaster in order to insure her own future existence. And she thinks through the

complicated interspecies dynamics of a seemingly benevolent species surviving by colonizing humans and genetically engineering hybrid human-alien organisms in *Lilith's Brood.* Yet my focus will be on one of her last novels to be published before her death, *Fledgling* (2005). I will demonstrate the ways in which this novel disrupts, which is to say, drastically alters the structure of what Sylvia Wynter calls the overrepresentation of Man-as-Human.[77] To reiterate, with this term Wynter invokes the ways in which a male philosophical construct of White Europeans, both pre-colonial contact or pre-Enlightenment (Man1) and post-Enlightenment (Man2), comes to overrepresent itself as *the* model for the Human over and against any other potential model for being human,[78] including any that Butler may offer. In *Fledgling* Butler literally displaces human notions of what it means to be a person through her protagonist Shori, a young black Ina (vampire) whose genes have been enhanced with African-American human DNA to allow her to tolerate sunlight. Yet Butler also proffers humanness as a mode of relationality demonstrated for us as readers by characters with whom we are meant to identify.

Fledgling focuses on the character Shori, a part human and part Ina girl who faces

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77. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337

78. *Ibid.* Here I am thinking more specifically, again without delving too far into it in this chapter, of the very beginning of the article when she lays out The Argument which "proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e. Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself," 260.

repeated attempts on her life as well as the successful mass murders of her extended family. Butler's take on the vampire genre stands out not just its reworking of centuries of vampire tales through a more scientific lens, but also the simple and important fact that Shori is described as "a lean, sharp-faced, large-eyed, brown-skinned person."[79] Butler also adds the plot point that, in the wake of the murders of her families and the first attempt on her life, Shori is an amnesiac. Immediately following the preceding physical description of her, Shori even wonders about her own appearance, musing "did I look like a child of about ten or eleven? Was I? How could I know?"; and moments later she says aloud, "I don't know this person…It's as though I've never seen her before."[80] This moment of cognitive dissonance where she both recognizes and does not recognize herself reveals the extent of the trauma that caused her amnesia.

Even though Shori doesn't recognize it on her first appearance in the novel, the murders of both her paternal and maternal family lines are, to a certain extent, racially motivated. As a result of her families' genetic experimentations, the DNA taken from Shori's African-American human mother gives her a higher melanin count relative to more lightly-complected Ina, thereby rendering her capable of walking in sunlight and staying awake during the day. Many other Ina are upset by her families' experimentation. The novel leaves open and unclear whether the upset among other Ina concerns the introduction into their bloodline of humans (which some Ina consider to be an inferior

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79. Octavia E. Butler, *Fledgling,* (New York: Warner Books, 2005), p. 18

80. *Ibid,* 19.

species), or whether it is specifically because the DNA introduced is from a black person, or if this factor simply compounds a general aversion to human admixture.

Through Butler's storying, it is precisely Shori's brown skin that allows her a greater expression of agency. Were she pale like most other Ina, Shori would be unable to stay awake during sunlight hours and certainly couldn't walk around relatively unscathed, if covered, in direct sunlight. In this example of the use of melanin and dark skin, coded as "race," as technology within the novel, dark skin is rendered a tool to be used for the *betterment* of a species. Shori's status as amnesiac—perhaps ironically, given its origin in racial violence—frees her from what Beth Coleman, referencing histories of anti-black racism, calls an "inherited position of abjection."[81] She almost immediately reenters this amnesiac state when facing her assailants' attempts to kill her or those close to her who survive. Thus Butler presents Shori as being freed from the racial terror she and her loved ones face because the character cannot remember the loss of her families, or of her symbionts (human companions on whom Ina feed and for whom Ina care deeply) no matter how hard she tries. Interestingly, she begins to recall in bits and pieces certain facts, including about herself as Ina, so long as they are unrelated to her trauma. In fact, when she escapes a second attempt on her life and is taken in by the Gordon family, one of the older Ina whom Shori befriends speculates that it is perhaps because Shori's body would be unable to withstand such an incredible loss that her mind wipes itself clear of anything associated with those lost connections.

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81. Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology" in *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 177.

The genetic engineering portrayed and debated by characters in the novel presses two points within my project. First, it reveals the ways in which Octavia Butler allows, if not pushes her reader to examine tendencies toward hierarchy and violence among different groups of humans in and through a classic science fiction trope of only ever addressing "race" through an extraterrestrial species. That is to say that she addresses the reality and materiality of race in the novel, even while many of her white counterparts authoring SciFi novels would tend toward placing difference onto an alien other, rather than a human one. The difference in *Fledgling* is that Butler makes race a crux upon which the novel's plot hinges even while she imagines relating across not just racial, but also species difference. It could even be argued that in *Fledgling,* humans become the Other to the presumptive Ina Self in the sense that they are physically inferior and become addicted to the venom released into their bloodstreams when their Ina feed upon them.

Second, across the scope of the stories presented within *Fledgling*, Butler refuses to plainly state whether or not violence, and especially racialized violence, is simply part of human nature.. I aver that the ambiguity and ambivalence with which she treats the subject of human violence is paramount here because any engagement with the human, and human violences, is most useful when it refuses either straightforward pessimism or optimism, the dystopic or the utopic. That is to say that, keeping Samuel Delany's point that SciFi is at its best when it posits alternate realities in the present moment, the way Butler writes her ambivalence about human violence into *Fledgling* evades the yes or no

question of whether or not violence and prejudice are natural to our species. Butler's ambivalence about the possibility of alternate present realities in which human violence and human tendencies to hierarchialization cease to exist is evident in her subject matter. Even in *Fledgling* she proffers not an altogether different present reality, but a parallel one lurking just underneath the surface because those in charge of crafting it, the Ina, do not wish to be discovered. Yet even they cannot escape very human tendencies toward hierarchy and senseless violence which evidences the ambiguity over the possibility or impossibility of a world in which humans exist, but violence based primarily in prejudices does not. As with other examples of her work in which a different species relies upon humans for something, like with the Ooankali in *Lilith's Brood,* it is unclear whether it merely the Ina's necessary mode of relationality with humans that makes them tend toward hierarchy and senseless violence. Yet what is clear is that the ambiguity speaks volumes even as it is difficult to parse precisely what is being said. It is precisely that ambivalence toward the human condition, and modes of relationality that include and rely upon humanity, that make Butler both useful for thinking through what makes us human, and unique in that she disrupts what we think we know about how to be human.

Butler's *Fledgling* encapsulates what I've called the work of disruption. According to Beth Coleman, race as technology does the work of disruption because it is a "disruptive technology that changes the terms of engagement with an all-too-familiar system of representation and power."[82] Butler's treatment of race in *Fledgling* hinges

82. Ibid., 178.

upon a similar recognition as Coleman's, who states that "the mechanism of race … functions systematically," in that "it is not a thing itself but an array of procedures - 'a means by which an effect or result is produced,' a collection of techniques that create certain people as 'things.'"[83] I understand this systematic function of race to be present when Butler leaves out exposition on the histories of racialized violence or the global patterns of anti-blackness instead, the fact that racism exists *because it happens* suffices to explain the controversy among the Ina over Shori as the product of genetic engineering using African-American DNA. Shori doesn't even recognize the racial epithet that a captured human assailant uses against her nor does anyone step in to provide an explanation as to why that word is meant to hurt. The intention, which she can read clearly, becomes what matters. Thus, it is the intention itself that Butler disrupts. Butler offers us a different story of human relationality by drastically altering the structure of race as an organizing principle among humans and deploying it as (in Beth Coleman's terms) "a levered mechanism, as a function that can be manipulated in one direction or another [that] enables greater freedom of movement."[84] Butler offers up race as a technology of liberation by deploying race as a means of self-extension, rather than as the imagined-to-be biologically encoded determination of one's life path. Butler disrupts the structure in which the Western bourgeois self-overrepresentation as human reigns as the only model for being human.

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83. Ibid., 189-90.

84. Ibid., 194.

My reading of Butler's work thus is distinct from that of some scholars who look to her work for inspiration on the stakes of posthumanism. For example, in *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction,* Sherryl Vint dedicates a chapter to Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (most often referred to as *Lilith's Brood*): the novels *Dawn, Adulthood Rites,* and *Imago*. On the whole, Vint's analysis of the trilogy is one iteration of the type of engagement with Butler's work that I am advocating. Vint contends that "scholars have typically interpreted the trilogy in terms of its comments on race relations, seeing the genetic science in the trilogy as a metaphor that allows Butler to explore human notions of hierarchy and human tendencies to evaluate others through body-based categories."[85] She also states her concern with "the place of the body in Butler's cyborg politics," along with "the visceral quality of the connections that have been undertheorized in earlier criticism," even going so far as to say that "the way these novels also engage with contemporary discourses about the appropriate uses of various biological technologies of body manipulation" have been overlooked.[86] However, she is more concerned with representations of the body in the novels that parallel contemporary anxieties over technologically-mediated interventions into the human body – such as genetic engineering, in-vitro fertilization, or in-vitro genetic engineering – than she is with questions of race. But Butler makes it impossible, or at least quite difficult to

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85. Sherryl Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007): 58.

86. Ibid.

overlook race when her work offers it up as a technology, a tool, and a technique, a 'thing' with which to think.

Butler even could be read as making moves toward a reading of race, to reference Coleman, as "a disinterested object of our delight, as opposed to one that is overinscribed."[87] It is much easier to imagine a tool as something detached from the body, as in the age-old philosophical question for theorists of technology about whether or not the blind man's cane functions as prosthesis, than it is to imagine it as something that is, at least *imagined to be,* embodied. But Coleman rallies against both the notion that technology is necessarily separate or distinct from our corporeal form, and the notion that race is indeed biologically and materially linked to the body, either mapped onto the skin or into the structure of our DNA. Coleman pushes us to take seriously the question, "can race survive as something other than the remnant of a traumatic history?"[88] It is a question that I argue Octavia Butler poses in *Fledgling.*

Coleman argues that "technology's embedded function of self-extension may be exploited to liberate race from an inherited position of abjection toward a greater expression of agency," which for her "indicates presence, will, and movement…the ability to move freely as a being."[89] Here she highlights the definition of technology as tools for self-extension, or ways of projecting one's will (agency) beyond the contours of one's own body into one's surrounding environment. Further, she contends that this

87. Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology" in *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 180.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., 177-78.

notion of self-extension can liberate not only racialized peoples, or even those folks imagined to be raceless, but race in and of itself, as a concept, a social construct, a system of mattering, an epistemology, and so much more. I understand Coleman to be proposing not "liberation" writ large, but more precisely liberation *from an inherited position of abjection.* By that I mean, liberation does not necessarily imply full and total liberation wherein the subject is fully free, in every sense of the word, to do as they please without consequence. Rather, it is liberation of "race" for those racialized from a position of being cast off, of being subjugated on the basis of racialization. In her analysis, the intergenerational inheritance of racialized trauma and violence is *real* in that it has effects on the psyches and bodies of its inheritors. But she also pushes that inherited position of abjection to one side as a place from which liberation may be made possible. An inherited position of abjection is a decidedly *un-free* positioning. As well, "abjection" suggests a state of degradation, of being cast off. If we think, again, linguistically, then the condition of being, the ontology, of this inherited position, is also spatio-temporal in that it represents a continuously repeated process of *having been.* But it also represents a position, a point in space-time where liberation is possible; and for Coleman, that liberation will follow rendering race as a self-extension that allows one to move toward a greater expression of agency. *Fledgling* is certainly a story in which race becomes a self-extensive technology that makes a greater expression of agency possible.

Conclusion

Butler proffers a fictional narrative in *Flegling* that allows for the potential of liberation from racialization and abjection. If race, or at least its biologized characteristics informed by discourses of race, can become the tool, the technology, for the liberation and improvement of a species, the Ina, then race constitutes a self-extensive technology making a greater expression of agency possible, to put it in Coleman's terms. I have argued that that self-extension disrupts popular imaginations, or even critical imaginations, of race, and to a certain extent, technology. That disruption is made possible by other creative intellectual works which interrupt the presumption that race is a necessary category for thinking the human as a species. Put another way, Afrofuturist thought and creative work is meant to exceed the popular imaginations of what blackness allows and what black peoples are capable of. If that works, if it convinces us, then it stops the continuous progression from human, inherently linked to racialization and colonial encounters, to the posthuman as articulated in posthumanist and transhumanist thought by non-black authors. Interruption and disruption in these examples, operate in tandem to reconfigure who and what constitutes the human. As Weheliye argues, a black mode of embodiment that is similar to the ones articulated in posthumanism as exemplified by Katherine Hayles, would begin at the moment at which both disembodiment and virtual embodiment is possible. For Hayles, it seems that information needs to lose its body to make that possible. But for Weheliye, the black body can never be imagined as without a body for it has been articulated as body. Therefore, Weheliye's intervention begs questions about what it means to take at least African-American

cultural histories seriously. In so doing, he interrupts the presumed universal progress from information as housed in material, embodied forms to bodiless streams and networks of information that begets the shift from human to posthuman.

Chapter 3

Expand/Wither: The Promise of Science and/as Fiction, Being Human as Praxis, and Scientific/Fictional Encounters

Expand: *(v.) to give a fuller version or account of*

Wither: *(v.) to lose vitality, force, or freshness*; *to make speechless or incapable of action*

I suggest, then, that the racial underpinnings of scientific knowledge, and the application of this knowledge to black bodies have, at times, foreclosed interdisciplinary conversations and a 'hybridly organic' and 'languaging existence'. Yet, a transgressive ground of understanding, a new form of life, and critical intervention are, I think, available if we shift our analytical frame away from the lone site of the suffering body and toward co-relational texts, practices, and narratives that emphasize black life.
Katherine McKittrick "Diachronic loops/deadweight tonnage/bad made measure"

For our proposed new objects of knowledge to be receivable, we accordingly need to go beyond the ontology of the figure of man and the empowering normalizing *discourses with which this 'figure,' as the projected model/criterion of being of the globally dominant Western-European bourgeoisie, is still enchantedly constituted –now dangerously, in the context of our post-atomic environment.*
Sylvia Wynter "On Disenchanting Discourse"

My writing in this chapter and thesis seeks to aid in giving a fuller account of the human, following Sylvia Wynter's vast intellectual project, in order to move toward more

"humanly workable genres." The phrase "humanly workable genres" is a complex riff on Katherine McKittrick's concept of "humanly workable geographies,"[90] which I link to Wynter's account of modernity's genres of the human while reversing disparagements of science fiction as "genre" writing to position it as a crucial site of creative and critical thought. To consider the ways in which black critical thinkers expand upon the human, I will work not only with Wynter and McKittrick, but also with Octavia Butler. I suggest that Butler pushes toward what McKittrick and Wynter may call "being human as praxis" by way of raising questions about what it means to be human that cannot be reduced simply to dichotomies such as Nature vs. Culture or Dystopia vs. Utopia. I submit that it is Butler's work in the marginal genre of science fiction—the strength of which lies *in its marginality,* according to Samuel Delany—that proffers a creative-intellectual project that, when read alongside Wynter's and McKittrick's work, moves toward being human as praxis and more humanly workable genres. I develop this account by placing McKittrick's monograph *Demonic Grounds* and edited anthology *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* in conversation with Wynter's essay "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom" and with two of Butler's novel from her *Patternist* series, *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind.* In conversation these authors spark new dialogues about who and what constitutes the human in ways that are no longer limited

90. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xv, 141, 145-46.

by what Wynter calls the genre-specific cosmogony of the human,[91] by an "inter-altruistic kin-recognition"[92] which centers one's accustomed version of being human, or by what Butler calls humanity's "great contradiction"[93]: our arguably inherently hierarchical nature. In place of these formulations, the authors and their works expand upon the limited notions of who and what constitutes the human in the wake of the violences of modernity. Taken together, these works also suggest to me that we may be able to move "toward the human,"[94] as Wynter suggests, without as Butler has suggested literally having to go "someplace else."[95]

In order to even begin to address these three creative-intellectuals' and the conversation we may have by asking their texts to converse more directly, I must situate this chapter alongside the ones that precede it. As McKittrick says of Wynter's oeuvre, her "anticolonial vision is not, then, teleological – moving from colonial oppression outward and upward toward emancipation – but rather consists of *knots of ideas and*

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91. Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 30-32.

92 Ibid., 32-33; 45.

93. Octavia E. Butler, *Adulthood Rites,* in *Lilith's Brood* (New York: Warner Aspect, 2000): 442.

94. I take this language from the title of Wynter's seminal work "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument."

95. Stephen W. Potts, "We Keep Playing the Same Record: A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler," in *Science Fiction Studies* 70, no. 23, 1996: 333.

histories and narratives that can only be legible in relation to one another;"[96] we can only have this conversation once we have and are having other ones. It is precisely because the critical use of blackness as analytical tool or location or question "holds in it the possibility of undoing and unsettling – *not replacing or occupying* – Western conceptions of what it means to be human"[97] that I seek to follow Wynter and McKittrick's lead in deploying blackness as an analytical tool to have a different and more expansive conversation about the human. Rather than implying an identitarian approach toward understanding the human, as McKittrick notes, "Wynter…[does] not use categories of disenfranchisement as starting points; rather, [she focuses] on the ways in which such categories work themselves out in relation to the human, being human, human being, and codes that govern humanness." In my estimation, this is a point of confluence for the vast projects of both Wynter and Butler. As noted in the preceding chapter, while Butler writes about different ways of being human among all different types of people, at the center we consistently find black women protagonists—from Shori in *Fledgling*, most recently, all the way back to Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* and Mary in *Mind of My Mind.* Yet, her treatment and development of these characters is not heavily focused in identitarian ways; rather, these women's blackness is depicted in factual rather than essentializing ways and is rarely, if ever, used as an explanation for their actions or

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96. Katherine McKittrick, "Yours in the Intellectual Struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis,* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 2.

97. Ibid

personality. Thus once we treat blackness as an analytical tool, the conversation to be had among these three thinkers can indeed reveal more and more about how being human "signals not a noun but a verb."[98]

As I explain in my reading of McKittrick reading the work of science in Wynter's project, our physiology—in this case our brain—works to reinforce the origin narratives and cosmogonies that we have authored to depict the way things are as the natural order. The immediate question this raises for me, as someone with a fondness for speculative fiction, is what happens when those cosmogonies are rewritten? What happens when humans encounter new origin narratives? We can look to nearly every other genre of literature or art to see what happens when humans encounter, or *become conscious of* the reality that "the way things are" is that way by human design. Among all such genres, science fiction reveals what happens when humans not only become conscious of the workings of this unnatural order, but also encounter alternative explanations or utterly new ways of accounting for the future, present, and past of what we are wont to call human nature. I suggest that the confluence between Wynter's and Butler's work extends beyond their interrogations and applications of science, and into the realm of reckoning with the potential for the human to both *expand*, that is to be given a fuller version or account, and to *wither*, that is either to lose vitality or force or freshness, or to be made speechless or incapable of action. It is for this reason that I center Butler's work, which repeatedly urges us to consider what we might do, be, or become in the wake of all that

98. *Ibid,* 3.

we know about being human withering. In her imaginative worlds, many of the things that we know about humanity become speechless or incapable of action, even while other parts survive. At the same time, she warns us, like Wynter does, that a simple replacement of one set of cosmogonies for another will not undo our great and terrible contradiction. Taken from Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, now generally called *Lilith's Brood, "*the contradiction" refers to the simultaneity of compassionate kin-recognition, capacity for cruelty, and inherent hierarchical tendencies that reveal themselves within Butler's larger body of writing to be, for her, central tenets of human nature. However, Butler does reveal for us the precise moment at which the human goes from noun to verb, that is when it ceases to be something one is and becomes instead something one does. The shift from mode or condition of being to an act occurs at the moment when, in the above mentioned trilogy, a member of the species encounters the distinct possibility of either expanding upon the human species, or letting it wither.

I open conversation among these authors' works at their convergence around biology, or the natural sciences, in Butler's fictional works, Wynter's theories, and McKittrick's engagements with both authors.[99] As I've established previously, Butler rejected classical sociobiology even as she incorporated questions related to biology in her work. Wynter rejects the biocentricity of Man-As-Human, insisting instead that we as a species are products both of *bios and mythoi* or, following her reading of Fanon, both

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99. I do not engage as much McKittrick's own contributions to thinking science creatively because she takes a wider scope of the sciences, has only published quite recently a few pieces that directly take up science, and because her own forthcoming monograph *Dear Science And* will speak for itself, I am quite sure.

skins and *masks*.[100] McKittrick writes extensively about the function of science, especially the natural sciences, in Wynter's work, and she also has written about Butler in her monograph *Demonic Grounds*.

Expansion

In the essay "Axis, Bold as Love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science" in her previously-mentioned anthology on Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick notes three ways in which science focalizes Wynter's work:

> First are the ways in which the question of scientific thought ushered in broad cognitive ruptures…Second, science is noted for being produced as an objective system of knowledge that enumerates and classifies 'difference'…Third, Wynter explores what I want to call the science of our living – the physiological and neurological processes through which humans organize their environments."[101]

To illustrate McKittrick's first point, Wynter names two "cognitive leaps," the Copernican and Darwinian, which correspond to the rise of two different yet related iterations of Man-as-Human. The Copernican leap, as mentioned in chapter one, is paradigmatic shift that occurs as a result of the adoption of Copernicus's theory that the

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100. Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 23.

101. Katherine McKittrick, "Axis, Bold as Love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis,* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 144-45.

Sun was the center of the galaxy, rather than the Earth. The Darwinian leap is parallel to it in that it ushers a paradigmatic shift based on a new theory. In this instance, Darwin proposed that humans are merely biological beings, just like any other species. This analysis allows Wynter to call attention to the constructed nature of the supposedly naturalized order, which is a hierarchical one established by racial science that precedes Darwin, by undermining the apparent objectivity of science and its attendant disciplines for the ways in which they participate, from the eighteenth century up to the present, in the reiteration of Man as the model for being human. Regarding her final observation, on Wynter's "science of our living," McKittrick highlights that Wynter pushes us "to explore how the governing code of Man-as-human is implicit to how the human *organism* biologically feels and experiences and creates; to think through how questions of physiology, neurobiology, physics, math, and other areas allocated to the natural sciences can be conceptualized *in relation to* human activities (rather than as naturally pregiven)," and "to denaturalize biocentricity and its attendant fallen/dysselected castoffs while honoring the science of functional living systems."[102] Wynter suggests that Man-as-human embeds itself in the physiology of our brains, through an opiate-rewarding and opiate-reward-blocking neurochemistry[103] that contributes to its naturalization within our

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102. *Ibid,* 146-47.

103. For more on the specifics of how Wynter interprets this particular functioning of our brains, and how this 'second set of instructions' becomes flesh, see "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations" cited later in this chapter. See especially the sections "Cosmogonies of Our Planetary Life and Our Chartered Codes of Symbolic Life and Symbolic Death: Fictively Induced Modes of Inter-Altruistic Kin Recognition and Auto-Instituted Pseudospeciated Mode of Kind" (33-39) and "The Peripherey Perspective of the Post-1492 Ex-Slave-Labor Ultimate

recognitions or misrecognitions of ourselves within the model of Man-as-human. Following McKittrick's reading, Wynter pushes us to recognize that even though the natural sciences retain their discursive and disciplinary pull, by positing themselves as objective, they do not precede us as a species. The natural sciences are constructed just as we construct ourselves, or our conceptions of ourselves, along lines of material differences that then become imbued with social power instead of carrying that power innately. For McKittrick, "it follows that, given our origin narratives of the biological survival of the fittest – which secure a normative worldview that is inhabited by the logically fallen indigenous/nonwhite/black/African – we replicate our present world order, ensconce our selfhood in that order and governing logics, because it appears to be the *natural* thing to do."[104]

In his essay "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?" Walter Mignolo reads Wynter's ouvre through another framework. For Mignolo, "Wynter's writings demonstrate that Western epistemology built itself on a concept of Human and Humanity that, in turn, served to legitimate the epistemic foundation that created it. That is, Human and Humanity were created as the enunciated *that projects and propels to universality the local image* of the enunciator."[105] Mignolo is concerned with the ways in which Western

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Human Other Archipelago: W.E.B. DuBois's Double Consciousness, Frantz Fanon's Skins/Masks, and the Reverse Paradox" (45- 62) within the chapter for its development as pertinent to her theory of what I call "neurosemantics".

104. *Ibid,* 147.

105. Walter D. Mignolo, "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?" in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis,* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 109.

epistemology manifests and functions as imperialism, or subjection of the colonial or racial Other. Seeing the similarity between his own and Wynter's scholarship, he refers to the vastness of her project as decolonial:

> Why decolonial? Why not postmodern or postcolonial? Wynter's work has consistently called into question whether the 'post'—in poststructural, postmodernity, postcolonial—is a useful conceptual frame, thus putting it aside in order to understand, instead, how particular epistemologies are unthinkable and/or unarticulated within hegemonic Western categories of knowledge and philosophy of knowing.[106]

In positing Wynter's work as decolonial, and noting that she puts aside questions of the "post" or even the "pre," Mignolo offers insight into her dynamic refusal of teleological or linear-progressive narratives. Wynter rallies precisely against those stories told about the world in order to calcify a genre of humanity as the universally applicable or desirable one. My engagements with Wynter's work thus echo Mignolo, who notes that "the mirage of totality—of epistemic totality that is laden with seeming egalitarian open-mindedness entrenched in our various birthrights—is the trap that Wynter has not only recognized but struggled against."[107]

Facing these accounts, my question then becomes how might we get beyond the epistemological borders of science: if the sciences are the very mechanisms we use to tell

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106. *Ibid,* 106.

107. *Ibid,* 109.

the stories we inherit and reiterate, then how could the materiality narrated within them be rehashed? These and other related questions are precisely why, McKittrick notes "in applying the findings and theoretical queries developed in the natural sciences to human agents, while noticing the widely accepted 'social construction of race,' differences between bodies *continue to matter*: race, class, gender, sexuality, location, and age impact upon the conditions through which life and living are made possible."[108] But McKittrick begins to uncover a line of questioning in Wynter's work that takes this fact, the continuity of socially powerful *embodied* human differences, and finds ways to use it rather than to dismiss it or attempt to make it wither. McKittrick suggests that while the "racial underpinnings of scientific knowledge" have necessarily "foreclosed interdisciplinary conversations" that might contribute to Wynter's conceptual framework of the human as hybridly organic, made of both *bios* and *mythoi,* black studies scholars often employ those phenomena relegated only to the sciences—such as black holes, DNA, and other examples—"to work through racial politics and questions of emancipation."[109] McKittrick's own intellectual project on what she might call the creative sciences is reflected in her accounting for how "noticing conversations and connections between black creative texts and scientific knowledge will reveal important

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108. Katherine McKittrick, "Axis, Bold as Love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis,* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 149.

109. *Ibid,* 149-50.

scholarly challenges."[110] Ultimately, I wager that she is interested in the rupture of the disciplinary boundaries between the "creative" and the "scientific" much in the same way she is interested in unsettling the "left-center-right" political spectrum.[111]

The scope of Wynter's questions and project is enormous: reading the development of science as a discipline, as a storytelling mechanism constituting the governing code of Man-as-human, and a mode of producing knowledge about the human neurobiology that physiologically reiterates that governing code in our thought patterns. McKittrick effectively condenses Wynter's intellectual project into a manageable form that permits reading its effects within Octavia Butler's science fictional work. By now it is perhaps clear that neurobiology factors heavily into the confluence I hope to illuminate between Wynter's and McKittrick's work, on the one hand, and Butler's on the other. The workings of the human brain and the ways in which the mind interprets the body's contact with external stimuli are of deep significance to Butler. Butler wrote an entire series of novels focused on the effects of what she has called "programming"[112] and on the question of whether or how it might be possible to work around that programming once we begin to understand it. Now dubbed the *Patternist* series, four of its five novels remained canonically supported by the late author. The fifth, *Survivor,* Butler disowned

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110. *Ibid,* 150. And for more on this, look to her piece "Diachronic loops/deadweight tonnage/bad made measure" published in *cultural geographies* vol. 23 no. 1, which was originally given as the annual *cultural geographies* lecture for 2015.

111. See *Ibid,* 150-154 for her fascinating and, if I may be so bold, revolutionary account of the question of political orientation along a linear spectrum.

112. Stephen W. Potts, "We Keep Playing the Same Record: A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler," in *Science Fiction Studies* 70, no. 23, 1996: 333.

for being too similar to *Star Trek* and as not worthy of continued publication after its first printing in 1978. In this chapter I set aside this novel and another in the series, *Clay's Ark,* not because they do not feature themes of neuro-socio-biology (they do) but because they do not take up Butler's frequent juxtaposition of empire, race-building, and master-slave dynamics with neurological relationality, (telepathic communication and subjugation). I focus on the stakes laid out in the plot line that begins in *Wild Seed,* which portray the millennia-long attempts to build a race of people by Doro-a parasitic being who occupies human bodies by killing their host but who cannot exist outside a human body on his own, and that ends in *Mind of My Mind* with Doro's death at the hands of a being he bred as a 'complete' version of himself. While I also take interest in what happens to 'the pattern' in *Patternmaster* several generations after Doro's demise, my reading focuses on examining the articulations of neurobiology in Butler's work that work toward hypothesizing an expansion of our conception of human-ness. What follows then will be a reading of the ways in which Butler uses both its neurochemical and the physiological or neurobiological mechanisms and functioning of the mind to expand the human as a species within an alternate origin narrative. I argue that in these novels, and especially in *Mind of My Mind,* Butler offers a cautionary tale of what may happen once the human encounters a different set of origin narratives that might bear the potential to create new modes of relationality across difference and to subjugate on the basis of those differences.

Mind of My Mind is the second novel published in the series, appearing in 1977, although the events of the first novel, *Patternmaster* (1976) occur chronologically *after* those in *Mind of My Mind.* In it we see the establishment of the pattern, a vast telepathic network of human beings endowed with psionic abilities, most of whom are the result of a breeding program of the ancient, parasitic body-snatcher Doro. *Mind of My Mind* follows Mary, a young mixed-race black woman with promising telepathic abilities, who is a descendant of Emma, Doro's fellow immortal with whom he has a complicated relationship (Emma was originally Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*). The novel switches between the perspectives of Mary and of Doro, whose breeding program produced Mary as the manifestation of his dream of building a race and an empire. However, the reality of that dream-come-true flies in the face of Doro's original hope of both owning and belonging to a race of people of his own design and creation. Once Mary transitions—giving her fuller access to her budding psionic powers—she realizes she has inadvertently tethered to her self six other "actives," or people whom Doro bred and who survived transition to become psionic. This tethering Mary later calls the Pattern. The novel ends when Doro attempts to "take" Mary, or assert his consciousness in her body by killing her and making her body his new host. In the conflict Doro realizes that Mary is like him—not human, and parasitic, although housed in her original body—and that she can both draw strength and sustenance from the people in the Pattern, and can consume another's consciousness, snuffing them out as Doro can. Mary ultimately succeeds in defending herself and the Pattern from Doro's attack, although she drains strength from all of her

more than 1500 Patternists and kills a number of the weaker ones, even as Emma kills herself once she learns of Doro's death.

Mind of My Mind, and indeed the entire *Patternist* series, deals with questions of race, and particularly blackness, but that is not the sole focus of the novel or series. Butler suggests that Doro is descended from Nubians who were, Doro presumes, entirely wiped out by the Egyptians.[113] In the conversation in which Doro reveals this information, Mary is astounded and says, "God! You're white so much of the time, I never thought you might have been born black." Doro responds, "It doesn't matter because I haven't been any color at all for about four thousand years. Or you could say I've been every color. But either way, I don't have anything more in common with black people – Nubian or otherwise – than I do with whites or Asians."[114] Ultimately Doro argues that "I'm not black or white or yellow, because I'm not human, Mary."[115] Given the racial underpinnings of science that lead to the dysselection/dehumanization of black people, the fact that Doro identifies himself as raceless because he is "a mutation. A parasite. A god. A devil" is quite interesting.[116] What interests me is the fact that only his parasitic nature allows him to transcend race. He wields an inhuman power to overtake the bodies of human beings, in the process killing them, yet he relies upon them for sustenance. Not only that, but his most deep-seated desire is to create an empire of mutated human beings

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113. Octavia E. Butler, *Mind of My Mind* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 87.

114. Ibid

115. *Ibid*

116. *Ibid,* 88.

that he can control. In some ways, he embodies the distinctly human drive for mastery and subjection and yet his desires for it precede and succeed the colonial encounters that begat modernity. The revelation that he isn't human unsettles Mary, and for good reason. Having said that, I intend to focus on the workings of the mind within Butler's novels and their function to delineate lines of difference, especially differences metaphorized as species or mutations.

The aspect of race that I wish to emphasize is the relationship Butler draws between neurological function and the figuration of the human as a species: namely, the extent to which Doro's attempts to build a race for himself, and Mary's success in so doing, can be read as alternative origin narratives. I believe it to be generative to read the workings of origin narratives in *Mind of My Mind* at the moment of encounter with another: specifically, in the encounter between Doro's dream of building a people to which he could belong and which he could own, and that dream's realization under the purview of someone else. While Doro is the progenitor, Mary is the realization of that dream to build an empire of people under one person's control. Thus, the encounter between the two within what we can only assume is both Mary's consciousness and physical body reveals the dangers of competing cosmogonies in a new light. In that moment, Butler paints a portrait not just of a literal inner turmoil, but also of a person who struggles against an externally-imposed cosmogony to which she is forcibly beholden in favor of one that she may more actively author. This encounter is removed from the implicit knowledge of the governing code of Man-as-human that many

marginalized peoples are, on some level, already aware of. We see here for the first time that at least in this world of Butler's design, it is possible to craft an alternative to either subjugation under a governing myth/natural order/cosmogony or to complicity in one's own and others' subjugation by co-authoring that myth/natural order/cosmogony. Mary, at great cost both to herself and to the hundreds whose lives she takes for power to defeat Doro, reveals that crafting a new cosmogony, a new mythos, to fit with one's changing bios (in this case her psionic capabilities, and the Pattern), is indeed possible. I hope to focus the ways in which that encounter—the action of encountering, and the moment of encounter—sparks consideration of how "the human" withers: how Man-as-human withers in the face of being human as praxis.

Wither

Being human as praxis, a humanism made to the measure of the world, "setting humanity's feet on a different path"[117]: each points to a foundational, radical shift in what it means to be human. The constant between them, as I just alluded, is to a moment of encounter that moves human from noun to verb. As Sylvia Wynter has demonstrated, Man arises out of the colonial encounter; following her reading of that encounter, our species as a whole began to change, adapt to new information, and reshape and reform reality. Octavia Butler's fictional worlds propose that the colonial encounter can and does

117. "Setting humanity's feet on a different path" is language that I gleaned from Octavia Butler's interview on *Charlie Rose* that I cited in the previous chapter. She uses the phrase to describe the holistic story one gets when one reads both *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* together and it offers a story of a woman who creates a new religion and 'sets humanity's feet on a different path.'

repeat: although it may not look like it did before, it recurs whether through an encounter with another intelligent species or a simple repetition with almost no difference from its own history. Katherine McKittrick, in response, offers up the promise of science, a framework which "points to relational and connective knowledges rather than positioning, say, science first and resistance later."[118] These three creative-intellectuals present hypotheses for which evidence appears either in glimpses of what a delivery on their promise might be, or fictions that are no less instructive. Read together, their works implicitly push us to ask whether or not "the human" remains a viable category, politics, or even praxis: that is, whether the human bears with it a potential to wither. If we do indeed face an "unparalleled catastrophe for our species"—if human beings are doomed to extinction unless we unlearn our great contradiction—then we need to ask whether the human as we have known it, in its biocentric functionings, is worth reviving or reworking. Together, these thinkers give us the tools to pose this question even if nothing could prepare us for the possible answers.

In *Mind of My Mind*, Mary clearly recognizes the power of origin narratives when she convinces Jan, one of her Patterned people whose ability is psychometry (the capacity to imbue material objects with thoughts, feelings, information, and memories), to create learning stones that will indoctrinate new Patternists the moment they transition. Mary's attempts to streamline the process of bringing people into the Pattern reveals the power of

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118. Katherine McKittrick, "Axis, Bold as Love: On Sylvia Wynter, Jimi Hendrix, and the Promise of Science," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis,* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 155.

myths of origin to the human species, and in this case the "hybridly human" nature of our species. With the emergence of Mary and the Pattern, the human species seems to be mutating, although we cannot be sure the extent to which those mutations necessarily constitute evolution beyond the species or an increase in biodiversity within it. Yet we simultaneously meet the importance of mythos: the reiteration of the social functioning of the Pattern as a means of organizing and linking a bios and society. The Patternists may be evolving beyond the previous limitations of homo sapiens by way of telepathic connection and psionic abilities, but they remain in Wynter's terms "hybridly human" precisely because the origin myths surrounding the Pattern reinforce its legitimacy *and* its neurological function as something in which they all take comfort. Even as the First Family—Mary and the original six actives in the Pattern —initially try to fight off Mary's connection because, as one says, it "feels like a leash,"[119] Mary urges them to acknowledge the comfort that they take in it and to embrace it. To draw in Wynter's musings on neurobiology, the Pattern becomes the operative means by which opiate-rewarding placebo and opiate-reward-blocking nocebo neurotransmitters are administered to humans activated within it. Given that the Pattern is a neurobiological reality that neither Mary nor her new Patternists can undo or escape, Butler's vision is perhaps as purely scientific as it gets. And yet it remains unacceptable to the First Family until they begin to accept it as a reality. It can only be accepted once it has been named. Thus, the Pattern isn't simply a neurobiological fact, or else there would need be no

119. Octavia E. Butler, *Mind of My Mind* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 114.

language for it. Instead, despite being a newly-established part of what makes them all "cognitive, neurolinguistic, flesh-and-blood, and thus 'science-y' beings,"[120] they still must make sense of it semantically and incorporate it into their language-ing, hybridly human experience. This new system of neurobiological functioning must come to *mean* something to those governed by it. Its meaning is made by the name it is given: the pattern.

We see here how Butler creates a method by which the newly-natural order of things cannot be ignored or dismissed as simply "how things are" but rather must be used as a means to construct a new origin narrative. Within that narrative lies what McKittrick calls the promise of science. The Pattern isn't a mere biological fact, but rather becomes a means of extension of the self. This extension of self is possible *even while tethered to a collective group of others*. In fact, in *Patternmaster* we glean that Patternists have come to use their abilities, like Jan's psychometry, to use the Pattern and their psionic abilities for art. The promise of science manifests when Mary asks Jan to make learning stones, to create a new art form. For McKittrick, the promise of science lies in Césaire's "Science of the Word" which "points to creative labor as recoding science through representational *and* biological feelings."[121] I understand McKittrick to remain cautiously optimistic about the promise of science, as when she suggests, following Wynter and NourbeSe Philip, "that the artist solders together self, flesh, physiology, and the word – bio-mythoi,

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120. *Ibid,* 154.

121. Ibid

cognition-neurology-creativity, phylogeny-ontogeny-sociogeny – to newly describe an ongoing, but hopeful struggle."[122] *Scientia*, then, is about how to creatively navigate, how to tell new stories about those biological, material realities that have been "wounded due to Eurocentric discourses."[123]

In her creative works Butler urges us to see the struggle just as much as we see the hope that motivates the struggle. Mary's act of killing Doro, in self-defense, can be read as a struggle motivated by a love for and desire to protect her people. Yet that struggle simultaneously reveals the larger struggle for the species and, in Butler's terms, the contradiction of human nature. Mary struggles against Doro, but to protect *only* herself and her people. Just prior to the actual struggle, Doro has a conversation with Emma in which she decries the Patternists' use of the term "mutes" to describe those human beings not endowed with psionic abilities.[124] She challenges Doro to recognize the cruelty the human species can wreak upon itself through its hierarchical thinking, by translating "mute" as "n***er."[125] Here we can see that Butler has written a new way for social power to manifest *physiologically.* Because the Patternists have psionic abilities, they can control those without such abilities (or even one another, depending on their strength) and make others do their bidding. The people subjected by Patternists then can be convinced that the things they are made to do are of their own will and choice. Mary

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122. *Ibid,* 155.

123. *Ibid*

124. Octavia E. Butler, *Mind of My Mind* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 155.

125. *Ibid*

thus fights not only to protect herself and her people, but also to protect her dream of a new way of life: her new reality in which she is one of the owners rather than one of the owned. Butler reveals for us that despite genetic mutations—ones which certainly parallel eugenics and genetic engineering but with different technologies—the tendency to wield power toward creating a social order that favors oneself or one's kind, one's genre, does not evolve alongside the Patternists' evolving brains. They may be superhuman, to a certain extent, but they remain tied to humanity's great contradiction.

What then might this teach us about ways of being human? What does this reveal about modes of relationality between different genres of the human? Will we always find new ways to subjugate, to create social power out of biological differences that matter? I submit that Butler does the work of pointing out the dangers of assuming that becoming conscious of our contradiction, or of the workings of social power *as they presently are*, will be sufficient to undo it. Using a metaphorization of science, and specifically neurobiology, Butler plies the contradiction faced not only by her fictional characters but also by her readers and herself, situated within social worlds defined by the violences of modernity. By setting a stage for the power relations that science has seemed to embed within biology, Butler demonstrates the continued danger of human degradation. She further illustrates the sustained, affective power of kinship to both the continuation of human degradation and the power relations embedded in science that work to sustain them. Butler does this by portraying the many ways in which those negotiating their survival model critical agency within the biological, and biologistic routes of power. Yet

in her sustained refusal, cutting across each of her fictional worlds, to provide a ready escape from these enduring entanglements, Butler and her works resonate with the efforts of theorists to take modern violence and its sciences as contexts in which creative and critical thought and new life might arise.

I do not wish to categorically define Butler's work as dystopic or as pessimistic. Instead I wish to reiterate that the ambivalence in her work is precisely what makes it both entertaining and compelling. It is what makes her work human. It is *only because* she refuses to write a straightforward utopic or dystopic account of speculative events that we can learn so much about being human from her. She seeks neither to solve preexisting ills related to social power, nor to introduce new ones solely for the sake of rehashing our hybridly human contradiction. Rather she warns us of the potential for the human, both as species and as a philosophical construct or figure, to "lose vitality, force, or freshness," to wither, if we do not learn how to *do* humanity differently. Without championing or fully espousing it, she toys with a different teleology of the species, one that orients us toward our self-destruction rather than towards an ever-increasing amount of tolerance and capacity to live with our differences. In so doing, she demands that we question what we think we know about being human. She forces us to encounter our contradiction and leaves it in our hands as readers to determine whether and how we may heed her warnings.

When we read this imaginative teleology alongside Wynter's caution about the ecological effects of the overrepresentation of Man-as-human, we begin to see a fuller

picture of the danger we are in as a species. Wynter consistently reminds us that the "liberal monohumanist" genre of humanity speaks of itself as if it is the ecumenical mode or genre of the species, as in a section of Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter conversation, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?" entitled "White Radiance/Aesthetic Normalcy and the Teleology of Our Ostensibly Ecumenically Human Development: The Genre-Specific/Culture-Specific Objective Truths of Economic Development." In this passage, Wynter posits that the governing code of Man-as-human prompts the Western and Westernized bourgeois subject to speak *for* the species as a whole. She responds to a *Time* magazine report on climate change and global warming by exclaiming, "It thinks the causes of global warming are *human* activities, but they are not!"[126] As she makes plain, global warming and its impending doom for the planet are not the fault of the species as a whole, but rather of "all of us – the Western and mimetically Westernized middle classes – after we fell into the trap of modeling ourselves on the mimetic model of the Western bourgeoisie's liberal monohumanist Man2."[127] By way of contrast, she invokes an indigenous population, the Masai "who were (and are) being displaced" but who, she asserts, "have nothing to do with global warming!" as a counterexample to the *homo oeconomicus* model of being human, in which development and its attendant environmental consequences becomes the absolute

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126. Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke UP, 2015), 21.

127. Ibid., 22.

model.[128] In addressing her own, and other Western and Westernized scholars' complicities in an issue like global warming, she speaks to the above-mentioned process of Westernization as a means of invitation to co-author the cosmogonies that govern one's life. For Wynter, against the tendency of Western and Westernized middle class subjects to speak as if for the entire species, "*the* single issue with which global warming and climate instability now confronts us [is] that we have to replace the ends of the *referent-we* of liberal monohumanist Man2 with the ecumenically human ends of the *referent-we in the horizon of humanity.* We have no choice."[129] Wynter insists that our collective survival will only be possible if this refusal to shift perspective comes to an end. The proposals for change, she wagers, will be devastating, and "most devastating of all for the global poor" because the proposals "are made from the perspective of *homo oeconomicus* and its attendant master discipline of economics, whose behavior-regulatory metaphysical telos of mastering Malthusian natural scarcity is precisely *the cause* of the problem itself."[130] If the problem and impending danger direct results from this subsumption of all other genres or models of being human into the falsely-posited-as ecumenical liberal monohumanist model of Man2, then nothing produced or proposed from within that model can solve the problem.

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128. Ibid., 22-23.

129. Ibid., 24.

130. Ibid.

Wynter insists that nothing short of a cognitive leap of Copernican or Darwinian magnitude and influence can save humanity from global environmental devastation. If Man has not only been forcibly embedded within our social order, but also reinforced consistently by our brain's physiology as the singular model for being human, then we have limited options. We can either reconceptualize the human as a praxis, as Wynter suggests, or we can let it wither. But if it has taken as much work as Wynter has put in just to contextualize the human species and the attendant genre-specific stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, then how much more work will it take to rework the human? How much resistance to such a proposed shift will we encounter before the species recognizes the danger it is in and recognizes the necessity "that these laws, for the first time in our species' history, be no longer allowed to function *outside our conscious awareness*"?[131] While Wynter does not purport to name the resistance we may encounter or the work it will take to materially manifest being human as praxis, we can return to Butler for a fictional account of both. Butler offers tentative answers to these questions when she expands upon the existing genres of the human by writing new ones in her creative works that flesh out the consequences of human encounters with new and different stories about one another. She insists, as strongly as Wynter that the governing code of Man-as-human or of Butler's contradiction cannot continue functioning without our conscious awareness, lest we perish. It is paramount to this project that we recognize that Butler insists that becoming aware of our contradictions, of the nongenetically yet

131. Ibid, 28.

'alchemically made flesh' workings of social power that appear to us as natural even if unethical or unjust, is *not enough.* In fact, within a genre of literature that is uniquely positioned to allow her to do so, she contends that it is perhaps that moment of recognition which *withers* us. She points to the moment of becoming consciously aware of the multitude of genres of humanness that have been subsumed under one model, Man, that purports to be ecumenical, as the event which actually renders human beings speechless or incapable of action. Were she, or any of her characters, unaware of the necessity of this moment of recognition, of this expansion, upon which Wynter insists, then Butler's work of disrupting that very structure of knowledge of how-to-be-human would be impossible, or at the very least less compelling. I hope that this curated conversation between Wynter and Butler reveals ways in which they sought answers to questions that may have in one another's work being or becoming human (as praxis).

Chapter 4

Speculate: An Epilogue

In this thesis, I have offered five categories of analysis: displace, interrupt, disrupt, expand, and wither. To situate each of these categories I have included their denotative definitions for their verb forms at the beginning of the relevant chapter preceding the epigraphs. I hope to have outlined the usefulness of each category for thinking through the subject matter appertaining. I now add a sixth: speculate. To speculate is to form a theory or conjecture about a subject without firm evidence. In order to, briefly, speculate, I need to outline and summarize what has taken place in this text. I will review in order what each category illustrates in chronological order by working through the preceding chapters. Then I will end with a brief speculative note of my own on the power and promise of science fiction.

Chapter one of this thesis introduces the central problematic of who and what constitutes the human. It begins by situating the stakes of an analysis of the human as a category which centers black critical thought. I make an argument for the work of displacement, that is the work of causing something to move from its usual place, as it pertains to theories of posthumanism and transhumanism. I contend that black critical thought on the human, as a figure or construct or, later, as a praxis, displaces the unchecked white supremacy present in some iterations of posthumanism and transhumanism. Then in order to situate the stakes of making such a claim I outline three subsections: “Modernity/Coloniality/Man,” “Race/Science/Fiction,” and

"Post/Trans/Human". In the first of these, I look to Sylvia Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom" and "1492: A New World View" for the ways in which she historicizes the colonial moment of encounter as the paradigmatic rupture that begets contemporary notions of the human (presumed to be wholly and fully articulated through Man). I take up her argument that a triadic model of relationality formed by the colonial encounters legitimates the supposed "inheritably enslavable" nature of the black African in the colonial context. An engagement with that argument, and her historicization of the rise of the category "Man" which represents itself as if it were the singular model for being human, allows for further contextualization of how the categories and discourses of "race" and "science" become twinned.

In the second section of the chapter, I look to Anne McClintock alongside Sylvia Wynter for the histories of the rise of both scientific and commodity racism. The history of how science comes to hold sway as a discourse is deeply intertwined with the rise of racialization and schemas for biologizing and taxonomizing race. I then articulate race and science as myths. I argue that while both have material effects and are certainly real in that sense, each also is grounded in a kind of misdirection meant to naturalize itself as commonsensical. Read in this light, the role of science fiction in this project becomes more clear. If science and race operate, on a certain level, as myths, or even fictions, then looking to the fictionally scientific, especially the work of Octavia Butler, offers new ways of thinking about the human as a category. From there I highlight the importance of Octavia Butler's contributions both to the genre and to literature generally and note that

she is taken up by many different intellectual movements, including one at the core of my project: posthumanism.

The third subsection of the first chapter situates posthumanism and transhumanism as modes of thinking the human in the terms of those credited with at least advancing the fields, if not originating them. I read back the now classic "Cyborg Manifesto" by Donna Harway through a more recent interview with the author in which she disavows the kind of posthumanist thinking that runs with the cyborg, and drops the feminist elements of her thinking. I conclude that even while she locates the cyborg potential in women of color laborers, creative intellectuals (including Butler), and feminists, she still gets taken up in a post-racial turn of posthumanity that not only drops the feminist analysis but drops the potential for anti-racist critique. I then end the section by reading Dr. Natasha Vita More's own words on transhumanism to contextualize transhumanist thinking as motivated by an active agency into human evolution. I conclude that the slippery slope from "designer bodies" to designer children, and a reiteration of eugenic medicine, is enough to warrant a cautionary approach to transhumanist thinking. I end the chapter with a brief outline of the remaining chapters in the text.

Chapter Two focuses on the categories "interrupt" and "disrupt". I locate interruption in projects both overtly articulated as Afrofuturist, such as Kodwo Eshun's and Alondra Nelson's, but also in those more implicitly aligned with Afrofuturist politics, like Alexander Weheliye's I contend that Afrofuturist thought and work can interrupt,

that is it can stop the continual and linear progression of, the white supremacy of contemporary mutations of humanism, especially posthumanism and transhumanism. Working through the rise of Afrofuturism as a social, intellectual, and artistic movement, I offer a genealogy beginning with Mark Dery's seminal chapter "Black to the Future" in which he interviews Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose, and arguably ending with ongoing projects like "The Afrofuturist Affair". I further aver that Weheliye locates the potential for what I read as a black posthumanism at the intersections of sound studies, black studies, and science and technology studies. His example of the phonograph could be considered the origins of a black posthumanist potential and also sets us up to consider another potential example of a black posthumanist articulation in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling.*

I move from Weheliye to consider Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* alongside Beth Coleman's "Race as Technology". I focus on Shori as the half-Ina, half-human, and bi-racial black girl protagonist for how she represents a different kind of posthumanist potential. I contend that Butler offers us a vision of race as a technology not unlike the kind Coleman calls for in her essay. If race can indeed operate as a technology, or at least a tool for manipulating one's environment or ecology, then Shori, both as a complex person and the result of genetic engineering, could be said to be a new kind of "cyborg". I thereby argue that Butler disrupts, or drastically alters the structure of, the notion of the human that allows for uncritically white posthumanism. She disrupts what we think we know about both "race" and "technology" and what counts as either. In so doing, she

further disrupts the notions of the human and of human relationality, even within science fiction wherein the human is not automatically constituted as the a priori subject.

Finally, in the third chapter I curate a conversation between Katherine McKittrick, Sylvia Wynter, and Octavia Butler. Though McKittrick and Wynter are already in ongoing conversation, as evidenced by the first full chapter of the anthology on Wynter McKittrick edited, the three are not often thought of together. I juxtapose them in order to discern how each treats "science," and especially the biological sciences, within their work. I conclude that this conversation expands upon the human as a category, especially after its disruption, interruption, and displacement in previous chapters. Read together, they give a fuller account of the human that takes it holistically as a species rather than necessarily engaging with Man alone, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human. Further, this expansion runs the risk of letting the category wither. To give such a fuller account of the human, McKittrick, Wynter, and Butler recognize the potential for it to lose vitality, force, or freshness be it as a figure, a construct, a mode of subjectivity, or even a mode of relationality. Yet it is precisely that risk of withering that may just allow the species to flourish.

I end here with my own contribution to the work of speculation. I do not predict or prophesize, but I do hope. I take seriously Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha, the editors of the anthology *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements,* when they say that political organizing is an act of science

fiction.[132] They contend that imagining a world without systemic violence based on prejudices against other members of our species is engaging in speculation. If we take that to be true then science fiction takes on a whole new meaning in our political, social, and intellectual movements of justice, no matter how specific or broad. In this thesis project, I have urged the reader to consider the awesome potential of shifting our paradigms such that non-black readers, creators, and thinkers would have to identify with black peoples and the multitude of iterations of blackness present in the creative intellectual projects I've focused on. I am certain it is not the case that this kind of cross-identification never happens, but I am also certain that it is a mode of relationality that is fraught with historical patterns of violence that continue to repeat themselves contemporarily. What if, rather than appropriation and theft, new modes of relationality were open to us? What if despite the ongoing uneven power dynamics at play, we manage to relate across difference and push through those difficulties like the characters in Butler's novels? What if we were pushed to the brink of extinction as a species? Which aspects of what we think makes us human would we fight to keep and what would we let wither and leave behind?

I think that the moment of encounter between reader and text is often a fraught one wherein the reader's personal experiences and text's inherent biases clash and layer and obfuscate such that we often read what we want to read and the text tries to speak over us rather than to us. But for me, encountering Octavia Butler's fiction for the first

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time, was a moment of recognition. I saw myself in her characters, as complex people with richly articulated life stories and circumstances that I could never relate to my own life. And yet she writes them such that we are beckoned to identify with them, even when we might also be forced to recognize how, if it were a "true" story, we might've been responsible for putting them in their threatened and endangered positions.

So I leave this thesis with some questions for the reader's consideration and a few final thoughts. What were the texts that taught you how to be human? When were the moments of encounter that made you pause, hesitate before continuing? With whom have you identified in the stories I've recounted? And where do you see the projection of humanity's future going? I like to think that any category that becomes so ingrained, so naturalized in our popular imaginations needs, begs to be interrogated. Thus the category of the human has become the central problematic for my thinking here and remains a kind of technology and a construct that I deploy in my daily life. But without having done this work to unpack its colonial underpinnings, the histories that begot it, and the analyses and critiques of it made by those often displaced from it, I wouldn't have such an appreciation for it. In order to expand upon the human and truly listen to those who tell a fuller, richer story of us as a species, I had to let myself run the risk of seeing it lose all meaning and influence.

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