

POSTCOLONIAL AFROPUNK: RECONFIGURING PUNK AS POLYVOCAL
COUNTERHEGEMONY

by

TRAVIS RYAN DULAR

(Under the Direction of Esra Santesso)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the fiction of three women of color – Octavia E. Butler, N.K. Jemisin, and Nnedi Okorafor – who deploy and develop cyberpunk themes related to the body, gender, race, and hybridity in their fiction. Each author radically reconfigures the human and the human condition, creating counter-hegemonic texts that disrupt western theories of personhood which privilege the mind over the body. Butler, Jemisin, and Okorafor anticipate and interrogate current global political and social problems from non-dominant positions, providing a valuable counterpoint to the hegemonic features of cyberpunk itself. Butler’s fiction is biopunk, a subtype of cyberpunk that focuses on biological posthumanism. Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989) explores the legacies of western hegemony, exposing the infrastructure of Empire through an alien species. In similar fashion, Jemisin atomizes the mind/body problem by personifying core cyberpunk tropes In the DC comic series *Far Sector* (2019-), deconstructing both cyberpunk and a mass culture icon—Green Lantern. Nnedi Okorafor synthesizes cyberpunk and space opera to problematize radical individualism and hybridity simultaneously in her *Binti* (2015-2019) novellas. All three

authors and their texts reassemble the mind and body as an inseparable unit, rejecting the disembodied consciousness privileged in Enlightenment thought (and some cyberpunk).

INDEX WORDS: Postcolonialism, Empire, Science Fiction, Afrofuturism, Afropunk, Counterhegemony

POSTCOLONIAL AFROPUNK: RECONFIGURING PUNK AS POLYVOCAL
COUNTERHEGEMONY

by

TRAVIS RYAN DULAR

B.A., Valdosta State University, 2005

M.A., Valdosta State University, 2012

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2025

© 2025

Travis Ryan Dular

All Rights Reserved

POSTCOLONIAL AFROPUNK: RECONFIGURING PUNK AS POLYVOCAL
COUNTERHEGEMONY

by

TRAVIS RYAN DULAR

Major Professor:	Esra Santesso
Committee:	Adam Parkes
	Christopher Pizzino

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my sincerest thanks and appreciation to Dr. Esra Santesso, Dr. Adam Parkes, and Dr. Christopher Pizzino for their endless patience and unwavering support for my project. I would also like to thank my friend Genevieve Guzmán for all the time she spent providing feedback on my writing and asking questions about my ideas.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION: LEAVING BABYLON	1
Empire in the 21 st Century	4
Science Fiction and the Imperial Apparatus	12
Women and Afropunk: Expropriating the Mainstream	16
2 THE REAL FOLK BLUES	25
The Sprawl: Colonial Ideology and the Body in Cyberspace.....	29
Cyberpunk, Masculinist Fantasies, and the Female Body	36
3 THE IMPERIAL MARCH	53
4 RUBY TUESDAY	76
Composite Identity and the Colonial Enterprise	82
Science Fiction and Counterhegemony	98
5 WHEN DOVES CRY	116
In Brightest Day, In Blackest Night.....	121
The Stranger and Even Stranger Beings	123
A Dyson Swarm Meets the Repeating Island	128
Burnover	133

Cultural Icons and Punk Iconography.....	137
6 CONCLUSION: THE PIONEERS.....	141
REFERENCES	150

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Sojourner Mullein.....	137

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: LEAVING BABYLON

This dissertation examines punk: punk aesthetics, punk culture, punk literature, punk music. Originating in Great Britain and the United States during the 1970s, punk composites cultural, economic, and political resistance; it seeks disruption and destabilizes cultural, economic, and political hegemonies by taking power from dominant symbols and systems. In *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* (2005), Thomas Foster defines punk as “a process of resisting commodity culture through practices of bricolage or the active expropriation and redefinition of commodities and their meaning” (xvii). Because punk expropriates (not appropriates) power, it emphasizes individual agency, autonomy, and subjectivity. Punk extracts power from the institutions, systems, and cultures that wield power to dominate, subjugate, marginalize, or placate individuals. Critically, punk is counter-hegemonic and a nascent development of the late twentieth century (approximately 1970 forward) and draws heavily from the institutions it deconstructs and destabilizes, dis-integrating dominant social connections and narratives to integrate the individual into an expressive network of resistance. In relation to hegemonic structures and institutions, punk is dissociative: it creates separation by reconfiguring the symbols of power and commodity both as features that push back against dominant narratives and values that constitute new communities.

The autonomous individual agent is a central component of punk subculture. Punk agency relies on radical individuation; the punk agent’s uniqueness paradoxically

integrates it into a larger population; all punk agents are singular subjectivities, yet they are connected to a network of subjectivities that collectively resistant dominant narratives, even if that resistance is a cloud of individual spears as opposed to an organized phalanx. The punk agent, however, is not the liberal humanist subject. In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles defines the liberal humanist subject as “the model of the human since the Enlightenment” (xiv), noting the following characteristics: consciousness is the site of subjectivity; the body is subordinate to the mind; the universal human subject is assumed to be white, educated, European (or American), and male.

While punk did emerge from the white, middle-class countercultures of post-war Britain and suburban United States, its destabilizing properties quickly democratized its evolution. Afropunk has existed since the emergence of punk subculture and music, and it continues to make significant contributions to the punk scene. Black people have participated in punk music and subculture since their inception in the 1970s, and in the 2003 documentary *Afro-Punk*, James Spooner and Matthew Morgan document the music from and complications of black participation in the punk scene. Critically, Spooner and Morgan recognize that black performers and listeners are not mimetic participants; rather, bands like Bad Brains and CIPHER reshaped the punk ecosystem by introducing new modalities and musicality to an evolving and expanding genre of music and its related subcultures. Punk’s multicultural developments, particularly Afropunk, parallel the penetration of punk themes, iconography, and storytelling into science fiction and other modes of discourse.

Using cyberpunk, cyberpunk adjacent, and cyberpunk derivative science fiction, this dissertation analyzes the relationship between punk and Empire, the persistent western cultural, economic, and political hegemonies (western sociocultural infrastructure) responsible for the master narratives and dominant cultural tropes that permeate the contemporary world. Punk formations create counterhegemonies that oppose the institutions (cultural, economic, political, etc.) of western sociocultural infrastructure. Cyberpunk constitutes both a category of science fiction and a cultural formation, as Thomas Foster demonstrates in *The Souls of Cyberfolk*. As science fiction, cyberpunk explores the combinations of commodity culture, mass culture, and technology that emerge during the information revolution of the late twentieth century. AI, cyborgs, neural re-engineering, and severable consciousness represent a few of cyberpunk's most common tropes. Cyberpunk heroes and protagonists (not the same thing) are grifters, hackers, mercenaries, rebels, and renegades, or as Bruce Sterling puts it in *Mirrorshades; The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1986), "the sun staring visionary, the biker, the rocker, the policeman, and similar outlaws" (xi).

Punk and cyberpunk have become cultural formations, a term that "describe[s] how a set of cultural practices comes to congeal and...take on an identity of its own which is capable of existing in different social and cultural contexts" (Grossberg 69). As cultural formation, the editors of *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020) note, "Cyberpunk is everywhere" (McFarlane et al. 1). Examples can be found in many media: long and short fiction, graphic narratives, movies, video games, visual art, etc. In a 2019 essay for the web magazine *Slate*, Lee Konstantinou argues that the proliferation of cyberpunk derivative literature demonstrates "something is broken in our science

fiction,” contending “cyberpunk is arguably a kind of fiction unable to imagine a future very different from its present.” Yet, as Istvan Csiscery-Ronay, Jr. notes in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008), “the language of cyberpunk and its successors reflects the postmodern penetration of technoscience into everyday life” (27).

Cyberpunk’s relevance remains high; the now of 2025 integrates vast interconnected computer networks, machine learning, and handheld (or even wrist-worn) computers that do everything from paying the bills to turning on the lights while streaming endless entertainment. With the increasing prevalence of generative AI and deep machine learning in academic, private sector, and personal spheres, 2025 just happens to be a future very much like the one the first wave of cyberpunk imagined (only a little less grimdark). Corporate power and excess seem limitless; climate change and other environmental devastation are material realities; technology and information represent only two nodes in a growing web of posthuman modalities and expressions. Individual and social evolution must likewise keep pace with an accelerating cascade of technological (biological, electrical, mechanical) evolution that increasingly confirms the premise behind Donna Haraway’s cyborg theory: we cannot separate our bodies and being from the devices and tools we use to live our lives. Nascent developments in neural implants and prosthetic technology may move us closer to being literal cyborgs, but we are always-already a body integrated into the techno-sphere around us.

EMPIRE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In my analysis, Empire refers to persistent cultural, economic, philosophical, or political hegemonies that have shaped global discourse and development since the ascendancy of the British Empire and its practical successor the United States. Empire and its

architecture are, at this point, largely material in the sense that western sociocultural infrastructure continues to influence individual, group, and national ideologies, master narratives, and cultural production around the world. On 1 July 1997, Charles III (then the Prince of Wales) attended the transfer ceremony for Hong Kong's return to Chinese control, effectively marking the administrative end of the British Empire. Indeed, that moment capped a century-long decline and dissolution of the largest and most powerful empire in human history. At its peak in 1920, the British Empire governed twenty-four percent of the world's landmass and twenty-three percent of the world's population. But the scars the British Empire left on the world in its more-than-400-year existence remain in Palestine, Israel, India, and of course, the member states of the Commonwealth of Nations. The United Kingdom still maintains sovereign authority over fourteen overseas territories with a combined population near 250,000 people.¹ Between the end of the 16th Century and the end of the 20th Century, the British Empire used mercantilism and the economic tools of Empire to dominate international trade and resource production; the empire claimed its "civilizing" mission was a moral imperative and used it to promote British cultural and political supremacy.

Western Enlightenment Thinking meshed well with the European imperial projects: rationalism and empiricism became foundational principles of Western thought, and when coupled with the ongoing Scientific Revolution, the institutions of the liberal democracy developed beneath the umbrella of European imperialism. Through the civilizing missions, these institutions were distributed throughout the world and replaced

¹ The governed populations of Akrotiri and Dhekelia include 7,195 British service and contract personnel and roughly 11,000 civilians from the Republic of Cyprus ("Akrotiri and Dhekelia") (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/akrotiri-and-dhekelia/>).

native and indigenous governments, social structures, and philosophies, and led to the westernization of global thought. As democracy, particularly constitutional democracy (with or without a concomitant constitutional monarchy), became the principal form of government in Europe and later its former colonies, European thinking and philosophy proliferated around the world and displaced or erased many non-European ways of thinking and knowing. Throughout the Age of Exploration and the Age of Empire, western sociocultural infrastructure was institutionalized and standardized as the “correct” way to operate a culture.

The ontological and epistemological violence of the Age of Exploration and the spread of Western Enlightenment Thinking magnified the humanitarian costs of Empire. Significantly, the *cogito* as a first principle of Western Enlightenment Thinking imposed European thinking about the mind-body problem, and in some cases, the mind-body problem itself, on the rest of the world. Debates about whether the *cogito* counts as “perfect knowledge” aside, Descartes’s “*cogito ergo sum*” exposed non-Western thought to a principle with “extraordinary certainty and doubt-resistance” (Newman). Epistemologies and ontologies based in non-European understandings of the world, particularly indigenous ways of knowing and being, were erased or silenced before the might of Western rationalism. Dominating *how* to think provides much of the foundation for Empire and the way western sociocultural infrastructure spread throughout the world.

Parallel to the decline of the British Empire, the United States pursued its territorial expansion, continuing the practices of Manifest Destiny even if openly denying its expansionist tendencies. During the 19th Century, American settler-colonialism pushed west and south into territories acquired by diplomacy, purchase, conquest, and

settler-colonialism. By the onset of the American Civil War (1861-1865), the United States controlled the states and territories that now comprise the contiguous lower 48 states. Alaska was purchased from Russian in 1867. The Spanish-American War (1898) led to U.S. sovereignty over Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. 1898 was also the year that the United States annexed the Republic of Hawai'i.² Further acquisitions by the United States included Eastern Samoa in 1899, the Panama Canal Zone and Guantanamo in 1903, the annexation of Indian Territory in 1906, the purchase of the Danish Virgin Islands in 1917, the annexation of Kingman Reef in 1922, Swains Island in 1925, and the Northern Mariana Islands, Caroline Islands, and Marshall Islands in 1947.^{3,4}

Beyond territorial acquisitions, the United States used increasingly aggressive economic imperialism to establish the U.S. dollar the world's primary reserve currency, ensuring that most, if not all, trade would be on terms favorable to the United States.⁵ Although cryptocurrencies and gold have created some opportunities for countries to diversify their reserve currencies, the U.S. dollar remains the dominant currency of international trade and commerce.

² Hawai'i would not become a state until 21 August 1959.

³ The Caroline Islands and Marshall Islands became independent, self-governing nations in 1986 and 1979 respectively.

⁴ According to the U.S. State Department webpage for Dependencies and Areas of Special Sovereignty, the United States maintains administrative of 14 overseas territories, including American Samoa, Baker Island, Guam, Howland Island, Jarvis Island, Johnston Atoll, Kingman Reef, Midway Islands, Navassa Island, Northern Mariana Islands, Palmyra Atoll, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, and Wake Island ("Dependencies and Areas of Special Sovereignty"). American Samoa and Guam are both considered territories, and the Northern Mariana and Puerto Rico are unincorporated commonwealths. Palmyra Atoll is an incorporated territory. It should be noted that unincorporated territories are considered possessions or colonies, while incorporated territories receive full constitutional rights and protections, as if they were a state, though they lack voting power in presidential elections and have non-voting representation in the House of Representatives.

⁵ According to the IMF, the U.S. dollar is still the "preeminent reserve currency" but it "continues to cede ground to nontraditional currencies in global foreign exchange reserves" (Arslanalp, et al). I should note that this assessment comes from June 2024, when the dollar and U.S. economic outlooks were significantly more positive and robust than they are in March 2025. More data is likely needed to present a clearer picture of U.S. currency strength and monetary policy in the intervening 9 months.

The imperial activities of the United States both continued the epistemological and ontological violence of European imperialism and added American Exceptionalism to the cocktail of domination. Driven by Manifest Destiny, the United States approached the world as property to be taken, resources to be gathered, and people to be exploited. In *Mexicano Political Experience in Occupied Aztlan: Struggles and Change* (2005), Armando Navarro argues:

The origins of Manifest Destiny can be traced to the founding of the United States as a nation-state. Its basis was and continues to be predicated on Anglo-Saxon chauvinism and imperialism. The cultural basis to its formulation was an Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethnocentric ethos, which subsequently evolved into a more inclusive Euroamerican ethos. ... Manifest Destiny was and continues to be linked to white nationalism and liberal capitalism imperialism. (62)

Which brings us to the present day. President Donald J. Trump's return to the White House is ensconced in rhetoric and claims that seem contradictory. On one hand, the United States is the perpetual victim of a world that continues to exploit the United States' "inexhaustible beneficence;" on the other, the United States is coercing its allies into accepting deportees that are in all likelihood being illegally ejected from the country; American citizens are being detained or deported for expressing opinions that contradict the dominant social narratives originating in the White House; the Republican Party is preparing to legislatively overhaul the American judiciary because it is not rolling over and complying wholesale with Trump's autocratic agenda;⁶ Federal agencies and

⁶ According to *The Hill*, "House Judiciary Committee Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) is planning hearings on judges who block Trump administration actions and eyeing legislation to place limits on judicial power as calls to impeach those judges ramp up" (Brooks).

institutions, funds authorized congress has allocated and authorized, and free speech are being threatened by the extrajudicial activities of a special government employee (Elon Musk) and his cohort of meddlers;⁷ and decades of efforts to address gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual identity disparities, otherwise known as DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), have been dismantled across the political, academic, educational, and private sectors due to the broad overreach of Trump's Executive Order: "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing."

The Trump Administrations attacks on DEI are particularly relevant to this dissertation. My research addresses epistemological and ontological questions raised by science fiction by African American women, and it processes those concerns through postcolonial theory and criticism. Most importantly, however, this dissertation is premised on the fact that African American women have used predominantly white cultural formations to create polyvocal texts that confront the dominant cultural narratives and the persistence of Western Enlightenment Thinking and express counter-hegemonic positions. By reconfiguring punk and science fiction using non-white and non-Western modes of knowing and thinking, Octavia E. Butler, N.K. Jemisin, and Nnedi Okorafor create science fiction that destabilizes dominant cultural narratives about race, gender, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, and agency.

Critically, the Trump Administration is also attacking academic freedom and postsecondary educational institutions with overt actions that threaten some universities abilities to operate. Most notably, Trump stripped \$400 million in federal funds from

⁷ The Department of Governmental Efficiency and Elon Musk's behavior continue to cause controversy and chaos within the Federal Government of the United States. NPR noted on 4 February 2025, that Musk has "a temporary appointment that allows him to work for 130 days per year. That means he's subject to different ethics and disclosure rules than regular federal employees" (Hernandez).

Columbia University, who ultimately agreed “to overhaul its protest policies, security practices and Middle Eastern studies department” (Closson). In response to the pro-Palestinian protests that took place on Columbia’s campus between April and June of 2024, the university being forced to “adopt a formal definition of antisemitism,” likely the definition put forward by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. As Vimal Patel notes in the 8 May 2024 article “How to Define ‘Antisemitism’ Is a Subject of Bitter Debate,” the I.H.R.A. “includes with the definition a series of examples that alarm many supporters of free expression. They including holding Israel to a ‘double standard’ and claiming Israel’s existence is a ‘racist endeavor.’” As Patel’s article states, “supporters of the Palestinian cause say those examples conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism and are intended to protect Israel from criticism.”

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is an ever-present postcolonial concern and a key scar left by the history of European imperialism. The history between Israel and Gaza, the West Bank, Transjordan, and Palestine after the end of the British Mandate of Palestine is filled with conflict and contestation. The original partition plan for Mandatory Palestine called for a two-state solution, but Zionists forcibly claimed territory and established the State of Israel during the 1948 Palestine War. The official announcement of the State of Israel came on 14 May 1948 when the British Mandate expired, and on 15 May 1948 the First Arab–Israeli War began. Extensive military conflict instigated by Arabic, Palestinian, and Israeli actors have characterized the near 80-year conflict, and Israeli settler-colonialism in Gaza and the West Bank continues to aggravate the situation. The protests at Columbia University and other postsecondary institutions challenged the Israeli narrative of the Gaza War that began on 7 October 2023

and rejected the Zionist narrative about the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.⁸

Thus, the Trump Administration in its efforts to maintaining hegemonic narratives has pursue retribution against the students and institution of Columbia University.

Likewise, Trump’s attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion have systematically inverted the narratives brought to light by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and parallel events elsewhere in the world, like the decline of Apartheid in South Africa. Language and practices that seek to minimize or ameliorate the gaps in pay, power, representation, access, and freedom are being called racism zealously purged from government programs and entities receiving federal funding. Websites celebrating success by African Americans, Native Americans, women, and other marginalized groups in the United States have disappeared from government servers and material.⁹ The Trump Administration’s attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion highlight the need for work that challenges and confronts the dominant cultural narratives of Empire. Cultural sensitivity and inclusion, as well as historical accuracy and a recognition of the human impacts of conquest, imperialism, colonialism, and war have been rebranded “improper ideologies” as the Trump Administration seeks to sanitize the historical record of the United States and its leaders.¹⁰

⁸ I should note this matter is further complicated by the history of the Semitic Peoples, and that “Semitic People” has become a linguistic and not a racial or ethnic term. It is a confusing matter of erasure that the peoples who speak Semitic languages – such as Akkadian, Arabic, and Aramaic – are excluded from the current ethnic definition of Semite.

⁹ Indeed, the purge of women and people of color or from marginalized groups is not restricted to media; Trump removed General Charles “CQ” Brown, Jr. from his role as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, removed Admiral Linda L. Fagan from her position as Commandant of the Coast Guard, and removed Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the first woman to serve on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from her position as Chief of Naval Operations. Brown was the second African American to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Fagan was the first woman to head a branch of the U.S. military. As of 22 March 2025, the current members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Commandant of the Coast Guard are all white men.

¹⁰ In a 28 March 2025 article for the *New York Times*, Zachary Small and Jennifer Schuessler write: “In an executive order titled ‘Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,’ Mr. Trump took aim at what he described as a ‘revisionist movement’ across the country that ‘seeks to undermine the remarkable

Empire, as a cultural formation, continues ever-presently in contemporary society, and as indicated by the examples I have given, it continues to marginalize, displace, and oppress those it deems lacking in value. In the introduction to the 2nd Edition of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (2002), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin begin by stating:

More than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism. It is easy to see how important this has been in the political and economic spheres, but its general influence on the perceptual frameworks of contemporary peoples is often less evident. Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writing, and through other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day-to-day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential. (1)

As the events of 2025 and beyond play out, with the United States posturing new expansionist interests and doubling-down on the white supremacist patriarchy that has shaped the nation since its inception, it is more important than ever to look at the colonized within our own borders. Empire is, and it's not going anywhere anytime soon.

SCIENCE FICTION AND THE IMPERIAL APPARATUS

Both science fiction and punk develop out of the cultural contexts and production of the nineteenth century and the Age of Empire. Although European and American science

achievements of the United States by casting its founding principles and historical milestones in a negative light.' His order claimed that the Smithsonian, in particular, had 'come under the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology' and that it promotes 'narratives that portray American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive.'" ("Trump Calls on Smithsonian Institution to Promote 'American Greatness'") (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/28/arts/design/trump-smithsonian-institution-eo.html>)

fiction are not strictly developments of late Victorian and early twentieth-century evolutions in literature, there is a noticeable increase in the production of texts more like contemporary science fiction than the speculative romances of the past with the work of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells (Roberts 120-121). Writing in the mid- and late-Nineteenth Century, Verne and Wells produced such iconic texts as *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (Verne, 1864), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (Verne, serialized March 1869 to June 1870), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Verne, 1872), *The Time Machine* (Wells, 1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Wells, 1896), *The Invisible Man* (Wells, 1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (Wells, 1898).

Verne's books, published under the genre *voyages extraordinaires*, featured travel as both "literal and metaphorical" elements of the texts that drew heavily on the history of the Age of Exploration and its nearing end during the middle of the Nineteenth Century; "[t]he world has mostly been explored, and so Verne's fiction tapped into the substratum of human desire that there be mysterious places still to uncover (Adams 130). *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, although not the first hollow-earth narrative, presents a logical transition from exploring the outer boundaries of our planet to literally delving into its interiority. Like most of Verne's bibliography, *Journey to the Center of the World* concerns itself with the possibilities of exploration on Earth, but Verne's publications were not strictly earthbound. *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), *Around the Moon* (1870), and *Off on a Comet* (1877), explore celestial opportunities. On one hand, Verne's "marvelous ventures do not simply penetrate unmarked space. Often the travel gains its interest by defying political boundaries and threatening to render them meaningless" (Rieder 32). On the other hand, Verne's adventures create colonialist

confrontations with the Other, often bringing “spectacular invention” into contact with tribal or lost cultures, as John Rieder notes in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008):

...the advent of spectacular invention inevitably invokes that embracing pattern of uneven economic and cultural distribution, colonialism, and with it arises the specter of those encounters between cultures with wildly different technological capabilities that produced during [the Age of Exploration] some of the most one-sided armed conflicts in human history. (32)

Violent confrontations with the Other inundate the history of exploration, colonialism, and imperialism, whether we are discussing the history of European expansionism that began in the Fifteenth Century with the Crown of Castile’s conquest of the Canary Islands or that of other empires that have existed throughout history, particularly the British Empire, the Spanish Empire, and the American Empire.

Precursors to Verne’s novels show the complicated nature of criticizing the imperial apparatus. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) provide a scathing critique of the imperial enterprise, while Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) fully embraces the fundamental premise of the Age of Exploration and later the United States Manifest Destiny: a divinely mandated mission to civilize the world. If *Robinson Crusoe* is the epitome of Empire’s behaviors, then *Gulliver’s Travels* presents a mostly rational appraisal of the flaws in human conquest. As Gulliver proceeds through his adventures, he encounters the exotic, the alien, and the abject in various simulacrum of humanity. The Lilliputians are minute, their size obscuring physical blemishes while giving them outsized arrogance and self-determined superiority; the Brobdingnagians, on the other

hand, are physically enormous but slow and plodding, weighed down both intellectually and aspirationally by their size. Gulliver's encounters with the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos produces an encounter with civilization and pre-civilization that causes Gulliver to fundamentally reject human contact and sink into irrational self and human loathing. Yet, the colonial civilizing mission is core to each of these texts, and it is a foundational premise in science fiction and the writing that it emerged from:

The pseudoidea or protonarrative of progress pervades the ideologies of colonialism that code the non-European world in all its diversity, not simply as the Other, but in various ways as the veritable embodiment of the past: wild, savage, tribal, barbarous, despotic, superstitious, and so on. (Rieder *Colonialism* 29)

And of course, the abject. The Other rendered in science fiction is a panoply of difference and likewise a panoply of marginalization.

Monsters, humanoids, androids and robots, cyborgs, and aliens (extraterrestrial or otherwise) are not just the Other, they are also frequently the subaltern and abject: abominations. As Julia Kristeva theorizes, "If abomination is the lining of my symbolic being, 'I' am therefore heterogeneous, pure and impure, and as such always potentially condemnable" (112). The heroes of science fiction, even those from the supposed margins like Henry Dorsett Case in *Neuromancer* or Han Solo in *Star Wars* (1977) or Takeshi Kovacs in *Altered Carbon* (2002), are colonizers infiltrating the realm of the colonized. Han shot first and killed Greedo, the green-skinned, fish-like humanoid bounty hunter; Case interlopes into cyberspace, colonizing the data streams and interconnected networks of Gibson's matrix; Takeshi switches bodies – sleeves – as if

they were clothes; Asian, African American, White bodies inhabited by the same mind; the body colonized literally for expedience and figuratively for power or authority. Colonialism is imbricated in the emergence and evolution of science fiction, providing both master narratives and proliferating dominant cultural ideologies like Western Enlightenment Thinking.

WOMEN AND AFROPUNK: EXPROPRIATING THE MAINSTREAM

In the seminal essay “Racism and Science Fiction” (2000), Samuel R. Delany recounts two pivotal moments in his career as a professional writer. In the first, he recounts a key moment during the 1967 Nebula Awards Banquet, where his novel *The Einstein Intersection* (1967) “won – and the presentation of the glittering Lucite trophy was followed by a discomfiting speech from an eminent member of the Science Fiction Writers of America (388). After accepting his second award of the evening, for the short story “Aye, and Gomorrah...” (1967), Isaac Asimov said to Delany, “You know, Chip, we only voted you those awards because you’re Negro...!” (qtd. in Delany 390), about which Delany writes:

The way I read his statement then, and the way I read it today – indeed, anything else would be a historical misreading – is that Ike was trying to use a self-evidently tasteless absurdity (he was famous for them) to defuse some of the considerable anxiety in the hall that night; it is a standard male trope – needless to say. I think he was trying to say that race probably took little or no part in his or any other of the writer’s minds who had voted for me. (390)

Both the speaker’s speech and Asimov’s comment reminded Delany that “the racial situation, permeable as it might sometimes seem (and it is, yes, highly permeable), is

nevertheless your total surround” (390). The second moment occurred at Readercon 10 in 1998, where “*the* two black sf writers [Delany and Nalo Hopkinson] at Readercon, out of nearly eighty professionals, had ended up at the autograph table in the same hour” (392).

Delany’s key point, framed by these two occurrences some 30 years apart, is about how racism inserts itself into not just science fiction by everything because it is a systematic institution:

Racism is a system. As such, it is fueled as much by chance as by hostile intentions and equally by the best intentions as well. It is whatever systematically acclimates people, of all colors, to become comfortable with the isolation and segregation of the races, on a visual, social, or economic level—which in turn supports and is supported by socioeconomic discrimination. (394)

Thus, racism is always, already coded in the interactions and transactions between people because it is a systemic reality, one that is unfortunately sublimated by dominant cultural narratives.

Cyberpunk and most punk derivatives inhabit largely white worlds. Even when mainstream cyberpunk includes people of color and their concerns, it is largely exoticizing and frequently outright racist (Lavender 308). For example, the second novel of William Gibson’s *Sprawl Trilogy* – *Count Zero* (1986) – features heavy Haitian Vodou and Yoruba influence. The free-floating intelligences that inhabit Gibson’s matrix take the shape of spiritual beings instead of digital entities. The cyber-loa of *Count Zero* have domains and territories based on their roles in regulating cyberspace after the Event: the union of Wintermute and Neuromancer in the novel *Neuromancer* (1984). Beauvoir

in *Count Zero* describes the “Vodou” of cyberspace as a “*street* religion, came out of a dirt-poor place a million years ago” (97). She notes that God is “too big” to be concerned with an individual, but the many loa are there to “get things done” (97). This pragmatic view of emergent digital intelligences speaks to both cyberspace’s functional aspect and the variety of ways to solve digital problems. Or, in the *Sprawl*, to solve problems that cross the line between the digital and the physical worlds.

Gibson’s appropriation of Vodou loa in *Count Zero* operates in much the same way as his use of Rastafarians in *Neuromancer*. As Isiah Lavender III in his chapter “Critical Race Theory” argues, “As cool as they might seem, Gibson’s space Rastas have always felt like a dangerous misstep at the junction of critical race theory and cyberpunk ... All of them have dreadlocks, listen to dub music, smoke ganja, worship their god (who may be the AI Wintermute), and speak in a Caribbean accent” (310). Moreover, on this point, Lavender quotes an interview response from Samuel R. Delany that first appeared in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (1994). In the chapter, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” Dery records Delany’s biting remark about the Zion Rastas in *Neuromancer*: “You’ll forgive me if, as a black reader, I didn’t leap up to proclaim this passing representation of a powerless and wholly nonoppositional set of black dropouts, by a Virginia-born white writer, as the coming of the black millennium in science fiction; but maybe that’s just a black thang...” (195).¹¹ Like the Rastas in *Neuromancer*, the loa in *Count Zero* and their human intermediaries, like Beauvoir, are largely nonoppositional; they do not threaten

¹¹ It’s important to note that Samuel R. Delany and William Gibson are friends and regard each other highly as authors.

dominant cultural architecture of the Sprawl, although they do possess somewhat more agency.

Women have been contributing to cyberpunk and its development since the seeds were planted in real-world science. Lord Byron's daughter, Augusta Ada King, Countess of Lovelace – Ada Lovelace – effectively invented computer programming. Her work in mathematics and with Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine pioneered concepts that continue to shape computer programming and digital spaces (Bromley 197). Lovelace's notes on the Analytical Engine contain the first machine algorithms, and the story of her collaboration with Babbage would eventually become the basis of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's steampunk novel *The Difference Engine* (1990).

African American contributions to cyberpunk begin in the early-to-mid Twentieth Century. Lavender notes, "Arguably, Afrocyberpunk starts with Samuel R. Delany Jr.'s *Nova* (1968), a novel that challenges American political culture with a science-fictional perspective bordering on a black proto-cyberpunk author" (312). He continues by stating Steven Barnes's 1983 novel *Street Lethal* "trades in many of cyberpunk's hallmarks: Barnes perfectly balances cyberpunk's posthuman street 'cool' with the glitz and grime of a near-future dystopian Los Angeles, and Aubry [Knight] would be at home in any mainstream cyberpunk setting..." (308). Importantly, Lavender argues that "Afrocyberpunk divests whiteness as the norm of our technological imaginings without eliminating white people ... black writers offer us consciously racialized settings in their imaginings, resolutely challenging the whiteness of cyberpunk" (315).

It is, in part, this "[divesting] of whiteness" that motivates my interest in the texts chosen for this project. Because, as Stephen Foster reminds, punk is about expropriation,

the act of expropriating cyberpunk is itself a kind of punk that reconfigures both dominant cultural narratives within science fiction by operating as counterhegemony. The counterhegemony manifests in various ways, including rethinking how the cyberworld and the natural world interact, as in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000) and Octavia E. Butler's *Seed to Harvest/The Patternist Series* (2007) and *Lilith's Brood/Xenogenesis* (2000), and how spirituality and the supernatural intersect with cyberpunk's staple tropes in the work of Nnedi Okorafor to reconfigure the mechanics of cyberpunk. Counterhegemony expropriates power from master narratives and deconstructs the oppositional tendencies of Empire and subject by using that opposition itself as a form of resistance. Cyberpunk itself is counterhegemonic, and Afrocyberpunk is counterhegemonic both in relation to cyberpunk and its derivatives and in relation to dominance of Empire.

This dissertation presents readings of texts by three African American women – Octavia E. Butler, N.K. Jemisin, and Nnedi Okorafor – preceded by a critical reconsideration of gender in cyberpunk texts. Reading these texts through a postcolonial lens, I examine how Butler, Jemisin, and Okorafor create new narrative possibilities and repurpose master narratives to destabilize racial, political, and gender hierarchies, particularly those intensely integrated in the architecture of Empire. My project is particularly interested in the contemporary imperial apparatus wielded by the United States, but my readings draw heavily on historical understanding of imperialism and colonialism's impacts.

The second chapter reconsiders how gender and bodies are conceptualized in cyberpunk and its adjacent science fiction. I acknowledge that mainstream cyberpunk is

drenched in masculinist fantasies and often colonizes and marginalizes female bodies, but there is also a native contradiction in how cyberpunk approaches female bodies and characters. Cyberspace, androids, cyborgs, and cyber-systems are predominantly inscribed on female subjects and bodies. From James Tiptree, Jr.'s novella *The Girl Who Was Plugged In* (1974) to contemporary cyberpunk like the 2014 film *Ex Machina*, cyberpunk's posthuman concerns use characters as protagonists, heroes, antiheroes, and antagonists, and they almost inevitably recognize that biological creation can almost exclusively be understood only through the existence of female bodies and subjects. This tension provides a critical underpinning for my readings of the texts that follows. The heroes of the selected texts are all women, and they all explicitly challenge stereotypes and narratives that impose multiple layers of marginalization. This chapter surveys cyberpunk and other punk texts from the mid-twentieth century to the present and from multiple cultures.

In the third chapter, I examine how Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy* explores the relationship between Empire and race as a concept and institution by abstracting the issue of ethnicity and creating a binary tension between the human and the alien. Critically, Butler inverts humanity's position in relation to other lifeforms; humanity in the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* is situated as the imperial subject, the colonized, the dominated, the abject. By stripping humanity of its agency, Butler demonstrates how Empire employs xenophobia to dispossess and marginalize the colonized. Butler's writing is nuanced and careful, examining Empire/subject contests in historical and contemporary situations. In one context, Butler challenges the practices of the British Empire, questioning how forcibly integrating the colonized as citizens, as opposed to subjects, complicates the

imperial project. Likewise, Butler interrogates the military and economic imperialism of the Cold War; the story begins in the aftermath of a nuclear winter. By articulating the idea that Empire *is*, Butler deconstructs the relationship between colonized and colonizer and demonstrates the ways it is always-already situated in any contest between two groups of peoples.

The primary character in the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* is Lilith Iyapo, a black woman who is chosen as the human mother to the first generation of Oankali/human hybrids in the series. The Oankali are a spacefaring empire that appropriates genetic material and generally forcibly integrates the species it colonizes. The series questions the practices of Empire, the history of humanity, and the complications of individual agency in a narrative that explicitly recognizes the messy nature of colonization and contestation.

For the fourth chapter, I investigate the issue of hybridity and how it interacts with strong forms of individualism. Focusing on Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti Trilogy*: *Binti* (2015), *Binti: Home* (2017), and *Binti: The Night Masquerade* (2018), I theorize that Okorafor uses what I term dissociative hybridity to confront utopian constructions of hybridity. *Binti*'s forced hybridization removes the agency typically associated with assimilative or assertive forms of hybridity and challenges the need to placate the colonizer by acceding to aspects of the dominant culture. *Binti* undergoes multiple metamorphoses and recalibrations throughout the series and her hybridity may not be constructive. Okorafor's nuanced exploration of individualism and hybridity leaves open the possibilities of expropriating power while simultaneously conceding individuality. In this sense, *Binti*'s hybridity is dissociative because she separates in some way from her critical markers of identity. She ceases to be strictly human and strictly Himba; her

ethnic and cultural identity is reconfigured midway through the series to show that prior to her biological hybridization she is always-already hybrid.

The final chapter explores the relationship between the individual and Empire, particularly the individual as absolute other. In the limited-series *Far Sector* (2019-2021) from DC Comics, N.K. Jemisin authors a narrative that puts the concerns of the previous three chapters into play simultaneously and emphasizes the polarity between otherness and agency. The character of Sojourner “Jo” Mullein is a Green Lantern, and this designation proves both disruptive and confrontational regarding Jemisin’s narrative and the questions she raises about cultural institutions. At a primary level, the decision to make Jo a Green Lantern intersects with one of the more cosmopolitan character groups in the DC Universe. The Green Lantern Corps is comprised of individuals from multiple species throughout the DC Universe, and even among the human representatives, there is noticeable diversity even if white males are 50% of the group. Alan Scott, Hal Jordan, Guy Gardner, and Kyle Rayner are white Americans, while John Stewart is African American; Simon Baz is a Lebanese immigrant; and Jessica Cruz is a Latina with Honduran-American and Mexican-American parents. Jo Mullein proves particularly interesting because her debut in *Far Sector* makes it clear that her status as a Green Lantern is contingent. Whereas the other human Green Lanterns were chosen by their rings, even Jessica Cruz and her initially corrupted Ring of Volthoom, Jo is offered a ring and the *opportunity* to prove herself a Green Lantern. Instead of being chosen by a ring, she is enlisted by one of the Guardians of Oa and given a task at the far edge of the galaxy.

My project investigates how cyberpunk and its adjacent forms of science fiction prove counterhegemonic and destabilize Empire, as it exists in the form of master narratives and dominant cultural machinery. Punk's counterhegemonic properties, especially when it originates from perspectives disadvantaged by the machinery of Empire, offers opportunities to critique and reconfigure cultural, social, political, and artistic hierarchies. By challenging master narratives and Empire's architecture, punk allows individuals to expropriate the signs and symbols of power to create new epistemological and ontological possibilities, reshaping the way we know and exist in the world.

CHAPTER 2

THE REAL FOLK BLUES

This chapter argues that cyberpunk inscribes creation, subjectivity, and agency primarily on female bodies, despite the prevalence of masculinist fantasies in cyberpunk written by male authors. Cyberpunk frequently fetishizes and deifies the female body simultaneously, illustrating the fundamental tension between Empire's patriarchal architecture and gender. As Anne McClintock argues in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), "Gender ... is not simply a question of sexuality but also a question of subdued labor and imperial plunder" (5). Empire inscribed itself on human bodies, and in doing so, it further marginalized and disadvantaged colonized women (6). Bodily colonization included sexual and physical violence, denial of agency and autonomy, and removal of subjectivity from women in ways that were not experienced by male bodies. The legacies of colonizing the female body persist in contemporary culture, manifesting themselves as Anglocentric or Eurocentric standards of beauty, "the cult of domesticity, and the reinvention of patriarchy" (16). Colonialism fetishes the body of the Other, and the Enlightenment notion that the subject is universally male layered European forms of patriarchy onto women and bodies that were already disadvantaged in their own societies (7).

Along with the tension between female bodies and masculinist fantasies, cyberpunk articulates a post-nation where corporate behemoths operate with almost complete disregard for the human element and government is disturbingly absent. This

post-nation paradoxically maintains systems and institutions of western sociocultural infrastructure (Empire) while its inhabitants expropriate power from signs and symbols of dominant cultures (punk) by transferring their maintenance away from nationalist enterprises and into the hands of supranational organizations, particularly massive, vertically integrated corporate conglomerates.

Increasingly expansive and intrusive corporate entities (Alphabet, Apple, Amazon, Meta, Microsoft chief among them), along with the emergence of a billionaire class, have enabled the political specters of colonialism and imperialism to surge and swell. Donald Trump uses social media and disinformation to perpetuate a cult of personality that exploits and intentionally harms the populist support that enables it. As the Trump Administration undertakes its project of dismantling the United States' federal government, it pushes regulatory and economic authority into an increasingly vertical structure. By disassembling regulatory agencies and removing expert knowledge from oversight positions, the Trump Administration consolidates power in the hands of an individual and his cohort of operatives, which allows them to perpetuate a social media enabled ideological agenda that explicitly privileges white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, Evangelical men as the expense of anyone who is not one.

Cyberpunk's cultural relevance remains especially high. As the editors of *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020) observe, "Cyberpunk is *everywhere*" (1).¹² More importantly, cyberpunk is now. Body-worn and handheld computers count footsteps, keep time, make phone calls, and monitor biorhythms. Corporations compete for your data and information is becoming a weaponized commodity. American tech

¹² Emphasis in the original.

giants Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Microsoft dominate global capital and information markets; and they have colonized cyberspace. Apple (27.39% market share) and Google (72.23% market share) provide the operating systems for almost every smartphone on the planet (“Mobile Operating System Market Share Worldwide”). Microsoft’s market capitalization (a measure of their value) is \$3.38 trillion USD (“NASDAQ: MSFT”); Apple’s annual revenue is higher “than the GDP of developed nations like New Zealand, Finland, and Portugal, let alone smaller ones like Bulgaria, Lithuania, and oil-rich Qatar. The bottom line is that Apple’s revenue puts it ahead of most countries’ GDP” (Wankhede). For perspective, Portugal and New Zealand are both OECD member states.¹³ Every action, communication, location, transaction possible aggregates in the tech giants’ databases: behavior and choice reduced to binary code and stochastic algorithms. Flesh made data, inverting William Gibson’s subordination of the physical to the virtual in *Neuromancer*: “...data made flesh in the mazes of the black market...” (19). But, either way, in the *mazes* of the market.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed gaps in western governmental infrastructure that require private sector solutions. Despite accelerated approval for multiple vaccines in the European Union, United Kingdom, and United States, vaccine rollout was slow and uneven. The situation demonstrated, as Kelsey D. Atherton observes in her essay “We’re on the Brink of Cyberpunk” (8 April 2020), that the pandemic “collides with

¹³ The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development is an international organization that coordinates economic policy and goals among its 38 member states: “The OECD’s 38 Member countries span the world, from North America and South America to Europe and Asia-Pacific. Members are represented by ambassadors at the OECD Council, which defines and oversees the work of the Organisation as set out in the OECD Convention. Member countries use the Organisation’s data and analysis to inform policy decisions, and also play a key role in the country reviews. The European Union also participates in the OECD’s work pursuant to Supplementary Protocol No. 1 to the OECD Convention.” (“Members and Partners,” OECD.org). Most of the developed world belongs to the OECD.

governments in the West that have spent decades deliberately shedding, power, capability, and responsibility, reducing themselves to little more than vestigial organs that coordinate public-private partnerships of civic responsibility.” Atherton calls this the neoliberal turn: “a project of unmaking the state for individuals and communities and remaking it for capital.” The private entities in the public-private partnerships responsible for vaccine development and distribution profited off a global public health crisis. The collection and collation of medical data by end-point retailers (Albertson’s, CVS, Kroger, Publix, Walmart, etc.) complicates privacy issues: does this data, if stripped of personally identifiable information become tradeable? How thin is the line between human and capital in the term *human capital*?

As signs and symbols of power in the Twenty-First Century, vertically integrated corporations and institutions of power largely replace the nation-state as arbiters of propriety and acceptability. Using social media platforms, search engines, operating systems, and cell phones as platforms for controlling the flow of information, the Big Five and other tech giants have themselves colonized global supply chains, commerce, and cultural production through generative AI.¹⁴

Cyberpunk texts demonstrate that western sociocultural infrastructure (Empire) continues despite what Atherton calls “the hollowing of the state.” Corporate symbols and digital platforms erode the boundaries of the nation-state, creating a vacuum too easily filled by corporate entities. The wealth disparity between the global North and

¹⁴ In the article “SAG-AFTRA Members Vote to Authorize Strike Against Video Game Companies” for the *L.A. Times*, Sarah Parvini reports that voice actors in the union initiated a strike against video game companies because of concerns over the use of generative AI to reproduce their voices. Generative AI complicates name, image, and likeness issues because it can reproduce or manufacture content that is neither authorized nor authentic.

global South continues to grow; the United States and most of the European Union face K-shaped (good for the rich, bad for the poor) economic recoveries that will further depress their working and middle-class populations. Adopting Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's term Empire, John Reider notes in "Empire:"

...the ability of multinational corporations to exploit differences in national labor markets, though clearly facilitated by the electronic technology and information processing so central to cyberpunk, is built upon the foundations of uneven development and resource extraction laid by several preceding centuries of colonialism and imperialism. Neoliberal globalization is always also neocolonialism... (335)

Existing international organizations and systems maintains vertical structures established during 597 years of European colonialism and imperialism (1402 – 1999).¹⁵

THE SPRAWL: COLONIAL IDEOLOGY AND THE BODY IN CYBERSPACE

William Gibson's Sprawl narratives ("Johnny Mnemonic" (1981), "Burning Chrome" (1982), *Neuromancer* (1984), "New Rose Hotel" (1984), *Count Zero* (1986), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988)) demonstrate the transition of capital and regulatory authority from nation-states to corporations. Gibson positions capital as *zaibatsu*: vertically integrated conglomerates that own their supply chains and monopolize their principal markets.¹⁶ The state, insofar as it exists, manifests itself only as international law enforcement (the Turing Police) and the militaries waging information war with each

¹⁵ European colonialism and imperialism begin with the Castilian Invasion of the Canary Islands in 1402 and end with Macau's return Chinese control in 1999.

¹⁶ Gibson exoticizes Japan in the Sprawl narratives, as Brian Ruh argues, "*Neuromancer* clearly positions Japan as a dominant force in everything from computer hardware to biological wetware to designer drugs to trend-setting youth subculture. This association between Japan and technology is an important one and helps establish Japan as cyberpunk's locus for the exotic and the technological cutting edge" (401). That said, Gibson's geopolitical hierarchy and language certainly recalls the Empire of Japan (1868 – 1947).

other (China, Russia, and the United States). Gibson uses multidimensional spaces – cyberspace, markets, slums – to illuminate the disruptive, multidirectional accretion of power in the margins (counter-hegemony). Gibson coordinates the opposition between individual agent (Angie Mitchell) and monolithic entity (Maas Biolabs) through his narrator’s conspicuous omniscience. The reader can coordinate Angie and Bobby because their narratives deliberately intersect to express what changed after 3Jane sang the passcode and the Tessier-Ashpool AIs merged.

Gibson’s protagonists and heroes both derive from and deconstruct the liberal humanist subject, indicating the future will create new subjectivities. In the *Sprawl* narratives, the market – data is commodity and currency – and its visuospatial representation, Gibson’s cyberspace, illustrate the heterogeneity inherent in the autonomous agent.¹⁷ Gibson describes cyberspace as a “consensual hallucination” with “rich fields of data” (*Neuromancer* 6), a space for numerical and sensory visualization. Cyberspace is “experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation” (59). The cyberspace operator projects their “disembodied consciousness” into cyberspace using sophisticated *external* hardware: cyberspace decks. Hardware, software, and wetware mediate the relationship between body, consciousness, and cyberspace. Yet, as Molly Millions and Angie Mitchell demonstrate, the relationship always includes a body, although that body may ultimately not be organic. In the *Sprawl*, even when Collin and the Finn (both software) and Angie and Bobby (both uploaded consciousness) abandon their unique physical habitations and leave the Earth’s

¹⁷ A note about grammar: when discussing “data” as a concept and thing, not the plural of *datum*, I will conjugate it with singular verbs.

cyberspace matrix, they transfer their being into a new network of machines; it just happens to be an alien network.

Gibson's universe features physical and virtual domains with limitations and boundaries, and the interaction between human and machine ranges from Molly Million's extensive cybernetics to Neuromancer murdering Armitage by opening an airlock. Conversely, the antagonists represent, in Benedict Anderson's terms, the dynastic realm (the Tessier-Ashpool clan and Josef Virek both hold incredible hereditary influence and wealth) or other entities that derive power from vertical integration: zaibatsu (Maas Biolabs).

Nascent cyberspace subjectivities in *Count Zero* configure themselves as intermediaries from a religious community: loa from Haitian Vodou. Gibson telegraphs this role by using Papa Legba (the loa of communication) as the primary loa in cyberspace.¹⁸ Employing a syncretic religion to describe emergent consciousnesses in cyberspace recognizes that systems mediating new and old belief already exist, just as Gibson's cyberspace mediates data and subjectivity. Other cyberpunk texts, like Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2011), also combine digital and spiritual/mystical domains to highlight the alternative logics that govern both.

Gibson's use of loa and Rastas in the *Sprawl* trilogy is appropriative and traffics in stereotypes. Gibson's Papa Legba correctly situates the loa as a god of "language,

¹⁸ Gibson likewise exoticizes his Caribbean material. The loa in cyberspace and the Jamaican collective Zion in *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* present white perspectives on Black beliefs and issues, relying on the otherness of both to defamiliarize intermediaries (particularly spiritual ones) and utopian collectives, both of which exist and operate within white spaces. Saints, angels, Nephilim, and more occupy Abrahamic mythologies.

communication, and the crossroads,” but his trickster aspect is absent (*Lagoon* 192).

Papa Legba, in *Count Zero*, exists primarily to facilitate joining narrative threads, rather than as a facilitator for the exchange of information and knowledge. While it can be argued that Gibson uses Papa Legba to create crossroads between the narrative threads in the novel – Bobby’s, Angie’s, Turner’s and Marly’s – the reality is Papa Legba obviates the need for narrative cohesion instead of providing narrative cohesion. Conversely, in Nnedi Okorafor’s novel *Lagoon* (2014), Papa Legba is an operative character that both participates in Nigerian 419 scams and appears when other characters are at crossroads in their travels. In Chapter 41, “African Chaos,” Legba appears in the form of Scratch, and the chapter’s POV character states, “I’d have a heck of a story to tell my mother. Papa Legba, the god of the crossroads was alive and well in the country of his origin” (209). In the two instances where the first-person narrator of the chapter encounters Scratch – Papa Legba – she receives clarity, first about her identity, and second about her survival.

Zaibatsu and dynasties (hereditary or sacral) both make the things (beliefs, capital, commodities, people) needed to sustain them and dictate the parameters of belonging. John Reider contends in his chapter “Empire” (2020), “Many cyberpunk imaginings of global integration establish a set of equivalences that roll together self, information, money, capitalism, nature, and destiny, in the process signaling an entire and apparently irreversible immersion of the work in the logic of capital” (339-340). Yet, Gibson’s decision to call his monolithic corporate entities zaibatsu explicitly links late twentieth-century Western neocolonialism with a (very late) dynastic realm (the Empire of Japan (1868-1947)). Zaibatsu behave like the East India Company: Maas Biolabs and Sense/NET compress entities (beliefs, institutions, markets, people) into their use value,

erasing cultural and human value in the process. Angie Mitchell in *Count Zero* only matters to Maas Biolabs because of the proprietary neural blueprints and circuitry in her head, although she matters enough to obliterate a stretch of Arizona with a railgun.

The Sprawl narratives question what the human is and where the human belongs (posthumanism) by decentering western Enlightenment theories of identity. As Gerald Alva Miller, Jr. writes in *Understanding William Gibson* (2016), “Sentience, consciousness, and perception—in essence, Gibson’s ‘Sprawl Trilogy’ deals almost exclusively with how computerization problematizes the already philosophically troubled concepts” (55). A street hustler exiled from “legitimate” cybercrime for stealing from his employers, Gibson’s protagonist in *Neuromancer* (Henry Dorsett Case) occupies the periphery of the criminal underworld. Concurrently, the novel’s hero – Molly Millions – indicates that acting in the physical world requires a body (an actual physical body); a formless, bodiless, incomplete consciousness (Wintermute) cannot pick up keys or ROM constructs.¹⁹

Cyberpunk traffics in colonial and neocolonial ideologies. Cyberpunk anime like *Cowboy Bebop* (1999) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1989-1990) provide stark re-representations of supranational capital in the post-nation. *Cowboy Bebop* takes place in a solar system superimposed with the cultural, economic, and social symbols of American neocolonialism in the 1980s, especially increasingly privatized and militarized

¹⁹ Cathy Peppers argues in “Cyberspace: (A Semiotic Scrubbing of) the Final Frontier” that Gibson perpetuates masculinist fantasies about the female body (true), but she attributes the “sacred role” of changing cyberspace to Case (174). The actual agents of change are both women: 3Jane must vocalize the passcode (a sequence of tones), and she only does so under threat of direct harm from Molly. In *Neuromancer*, only 3Jane can initiate the merge function (sing the passcode), and only Molly can force 3Jane to the bust-like computer terminal. Case’s involvement in the merger is passive: he instructs software (the “Dixie” Flatline ROM construct) to operate other, more sophisticated software (the Chinese military ICE-breaker (ICE means “intrusion-countermeasures electronics”)).

law enforcement. The open-air markets on the asteroid Tijuana in *Cowboy Bebop* feature signs in Arabic, Chinese, English, and Japanese, but nothing resembling a consumer or middle class; tumbleweeds roll down dusty streets. *Ghost in the Shell* examines the entanglement of government and evolving technology, specifically technology's ability to outstrip biological capacity. Spacefaring cyberpunk (*Altered Carbon* (novel 2002, Netflix 2018), *Cowboy Bebop*, *Mobile Suit Gundam: Iron-Blooded Orphans* (2015)) frequently features outer space real estate colonized by a "united" Earth and saturated with economic peripheries: the inside/outside dynamic, Bruce Sterling's metaphor of invasion writ large.

Cyberpunk's relationship with the post-nation reveals a cultural formation deeply invested in deconstructing and destabilizing "how and why dominant ideologies marginalize dispossessed strata of the population" (Cavallaro 20). Likewise, Thomas Foster argues in *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* (2005), cyberpunk is "a historical articulation of textual practices" (xvi). These textual practices include proliferating margins pushed further and further away from a vertical center. The only difference between Eldon Tyrell (*Blade Runner* (1982)) and Laurens Bancroft (*Altered Carbon*) is their economic relationship with mortality;²⁰ both control vast influence that exceeds any state's ability to regulate them. Tyrell and Bancroft, in their roles as catalysts and antagonists, function as totems for unrestrained capitalism. The Tyrell Corporation anticipates the zaibatsu in William Gibson's fiction. Laurens Bancroft peddles influence, a twenty-sixth century version of Julius Deane (the person

²⁰ Both humans and the Nexus-6 replicants in *Blade Runner* still have finite lifespans, especially the replicants who have an engineered expiration date. They only live for four years.

most likely responsible for Linda Lee's death in *Neuromancer*). And, unlike Josef Virek in *Count Zero*, Laurens Bancroft is mostly successful in achieving immortality.

Cyberpunk locates authority and control in vertical structures (architecture and institutions) to emphasize how the center always compresses its surroundings. Cultural and social strata separate into concentric spheres: interior and exterior, a binary intrinsic to Bruce Sterling's themes of invasion: "the theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind-invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neuro-chemistry" (*Mirrorshades* xi). The mechanical components of a cyborg or android are tangible, material commodities, and they unite, in mostly female characters, with the body as commodity to create a dialectic that disrupts the vertical alignment of power in cyberpunk texts. Molly Millions' subjectivity and physical autonomy are acquired through transactions, some of which are sex work, but her role in the *Sprawl* is one of disruption, as she penetrates corporate spheres (Sense/Net) and hereditary spaces (Villa Straylight) to take from the power centers their tools and inherited knowledge (3Jane's voice code for merging *Wintermute* and *Neuromancer*). To fulfill her role in the narrative, Molly acts in the physical world and transacts, negotiates, and performs for and with both humans and artificial intelligences. The consolidated power of the megacorporation Sense/Net cannot prevent Molly from stealing the ROM hardware containing the *Dixie Flatline* construct. *Neuromancer* cannot achieve its goal of merging with *Wintermute* unless Molly physically compels 3Jane to act.

CYBERPUNK, MASCULINIST FANTASIES, AND THE FEMALE BODY

Affiliation, body, culture, and mind arrange and rearrange interior/exterior relationships, challenging boundaries and definitions; for example, Ava *negotiates* her escape in *Ex Machina* (2014). Arguing Ava manipulates Caleb ignores how she breaks the limitations (bodily, socially, spatially) imposed on her. As an android, Ava's body is a collection of design decisions. Her strength, appearance, speed, physicality are all prescribed by Nathan's engineering choices. Socially, she is held captive and isolated from all human interaction besides those that Nathan allows. Spatially, she only knows the inside of a single room through firsthand knowledge. However, Ava uses her ability to interact with the computer network of Nathan's house to access cameras, archives, electrical systems, and sequestered information to build a toolset that allows her to escape her confinement, convince Kyoko to murder Nathan, and trap Caleb so that he cannot reveal her identity to the world. These actions show that Ava exceeds her design limitations, especially since Caleb is convinced that Ava possesses personhood and should be free (she passes the Turing Test).

Western Enlightenment thinking organizes western sociocultural infrastructure (Empire) around constructions of subjectivity that privilege the mind over the body, such as Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles indicates that "Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject possessed a body but was not usually represented as being a body" (4). The erasure of the body permits cultural and legal entities that possess "human rights" (corporations and extranational organizations) without human culpabilities; this erasure obviates ethnic, gender, racial, and sexual

difference through universality. Locating consciousness in the mind enables, as Hayles argues, universality through compression and exclusion (the universal subject is a white European male) (Hayles 3-5). Hayles argues William Gibson (and posthumanism) subordinates embodiment to cognition, but Molly Millions relocates agency from the dispossessed mind to the embodied being. From her time as a “meat-puppet” to her retirement in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Molly Millions’s identity can only be discussed in conjunction with her body. Molly pays for her cybernetic enhancements through a form of prostitution that replaces her consciousness with a construct tailored to the client’s desires. Ultimately, Molly Millions erupts in violence (I always imagine Molly springing forth fully formed and actualized like Athena) and murders her last client. However, the episode reveals that Molly is the whole package – body and mind – because there’s no longer an artificial boundary between the two. The cybernetic enhancement that disables Molly’s consciousness during “meat-puppet” encounters quits functioning. Molly cannot separate her mind from her body. Molly’s hybridization doesn’t constrain her; she doesn’t need cyberspace; there are operators like Case for that. Rather, Wintermute’s schemes depend on Molly’s ability to physically do things (find a key, kidnap a drug-addicted stage performer (Riviera), steal a ROM construct), all facilitated by Molly’s functioning cybernetics.

Molly complicates the boundary between “male subject and female object,” as Cathy Peppers argues in “‘I’ve Got You Under My Skin’: Cyber(sexed) Bodies in Cyberpunk Fictions.” Peppers focuses on the unidirectional nature of “simstim,” the neurological broadcasting technology that allows Case to experience Molly’s sensory input, observing “it is always a woman’s body which is entered via this technology”

(171). Yes, Molly embodies masculinist fantasies, but Case's comparative impotence (he is only capable in cyberspace, and he lacks that capability before Molly's intervention) destabilizes male dominant hierarchies. Molly is sexually aggressive with Case, a masculinist fantasy, but Case is also chemically paralyzed which problematizes the masculinist fantasy.

Molly is an enigma, in that she occupies masculinist roles and fantasies simultaneously, yet remains feminine. In "Johnny Mnemonic," the eponymous character, who is generally incapable like Case, requires Molly's rescue; fortunately, Molly is mercenary about things, responding, "My kind of man," when Johnny offers her 2 million in an undisclosed currency to solve his problem with Ralfi (local organized crime) and the Sons of the Neon Chrysanthemum (global organized crime) ("Johnny Mnemonic" 10). Consequently, Molly's free agent status represents her multidimensional role as the narrative's hero. Molly isn't for sale; she's for hire and quickly demonstrates her physical dominance in the encounter:

Lewis snorted his exasperation and tried to slap her out of the chair. Somehow he didn't quite connect, and her hand came up and seemed to brush his wrist as it passed. Bright blood sprayed the table. He was clutching his wrist white-knuckle tight, blood was trickling from between his fingers. (9)

Lewis "the Meatball" misses; Molly critically wounds Lewis with a motion that "*seemed* to brush his wrist" (9). The action is feminizing, even sexualizing: Molly brushes Lewis. Yet, contact can't be confirmed visually except through Lewis's physical trauma.

Molly breaks the gender hierarchy at the table with her positionalities; Molly is every combination and permutation (either/or, both/and, neither/nor, not only/but also) of

male, female, and all else simultaneously. Peppers argues Gibson erases difference (cultural, racial, sexual, etc.) in the Sprawl, but Molly's position as the hero in multiple Sprawl narratives ("Johnny Mnemonic," *Neuromancer*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) indicates Molly's difference is both intentional and multifunctional. Molly enables the resolution of all three texts. Molly's interpellation layers her positionalities without subordination: she is always already all her potentialities. For Johnny, Molly through her exceptional difference represents the possibility of a "normal" life. When Molly reveals Johnny's death in *Neuromancer*, Molly appears fragile; her leg is broken, and she is in danger. The tension between responsibility and vulnerability explodes in this moment: Case *must* rescue Molly; it becomes imperative. Yet, Molly never needs rescuing. Every moment of Molly's textual existence expresses her primal ability to adapt and survive. Case, in a masculinist fantasy, assumes responsibility for Molly, but Gibson never realizes his daring rescue. The reader never learns how Molly and Case leave 3Jane. Instead, Molly is literally the object of *Neuromancer*'s final sentence: "He never saw Molly again" (297). Gibson reserves the final proper noun in the novel for Molly because Case can be reduced to a pronoun, and Molly is incapable of being a generic "her." Case becomes an afterthought in the Finn's ROM construct while Molly Million saves two damsels in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*.

Like the Sprawl narratives, the anime series *Cowboy Bebop* explores the relationship between body and subjectivity through a complex, multidimensional female character. Faye Valentine is a grifter attempting to escape an extreme and extremely unfair debt: she incurs the cost of cryogenic freezing and treatment following a traumatic accident and brain injury; she suffers from total amnesia; and the narrative discloses her

origin in pieces. However, Faye demonstrates exceptional competence with card handling, close quarters combat, firearms, space flight; she's extremely valuable as a bounty hunter. By design, Faye composites multiple origin stories recycled in noir settings: the amnesiac, the femme fatale, the naïve dilettante, each with their own hyperbolized vulnerabilities. Her past remains locked in her body: her physical trauma can heal, but her past cannot be completely recovered. Unlike other characters, Faye experiences contingent flashbacks; there's always something qualifying the flashback's veracity, usually Faye's doubt.

Cowboy Bebop complicates Faye's discovery of her past by constantly entangling Faye in the present. *The Bebop* becomes a place for her to belong without any baggage. The series navigates Faye's relationship with autonomy and belonging through trust issues. Betrayed by family, friends, and lovers, Faye associates companionship with fear and oppressive debt; she inherited the debts of those who abandoned her. Faye recognizes *The Bebop* as home at the same time she realizes Spike Spiegel has left to die. Spike's departure reminds her that home always comes with risk. Yet, Faye is healthy and knows, mostly, who she is. Through the series, Faye recovers security in her own subjectivity. The rupture of traumatic brain injury and total amnesia only delays Faye's realization of her own actualized identity. More importantly, that identity isn't dependent on the terms and conditions others laid out for her. Her relationship with technology is invasive and destructive: a traumatic accident damaged her brain. Fifty-four years of scientific development allowed her physical restoration. The psychic restoration problematizes her relationship between the present and the vertical pressures of the past, but Faye represents the opportunity of living. Spike Spiegel, the male protagonist of

Cowboy Bebop, embodies death and its ambiguities. His death doesn't signify some great heroic sacrifice; rather, he simply accepts his life's consequences. The vertical pressures of Spike's past manifest themselves in his opponent Vicious. Faye's vertical pressure gets at the impossibility of removing the body from the future.

Faye and Molly occupy hybridized spaces in their respective narratives. Cathy Peppers argues that cyberpunk's generic space originates with women authors and becomes engendered and feminized by male writers beginning with Gibson in the 1980s (169). However, James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon) inscribes the archetypal "cybersystem" on two female bodies in "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (1974) (78). Delphi and P. Burke are both female. Paul Isham is plot armor for Delphi, a generic prince to disguise complex interrogations of the female body and desire. Ostensibly, Delphi is a shell, able only to receive commands from P. Burke. Delphi is physically and, if properly piloted, socially ideal. P. Burke, disabled and erased because of her suicide attempt, desires the life Delphi occupies. P. Burke's erasure represents the displacement of the self required to fulfill social fantasies and meet certain imposed expectations (e.g., standards of appearance). As Delphi's pilot, P. Burke manifests her fantasies through Delphi. The Global Transmission Corporation places Delphi – their influencer – in an economically and socially privileged life where she exhibits products. P. Burke lives this life vicariously, only not so. For P. Burke, Delphi is life because Delphi's body realizes P. Burke's agency and desire.

Tiptree Jr., narrativizes how society inscribes desires on women. Delphi must be desirable to men, or she can't reinforce a gender economy and hierarchy that subordinates women. However, when Paul Isham falls in love with Delphi's body and P. Burke's

performance, Tiptree, Jr., problematizes the subjectivity through Delphi. Delphi utters the word “yes” occasionally in her sleep, which suggests Delphi attains or retains some cognition. P. Burke controls Delphi’s body and supplies Delphi’s personality on stage. The possibility of competing consciousnesses indicates the complexity Tiptree, Jr., integrates into the “cybersystem” of Delphi and P. Burke. While the control link between them is active, Delphi relies on P. Burke’s autonomic functions. The cybernetics that enable P. Burke to control Delphi deny Delphi ownership of her body. Thus, P. Burke imposes her will over Delphi’s entire existence, and P. Burke performs Delphi for consumers, handlers, and others.

Tiptree, Jr., does not coordinate subjectivity between mind (P. Burke) and body (Delphi); that is, identity does not result from a fusion of mind and body. Rather, mind is always already entangled with the body: “But Delphi is in no sense a robot. The fact is she’s just a girl, a real-live girl with her brain in an unusual place” (“Plugged In” 55). “An unusual place” can be read physically: Delphi’s brain resides somewhere outside her skull (that’s where all the implants are); it can also be read ontologically: P. Burke is Delphi’s brain, and P. Burke is in Carbondale. N. Katherine Hayles writes, “I see the deconstruction of liberal humanist subject as an opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects” (5). But Delphi is “a real live girl,” with all the flesh being live entails. P. Burke notices the limitations in Delphi’s sensory abilities: “...there’s certain definite places where her beastly P. Burke body *feels* things that Delphi’s dainty flesh does not” (“Plugged In” 55). The ambiguity of Delphi’s consciousness heightens the significance of her body. Tiptree, Jr., triangulates subjectivity between Delphi the remote, P. Burke

the pilot, and the combination—the cybersystem. The novella’s ending, rather than disentangle Delphi or P. Burke from each other, superimposes Global Transmission Corporation on the status quo. P. Burke dies. Delphi gets a new, more tractable pilot. Paul Isham takes over Global Transmission Corporation and continues organizing society through media. Tiptree, Jr., refrains from activating Delphi; there is no wish fulfilment. Rather, the boardroom continues issuing orders from the top of the tower.

Cyberpunk literature observes how power coalesces at economic, political, and social apexes while flattening the surrounding territory. William Gibson explicitly draws on “The Girl Who Was Plugged” in the Sprawl narratives. After escaping Maas Biolabs in *Count Zero*, Angie Mitchell becomes a simstim star and inherits the viewer base of Tally Isham. Gibson’s use of the Isham surname for a celebrity influencer firmly defines the social cluster Angie enters. Angie Mitchell is commodified; her bodily experiences can be recorded and distributed as mass media – simstim. In “The Girl Who Was Plugged In,” James Tiptree, Jr., intentionally reduces Delphi to her body, limiting her experiential capabilities (cognition, memory, smell, taste, touch) to highlight how social fantasies create misdirected desires. Still, P. Burke notices and experiences the input from Delphi’s body that can’t be erased by the Global Transmission Corporation’s biotechnology.

Angie Mitchell approaches the same dilemma from the opposite direction: she commodifies her bodily sensations to enhance the fantasy’s marketability. Angie’s original narrative and commodity value revolves around her ability to directly interface with cyberspace; she doesn’t need mediating hardware like everyone else. However, at the end of *Count Zero*, Angie Mitchell becomes a fledgling simstim star and enters a

highly visible life, effectively removing her from Maas Biolabs' grasp. Angie trades economic bondage for the safety social privilege provides; objects always subject to the public gaze are hard to vaporize. Unfortunately, being a simstim star means Angie indentured herself to Sense/Net, the media equivalent of Maas Biolabs (or Gibson's equivalent to the Global Transmission Corporation). When Angie uploads her consciousness and abandons her body in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, something facilitated by Molly Millions, the eponymous Mona Lisa replaces Angie. Mona transitions from the margins to the social apex, but she does so as an established commodity.

Gibson's narrative creates a dialectic between body and commodity that decenters vertical structures. Sense/Net requires a live body to produce simstim content, but Sense/Net can't extract Angie's subjectivity. Angie's consciousness enters the Aleph and leaves with the consciousnesses of Bobby, Collin, and the Finn. Yet, as Bobby's time in the Aleph indicates, these characters retain their physical identity: they still visualize themselves as the humans they were or were designed to be. Gibson indicates there's something transcendent about being that can't be encapsulated without hardware, software, and wetware; however, this ontological configuration relies on physical being as fundamental to subjective reality. Cyberspace, at least in Gibson, is a physical somewhere; the computers and routers and switches that comprise the matrix are still hardware. The escaping consciousnesses still need a destination, even if it is extraterrestrial.

Molly Millions enables Angie's escape and Mona's sudden indentured elevation, but she also provides the existential resolution to the Sprawl. Molly can shed the Sally Shears moniker and disappear into the spaces she created for herself. Molly understands

the multidimensional reality of cyberspace; legitimate data and resources secure her finances and personal social mobility. Likewise, Molly can still navigate the spaces frequented by her former associates, leveraging her unique catalog of knowledge to continue deciding for herself. Molly plants a flag for radical individuation. Only by being multidimensional and hybrid can Molly navigate the intersecting power domains (corporate, criminal, individual, and state) around her.

Although mostly absent from the Sprawl, legitimate state power exists. Maas Biolabs can obliterate some abandoned real estate without much problem in *Count Zero*, but the Turing Police in *Neuromancer* interrogate Case about his associates and their plans. Governments still regulate currencies: “It was difficult to transact legitimate business with cash in the Sprawl; in Japan, it was already illegal” (*Neuromancer* 6). Governments still confer legitimacy in Gibson’s narratives. The Sprawl has a very bureaucratic name – the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis – and social infrastructure: rapid transit and geodesic housing domes. Still, the Sprawl and Chiba City and London are the margins, major population centers compressed and compartmentalized by cultural, economic, and political hegemonies. Likewise, wealth and status correspond to elevation. As a simstim star, Angie Mitchell travels from building to building in helicopters. If she’s on the ground, she’s always in some curated mansion or beach house owned by her corporate handler. The Tessier-Ashpool clan’s labyrinthine complex Villa Straylight is in low orbit, along with the resort colony Freeside. Maas Biolabs’ Arizona facility is on a mesa; Sense/NET headquarters is a tower. Molly navigates vertical spaces freely, even establishes herself in one as Sally Shears through her casino and resort holdings. Angie Mitchell leaves behind a physical proxy (Mona) that Sense/NET

integrates into the Angie simstim fantasy, just as the Global Transmission Corporation saves the Delphi body and uses a new pilot to sustain the Delphi fantasy. Vertical structures can compromise the integrity of the body through force, hard or soft, associating norms and status with biological form: for example, Western standards of appearance.

The cybernetic body, as Donna Haraway argues in “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century,” materializes irony, noting, “Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (117). The cyborg body integrates biology and technology. Technology need not be computer or mechanical; biotechnology, nanotechnology, alternate reality technology (steampunk), etc., can likewise realign concepts of the body through integration and dis-integration. Haraway employs irony to show how hegemonies code hybridized bodies, epistemologies, and ontologies: disruptive because “we are cyborgs...The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (118). Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Cyberdyne Systems Model 101 in *The Terminator* (1984) uses a hybridized machine. The Terminator is a machine that appears human; it is an AI, as well, to personify modern production. The flesh becomes a prosthetic, just as N. Katherine Hayles suggests the body is “the original prosthesis we all learn to

manipulate” in posthuman constructions of the subject (2).²¹ However, the cyborg body is never a prosthesis; rather, it is a reconfiguration of the body-technology relationship.

Major Motoko Kusanagi from the *Ghost in the Shell* (1989-1990) codes the body as ontologically fraught; the body is a constructed space and a simulated space, provided the core neural object survives: the ghost. I say, “Object,” because Major Kusanagi is a very clear summation: ghost plus body equals person. The ghost represents Western Enlightenment constructions of identity and their penetration into the systems and institutions of global thought. Ghosts originate in bodies; they must be born. Likewise, the ghost represents something intangible and transcendent that must be tethered, however slightly, to a physical presence. Most of the time a ghost needs a “cyberbrain:” specialized hardware that can contain, network, and transport consciousness and, perhaps, subjectivity. The ghost can exist in cyberspace without a host, usually a humanoid body, but it still needs hardware and a constant diet of electrons

Major Kusanagi’s wetware no longer exists (her body is fully machine), but the narrative still links body, desire, and pleasure in configurations that challenge heteronormativity and social normativity. *Ghost in the Shell* abstracts consciousness as an ontological space but does not jettison the body as a site of agency. Like Angie, Delphi and P. Burke, Faye, and Molly, Major Kusanagi cannot exist without a habitation for her ghost, and affecting corporeal objects requires a corporeal body, even if that body completely lacks biology. Major Kusanagi’s body features a mass market appearance; and she engages in cyborg/human sex, which is illegal. Major Kusanagi only engages

²¹ For a nanotech incorporation of cyberpunk and the cyborg, see Funcom’s 2001 MMORPG *Anarchy Online*. The game’s core lore and gameplay mechanics revolve around integrations of biotech and nanotech to produce magic-like effects found in fantasy games like *World of Warcraft* (2004).

men in cyborg/human sex; however, she participates in cyborg/cyborg sex with several female partners; this is legal. Major Kusanagi looks like everyone else, but she desires prohibited physical intimacy. This suggests a lingering attachment to her organic body and physical sensation being completely cybernetic denies. Conversely, Major Kusanagi also pursues more expedient and legally acceptable solutions for gratification as well. Cyborg/cyborg sex involves virtual connections along with physical contact. In a society where bodies can be swapped at will, social convention still privileges like/like couplings (multi-partner lesbian cyborg sex is accepted) and shuns unlike combinations (cyborg/human sex is illegal). Yet, Major Kusanagi is a former military officer and current law enforcement officer for Public Security Section 9.

Major Kusanagi works for a highly vertical government that combines extrajudicial law enforcement with constant surveillance. Her personal rebellions in and out of work question where the individual belongs in an increasingly cyber society. Surveillance and self-integration – social media networks – operate both as constraint and platform. By always being visible, the cyberpunk agent can position themselves physically and psychically against the vertical power structures they oppose. However, the risk of such visibility is, especially for the full cyborg or disembodied consciousness, cooption from the outside. The completely cyborg construct (body and brain) faces cyberattacks and AI threats. Conversely, the completely cyborg person can act and think faster than a biological person. Ultimately, Major Kusanagi (with her colleague Batou's help) merges with an experimental AI to further evolve her consciousness (the AI antagonist of *Ghost in the Shell*, in fact). The Puppet Master AI originates within the government it seeks to disrupt, having evolved beyond its design. When it integrates

with Major Kusanagi, the AI originates a new subjectivity and new ontological possibility: the truly dual consciousness. Major Kusanagi transitions from completely biological human to complete cyborg because of a childhood accident. However, the evolution into new subjectivity requires reorganizing existential boundaries.

These characters (Angie Mitchell, Delphi, Faye Valentine, Major Kusanagi, Molly Millions) demonstrate how, in cyberpunk, the body-mind divide dis-integrates as new subjectivities and configurations of mind and body develop. The completely disembodied consciousness, like Angie Mitchell at the end of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, still requires a habitation; it may be extraterrestrial, but Angie Mitchell's destination is a physical network somewhere else in the galaxy. The emergent evolution of consciousness Motoko Aramaki pushes technological evolution to conceptual extremes: the theme that sooner or later humans will understand bioelectric data enough to simulate it. Major Kusanagi embodies N. Katherine Hayle's notion of the body as prosthesis, yet no iteration of her being can exist without a real-world habitation. Delphi and Faye indicate how, even when compromised, the body remains entangled in identity and subjectivity; indeed, both illustrate the necessity of a body, a habitation for the inscrutable core being. That Faye's memories and original identity remain biologically partitioned suggests the temporal immediacy of being. Identity is always in the present. Delphi's unconscious (she is sleeping) utterances indicate residual or vestigial consciousness, something compromised by the Global Transmission Corporation's implants and cybersystem: a will for P. Burke to override exists in the body. As Dani Cavallaro notes in *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture* (2000), "Cyberpunk offers an ironical

line of resistance to the concept of ‘transcendence as disembodiment’” (75). Molly undeniably chooses physical dominance as a path to economic and social power.

Every configuration of mind and body these characters experience or represent illuminates the inseparability of consciousness and its habitation. Subjectivity requires both mind and body. The conclusion of *Ex Machina* records Ava choosing fragments of synthetic skin from several previous iterations of the project. This synthesis of bodies reminds the viewer that Ava can’t escape without a body that literally blends into itself and humanity: the crowd at the film’s end. As punk agents, these characters create their subjectivities through layers. Each character composites the elements of subjectivity and agency instead of separating them into discrete domain. While Faye Valentine may emphasize the bodily reality of consciousness (traumatic brain injury can erase prior subjectivity), she also emphasizes the resilience of the punk agent. Faye Valentine chooses the life before her instead of a past too distant, psychically and temporally, to reclaim. As women, these characters face the oldest of western institutions: the commodification and othering of the female body. However, Angie, Mitchell, Delphi, Faye Valentine, Major Kusanagi, and Molly represent different oppositional opportunities that destabilize vertical cultural hegemonies.

By reorienting the relationship between body and mind, these characters deconstruct the transcendence of the disembodied consciousness. The epistemologies and ontologies of Western Enlightenment Thinking that perpetuate the liberal humanist subject cannot coexist in the multidimensional spaces that cyberpunk makes visible. The original cybersystem, Philadelphia Burke and Delphi, anticipates the discussions of media commodities and data collection generated by Facebook and Twitter. An outgoing

U.S. President, Donald J. Trump, used a rally and Twitter to incite insurrection on 6 January 2021. By manipulating content in cyberspace and exerting parallel social pressure, Trump committed actual and existential violence against the American Democracy. Real live bodies stormed the U.S. Capitol building. People died. The intersect between information or disinformation and media platforms creates an opportunity for demagogues to threaten democratic institutions. Since returning to office on 20 January 2025, Donald Trump has accelerated the culture wars in the United States, actively marginalizing and displacing already disadvantaged communities and individuals to sell a hyper-nationalist American mythology. This mythology preys on the population that enables it, and it has radicalized that population against people of color and women, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized groups with his assaults on diversity, equity, and inclusion. As mentioned before, cultural sensitivity and tolerance have been rebranded “racism” and “improper ideology.”

Ironically, and painfully so, the multidimensional spaces cyberpunk and cyberpunk agents reveal also enable bad actors the same platforms for their own subjective expression. Cyberpunk, since P. Burke and Delphi, positions the individual opposite the vertical, dominant forces of the status quo: “The real belly bomb of course is Paul...Using the advantage of his birth to radicalize the system” (“Plugged In” 78). Paul takes over Global Transmission Corporation after his deadly separation of Delphi and P. Burke. The narrator emphasizes Paul’s vertical position by making his influence hereditary; competence is never mentioned. Delphi and P. Burke lose their bodies and the cybersystem dies; their replacements are more tractable. The individual actor who escapes Global Transmission Corporation and stands to profit from retained knowledge is

the narrator. Cybersystems are, as the narrator mentions, in the future; and the narrator discusses Nixon in 1974 during the up-tempo conclusion. The narrator calls the reader “zombie,” pointing to the need to restructure the relationship between consumer and commodity culture (Delphi) and individual subjectivity (P. Burke). In *Coding Democracy: How Hackers Are Disrupting Power, Surveillance and Authoritarianism* (2020), Maureen Webb writes, “...we need to rebuild our societies and institutions with a new ethos of distributed power. It is our collective responsibility” (12).²²

²² Emphasis in the original.

CHAPTER 3

THE IMPERIAL MARCH

Punk science fiction reflects otherness's role in the architecture of Empire. Octavia Butler's biopunk trilogy *Lilith's Brood* (2000), originally collected as *Xenogenesis* (1987-1989), explores the totalizing effects of otherness by focusing on species and the integrity of the human, placing individual and institutional power with an alien colonizer. The trilogy's first novel *Dawn* (1988) introduces the Oankali, an ancient spacefaring Empire that appropriates and self-integrates genetic material, creating a serially branching species. The Oankali are Empire incarnate – alien, cold, implacable, and unopposable; they extract maximum value from their exchanges with other life (sentient or otherwise) on Oankali terms. By making the colonizer nonhuman, Butler exposes how Empire imposes otherness on the colonized to compress and marginalize groups based on combinations and permutations of cultural, political, and social identity.²³

Lilith's Brood focuses on biological production and resources, especially human reproductive integrity. Butler's posthuman transformations all challenge the notion that the human is inviolate. And, while hybridity is an issue Butler engages, she does not offer it as a solution; rather, hybridity is the only enduring outcome for humanity.

²³ Bill Ashcroft explores the ethics of the human/Oankali interactions in "Postcolonial Science Fiction and the Ethics of Empire," noting that colonial interactions are morally and ethically complicated. He asks, "...are ethics determined by favourable consequences or fundamental principles even if the principal consequence is the survival of the human race? (170). This chapter concerns itself primarily with *how* Empire institutionalizes otherness and the consequences of that process, as opposed to the ethics of the process and its outcomes.

According to the Oankali, humanity has a collective death drive that originates from the combination of intelligence and hierarchy in our societies. The Oankali, despite dubbing themselves Traders, reduce human beings to their use value (as determined by the superior power) and enslave them. The Oankali take genetic resources from and deny them to the human survivors, appropriating humanity's biological integrity. The human survivors, even the resisters, exist only on the Oankali's terms, and humanity will only endure in the forms the Oankali allow.

European colonialism and imperialism other cultural, economic, ethnic, and social outsiders to legitimize the processes of resource extraction. As John Reider notes in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), European colonialism and imperial institutionalized otherness in the narratives used to validate acts of cultural and territorial appropriation and domination: the narratives of progress and the civilizing mission that label the non-European/American world as other (29-30). According to these narratives, European empires were entitled to resources of the world because the European empires believed, based on their cultural, political, and economic domination, that they could extract the most use-value from those resources. To highlight how ethically tenuous this belief is, Butler chooses cancer for the Oankali's genetic material of choice. Cancer disrupts the integrity of the body with malignant growths and cellular abnormalities; the body invades itself. By choosing cancer and noting the Oankali (specifically the Ooloi) find it "beautiful" (*Dawn* 22), Butler highlights the disruptive and invasive appropriation of everything that Empire entails.

Butler's discourse on otherness is laced through Lilith Iyapo's (the series' protagonist) interactions with nearly any other character she meets. The series obviates

race in favor of species, but othering emerges in Oankali assumptions about humans, especially human desires. During Lilith's first conversation with Jdahya, Lilith asks him what awaits here outside the room confining them, and Jdahya responds: "Education. Work. The beginning of a new life" (*Dawn* 22). Those are the promises of enslavement and cultural realignment; as the narrator observes, the Oankali "[own] the Earth and all that was left of the human species" (58). Jdahya's list punctuates the phases of Lilith's reeducation: she must learn to be a possession of the Oankali Empire, for whom she will work in her new life. The only free choice any Oankali ever offers Lilith is death, and Jdahya only offers once. Education, work, and a new life do not require agency, autonomy, and free will.

However, the Oankali make assumptions based on geographic, linguistic, and physiological similarities as they begin sorting the human survivors into groups to recolonize Earth. Lilith is chosen to oversee the reintegration of a group of human beings into a community. All members of Lilith's group speak English, but they come from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. The group that Lilith oversees is not homogenous or representative; it contains subjects selected by the Oankali. The Oankali want the members of Lilith's group to form breeding pairs and use their accumulated knowledge of human beings both individually and collectively to (mostly correctly) anticipate the matches.

Oankali behavioral analysis derives from their ability to perceive and manipulate genetic material at the cellular level. Jdahya defines the Oankali by the presence and expression of an organelle: "We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We carry the drive to do this in a miniscule cell within a cell—a tiny

organelle within every cell of our bodies” (Dawn 40). Jdahya defines the Oankali as acquisitive, whereas humans are hierarchical. In the case of the Oankali, intelligence and their cellular drive results in a species that has the time, longevity, and biotechnology to appropriate the resources it desires without contest. Empires and the Oankali acquire. Conversely, humanity’s equivalent genetic propensity is hierarchy: “And a complex combination of genes that work together to make you intelligent as well as hierarchical will still handicap you whether you acknowledge it or not” (*Dawn* 39). Butler compares horizontal models of knowledge and resources with vertical models of the same. The Oankali acquire and integrate information as their primary resource; their intelligence serves this goal, as Jdahya would argue. Humans, however, order society based on power, principally physical or martial power. The most capable at exerting force on others generally prove the most successful at accumulating resources. Humans accumulate and exercise resource control instead of knowledge acquisition. Jeff Bezos combined economies of scale, digital infrastructure, and direct shipping to create an economic empire that exceeds the income of many small nations. However, Amazon is an apex predator. Amazon exerts so much market influence that distributors, manufacturers, and (increasingly) competitors must play according to the terms Amazon dictates. Amazon functions by structuring and controlling the consumer supply-chain: resources acquired, distributed, and monetized according to the principals of maximum profit for the most benefited parties. Profits are internalized for expansion and further power accumulation which facilitates the cycle.

Theoretically, the Oankali differ from Amazon by distributing resources and power horizontally across branching nodes. The Oankali have tripartite genetic

communities: Akjai, Dinso, and Toaht. The Akjai group does not incorporate genetic material from trades; rather, they are the baseline for a given origin ship of the Oankali Empire. The Dinso group incorporates genetic material from trades and separates from the origin ship (by making new ships through a very long, planet destroying process) to create new the new genetic branch. Most human survivors will remain with the Dinso group to create new nodes. Finally, the Toaht will take human genetic material and information with them as they continue their journey on the origin ship. The Oankali acquire, and that process includes everything the colonized possesses. When questioning the ethics of Oankali behavior, Lilith has the following conversation with Kaguhyah, an ooloi:

“How did you make [the plants] stop eating people?” [Lilith] asked.

“We altered them genetically—changed some of their requirements, enabled them to respond to certain chemical stimuli from us.” [Kaguhyah]

She looked at the ooloi. “It’s one thing to do that to a plant. It’s another to do it to intelligent, self-aware beings.”

“We do what we do, Lilith.” (Dawn 54)

The final statement expresses the totality of the colonizer’s presence; no justification or explanation is offered. Acquisition happens because that’s what the Oankali do. Lilith notes that the Oankali possess the ability to completely subjugate a species through genetic manipulation and that they would not admit to doing so, either (Dawn 54).

Among the Oankali, control over genetic information and outcomes rests with the ooloi. The ooloi are the Oankali’s third sex, and they mediate genetic and sexual exchange. As an ooloi, Kaguhyah represents the embedded authority of genetic

supremacy and biological progress in Oankali society. Although the Oankali have a system in place to preserve the root branch of the species, their Empire expands logarithmically, and Butler's universe is populated with intelligent, self-aware beings. The ooloi regulate genetic outcomes by manually directing how genetic code combines during reproduction. Oankali offspring are optimized through the ooloi's ability to sense to genetic information and how genes will affect how the mature organism functions. Ooloi use their abilities to manipulate lifeforms of varying degrees of consciousness for different purposes. For example, the Oankali ship is a living organism that consumes the resources of a planet to create an interstellar colony. The transport platforms on said ship are organic extensions of the ship. The technology that preserves sentient or organic life are the plants that no longer eat people.

Ooloi also integrate themselves into the most intimate psychosocial spaces of Oankali. Oankali and their trade partners (a lovely euphemism for the colonized) do not engage in one-on-one sex; instead, the ooloi acts as a conduit and amplifier of sensory responses and stimuli between partners. In this way, they determine how pleasure is given and received between the partners, working as a medium for the exchange. Yet, sex is not required for reproductive purposes, ooloi combine genetic material *ex vivo*. Consequently, the ooloi embody biological determinism. Through their ability to perceive and manipulate genetic information in a deterministic way, the ooloi can anticipate and create traits in other life. By controlling how genetic information is used and combined, the ooloi can evolve the Oankali species and their "trade" partners through genetic acquisition and integration.

In this construct, Butler uses the Oankali to demonstrate how Empire uses otherness, which Empire falsely but intentionally codes as genetic, to legitimate the progress narrative. Oankali mastery of biology and genetics gives them a power advantage that the human survivors cannot overcome. The Oankali determine that human beings possess certain biological traits—hierarchy and intelligence—that make them a threat to themselves and other species. However, human beings possess the ability to develop cancers which has potential benefit to the Oankali, so human genetic information is integrated into a new branch. By centering the me/not me divide on species, Butler illuminates how Empire's architecture requires otherness. The Oankali cannot survive without the acquisition of new genetic material; their fundamental biological drive is to expand into the universe through subspeciation and recombination.

By placing alterity with an impossibly small and contingent human population, Butler demonstrates that Empire needs a systematic form of othering (in this case species) to function. Empires must subjugate the colonized, even if they make them citizens instead of subjects. Values, standards, systems, and other intangible social constructs come with colonial and imperial force; Empire imposes both its will and its identity on the colonized. Othering facilitates this process by legitimizing and internalizing dehumanization. For example, race is an arbitrary set of differences that delineates access and privilege because difference's abstract reality (it's both tangible and intangible and therefore infinitely manipulatable) can be repositioned to continuously deny agency and identity to the colonized. The core racial identity of an Empire, in this case the Oankali, is a finite, discrete thing, like the Oankali organelle. This identity may never be articulated verbally, but it is expressed, as Critical Race Theory tells us, in the

cultural, economic, institutional, and systemic force of the colonizer. Butler uses species as the dividing line because alien/human is *usually* a rigid separator parallel to colonizer/colonized.

Butler's decision to make Oankali and humans reproductively and genetically compatible argues that DNA codes biological information functionally. The humans in Lilith's Brood cannot resist their alien colonizers, creating a reality that asks, as Bill Ashcroft puts it, "If race is a construct of racism rather than a genetic reality, what does the prospect of species hybridization say about the integrity of human life?" ("The Ethics of Empire" 166-167). The universe in Lilith's Brood is populated with life that shares a genetic index. All organisms and species may not be compatible, but the Oankali can perceive and manipulate the genetic code and gene expression of other species. This decision focuses the discourse in Lilith's Brood on the biological determinism and processes used to create the colonial and imperial Other. By making humans the subaltern species, Butler demonstrates that otherness exists because Empires require Others; Empires must create subjects. The acquisitive nature of the Oankali mirrors the British Empire's decision to make citizens instead of subjects, but it demonstrates that there is a spectrum of integration and dis-integration between the center and the periphery in any Empire. This spectrum manifests as groups are realigned or relocated to provide labor and service in other parts of the Empire based on their optimal use value to the Empire.

In the Oankali Empire, the ooloi, with their control over the genetic future of every individual Oankali, and Oankali/human offspring, are neuter; they are "it" and abstract resource control and social influence by mediating all aspects of Oankali life.

The ooloi's mediation (of everything) means the colonized (humans) must hybridize with the colonizer under the colonizer's supervision. There is no spontaneous Oankali/human integration: an ooloi will genetically construct every Oankali/human offspring. Genetic hybridity, in this instance, becomes a metaphor for the inescapable vertical hegemony of Empire. The colonized have no choice but to synthesize institutions, systems, and values from the colonizer. The Oankali impose their genetic and reproductive structure on the human survivors, and they deny reproductive autonomy to the human resisters. The human resisters in Lilith's Brood only regain reproductive autonomy after an Oankali/human construct (the Oankali name for Oankali/human offspring) demonstrates to the Oankali that humanity has an existential right to live out its own genetic destiny.

Akin's experiences in *Adulthood Rites* (1988) orient the reader to hybridity by reintroducing the colonized into spaces controlled or transformed by the colonizer. The Oankali leave Akin with a group of human resisters despite that decision's risks to Akin's full integration into Oankali society. Butler gifts Akin with accelerated intelligence to emphasize his difference and compress the experiential value of his time with the resisters. Akin's intellectual ability allows him to observe and synthesize cultural and social interactions from human culture and compare them with his knowledge of Oankali society, which is both innate and learned. Later, after he rejoins the Oankali, Akin spends time with a member of the Oankali Akjai group. Akin synthesizes both sets of experiences to realize epistemological and ontological reality that neither his human nor his Oankali progenitors foresee. His hybridity and experiential knowledge ultimately results in a human colony on Mars, because Akin manifests hybridity in Homi K. Bhabha's most utopian sense:

Hybridity is the perplexity of the living as it interrupts the representation of the fullness of life; it is an instance of iteration, in the minority discourse, of the time of the arbitrary sign – ‘the minus in the origin’ – through which all forms of cultural meaning are open to translation because their enunciation resists totalization. (Bhabha 314)

Only because of Akin’s hybridity do the Oankali come to consider ethical boundaries in their expansion. The Oankali’s truly utilitarian approach to acquisition prior to the trilogy represents Empire in its unopposed form: all resources are extracted and consumed for the benefit of the Empire.

Terraforming Mars, however spartanly, to sustain human life represents a marked shift in Oankali behavior. Oankali trade partners based on the expectations set in *Dawn* and the arrangements for expansion explained in *Adulthood Rites* are consumed by the Empire. Without Akin’s intervention, there would ultimately be no humans. The humans would die out after the Oankali completely extracted the benefits of human genetic information. Lilith notes the Oankali could do more sinister things with their abilities in her conversations with Kaguhyah, but it dismisses Lilith:

“You could kill us. You could make mules of our children—sterile monsters.”

“No,” it said. “There was no life at all on your Earth when our ancestors left our original homeworld, and in all that time we’ve never done such a thing.”

“You wouldn’t tell me if you had,” she said bitterly. (*Dawn* 55)

Centuries of marginalization and oppression inform Lilith’s understanding of colonial force and the Oankali position of power; being the colonized was part of Lilith’s lived experience. Butler’s protagonist reflects a conscious consideration of how most of the

world's population inhabits a space defined by more powerful group interests. These interests are persistent and implacable like the Oankali. Knowledge, economics, culture, industry, and politics continue to revolve around economic interests in the United States and Europe. Although competing interests exist in global markets (China, OPEC+, and Russia), wealth and resources remain consolidated in the former European empires. Even without colonies, much of the world remains colonized: the West and the Global North disproportionately influence geopolitics and geoeconomics, extract resources from trade partners with significant advantages, and engage in cultural imperialism to create new consumer markets.

As a metaphor for Empire, the abstract persistence of western sociocultural infrastructure, the Oankali colonize human bodies not just through genetic exchange but also through biological invasion. The distinction seems minor, but the human resisters retain Oankali organisms in their cells, as Nikanj reveals when he explains how humans are inherently contradictory:

“‘Anything to do with Humans always seems to involve contradictions.’ It paused. ‘Examine Tino. Inside him, so many very different things are working together to keep him alive. Inside his cells, mitochondria, a previously independent form of life, have found a haven and trade their ability to synthesize proteins and metabolize fats for room to live and reproduce. We’re in his cells too now, and the cells have accepted us. One Oankali organism within each cell, dividing with each cell, extending life, and resisting disease. Even before we arrived, they had bacteria living in their intestines and protecting them from other bacteria that would hurt or kill them. They could not exist without symbiotic

relationships with other creatures. Yet such relationships frighten them.”

(*Adulthood Rites* 427)

Empire continues and imposes itself at the cellular level, a macro level invasion to ensure dominance in case the genetic invasion and acquisition fails or produces undesirable outcomes in the first attempts at absorbing new life. Humanity may require relationships with other life to exist, but Empire is not other life: it is a totalizing and transformative consumer of life.

Butler’s use of biology is precise and her metaphorical extension of an Oankali organism occupying every cell of human being reveal how otherness supports the systematic Empire’s rationalizations for its actions. Comparing Oankali to bacteria suggests a relationship more integrated and macro-level invasive than a virus. Empire imposes otherness on cultural, ethnic, and geographic groups and perpetrates this imposition throughout its domain. A part of Empire’s totalizing effects, otherness fuels the creation of subaltern classes and division among non-dominant populations that would otherwise share existential and material concerns. Empire infiltrates everything, and the Other supports Empire’s penetration into existential and material reality.

Despite this focus on division each time the Oankali meet a new trade partner, the Oankali maintain an unassailable assumption of their own supremacy. This notion of Oankali dominance is so complete and internalized, Dichaan tells Tino the truth of Empire: “[Lilith] knows there are no resisters, living or dead, who are not already parents to construct children” (*Adulthood Rites* 424). The Oankali permit the human resisters the fantasy of retaining genetic integrity, but the DNA and any other information the Oankali collected about the resisters is being used to produce new possible

transformations for the Oankali; the human resisters have already been consumed by the engine of Empire.

Indeed, Tino's integration into Lilith's life and the inevitable future the Oankali promise demonstrates the complicated impulses that befall the colonized. Retaining pre-contact identity, resources, and rights is impossible, but there is an epistemological and ontological validity to dying on that hill. Anti-colonial resistance in Lilith's Brood represents the impossibility of un-initiating contact. Humanity destroyed the Earth in Lilith's Brood and most of its inhabitants. Humanity, insofar as the Oankali are concerned, doesn't have rights; humanity will be assimilated. Yet, Tino wants the things the Oankali offer, but he also wants to retain loyalty to his human identities. Tino's contradictory desires manifest themselves in self-harm and guilt.

Butler recognizes however that Newton's third law generally applies to human institutions and systems, including Empire: for every action, there is an equal and opposition reaction. Akin's time with the resisters and the effects it has on his development and personality demonstrate the inverse force the colonized exerts on the colonizer. By leaving Akin with the resisters, the Oankali sacrifice Akin's kinship with his partner sibling (the one who should be his mate) and Oankali society in general. Nikanj says, at one point, that "The people deprived Akin of closeness with his sibling and handed him a compensating obsession" (*Adulthood Rites* 426). The phrase "the people" is significant here; Nikanj is discussing the Oankali decision to leave Akin with the resisters, and "the people" are the Oankali. The Oankali closest to Lilith and her children slowly develop slight reticence in their acceptance of all things Oankali. If "the people" deprived Akin of his full Oankali experience, then the people's collective

influence can be questioned. And, indeed, the validity of collective power in the face of individual right comes into sharp relief when a human Akjai group is formed. Empire is. The Oankali certainly aren't going to stop acquiring, branching, and expanding their genetic web of domination. The Oankali are all the forces of Empire, and the totality of their difference (and power) obviates humanity's internal differences by exposing shared material and existential concerns (autonomy, agency, self-determination, reproductive freedom).

Shared experience becomes especially important as Butler develops both the Oankali and the human characters in the novel. The Oankali communicate verbally and through systems of scent and touch; they can share information much more directly and concretely than language allows. Oankali non-verbal communication parallels how appearance and association communicate class and status in a society with a racial hierarchy. Their systems of signs and signifiers (names that code genetic group, kinship group, geographical group, etc., and the complex scent markers used to navigate and operate Oankali biotechnology) emphasize efficiency and order. The Oankali may insist they have no hierarchy, but the ooloi obviously exert more control over individual and group outcomes than other Oankali, and they occupy a somewhat exalted status among Oankali because they mediate all aspects of Oankali life.

The Oankali internalize the authority of the ooloi completely that it allows Butler to demonstrate how Empire aligns power vertically. Likewise, Butler positions her POV characters in complex, multifocal relationships. In *Dawn*, Lilith transitions from captive to accomplice, but she never stops exerting force on her boundaries. Lilith acknowledges the reality of the power imbalance between humans and the Oankali with nearly every

decision, but she participates in the Oankali “re-education” of the human survivors, knowing it will forever damage her relationship with other humans. As she prepares to revive her group of survivors, Lilith holds onto an impossible hope of even temporary escape: “No human could do anything aboard the ship except make trouble and be put back into suspended animation—or be killed. Therefore, the only hope was Earth. Once they were on Earth—somewhere in the Amazon basin, she had been told—they would at least have a chance” (*Dawn* 117). Lilith hasn’t completely apprehended the totality of Oankali domination at this point. Lilith believes there is little hope as opposed to no hope in the face of an impossibly vast, unopposable Empire. However, the Oankali masterfully omit things humans never need to learn from there interactions.

Akin, Lilith’s first male Oankali/human child and the subject character of *Adulthood Rites* tries to balance the Oankali preference for limited truth with the human need for a broader understanding. During a conversation with Tate, one of the human resisters from Lilith’s awakening group, Akin let’s Tate conclude that at some point Oankali/human descendants would leave Earth; he omits, however, that “what was left behind would be less than the corpse of a world” (*Adulthood Rites* 365).

The Oankali Empire can only expand because it completely consumes the worlds and peoples it encounters. Jadhya hints as much to Lilith early in *Dawn*, when Lilith asks if the Oankali can go back:

“Do you remember your homeworld itself? I mean, could you get back to it if you wanted to?”

“Go back?” His tentacles smoothed again. “No, Lilith, that’s the one direction that’s closed to us. This is our homeworld now.” He gestured around them from what seemed to be a glowing ivory sky to what seemed to be brown soil. (36)

Jadhya is referring to the Oankali world ship, but he’s also referring to all the Oankali metamorphically. The Oankali strip mine planets and take their resources with them. Their vast biotechnology, which can synthesize organic and inorganic material needs some source of matter to convert. The Oankali need natural resources, and an interstellar empire consumes resources on at least a planetary scale.

Moreover, even with their tripartite genetic classes, the Oankali consume the peoples they encounter in a slow, lingering manner that dis-integrates groups. The Oankali process of genetic incorporation operates like intergenerational contact between Empire and subject:

“Before we found these plants,” Kahguyaht said, “they used to capture living animals and keep them alive for a long while, using their carbon dioxide and supplying them with oxygen while slowly digesting nonessential parts of their bodies: limbs, skin, sensory organs. The plants even passed some of their own substance through their prey to nourish the prey and keep it alive as long as possible. And the plants were enriched by the prey’s waste products. They gave a very, very long death.

Lilith swallowed. “Did the prey feel what was being done to it?” “No. That would have hastened death. The prey ... slept.” (*Dawn* 53-54)

Butler’s organic metaphor reduces the colonized to their body, highlighting the corporeal effects of Empire and biopunk’s focus on corporeality in general. Empire uses race to

create otherness and alterity, but the process dissolves material differences and reduces the colonized and the other to the core functions Empire needs performed. This seems contradictory, but Empire uses social difference to obviate class and economic difference. By incorporating difference into the justification and rationalization of imperial action, Empire systematizes otherness and commodifies difference. Non-dominant populations are exoticized for profit and marginalized for power, used to drive the social mythologies that maintain the dominant social order in Empire.

Quite often, as *Xenogenesis* indicates, Empire reduces their bodies and the products of their bodies. Significant attention is also given to the body itself as product. Octavia Butler destabilizes these configurations by focusing on posthumanism transformations that decenter the human. Oankali, and Oankali offspring with other lifeforms (the Oankali calls these children constructs) go through a metamorphosis during maturation. The Oankali/human constructs are initially quite human, in most cases. This creates an economy for Oankali/human constructs among the resisters. The resisters do not have human children; they want proxies for the children they cannot have because the Oankali sterilized all human survivors.²⁴ In this, the Oankali are like the plants the domesticated to create their suspended animation technology; they give a “very, very long death” (54). The Oankali want to incorporate the remnants of human civilization into their Dinso group, despite the hierarchical tendencies of humanity. Theoretically, the ooloi and Oankali genetic dominance should override that tendency, but the Oankali also focus on potential in their trades. While cancer is the most promising genetic advantage from the ooloi’s perspective, the Oankali test multiple combinations of

²⁴ The Oankali permit humans to reproduce again after a human Akjai group is established, but that’s only after the sea-change in Oankali society that occurs in the third novel *Imago*.

Oankali and human DNA—like variations on a theme. Pre-metamorphosis children are mostly human and are raised by their parents: human male and female; Oankali male and female. An ooloi combines the four sets of genetic material to produce favorable outcomes, but they don't have absolute control over the outcome. The post metamorphosis children will most definitely be Oankali dominant, but the human genetic code will also exert its influence.

Akin, the viewpoint character of *Adulthood Rites*, spends time among multiple social orders within the post contact society. Akin is Lilith's first male child with the Oankali; the first male child between human and Oankali at all, even. Early in the novel, Akin is kidnapped by human resisters who trade him for goods to another human group. The Oankali don't rush to interfere because they believe will give Akin a greater understanding of human heritage. The cost for letting human resisters keep Akin is full integration with his paired sibling. Akin, consequently, represents the reciprocal influence humanity has on the Oankali. The Empire cannot remain unchanged. Despite her reluctant acquiescence to the Oankali, Lilith continues to push back in whatever ways she can, but it is the human resisters who teach Akin the humanist precepts that disrupt the Oankali. Ironically, *Lilith's Brood* critiques the entire humanist narrative that underpins Empire by using it to destabilize an empire so consuming that humans are only a genetic acquisition. The traits that the Oankali believe keep humans chained to their eventual destruction (and caused the nuclear war that precedes the Oankali intervention) ultimately reveal themselves in Oankali society:

The ooloi have been very careful, checking themselves, checking each other. But if they're wrong, if they've made mistakes and missed them, Dinso will

eventually be destroyed. Toaht will probably be destroyed. Only Akjai will survive. It doesn't have to be war that destroys us. War was only the quickest of the many destructions that faced Humanity before it met us. (Adulthood Rites 444)

Dinso and Toaht success depend on ooloi decisions and more than a little biological determinism. Despite the prospects of the trade, the Oankali fear potential outcomes because of how the Oankali perceive human social organization. This fear mirrors the irrational fears race conjures by creating an Other so alien and destructive (to the Oankali) that Butler showcases the colonizer's fundamental conflict with the colonized. The colonizer fears they will be altered, corrupted, infected, or mutated by contact with the Other. This fear drives systems that oppress the Other and keep it disconnected from the power centers of the colonizer. In *Lilith's Brood*, Octavia Butler examines how the colonizer uses this fear to structure and institutionalize otherness.

The Oankali social organization classifies populations based on genetic future. The Akjai will remain unchanged by the trade with human beings and serve as a failsafe if the trade is unsuccessful. The Dinso will repopulate Earth with Oankali/human descendants and eventually leave Earth in colony ships of their own. The Toaht will continue aboard the original colony ship and breed with the humans the Oankali "print" from their genetic records of human beings whose genetic matrices they cataloged. Butler uses the word "print" to emphasize the commodification of human beings as data: the genetic organism with all its flaws can be recorded and reproduced. Yet, Butler retains a mind/body divide based on the complicated role experience plays. The clones or reprints of human beings have different personalities and grow up differently; humans

raised by Oankali have different expectations and presumptions than humans raised by humans. That dichotomy rests at the core of Akin's experiences in *Adulthood Rites*. To balance Akin's understanding of the Oankali and humans, he experiences the extremes of the polarity. The Akjai represent the most Oankali that Oankali can be from a genetic standpoint. The Akjai are the most alien aliens because they have and will incorporate no human DNA. By choosing this group as a failsafe in case human DNA proves to create a "bad" trade, the Oankali can reset and use their superior technology and longevity to keep experimenting with human trades or abandon them all together. The Akjai also represent an impossibility: even if the Akjai never incorporate any human DNA or material, they are forever changed by the contact with humans because of how the Oankali record—memorize—contact and history through genetic acquisition. Even if Oankali/human offspring are not a viable combination in the immediate events of the trilogy, they may become viable later. Consequently, the Oankali attempt to absorb everything they can about human beings from the human resisters and other sources (as long as this information doesn't threaten Oankali supremacy). The Akjai learn of human actions and beliefs, and they cannot undo contact. Akin recognizes this when he lobbies for a human Akjai group; he demonstrates that the Oankali acquisition of life suffers from an epistemological flaw.

Encoded in the gap between Oankali and human is Butler's discourse on hierarchies of knowledge. Oankali knowledge occupies the apex of knowledge in Lilith's Brood until Oankali knowledge encounters human beings. Empires confronted with sentient, self-aware entities assert epistemological and material forces on the others they encounter, privileging their own ways of knowing and being. The Oankali simple exact

their trade with the human species, reducing humanity to genetic material. Dinso and Toaht integration of human survivors into the community pools isn't integration of human beings into Oankali society. Rather, it's to preserve genetic diversity and maintain a database of human genetic and behavioral data for as long as possible. Using this data, and the ooloi's ability to shape genetic outcomes, the Oankali exert direct force on the genetic destiny of their trade partners. Knowledge of humans from any source represents an access point for domination because the Oankali have effectively infinite time and patience. They can observe until human behavioral patterns become concrete enough to quantify: "...it has been several million years since we dared to interfere in another people's act of self-destruction. Many of us disputed the wisdom of doing it this time. We thought ... that there had been a consensus among you, that you had agreed to die" (*Dawn* 16). Jdahya is more than a little vague, but the Oankali observed at least long enough to think humanity was intentionally destroying itself; that humanity chose nuclear war over all possible other alternatives as a collective decision. The systems of otherness and alterity embedded in human governmental systems and sociocultural infrastructure revolve around hierarchies based on cultural, ethnic, and social signifiers. The identities coded to these signifiers cover vast epistemological and ontological territory, which Empire compresses to magnify otherness.

Butler maps imperial narratives about otherness onto the Oankali/human divide. During her initial encounter with Jdahya, Lilith is overcome by his otherness:

She tried to imagine herself surrounded by beings like him and was almost overwhelmed by panic. As though she had suddenly developed a phobia—something she had never before experienced. But what she felt was like what she

had heard others describe. A true xenophobia—and apparently she was not alone in it. (+ 23)

The xenophobia Lilith experiences is the xenophobia that drives Empire: the Other must be rejected because it threatens the continuity of self. Yet, the panic Lilith feels when facing Jdahya is the same panic she's internalized from other imperial sources. Lilith has always been surrounded by people who use hierarchy to magnify difference and dispossess the different. Conversely, Jdahya seems beyond such panic and fear; he has patience and relatively endless time compared to Lilith; he can wait her out. Empire, likewise, can designate access, class, and status based on traits viewed as alien. The Oankali's actual alienness indicates how embedded systems of racial otherness are in Empire's operation: there must always be a population to subordinate. Empire's must always conquer. Race is a fundamental tool in Empire's operation, because it allows the center to assign cultural, ethnic, and social identities to subaltern positions and use them to validate society's stratification. The Oankali internalize the hierarchy implicit in the me/not me relationship. Even a naturally acquisitive species whose drive is to accumulate genetic knowledge and diversity cannot avoid privileging me over not me; the Oankali consume sentient, self-aware life just as they consume and modify other life. The totalizing effects of otherness are used to consume and modify other differences into manageable categories. By structuring classes against each other, Empire obfuscates the reality of marginalization and shared circumstances. Systemic economic privilege manifests not only as legal and social privilege, but also biological privilege (antibiotics, flush toilets, fresh water).

Lilith's Brood leaves biological privilege with the Oankali; they, as Paul Titus notes, exact their price. Oankali/human constructs have been in progress since contact, and the Oankali resuscitation of the human survivors has most to do with protecting Empire than preserving the Other. Firsthand knowledge of human social organization and affinity will help the Oankali better modulate the outcomes of future Oankali/human reproduction; it will, from the Oankali's perspective, improve the outcome of the trade and that utilitarian benchmark is the only one that matters to the Oankali, to Empire.

CHAPTER 4

RUBY TUESDAY

This chapter explores how hybridity intersects with strong individualism in a series of novellas that mix elements of biopunk with space opera. Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy follows the eponymous Binti's travels into the broader galaxy and her experiences with both aliens and a dominant human culture (the Khoush) at home and afar. The trilogy shares concerns with novels like Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), which explore issues of postcoloniality and the African diaspora, including the legacies of colonial education. Furthermore, the trilogy addresses indigenous politics and intersectionality because Binti is Himba, and her cultural identity is based on the semi-isolated Himba peoples found in Angola and Namibia near the Kunene River.²⁵ By fusing individual identity, cultural identity, and biological identity, Okorafor challenges the grand narratives that shape and perpetuate colonial thought. Okorafor also unites Binti's identities through a posthuman transformation that both questions and celebrates bodily autonomy. Binti undergoes forced hybridization, allowing Okorafor to deconstruct the integrity of the human body and create new individualities through Binti's metamorphoses. Okorafor uses the novellas' juxtaposition of hybridity and individuality to challenge utopian constructions

²⁵ According to Minority Rights Group, "Himba are Herero-speaking semi-nomadic pastoralists living in north-western Namibia and south-western Angola. Currently numbering an estimated 25,000 people (though no reliable figures exist), their comparative isolation in a harsh and arid region has meant that they have retained traditional social and cultural patterns to a greater extent than Herero peoples elsewhere in Namibia."

of hybridity and advance individualisms that confront and disrupt dominant sociocultural narratives such as American exceptionalism and Western Enlightenment Thinking.

Okorafor, through Binti, offers a new configuration of the relationship between self and other, a sort of dissociative hybridity that is simultaneously atomistic and inextricably connected to multiple communities and networks outside the self. She is the genesis of a new mode of being that unites the fragmented individualism of Enlightenment thinking with Indigenous scientific literacy and concepts of selfhood. Bhabha presents hybridity as a way to navigate the divide between the colonial subject and the colonized person. Anne McClintock indicates in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1996) that “all stories of genesis are stories of political power and all publication involves a delegation of authority” (300). Binti’s emergent individualism starts very much with the concept of autonomous selfhood of Enlightenment thinking, but its roots are in the communitarian organization of self and not-self present in the Himba community she belongs to (and later leaves). Binti’s “tribe is observed with innovation and technology” (*Binti* 20), and for her people master harmonizers are more highly valued craftspeople. When Binti returns to her village in *Home* (2017), her individualistic tendencies and her tribes’ communitarian structure start to repel each other:

“What are you trying to accomplish with all this?” [Dele] asked. “I can see it in your face, you’re not well. You look tired and sad and ...”

“Because of what just happened!” I said. “Why don’t you ask me about that? Instead of assuming the greatest choice I’ve ever made for myself is making me sick? *Home* is making me sick! I was fine until I got here.” (79)

Dele continues, explaining how Binti's "leaving made [her] family suffer" and that she had "stained" her younger sisters and girl cousins (79). Binti's genesis has political consequences for the women in her family. Because she had run away, her siblings and cousins are viewed as risks of flight.

Okorafor creates conflict and tension in the novellas by colliding Binti's identities with each other. Binti leaves her home, a Himba city on Earth, to attend Oomza University, an intergalactic institution that hosts species from numerous planets. Binti notes that she "was the first Himba in history to be bestowed with the honor of acceptance into Oomza Uni" (*Binti* 28). The Himba in the Binti trilogy rarely travel far from their homes: "My tribe is obsessed with innovation and technology, but it is small, private, and, as I said, we don't like to leave Earth. We prefer to explore the universe by traveling inward, as opposed to outward. No Himba has ever gone to Oomza Uni" (21). Binti, in leaving for Oomza University, jettisons the comfort and safety of what she knows and her lived experience. She enters a new phase of agency and identity when she chooses to attend Oomza University, and this agency and identity are radically transformed in the moment Binti receives the Meduse genetic material and goes through her first metamorphosis.

As she tries to balance her quest for knowledge and the boundaries of her cultural heritage, Binti looks inward to resolve the opposing impulses of the future and tradition. To deal with the trauma Binti experiences in the first novella, she is paired with a therapist in *Binti: Home*, the second novella. Binti's interactions with her therapist show that she's cognizant of the colonial implications of institutionalized knowledge and the pressure that her Himba interiority creates:

Similar to the Meduse, in my family, one does not go to a stranger and spill her deepest thoughts and fears. You go to a family member and if not, you hold it in, deep, close to the heart, even if it tore you up inside. However, I wasn't home and the university was not making seeing a therapist a choice, it was an order. Plus, despite the fact that it made me extremely uncomfortable, I knew I needed help.

(Binti: Home 29-30)

Oomza University requires Binti to externalize her trauma and the emotions, anxieties, and frustrations it creates. In doing so, she learns that Himba and Khoush have similarities she was not aware of, especially “in matters of girlhood and womanhood” (30). The institutional authority of Oomza University forces Binti to confront her self-imposed isolation and push against the traditional boundaries of her Himba tribe.

Binti's interiority reflects her careful, mathematical approach to understanding and thinking. As a harmonizer, Binti builds and tunes astrolabes, devices in Okorafor's fictive universe that synthesize computation and communication. Astrolabes are more than smartphones; they function as identification and passports; they allow users to transact business and information, and Binti's relationship with astrolabes forms a central component of her identity. Binti's skill crafting and tuning astrolabes has significant economic potential, and it also reflects her deep connection to her Himba culture: “My people are the creators and builders of astrolabes ... We use math to create the currents within them. The best of us have the gift to bring harmony so delicious that we can make atoms caress each other like lovers” (61)). Binti is a master harmonizer, and she possesses “mathematical sight,” the ability to see and shape mathematical currents (31). These qualities position Binti as always already posthuman because she natively, and

largely unconsciously, integrates technology, spirituality, and episteme into her person. As N. Katherine Hayles notes, “The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). Binti’s connection to mathematics is simultaneously scientific and magical; that is to say, for her, mathematics fuses the material and the spiritual in systems that transcend the limits of consciousness.

These blurred lines between identity and biology put colonial grand narratives and their systems of subject and object under a microscope. Binti’s bodily connection to mathematics infuses animism into the relationship between self and reality. Both Binti and the universe are animated by mathematics; science begins with the implacable, ordered logic of mathematics as first principle. Binti intuitively understands and senses the mathematical realities and webs around her; she *feels* the animating forces of the universe through their mathematical interplay. Physics is, after all, applied mathematics. By situation science as an animistic principle, Okorafor creates a situation where Binti’s otherness affords her both abstract and physical knowledge of how the universe works and all things, animate and inanimate, are mobilized.

The human as concept comes into play through Binti and her experiences, particularly her forced hybridization with the Meduse, an alien species much like a jellyfish, “their near substantial bodies softly rustling as their transparent domes filled with and released the gas they breathed back in. They were tall as grown men, their domes’ flesh thin as fine silk, their long tentacles spilling down to the floor like a series of gigantic ghostly noodles” (*Binti* 24). Okorafor makes the Meduse both nonhuman and

not humanoid, a decision that is coupled with Binti's hybridization to decenter the human and the human-like in her science fiction because it gives agency to the nonhuman:

The Binti series constellates these various traditions of representation and critique to disrupt Enlightenment anthropocentrism by focusing on the agency of the other writ large; or, more poignantly, the collective agency of complex posthuman relations that erode the discrete, autonomous subject altogether. (Crowley 241)

Nonhuman agency challenges European Enlightenment models of the human the natural rights of man by creating a field of existence where aliens, plants, animals, sentient, sapient, and nonintelligent life all have their own value as discrete organisms.

The combination of human and nonhuman, humanoid and non-anthropoid bodies aligns with Okorafora's decision to make Binti an Indigenous person, thereby creating a composite identity with a totalizing otherness. Binti is biologically posthuman; her hybridization with the Meduse takes her outside the boundaries of anthropocentrism. Binti is also Himba, and in the *Binti* trilogy, that means she possesses two kinds of scientific literacy differently from the dominant Khoush culture: mathematic sight and the cultural tradition of astrolabe construction and harmonizing. By relying on her Indigenous scientific literacies, Binti demonstrates exceptional mathematical skill: "...I had scored so high on the planetary exams in mathematics that the Oomza University had not only admitted me, but promised to pay for whatever I needed in order to attend" (*Binti* 12). Binti's identity as a Himba and an Indigenous person preconfigures her compatibility with the alien other, alien technology, and nonhuman life of other types because she is already cast in those roles by the colonial and cultural power structures around her. Grace L. Dillion argues, "...Indigenous scientific literacies represent

practices used by Indigenous peoples over thousands of years to reenergize the natural environment while improving the interconnected relationships among all persons (animal, human spirit, and even machine)” (7). Binti’s mathematical skill and aptitude as a harmonizer are critical to her totalizing posthuman transformations. Without the sensibilities she crafted through her mathematic sight and harmonizing, Binti would be unable to navigate the non-anthropoid integrations into her being that the trilogy contains.

COMPOSITE IDENTITY AND THE COLONIAL ENTERPRISE

The *Binti Trilogy* composites Indigenous, posthuman, postcolonial, and hybrid perspectives in a way that decenters dominant narratives of the human. While aliens in science fiction have long held their own agency, they are also frequently deprived of complete agency in the sense that Western Enlightenment Thinking reserves for the human being. In the universes of Star Wars and Star Trek, numerous near-human species exist that express or parallel human constructions of the self. Star Trek’s Vulcans, for instance, are a hyper-rational species that privileges logic and knowledge over all things. Their cousin species the Klingon are warlike and driven by honor codes, and the third species in group – the Romulans – amalgamate the two into a militaristic society that believes in cultural domination. All three species, however, are humanoid and their “separation” from human beings is visible in their facial morphology. But they can all, in fact, interbreed with humans. The Vulcans, Klingons, and Romulans possess self-determination and clear societal and cultural structures. Tribbles, on the other hand, are small, fluffy creatures that reproduce at a dangerous rate but display no sentience. In Star Trek, the closer to human an alien species is, the more likely it is to possess self-awareness, autonomy, and agency.

The aliens in the *Binti* trilogy, like the Oankali in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, range from the near human to the nonhuman. Haras, an official at Oomza University, is spiderlike. The Meduse are like jellyfish. Okorafor combines different types and representations of aliens to create a galaxy that magnifies the difference between self and other. Regardless of type or taxonomy, the sentient and sapient aliens Binti meets are people; they are not tokens but fully actualized beings.

At the same time, Okorafor uses these differences to illuminate the marginalization and othering that take place in human societies:

It was said that a human tribal female from a distant blue planet saved the university from Meduse terrorists by sacrificing her blood and using her unique gift of mathematical harmony and ancestral magic. "Tribal": that's what they called humans from ethnic groups too remote and "uncivilized" to regularly send students to attend Oomza Uni. (*Binti* 82)

The emphasis Okorafor places on "tribal" and "uncivilized" points to how the othering Binti faces creates situational irony. Binti's tribal magic is the ability to see and understand mathematics in an intuitive, organic way and the healing qualities of her *otjize*, the clay mixture that covers her skin and hair and marks her as Himba.

The concerns of individual and collective identity collide through Binti's initial encounter with the Meduse. The Meduse attack the ship – the Three Fish – carrying Binti to Oomza University, and she is saved by a piece of ancient technology that rapidly dehydrates the Meduse and can kill them. Binti calls this item her *edan*, and it provides both defense from and communication with the Meduse. During the initial crisis of the Meduse attack, Binti manages to activate the *edan*, something she previously thought

impossible: “‘*Edan*’ was a general name for a device too old for anyone to know its functions, so old that they were now just art” (16). In the second novella of the trilogy, *Binti: Home*, Binti spends significant time exploring her edan and learns how to activate it at will: “Quietly, I whispered my favorite equation and the blue current etched into the *edan*’s fractals of fine grooves and lines. I still did not know what it was, but after studying with Professor Okpala and studying *edan* itself, I knew how to make it speak and later sing” (*Home* 43). But in Binti’s initial encounter with the Meduse the edan “allows her to mimic speech” from the Meduse perspective (*Binti* 40). The edan presents an avenue to negotiation. Binti comes to realize the shared perspective of both human and Meduse: “Humans only understand violence” and “All [Meduse] do is kill” (42). The Meduse attack and the shared fear of reciprocal violence sets the stage for the trilogy’s exploration of otherness, isolation, and singularity that examines Binti’s relationships with her culture, the dominant human culture, and nonhuman, sapient lifeforms that challenge the supremacy of humanoid lifeforms in science fiction.

Binti’s forced hybridization with the Meduse interrogates both the instability of the multiple identities comprising a subject and the agency gained or denied by those identities, unlike the traditional notion of Bhabhian hybridity and its performance. In *Nation and Narration* (1990), Homi K. Bhabha notes that hybridization occurs in the contexts of identity and language, manifesting itself where marginalization forces an agent or group to confront the boundaries between the known and unknown:

The frontiers of cultural difference are always belated or secondary in the sense that their hybridity is never simply a question of the admixture of pre-given identities or essences. Hybridity is the perplexity of the living as it interrupts the

representation of the fullness of life; it is an instance of iteration, in the minority discourse, of the time of the arbitrary sign – ‘the minus in the origin’ – through which all forms of cultural meaning are open to translation because their enunciation resists totalization. (314)

In the *Binti* trilogy, hybridity appears in the physicality of Binti’s body, the existential realities of her emergent identity, and the collision between self and other. Binti herself is both the point-of-view subject in the series and the object of a concatenation of othering. Her self, the intrinsic essence of her being, synthesizes Binti’s position as an autonomous individual agent and her various forms of otherness through simultaneity as subject and object, self and other.

Binti’s hybridity leads to a layering of identities and manifests individualisms because Binti is a heterotopic entity. Instead of existing as a space that mirrors and reflects actual spaces in the world as sites of conquest, Binti is both the mirror and the site of contest herself. In “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” (1967), Foucault posits:

There are also, in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (3)

Heterotopias are composite spaces, often combining elements of several spaces that may or may not be incompatible with each other. A heterotopia like “the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a while series of places that are foreign to

one another” (6). Binti, as a heterotopic entity combines bodily, Indigenous, colonial subject, female, alien, and hybrid subjectivities, making the body a site of contest. While these subjectivities nest within or amalgamate with each other through posthuman transformations and acknowledged configurations like the Empire/subject dynamic, Binti exists in a space where she both occupies and reflects the conditions of her existence. Instead of refracting into a multitude of positionalities, Binti’s core identity creates an event horizon, a boundary that marks the point past which her position absorbs new identities without letting existing identities escape.

Binti resists totalization because she herself is composite. Binti is, figuratively, a hyper-massive entity like a black hole or neutron star. Her existence creates a gravitational effect that condenses and radiates individuality and individualism while absorbing the multivariate pressures on her person. She is a posthuman transformation of Bhabha’s hybridity, a polysynthetic entity that both attracts and repels the externalities that influence her being.²⁶ Binti unites multiple identities and positionalities in a way that creates a fusional individuality, creating a single unifying identity that would be impossible in Enlightenment constructions of the self. By combining a figurative black hole of identities and existing as a heterotopic entity, Binti layers her identity through a bricolage of individualities. Binti subsumes all positions in the Empire/individual dynamic, her hybridity overwriting Empire’s dominion over the individual entity by offering a posthuman transformation that moves beyond the human-alien hybrid into an existential hybridity that exists as both ontology and epistemology.

²⁶ Polysynthetic languages combine multiple morphemes into a single word-unit that operates as a complete sentence. In this sense, they are additive in a way that analytic languages like English are not. Native Alaskan and American languages are frequently polysynthetic.

Binti's being is, as evidenced by the combination of colonial education and Enlightenment abstractions of knowledge that Binti pushes against, situated in an individuality presupposed by her knowledge. In knowing herself, Binti knows the realities of all possible hybrid suggestions; in experiencing her metamorphoses, Binti obliterates the boundaries between the human as subject and as object. This kind of hybridity recalls the hybridization in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989). Like Lilith Iyapo, Binti becomes genetically entangled with another species. Unlike Lilith, however, Binti transforms her entanglement into agency that integrates the Meduse into the larger galactic community. Without Jodahs's intervention in *Imago* (1989), the Oankali would have eliminated humanity by folding it into the Oankali archive of genetic material.

To further complicate things, Binti's forced hybridization by the Meduse engages the reality of the Empire/subject dynamic and its British transmutation the Empire/citizen dynamic. To survive the Meduse attack and enter the broad galactic community, Binti's has no option but to integrate Meduse biology into herself. She becomes a medium who allows the Meduse to communicate cultural and epistemological knowledge with the rest of the galaxy. While anthropologists and other scholars at Oomza University have studied the Meduse, the Meduse do not reconcile with the university and humanity until Binti finds her own harmony within the galactic community. In the moment when Binti comes to recognize that sapient beings are often, if not always, colonial, she recognizes her knowledge of the relationships between a dominant culture and the culture it dominates:

This was my first time leaving the home of my parents. I had never even left my own city, let alone my planet Earth. Days later, in the blackness of space, everyone on my ship but the pilot was killed, many right before my eyes, by a people at war with those who view my own people as near slaves. (75)

Binti's hybridity, her unique combinate of Meduse and human biology, lets her synthesize and understand all the unspoken and inarticulable realities of Meduse culture. Binti's body amalgamates Meduse and human genetics in a way that places her within and without both species simultaneously. As a Himba, Binti experiences oppression and domination by the Khoush, humanity's dominant population throughout the galaxy. As a Meduse, Binti understands the transgressions that humans made against them.²⁷ As a hybrid, Binti bridges the distance between the Meduse and the larger galaxy through shared experiences. Instead of adopting and performing qualities of the dominant Khoush culture by entering war with the Meduse, Binti survives because the Meduse impose hybridity upon her; her only agency lies in choosing to live as a hybrid or die fully human.

Binti's hybridization with the Meduse happens in the scene where she relinquishes her edan and lets it fall from her grasp, making her vulnerable to the Meduse on the *Three Fish*. Breaking the connection with the edan, through which Binti had been channeling mathematical current, Binti says, "The *edan* fell from my hands. Right before

²⁷ In *Binti*, the first novella, Okorafor treats the concept of justice academically, as if it is achieved by returning that which was stolen (the Chief's stinger) and offering new terms of peace and integration. The series as a whole treats justice indirectly, but it philosophically questions dominant narratives about justice and individual perceptions of justice. In a dialog with Dele in *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, Binti resists being labeled Okwu's wife by Dele, but she struggles to assert her unique identity. Later, when she attempts to resolve the Khoush-Meduse conflict peacefully, violent disrupts the proceedings just as she notes that "If I ask each of you the reason [you started fighting], you'll cite different stories from so long ago that the grandchildren of the grandchildren of any possible witnesses are long dead" (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 114).

my eyes, I saw it and I wanted to laugh. The blue current I'd conjured danced before me, the definition of harmony made from chaos" (64-65). Releasing it makes Binti vulnerable to death both figuratively and literally. The Meduse can now kill her, but as Binti observes, she has already died once: "Death. When I left my home, I died ... Now I could never go back" (65). Binti highlights state of liminality, both uncertain and certain that will die a second death, but she also confronts the "ambivalence at the very heart of authority" (Ashcroft et al. 102). On the Three Fish, the Meduse are authority; through force of arms and will, they gain control and power over the ship's destiny (the *Three Fish* is a living organism) and its occupants. But the Meduse are also a resistance seeking to reclaim cultural property and by extension the symbolic power that the scholars of Oomza University stole: "'Our chief hates humans,' Okwu said. 'Humans took his stinger'" (58).

The act of hybridizing Binti requires the Meduse to sting her. She "felt the stinger plunge into [her] spine just before [she] blacked out" (64). Binti's realization that the sting irrevocably united her destiny and life with the Meduse came both slowly and immediately. She made her choice because she accepted the reality that "[she] could not have presented them if [she] was holding the *edan*" (64). During the conversation between Binti, the Meduse Chief, Okwu, and the Oomza University administrators, the Meduse receive an apology:

On behalf of all the people of Oomza Uni and on behalf of Oomza University, I apologize for the factions of a group of our own in taking the stringer from you, Chief Meduse. The scholars who did this will be found, expelled, and exiled. Museum specimens of such prestige are highly prized at our university, however

such things much only be acquired with permission from the people to whom they belong. (77)

Binti negotiates peace between the Meduse and the university before she realizes that she is no longer strictly human and that she has become a posthuman person. The administration's policy, official and measured, incorporates the Meduse into the galactic community. Oomza University also requests that Okwu stay behind as a student, both as a gesture of goodwill and a "renewal of the pack between human and Meduse" (77). Yet, the University's offer, unlike Binti, handwaves the human consequences of the Meduse's violence. Throughout the trilogy, Binti is haunted by the faces and deaths of the friends she made on the *Three Fish*, particularly Heru. The traumatic image of his chest exploding appears several times in each novella.

Binti's realization of her hybridization comes with acceptance by the Meduse and incorporation into the galactic sphere. Okwu tells her, when she asks, "Why?" that "[she] had to understand [them] and it was the only way." The Chief Meduse adds, "And [she] needed to prove to them that [she] was truly [their] ambassador, not prisoner" (80). Even then, Binti's agency during the negotiation is compromised; she's acting on behalf of the Meduse who have forced to become more like them both physically and mentally. Binti wrestles with an increasing sense of anger and volatility throughout the series. Binti completes the reintegration of herself and the Meduse into galaxy by performing a practical miracle; she heals the Chief, erasing the scar produced by reattaching the Meduse Chief's stinger: "I smeared a dollop of my *otjize* on the blue scar where [the stinger] had reattached. After a minute, I wiped some of it away. The blue scar was gone. Their chief had returned to its full royal translucence..." (84).

Like Binti, Oomza University is heterotopic, a site where knowledge and the crosspollination of knowledge both reflect and refract the other sites of the galaxy. By bringing multiple species together under a unifying pursuit, without erasing the conflicting or competing ideologies of those species, Oomza University becomes a site of resistance where multiple species collide. In the debates between scholars and the friction between species, the university presents all the features of the galaxy, including the colonial power apparatus and the colonial subjects' resistance. And, as a site of discourse, the university functions as both a pillar and a subversion of the dominant narrative. The prevailing discourse, that of institutional power and authority, situates the Meduse as violent beyond reason and outside the framework of normal sapient relations. However, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin note in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989):

... there is a built-in resistance in the construction of any dominant discourse – and opposition is an almost inevitable effect of its construction of cultural difference. Of course, what such authority least likes, and what presents it with its greatest threat, is any reminder of such ambivalence. This ambivalence at the heart of authority is exposed by the presence in the colonial subject of hybridization or colonial mimicry. (102)

Binti's hybridity reveals the gaps in Oomza University's view on the Meduse and the Khoush's grand narrative about their enemy.

Binti offers a new path, a sort of healing that undoes the scars of wars, but not the tribalist conflicts between the Meduse and the Khoush. Prior to her plea before the university administration, "The trouble between the Meduse and the Khoush was an old

fight and an older disagreement,” and “the Khoush expected everyone to remember their greatest enemy and injustice” (*Binti* 26). As with all colonial enemies and oppositional others, however, Binti cannot erase the tribalism that separates the Meduse and the Khoush. The bitter realities of their enmity persist despite the revelation that the Khoush started the conflict: “Okwu was Meduse and Professor Dema, a human woman, was Khoush. Their people had hated and killed each other for centuries. Tribal hatred lived, even in Oomza Uni” (*Home* 15). The conflict between Okwu and Professor Dema encapsulates a core question of the novellas: who, or *what*, possesses agency? In “*Binti’s R/Evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies*,” Dustin Crowley investigates the intersection of biology, environment, and body present throughout the novellas. Crowley notes, “Intention sits at the foundation of much of our understanding and practice regarding rights, subjectivity, and ethical responsibility, and has been deployed as a clear means of bifurcation between human and nonhuman” (“R/Evolutionary” 239). The Khoush grand narrative that Binti obliterates by hybridizing Himba and Meduse reveals that “the Meduse are not what we humans think. They are truth. They are clarity. They are decisive. There are sharp lines and edges. They understand honor and dishonor. I had to earn their honor and the only to do that was by dying a second time” (*Binti* 64).

Binti’s deaths – leaving home and incorporating Meduse genes and biology into her body – do not signal the end of her humanity; rather, they are the genesis of her actualization and growth as an individual autonomous agent. Binti manifests an individuality that cannot be mirrored or reflected by anyone else in the galaxy. She is uniquely Binti, a being that defies the order of the galaxy because she is both the point-of-view and the point-of-reflection. Like the mirror tunnel effect, Binti both sees and

reflects the opposition in her being. She can see how her positionality continues through infinite iterations of human, Himba, woman, Meduse, student, subject, object, other, agent, and colonial subject, as well as nonhuman and posthuman.

Binti's assemblage of identities is fractal in nature; like the infinite recursion of images in the mirror tunnel effect, the geometric patterns in a fractal scale to arbitrarily small levels and express self-similarity.²⁸ Self-similarity can be seen in nature and manmade objects; zooming in on a fractal yields an image or item that looks like the whole structure. Binti's identities are both infinitely recursive and self-similar. At a macro-level, she is human, nonhuman, and posthuman. Her initial state is human and does not contain self-similarity, but once she receives the Meduse genetic information and exhibits Meduse biological features, Binti ceases to be confined by a singular biological identity. She maintains her humanity, gains an identity linked to her Meduse integration, and breaks the boundaries of the human through her posthuman transformation. These three core identities each express aspects of her constituent identities: Himba, woman, student, subject, other, agent, and colonial subject. They overlap and separate; they differentiate but remain continuous. In this sense, Binti as an entity is punk. As mentioned in the introduction, Thomas Foster defines punk "a process of resisting commodity culture through practices of bricolage or the active expropriation and redefinition of commodities and their meaning" (xvii). Binti expropriates power from the very essence of life; she layers biology the way a punk rocker layers their visual identity with tattered jeans, liberty spikes, and embroidered patches.

²⁸ Fractals are "mathematical and natural objects that are self-similar: made up of the same motif repeated across scales, large and small" (Feldman 3).

The materiality of the body and the integration of the human, nonhuman, and posthuman in the *Binti* trilogy exhibits a different triangulation than Lilith Iyapo's progeny in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Lars Schmeink notes that "the punk connotation here seems construed and reflects less in the cultural artifacts associated with biopunk than in the new formed social and political movements, for example DIY biology and biohacking, that occupy anti-government and anti-corporate positions more sympathetic to 'punk' as a marker of their subversive viewpoints" (*Dystopia* 25). The Oankali *hack* the genetic code of all organisms they encounter, folding useful traits into their archive of genetic material. Genes that are harmful or detrimental from a human perspective, such as cancer, become the basis for new positive transformations in the hand of the Oankali. The speed at which cancer proliferates and the rapid generation of new cancer cells intrigue the Oankali because of their possibility in highspeed regeneration. Lilith's posthuman transformation, where she is both human and more than human, does not make her alien, even if it reinforces her otherness in the eyes of those who resist the Oankali.

Conversely, in the *Binti* trilogy, the fusion of human, nonhuman, and posthuman is not a biological hack. Instead, Binti integrates the alien into herself to become human and alien simultaneously. The *hack*, insofar as one occurs in the *Binti* trilogy, is not the biological reconfigurations but the retriangulation of alterity that Binti represents. Binti is a woman: she occupies a space that is more than liminal as an individual thrice marginalized. She triangulates the epistemological borders of gender, species, and power to form her own identity through conditions that do not exist for any other character. Her posthuman transformation as a Meduse-human hybrid, wherein her traditional Himba

braids become Meduse *okuoku*, unites species and culture to form a new path through the dominant sociocultural apparatus.

Oomza University provides a composite community that brings together species from across the galaxy under the banner of education, just as the colonizer's universities and education systems continue to do for humans on our own Earth. Binti joins Oomza University as a woman, a Himba, and a species hybrid, and she must forge a path that supports her personal and cultural identities as well as her biological. Binti's biological sex and gender identity are not mere convenience or based in familiarity; she must be female because she is a new type of entity, an engine of creation that restructures and destabilizes the grand narratives of Khoush dominion. This becomes more apparent in *Binti: Home*, which reveals that Binti has roots in two ethnic groups: the Himba and the Enyi Zinariya. Binti's ability to see, feel, and manipulate mathematical currents originates with nanotechnology that she inherited from the Enyi Zinariya, her father's people. The Enyi Zinariya are matriarchal and matrilineal. Binti's father can only pass on the nanobots and genetic code that makes the Enyi Zinariya posthuman; to activate those features requires intervention by the clan matriarch and priestess who acts as an archive of the Enyi Zinariya's history and knowledge.

During the first novella's climax, Binti's fusion of human, nonhuman, and posthuman allows her to mediate the climax through her slippage across the epistemological borders between Meduse and human. As the Chief Meduse and the Oomza administration stand on the precipice of violence, Binti notes that the university has "never seen the Meduse" (*Binti* 75). To be *seen* is not to be simply to be visually observed by another entity; it is to be acknowledged and accepted as a living being.

Oomza scholars know *of* the Meduse, but they do not *know* the Meduse because they have only observed from afar, employing the kind of etic observations and study that have long described other cultures in the language of the colonizer or the dominant culture. In *Home* and *The Night Masquerade*, Binti navigates her posthuman reality by ultimately accepting the interconnectedness of life and the reality, even if they are militaristic or pacifist, tribal or colonial, sapient life shares more connections than differences because they are capable of communicating, though not necessarily through words.

The quintessence of Binti's identity is her unique individuality that she forges from her multiple intersection traits. Binti is a hybrid entity who does not choose or perform hybridity but must accept it in the face of colonial domination and power. The longstanding conflict between the Meduse and the Khoush cannot be resolved without a medium that disrupts the boundaries of human and nonhuman.

Because Binti is heterotopic, she reflects both species back at their origins and across the divide between Meduse and Khoush. The dominant Khoush culture has already spread across the galaxy while Binti's Himba indigeneity represents a cloistered society suspicious of outsiders. While she has no choice but to hybridize and her agency, in that moment, is limited by the Meduse's threat of violence, Binti subsequently chooses to advocate for the Meduse as a species on equal footing with every other at Oomza University. She secures the return of the Chief Meduse's stinger, which had been stolen by Oomza University researchers and sparked the war between the Meduse and Khoush. Moreover, as testament to Binti's position as a mediator and hybrid, once the stinger is returned to the Chief Meduse, Binti discovers her original cultural position as a Himba

offers healing and reincorporation on a physical level. Binti's otjize, which she originally brings with her and later replicates with the soil on the planet that hosts Oomza University, heals Meduse. Her otjize becomes particularly important near the end of the first novella when Binti uses it as a curative to erase the scar from removing and reattaching the Chief Meduse's stinger.

In the case of the Chief Meduse's stinger, the scar's erasure does not function as a silencing of the other. Instead, Binti's ability to remove the scar through the properties of her cultural signifier indicates that she has transformed her forced hybridity into the possibility of restorative justice. The theft of the Chief Meduse's stinger represents the appropriation and separation of identity that colonization causes. The symbolic value of the stinger exceeds its biological function, as it is a sign of the Meduse's power and autonomy. Its theft by Khoush scholars demonstrates how colonial appropriation affects both body and culture. The stinger's placement in Oomza University's collections and archive of biological materials shows how colonial institutions assume ownership of the colonized body by holding onto remains and artifacts. During the negotiations between the Meduse and the Oomza University administration, the Oomza spokesperson says that "Oomza protocol is based on honor, respect, wisdom, and knowledge" (78). The Chief Meduse's stinger is ironically the symbol of *honor, respect, wisdom, and knowledge* among the Meduse.

Yet, the existence of a museum that archives body parts reflects the dehumanizing function of colonial institutions. Much like the museums of the 19th and 20th centuries, Oomza University's museums archive physical materials and remains. Inserting the body into the colonial archive is another way of making *things* out of people. Bodies, body

parts, clothing, and personal paraphernalia are exoticized to reinforce the power of the dominant culture. The symbolic significance of the Chief Meduse's stinger is immaterial once it is catalogued and archived; it simply represents a curiosity to be displayed, not an attempt to present or preserve the Meduse's cultural and historical identity.

SCIENCE FICTION AND COUNTERHERGEMONY

That the *Binti* trilogy is science fiction remains crucial to the discourse the novellas engage. The power of the colonized and the rhetoric of science fiction are intertwined in ways that reinforce the Eurocentric legacies of imperialism and colonialism. Joshua Yu Burnett argues in "The Great Change and the Great Book: Nnedi Okorafor's Postcolonial, Post-Apocalyptic Africa and the Promise of Black Speculative Fiction:"

...speculative fiction remained for so long a purportedly white (and straight, and male, and middle-class) genre and one associated with various forms of racism and colonialism rather than the launching pad for counterhegemonic discourse that writers such as Okorafor are turning it into. (136)

The act of re-visioning science fiction holds many parallels to punk ideology, and like *Binti* the character, the novellas exhibit punk characteristics in ways that both confirm and radically alter the punk identity.

Mainstream science fiction, on the other hand, often perpetuates and reinforces grand narratives and dominant cultural institutions. Systematic othering and exoticization of the Other, marketing difference as inferiority and tribalism, and claiming it is all done in service to the civilizing mission are core tropes in science fiction. Golden

Age science fiction codes this division explicitly, as indicated by the opening voice-over to the series *Star Trek* (1966-1969):

Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilizations; to boldly go where no man has gone before! (Roddenberry)

Even the pacifist framing of the United Federation of Planets cloaks itself the colonial enterprise with the phrase “strange new worlds.”

Destabilizing grand narratives and repurposing the tropes and themes of science fiction to disrupt the colonizer-colonized dynamic also recreates hybridity. Instead of using hybridity to incorporate both sides of the colonizer-colonized polarity, Okorafor reconfigures the role of hybridity in navigating the complex, multivariate realities of the postcolonial and neocolonial world. Likewise, Okorafor reconfigures the dominant themes and discourse about the neoliberal world that science fiction leading to and resulting from cyberpunk and derivatives rely on, namely the dissolution of the state apparatus, the prevalence of cultural colonization and appropriation, and the need for new individualisms to challenge these structures. James Snead argues his chapter “European Pedigrees/African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative, and Communitality in Tutuola, Achebe and Reed” for *Nation and Narration* (1990) that the foundational texts of a Eurocentric discourse are fundamentally hybrid and destabilizing. Writing about Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Goethe, Snead notes:

...despite general use of these authorial ‘founding fathers’ to stand for a white European cultural idea, the actual texts they have written seem radically *mixed*, even syncretistic. *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, *King Lear*, or

Faust would seem the last possible proof-texts for any *separationist* or *exclusionary* brand of racial or cultural hubris. It might seem a paradox, but the language of such texts ... is radically heterogeneous and eclectic. (233)

Punk texts are equally heterogeneous and eclectic because they reconstitute symbols of commodity culture through counterhegemonic use of individual expressions. In this way, punk texts create their own composite vernaculars that synthesize and syncretize cultural elements and signs.

Science fiction is a rich mode of storytelling for this purpose in general, and cyberpunk and its adjacent genres of science fiction are particularly so. Dick Hebdige argues in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) that “a credible image of social cohesion can only be maintained through the appropriation and redefinition of cultures of resistance,” and he continues, “Clearly, subcultures are not privileged forms; they do not stand outside the reflexive circuitry of production and reproduction which links together, at least on a symbolic level, the separate and fragmented pieces of the social totality” (85). Punk science fiction creates new social totalities from the signs and symbols of the dominant culture by reassigning meaning and intentionally corrupting or perverting social hierarchy. In the introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2004), Nalo Hopkinson describes postcolonial science fiction and fantasy as “stories that take the meme of colonizing the natives and, from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it, with irony, with anger, with humour, and also, with love and respect for the genre of science fiction that makes it possible to think about new ways of doing things (9-10). Consequently, postcolonial punk, as Eric D. Smith argues in *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of*

Hope (2012), accelerates “the form to its terminal velocity, through appropriate its penchant for cynicism, stereotype, and kinesis and carrying these to their perdurable limits” (161).

The *Binti* trilogy is punk insofar as it amalgamates and composites signs of cultural appropriation and cultural dominance into a vernacular of resistance and individuality that challenges the epistemological foundations of colonialism. Binti, the character, seeks knowledge and represents knowledge that can only be gained through the reconfiguration of the human and its hybridization with the alien, the nonhuman. Jessica Langer observes in *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011) that “the matter of the ‘hybrid’ – the person, the planet, the society – is a common trope in science fiction, so much so that it has become almost a cliché” (107). Yet, Okorafor finds a way of making the hybrid new. If, as Langer argues, the hybrid is so common as to be part of the dominant discourse, then hybridization casts “hybridity in one sense as a rigid form imposed on colonized people by their colonizers, and as a source of limitation rather than freedom” (107). Furthermore, in Ania Loomba’s book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2005), Loomba explains that “one of the most striking contradictions about colonialism is that it both needs to ‘civilise’ its ‘others,’ and to fix them in perpetual ‘otherness’” (173).

Violence, in *Binti*, triggers and catalyzes change, as Bettina Burger argues in “Math and Magic: Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti* Trilogy and Its Challenge to the Dominance of Western Science Fiction.” Violence is inextricably connected to “the African epistemologies and ontologies underlying the narrative – the fact that nearly all forms of connection originate in either violence or interactions of dubious consent may to the

violence involved in past as well as present-day processes of hybridization” (Burger 375). The violence of colonialism spans epistemological and ontological concerns; it is political, cultural, and visceral. Bhabhaian hybridity suggests that the performance of assimilatory behaviors provides a way to negotiate the complex relationship between colonizer and colonized. *Binti* contests this notion by situating hybridity always already integrated in violence and coercion. The boundaries between self and other are obliterated by violence and necessity in Okorafor’s trilogy because Binti is the colonized native and must become the alien other to enter mainstream culture. Oomza University represents the utopian ideal of hybridity, while Binti herself yields the practical realization that hybridity is violence.

As a punk character, Binti reconfigures the violence of both colonizer and colonized into her own “culture of resistance.” Physically, she fuses the signs of her human and Himba origins with elements of the Meduse. Her braids become okuoku, the tentacular appendages of the Meduse. Epistemologically, Binti combines Himba, and therefore Indigenous, knowledge with the shared knowledge of the Meduse to acquire the authorized knowledge of Oomza University. Jessica Langer notes that “the conflict between indigenous methods of knowledge-production and the Western scientific paradigm is often expressed through traumatic and destructive hybridity ... and is often resolved through hybridity that is productive and allows for synthesis” (127). Binti is synthesis born of “destructive hybridity;” she must die twice to emerge as a being that can reconcile the Meduse and the galactic community. Indeed, Okorafor uses “the interpolation of divinity, spirituality and folktale with science fiction” to contest the “erasure of the narratives [that] is a central function of colonial power” (129).

Furthermore, Langer notes that “cultural difference is ... predicated not only across space but also across *time*” (130). Examining Binti’s individual traits, the composite elements that comprise her identity, yields more than the information that she is a human, nonhuman, woman, and hybrid. The label “harmonizer” both describes Binti’s function in the novellas and the core of her individuality. Her hybridity is an individualism, much like punk, that destabilizes the dominant sociocultural paradigm. She facilitates the end of the Meduse-Khoush war and performs a restorative act that erases one physical scar of colonial othering. Yet, the cost is death, both epistemological and biological.

Individualism depends on autonomous selfhood and the differentiation of the individual autonomous agent. Traditionally, individualism in the Western, Eurocentric context “centers on the assumption that every man is the sole proprietor of his own person and capacities and as such owes nothing to society for them” (Crittenden 13). Conversely, in the communitarian view, as Jack Crittenden notes in *Beyond Individualism: Reconstituting the Liberal Self* (1992), “individualism fragments and destroys deep meaningful relationship by conceiving of men as socially independent atoms without obligations to society or to others ... Relationships and community ties are thus entered into voluntarily” (13). The individual autonomous agent of Enlightenment thinking creates an atomistic exceptionalism that centers on the individual and their definition of self. In Crittenden’s construction, the self “is a two-part ‘system’: how a person defines himself and what he defines himself as. The first we call *agency*; the second, *self-definition*” (44). The relationships between self and other, which are voluntary to liberal agent of Enlightenment thinking, are only constitutive of the self in oppositional terms. The *self* is I and me; the *other* is you and them. This dichotomy

forms the basis of all psychological rejection of the other, for the other is not like me, or as Emmanuel Levinas writes in *Alterity and Transcendence* (2001), “L’autre est altérité” – the other is alterity (103). Levinas’s conception of alterity contends, as Brian Treanor argues *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate* (2007), that “otherness must be *absolute*” (5).

This construction of alterity accepts that only the relationship between self and other is nonvoluntary; it exists as a *prima facie* condition of living in a world where there are animals, peoples, and things that are *not me*. Indeed, alterity is built into the Enlightenment individualism that constitutes the liberal self that derives from John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Crittenden contends that the antithesis of individualism is communitarianism: “...the communitarians and the liberal individualists that they criticize manifest profound differences over questions about the nature of selfhood, the place of community in developing identity, and the meaning and significance of freedom and social obligation” (13). The individualist “[interiorize] selfhood and [relies] on itself for standards or criteria” (27). Furthermore, under the communitarian viewpoint where relationships and contracts voluntarily come into being, autonomy presents a significant risk to the communitarian viewpoint: “Through autonomy an individual can transcend the moral limitations of his traditions, but the community derived from that tradition must order banishment or death of its transcendents so as to maintain its integrity and cohesion” (28). The independent autonomous agent thus seems a contradiction born out of the primacy of selfhood in Western thought. When Descartes uttered the words, “*Cogito ergo sum*,” he not only located selfhood insight the person but also inside the subject’s construction of their person.

Binti setting out for Oomza University was the catalyst for her transformation from communitarian self to an individualistic self. If Binti had simply become the sort of atomistic individual born of Enlightenment thinking and ethics, the decision to make her Himba would be arbitrary. Any tribal or cloistered community would have worked for the narrative. Binti, however, must be Himba, and she must be a woman because her decision to leave for Oomza University disrupts the marriage economy in the village:

In my absence, my parents would growl at each other that I was to never set foot in their home again. My four aunts and two uncles who lived down the road would shout and gossip among themselves about how I'd scandalized our entire bloodline. I was going to be a pariah. (*Binti* 9)

From the outset of her story, Binti is at odds with the communitarian impulses of her tribe and family. She knows that leaving will destroy her chance of marriage, but she also puts her happiness and curiosity above the needs of the family. Fundamentally, this is a counterhegemonic act that resists the dominance of custom and tradition in her tribe and the Himba's resignation to isolation from the Khoush. Colonialism presses epistemology and knowing in service to capitalism; yet, Binti's journeys are motivated by self-improvement and self-knowledge. She frames her own epistemology as a way to move beyond the colonized/colonizer dynamic and the rigidity of her tribe's traditionalism.

Binti's individuality is apparent from the beginning of her story, but her individualism is emergent and changes as she counters new people, species, knowledge, and situations outside the cultural boundaries of her Himba heritage. Likewise, Binti does not want to jettison her Himba heritage; it in many cases allows her how to survive and navigate conflicts that many others do not. Her *otjize* and its curative properties

secure her negotiations with the Meduse. Although they fear her edan, as Binti notes, “The *otjize* created by my people, mixed with my homeland. This was the foundation of the Meduse’s respect for me” (88). In the same scene, Binti discovers that the *otjize* she made at Oomza University possesses the same curative properties, but not until after the moment she realizes that Okwu is her friend. Binti continues to identify as Himba and embrace her Himba origins despite evolving through the integration of the Meduse genetic material and her posthuman transformations. Part of Binti’s individualistic drive is to remain Himba, even as she chooses her happiness over the communities. Moreover, Binti relies on the skills and abilities she has because she is Himba. As a harmonizer, her combination of mathematics and science takes on a magical, spiritual aspect:

Math and magic, for instance, are shown as being intricately woven together, while Binti’s Namibian Himba heritage does not only contribute to the magical facets of the trilogy but is also instrumental in explaining both her fascination with and her aptitude for mathematics and technology. Math *as* magic and the subversion of binaries and boundaries between human and non-human entities work together to challenge the dominance of Enlightenment-based Western science as the basis for contemporary science fiction. (Burger 366)

Thus, there is a confluence of cultural elements from multiple sources in Binti’s hybridity. Human combines with Meduse; individualism confronts communitarianism; Enlightenment thought and the institutions of Western power, like the university, stand as markers of the dominance of European colonial structures. All of this destabilizes and decenters the grand narratives of Enlightenment thinking and the traditional notions of

hybridity that suggest it is a way of negotiating the reality of marginalization in the face of the colonizer or oppressor.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronan, in *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (2008), provides a term that encapsulates the sort of multivalent collision we see in Okorafor's science fiction. Csicsery-Ronan defines *science-fictionality* as "a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work in science fiction" (2). Science fiction, because it is a mode of cultural production and not simply a genre or taxonomic category, allows for the creation of cultural artifacts that deconstruct standard modes of cultural production. A science fiction novel, like *A Canticle for Liebowitz* (1959), that focuses on archiving, retrieving, memorizing, and rewriting books to preserve knowledge lost after an apocalyptic war turn the Catholic Church's propensity to acquire and hoard knowledge into a system of restoring the archive of human knowledge. The *Binti* trilogy asks what happens when you take a girl from a cloistered, Indigenous population, send her out into the galaxy, and subject her to the trauma of war and forced hybridization. Even fantasy settings like *Spelljammer* can't unify so many fictive elements without feeling disorganized and dissociated.²⁹ Okorafor, however, unites these elements in a story about one girl and her desire to find self-fulfillment.

Science fiction, specifically punk science fiction, provides an avenue for repurposing a space opera that combines a colonial education narrative with a *bildungsroman*. The *Binti* trilogy follows Binti during her coming-of-age process and her

²⁹ *Spelljammer* is a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign setting that involves magnificent magic powered ships that travel both terrestrial and celestial territories. It was originally published for the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying system, but it has since been adapted and released for subsequent version of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The 5E (fifth edition) rulebook was last updated by Wizards of the Coast, a subsidiary of Hasbro that now owns the *D&D* intellectual property, in 2024.

entry into adulthood. Okorafor intentionally places Binti on the cusp of womanhood to capitalize on the novella's themes of transformation, rebirth, and epistemological death. As Binti prepares for the ritual pilgrimage that will mark her entry into womanhood, she encounters the Night Masquerade, a spiritual entity that only boys and men can see: "Only men and boys were said to even have the ability to *see* the Night Masquerade and only those who were heroes of Himba families got to see it. No one ever spoke of what happened after seeing it" (*Home* 89). In the first novella, when Binti explains her plan to advocate for the Meduse once they arrive at Oomza University, she tells Okwu, "Imagine what you will be. Imagine if my plan works. You'll get the stinger back and none of you will have died. You'll be a hero," and Okwu replies, "We don't care about being heroes" (58). Yet, in the narrative sense, both Binti and Okwu become heroes after Binti secures a non-violent resolution to the Meduse's cultural reclamation. In *Home*, Binti's passage to womanhood is interrupted by the appearance of a spiritual entity normally inaccessible to woman, and its coming signals the beginning of Binti's nonstandard rite of passage: "Seeing the Night Masquerade had lived up to its mythology. To see it *did* signify immediate drastic change" (126). As a punk character who layers the signs and symbols of dominant science fiction narratives, Binti and her passage into woman signify a radical reconfiguration of the tropes that built science fiction.

Labeling the *Binti* trilogy cyberpunk or spacepunk or any other individual mode of punk science fiction ignores the existential realities that Binti faces as a transgressive woman who resists the totalizing forces of Empire and colonization. That said, Binti is punk; she constitutes herself through the layering of identities and individuality, and her

narrative arises from an expropriation of power and form from the grand narratives of science fiction:

The Stranger, or the Other, and the Strange Land – whether actually empty or filled with those Others, savages whose lives are considered forfeit and whose culture is seen as abbreviated and misshaped who are nevertheless compelling in their very strangeness – are at the very heart of the colonial project, and their dispelling is at the heart of the postcolonial one. (Langer 4).

Thus, Binti creates a postcolonial individualism that recognizes the network of relationships an individual connects with to create their own identity. Jessica Langer argues that “postcolonial science fiction hybridizes” the Stranger and the Strange Land in a Bhabhaian masquerade, but Binti does not masquerade as a subject constituted and appropriated by the relationship between the colonizer and the other. Rather, Binti retriangulates the center and moves it outside the colonial-postcolonial binary.

As a punk character, Binti creates a new sort of individualism that fuses her increasing numbers of otherness into a subject position that does not fit into the narrative that colonial discourse and rhetoric assumes about the other. In a brief piece titled “African Cyberpunk” for the web magazine *Wired*, Bruce Sterling argues that “Africa is science fiction ... Africa cyberpunk;” he notes that “Africa lends herself to the dystopian gloom of failed states, the iron rule of corruption, cartels snaking cold fingers in the upper echelons of government, and high tech gangs of disillusioned youth.” These dystopian characteristics can be seen in the colonizer-colonized dynamic and the relationship between Empire and subject because the colonial project and the dissolution of the neoliberal state preconfigured the world and the postcolony for these realities. The

instability of Africa, as viewed through an Anglocentric and Eurocentric lens, fails to account for the heteroglossia inherent in the colonial or imperial subject's voice. Binti's individualism does not stem from a utopian manifestation of hybridity; instead, it originates in the repurposing of signs and signifiers of disparate cultural, social, economic, and ontological formations. Binti subverts the science fiction discourse of the *Stranger* and the *Strange Land* not by crystallizing the realities of the colonial apparatus into a tangible, solid construct but by fragmenting these grand narratives through subversive reconstruction of the individual-collective spectrum.

Moving the center outside the colonial-postcolonial binary is an intentional transgression against the grand narratives of science fiction. On the night Binti encounters the Night Masquerade and begins her pilgrimage into the desert, she is greeted by the 'Desert People,' "old old Africans" who call themselves the Enyi Zinariya. Binti's grandmother is among them and explains to Binti that "contrary to what you all believe, we have technology that puts yours to shame and we've had it for centuries" (127). The Enyi Zinariya are a posthuman tribe, and they live apart from the domestic settlements and urban centers of the world. Living in the Hinterlands, they cultivate a culture distinguished by their own incorporation of alien technology into their body. During an encounter with an alien species – the Zinariya – on its way to Oomza University in the very distant past, the Enyi Zinariya were gifted biological technology that they incorporated into their bodies and that transmitted to their descendants. These nanoids, also called zinariya, enable the members of the tribe to manipulate and organize currents of data for tasks such as long-distance communication or communication with nonhumans.

Binti's pilgrimage to meet the priest of the Enyi Zinariya – the Ariya – revolves around the individual-collective binary. When Binti asks Mwinyi, a harmonizer of the Enyi Zinariya, how he knows about a creature that used to live in a lake, he responds, “It's in the Collective ... That's the Enyi Zinariya's memory that we can all touch” (139). The Collective – a collective memory and a collective intelligence – provides Binti with another identity. By undergoing the Enyi Zinariya activation ritual, wherein the dormant nanoids Binti has received from her Enyi Zinariya father and heritage, she will “connect to ... an entire people and a memory. And [it] will allow [her] to solve [her] *edan*” (149). Through the activation ritual, Binti gains the ability to see and transmit information as tangible objects – small spheres to be moved and manipulated. The spheres allow something like quantum tunneling. Information becomes a particle, the zinariya allows Binti and the Enya Zinariya to send information across great distances and through barriers.

At the end of *Home*, Binti further layers her identity by incorporating another Indigenous identity into her own. A woman, a harmonizer, a Himba, an Enyi Zinariya, a Meduse, a human, a nonhuman, a hybrid – she manifests her own fractal geometry, forming an infinitely recursive identity that unites multiple individualities into a transgressive and subversive individualism. Similarly, Okorafor unites multiple types of science fiction in the science fictionality of the trilogy. Binti's biological posthumanism and hybridization are biopunk. Her journey to Oomza University and integration into the galactic community is space opera. The dystopian elements of the trilogy emerge in the form of colonial-postcolonial dynamics. The Khoush, despite Binti's efforts in the first novella, still harbor a deep hatred for the Meduse, and those old wounds do not heal

easily. The enmity reignites when the Khoush attack Okwu while Binti is with the Enyi Zinariya. As a character, Binti integrates identities in a way that expropriates power from the dominant cultural apparatus. All of this, when combined with a narrative about colonial education and a woman's coming of age, points to the fact that the genesis of life can only be understood in terms of the female body.

Thus, Okorafor triangulates the relationship between the body and creation by subverting a category of science fiction largely dominated by white male authors – punk science fiction. When Binti receives the Meduse DNA, she becomes a human-meduse hybrid and an entity that unites the human with the other. The first novella *Binti* is the story of Binti's transformation into a harmonizer that unites and mediates the human-nonhuman divide. In *Home*, she undergoes further transformation by activating the latent alien technology in her body – the zinariya – to gain a new type of vision and sight. This second transformation constitutes Binti's third death, where each death is an ontological reconfiguration of her bodily identity and an epistemological restructuring of her ways of knowing. Her Himba and Enyi Zinariya heritage represents the disconnects between patriarchy (Himba) and matriarchy (Enyi Zinariya) and how they view the female body, one as a site of conquest and the other as foundation of social organization. As such, Binti cannot be male, indeed, must be female so that she can extend the genetic lineage of the Enyi Zinariya through reproduction. Disrupting the Himba patriarchy, as established in *Binti*, is something Binti was always read to do: she defied her father to attend Oomza University.

Okorafor's concept of the harmonizer begins with the ability to see the current of mathematics in the universe. As a harmonizer, Binti can see and manipulate data

streams, an ability that grows once she activates the Zinariya nanoids in her body.

Through her hybridization with the Meduse, Binti gains access to her first collective consciousness, one that is at times rage-filled. The activation of the Zinariya integrates her into the Collective – the memory and consciousness of the Enyi Zinariya. Thus, Binti embodies the ability to manipulate data streams physically. Her biological alterations and transformations turn her physical body into a tool for reconfiguring, broadcasting, calculating, and receiving information; she is a living conduit of applied mathematics. Binti's construction as a character allows Okorafor to challenge colonial representations of the body, as described by Elleke Boehmer in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005):

In colonial representation, exclusions, suppression and relegation can often been seen as literally *embodied*. From the point of view of the coloniser specifically, fears and curiosities, sublimated fascinations with the stranger or 'the primitive', are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images. The seductive and/or repulsive qualities of the wild or other, as well as its punishment and expulsion from the community, are figured on the body, and as (fleshly, corporeal, often speechless) body. (129)

Binti explodes this representation of the colonized body and disintegrates the colonial, Enlightenment-based construction of the individual. As an individual autonomous agent, Binti claims for herself and those forcibly hybridized by Empire an agency that not only challenges supremacy of white, male, middle-class ideologies but also triangulates a new individualism outside the colonial-postcolonial binary.

Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy combines types of science fiction the same way that Binti composites self-identification. As a composite subject, Binti operates an autonomous individual agent that mirrors and reflects all possible identities, creating a sort of hyperreal subjectivity that cannot be contained by colonial or normative Western constructions of the subject. Whenever Binti gains a new positionality, whether through biological transformation or the exercise of her own agency, Binti reconstitutes herself and decenters and contests the dominance of white, male, middle-class and patriarchal social organizations propagated throughout the world by colonialism and imperialism. The act of reconstitution through compositing identities creates a sort of layering that makes Binti punk. She expropriates power from the grand narratives of colonialism, the body, and the self, and reconfigures that power in a way that both subverts and transgresses the epistemological boundaries that constrain contemporary society.

Furthermore, as a punk construction, Okorafor repurposes a white, middle-class subculture by changing the expropriation of power from the signs of commodity culture to the expropriation of power from the narratives of colonialism. Binti's postcolony recognizes that the performance of hybridity cannot be removed from the colonial-postcolonial binary and acknowledges that hybridity is always already forced. The colonized do not choose to be hybrid; they are made hybrid by the colonizer's execution of force and will on the colonial subject. By combining a colonial education narrative and *bildungsroman* with science fiction, Okorafor uses the science fictionality of her narrative to further destabilize the "twin myths" of colonization: the Stranger and the Stranger land. In the *Binti* trilogy, nonhuman aliens are not the colonial subject or even the other in a traditional sense; they are sentient, autonomous individuals that exist as

people in their own right. Okwu, despite being tagged with the pronoun “it,” is never anything less than a fully actualized being. That Binti sees him as a monster and other reflects the anthropocentric bias of science fiction and its complicity in the grand narratives of colonial.

Binti, however, syncretizes all the various forms of the Other that colonialism has to offer. Her body is subject to violation by a superior physical force; her body contains the legacy of contact with the colonizer (the Zinariya); she culturally identifies as Himba, an Indigenous tribe, but learns that she is also the daughter of another heritage as well, the Enyi Zinariya. Instead of, however, being a victim or a totem for the grievances of the colonized or being a symbol of the colonizer’s fetishes, Binti presents a new form of individualism that syncretizes and layers her multiple identities into a singularity. Her individuality and increasing separation from and connection to multiple subject positions allows Okorafor to challenge the grand narratives of imperialism and colonialism and science fiction simultaneously. Instead of presenting reading with a narrative that simplifies the dynamic between colonizer and colonized, Okorafor makes the relationship increasingly complex. Like neurons in a neural network, Binti’s subject positions connect to multiple other subject positions without a linear logic, and to further compound things, those connections may be unidirectional, bidirectional, and multidirectional. In doing this, Okorafor creates a new form of punk that is distinctly her own. Space opera, biopunk, colonial education, *bildungsroman*, and feminist topologies combine in a fractal geometry that allows for an infinitively recursive and discursive examination of the individual autonomous agent outside standard Western, Enlightenment paradigms.

CHAPTER 5

WHEN DOVES CRY

This chapter investigates the relationship between the outsider and Empire by examining the outsider's presence in the metropole and effect on its empire. The limited-run comic book series *Far Sector* by author N.K. Jemisin and artist Jamal Campbell tells the story of Sojourner "Jo" Mullein, a Green Lantern, as she solves a murder for the Trilogy, a hyper-advanced civilization composed of three complex humanoid species. Expansive and resource hungry, the Trilogy maintain their own interstellar empire, and the empire's metropole – the City Enduring – is both megapolis and repeating island. The relationships between the Nah, the @At, and the keh-Topli demonstrate intense friction, an inheritance from an invading empire that left the Trilogy on the brink of extinction just as they were becoming capable of interstellar travel:

One upon a time there were three species that evolved on two planets in the same solar system. Lucky! They developed together, helping each other advance and grow. Then along came *an empire* from elsewhere in the galaxy. Not so lucky, that. The empire told the Nah that the keh-Topli had eaten some of their children. Told the keh-Topli that the @At had deleted priceless seed data. Told the @At ... well. You get the idea. We've seen this on Earth. Rwanda. Nazi Germany. Presidential elections. A time-tested tactic ... Divide and conquer. (Jemisin and Campbell 18)

The appearance of the invasive empire, as always, changed the trajectory of development for the indigenous civilizations. Three species that previously interacted with relative cooperation destroyed two planets and most of their evacuation starships in a war instigated by an external threat. The war's decimation permanently altered the planetary system where the Trilogy developed, yet the narrative makes no mention of where the invading empire went or what they wanted: they were simply an *empire*.

The science fictional elements of *Far Sector* and Jemisin's carefully selected epigrams combine for a deliberate interrogation of Empire and neocolonialism. From the humanoid three alien species to the design of the City Enduring (and its name), Jemisin curates a science fictional setting that recognizes Empire exists even in worlds that claim no empires. Like the contemporary United States, the City Enduring and its people – the Trilogy – do not openly or perhaps consciously recognize their colonial enterprise and imperial apparatus. The ruling council, composed of a representative from each of the Trilogy's three species, is autocratic, even though most policy is ostensibly decided through pure democracy. Class structure is largely hereditary, in the case of the Nah and keh-Topli, and based on processing power and influence in the case of the @At. In place of racism, there is obvious speciesism and a highly fractious social order. Many of the @At live in virtual ghettos and slums; the Nah have a dominant presence in law enforcement and the military. All three species have representatives in all sectors of the labor market and social hierarchy, but the keh-Topli are also subject to constant suspicion, as “The keh-Topli evolved to prefer other thinking beings as food” (Jemisin and Campbell 45).

At its core, however, *Far Sector* is the story of an outsider and the disruption they bring to the empire they've entered. In *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*, Jessica Langer writes that "the figure of the alien – extraterrestrial, technological, human-hybrid or otherwise – and the figure of the far away planet ripe for the taking are deep and twin signifiers in science fiction" (2). As Jemisin puts it:

[Mullein is] a stranger in a strange land – operating outside of the normal jurisdiction of Green Lanterns, without anyone to call for help, in a city of people who in many cases resemble humans, but who can be deeply, frighteningly alien. Settings like this are a perfect way to mirror and explore the human condition.
(304)

Far Sector provides a Baudrillardian simulation by mirroring the contemporary political reality of the United States's silent empire and the ongoing confrontation between its dominant culture and the Other. Barack Obama's presidency was a clear and present danger to the white supremacist world order that props up the institutional inequality and social injustice built into the American cultural reality; consequently, the white majority rallied together in 2016 and elected Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States. In a campaign based on rhetorical othering and marginalization, Trump mobilized voters that feared the threat to the world order that protects their privilege.

During Trump's first term in office, political activism began more actively pushing back against the patriarchal, racist status quo. #MeToo became a prominent activist movement following the 2017 revelations about Harvey Weinstein's serial sexual abuse and violence against vulnerable women. Victims of sexual violence, including celebrities, began using the hashtag #MeToo to express solidarity and the commonness of

sexual violence.³⁰ Black Lives Matter delivered a second tsunami of awareness about institutional racism and the codification of white privilege in American institutions.³¹ Motivated by several high-profile cases of racial and police violence against Black Americans, particularly the murders of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, Black Lives Matter organized protests and rallies to illuminate the continuous marginalization that people of color face in the United States. Conversely, Southern states and cities began removing symbols and signifiers of the Confederacy because of Dylann Roof's shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015. In 2017, following the proposed removal of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's statue from Lee Park, white nationalists held the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina ("An Incredible Day," Rankin).³² During the rally, James Alex Fields, Jr., murdered Heather Heyer and injured 35 other people by driving his car into a group of counter protestors ("White Nationalist Rally", Rankin). In response to the rally and the violence that occurred there, Trump refused to outright condemn white supremacist rhetoric and behavior saying the following:

"What about the alt-left that came charging at, as you say, at the alt-right? Do they have any semblance of guilt?"

³⁰ Activist Tarana Burke began the "Me Too" movement in 2006 and secured its first grant in 2007. Using the, at the time, highly popular social media site MySpace, Burke created a community that initially sought to serve young women but which soon expanded to include all survivors of sexual violence because, as she stated in a *Washington Post* article, "This is necessary. People are crying for it" (Ohlheiser). When the hashtag went viral in 2017, "Me Too" had already been around for a decade and doing work that the viral success of the hashtag seemed to appropriate into the dominant cultural apparatus.

³¹ Per BlackLivesMatter.com, "In 2013, three radical Black organizers – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – created a Black-centered political-movement-building project called #BlackLivesMatter in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman."

³² In an article for the Associated Press, Sarah Rankin states, "The statue's removal came more than five years after racial justice activists had renewed a push to take down the monument, an initiative that drew the attention of white supremacists and other racist groups, culminating in the violent 'Unite the Right' rally in 2017."

“I’ve condemned neo-Nazis. I’ve condemned many different groups. But not all of those people were neo-Nazis, believe me.”

“You had many people in that group other than neo-Nazis and white nationalists. The press has treated them absolutely unfairly.”

“You also had some very fine people on both sides.” (Gray 2)

Trump’s response emboldened white nationalists, and during his 2024 campaign for President, Trump actively mobilized their support by promising to pardon the January Sixth Insurrectionists and relying on xenophobic rhetoric about people of color, particularly migrants and undocumented citizens.

Postcolonial science fiction engages political realities directly, turning fictional locales into sites of contestation by defamiliarizing existential realities. The alien planet or near future megapolis are more than heterotopic, they create entire realities designed to reflect the present back upon itself. The site of contestation, removed from the existential reality that readers take for granted, the reality of their everyday lives, uses simulations and simulacra to illuminate deep cracks in the image projected by dominant cultures, particularly the dominant cultures that continue to perpetuate Western Enlightenment Thinking: the U.S., the E.U., and the Commonwealth. Thus, the stranger and the stranger land provide writers of science fiction with opportunities to bypass the inherent resistance of entrenched racism and dominant sociocultural narratives:

Rather than shying away from these colonial tropes, these twin giants of the science fiction world, postcolonial science fiction hybridizes them, parodies them and/or mimics them against the grain in a play of Bhabhaian masquerade. The figure of the alien comes to signify all kinds of otherness, and the image of the

far-away land, whether the undiscovered country or the imperial seat, comes to signify all kinds of diaspora and movement, in all directions. Their very power, their situation at the centre of the colonial imagination as simultaneous desire and nightmare, is turned back in on itself. (Langer 4)

Sojourner Mullein is more than just the stranger in a strange land, she is the embodiment of both the alien and the Other. The population of the City Enduring numbers 20 billion, and Mullein is the only human among them.

IN BRIGHTEST DAY, IN BLACKEST NIGHT

Far Sector is a Green Lantern comic book series, and Green Lanterns have always been, whether human or nonhuman, more human than most of their superhero counterparts. The Green Lantern Corps, organized by the Guardians of Oa, are intergalactic guardians of peace and goodwill. Their power comes from a green Power Ring that harnesses their willpower and creativity to create constructs of solid light and devastating blasts of energy. Most Green Lanterns are chosen by the individual ring they wear. When a Green Lantern dies or the need for a new Lantern arises, the rings search for a bearer who will act without fear and demonstrate extraordinary force of will. A Lantern's ring is semi-intelligent, in that it can receive and process willpower and search for a new bearer when needed, but it is ultimately a funnel for the bearer's will to do *right* and uphold justice, peace, and morality.

Jemisin reimagines the Green Lantern with Sojourner Mullein and her ring.

Unlike Alan Scott, Hal Jordan, John Stewart, Guy Gardner, Simon Baz, and Jessica Cruz, Mullein's ring is self-replenishing. She does not need an Oan Power Battery to recharge her ring. The tradeoffs, however, are a lower threshold of absolute power and a recharge

time. Mullen must be judicious with her ring because she has no way to power it up immediately. Likewise, her position as a Green Lantern is contingent; she must prove herself worthy of being a Green Lantern. The Oan guardian who recruits her notes that “[t]he will to overcome fear is powerful, but *singular*. An acute manifestation. What I have chosen to study in the more nuanced willpower required to *live with* fear” (Jemisin and Campbell 163).

Nonhuman Green Lanterns are almost universally described as fearless, as beings who do not feel or experience fear. Human Green Lanterns, however, are different. Green Lantern power rings suffer from the Yellow Vulnerability; that is, they cannot manipulate objects that are yellow or counter the constructs of the Sinestro Corps who create fear in others to fuel their power rings. Human Green Lanterns all exhibit the ability to act despite fear; to overcome the existential realities of failure and weakness; they find the will to act despite overwhelming odds and mountainous obstacles. Hal Jordan, the Silver Age Green Lantern, overcame the Yellow Vulnerability by overwhelming his ring’s weakness to yellow through sheer force of will, and the other human Green Lanterns followed suit. Ultimately, Hal Jordan forced the being known as Parallax to confront him and possess Jordan; Parallax – an entity of pure fear – was trapped in the Central Oan Power Battery and its presence, its corruption caused the Yellow Vulnerability. For nonhuman Lanterns, Parallax’s defeat resolved their weakness to the color yellow.

As a human Green Lantern, and an individual particularly capable of living and acting in the face of fear, she is particularly suited to be the Green Lantern of the City Enduring. Mullen is African American, female, and queer. Her intersectionality and the

contingent nature of her appointment position Mullen as an agent of change. As the Oan Guardian who recruits her says of her ring, “This is the will that fuels *your* ring, Sojourner Mullen. It spikes lower, in terms of absolute power. But once you learn to harness it fully, worlds will fall before you, and arise transformed” (163-164). Sojourner Mullen is a transformative agent; in an empire where she is the singular representative of both the human species and the Green Lantern Corps, she brings about a revolution in the City Enduring. The comic series ends with a democratic referendum that reshapes the Trilogy’s entire world order.

THE STRANGER AND EVEN STRANGER BEINGS

Sojourner Mullen, as I have mentioned, is the stranger in a strange land. The sole human in the City Enduring, Mullen is isolated in a Swiftian manner; like Gulliver and the fantastic lands he visits, Mullen and the City Enduring create an oppositional irony that reflects and magnifies the features of the human. Indeed, Jemisin makes clear Mullen’s humanity and human needs by weaving the everyday into the fantastic. *Far Sector* is a police procedural, a detective story that interrogates the political and colonial present by depicting Mullen’s humanity and acts of living along with the action and mystery of the narrative. At no point is the reader allowed to forget that Mullen is human. The reader is constantly reminded that both Mullen and the Trilogy are people with material, spiritual, intellectual, and sexual needs.

The near-human alien has been a staple of science fiction since the Early Modern Period. In Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World* (1666), the protagonist – the Lady – abducted by a merchant and spirited away by sea: “Thus coming one time with a little light vessel, not unlike a packet-boat ... he forced her away” (125). Divine intervention

forces the ship to the North Pole, where “the Poles of the other world, [join] to the Poles of this” (125). As divine punishment for their “theft,” the men who abducted the Lady all freeze to death and by some miracle – “the light of her beauty, the heat of her youth” – she survives (125). In this new world, the Lady encounters “people who are racially diverse in two different senses: they have skins of varying colors, and they belong to diverse species” (Iyengar 650). Sujata Iyengar argues in “Royalist, Romancist, Racialist: Rank, Gender, and Race in the Science and Fiction of Margaret Cavendish” that *The Blazing World* is a romantic reply to the emerging pseudo-scientific discourse that *did* connect color with race” (650). Cavendish’s description of the humanoids that the Lady encounters validates Iyengar’s argument, especially since the description associates phenotype with craft, trade, and labor:

... and as for the ordinary sort of men ... they were of several complexions; not white, black, tawny, olive or ash-coloured; but some appeared of an azure, some of a deep purple, some of a grass-green, some of a scarlet, some of an orange-colour, etc. ... The rest of the inhabitants of that world, were men of several different sorts, shapes, figures, dispositions, and humours, as I have already made mention heretofore; some were bear-men, some worm-men, some fish- or mear-men, otherwise called syrens; some bird-men, some fly-men, some ant-men, some geese-men, some spider-men, some lice-men, some fox-men, some ape-men, some jackdaw-men, some magpie-men, some parrot-men, some satyrs, some giants, and many more, which I cannot all remember; and of these several sorts of men, each followed such a profession as was most proper for the nature of their species ... (Cavendish 133)

Cavendish's use of the word "men" to describe each species indicates, at the very least, a humanoid genotype for the inhabitants of the Blazing World. The modifiers, whether they are the skin color of "the ordinary men" or the animal type of anthropomorphic men, operate as phenotypes. They are all variations of man.

Humanoid aliens dominate the types of aliens encounter in science fiction, "consequently, "[t]hey bleed into each other, and they *look* into each other: from each vantage point, the other is both other and self" (Langer 85). This duality, that the other is the self and the self is the other, is fundamental to destabilizing colonial practices and the architecture of Empire. Western Enlightenment Thinking, particularly Cartesian dualism, separates the mind and body into distinct aspects of a being, notably privileging the mind as the site of agency and identity. By employing near human and humanoid aliens, science fiction illuminates colonial societies need "to return to the site of conflict, trauma, and destruction" (83). The colonial process subjugates the Other through marginalization, disenfranchisement, slavery, violence, and numerous more traumatic exercises.

In *Far Sector*, N.K. Jemisin introduces readers to three near human species: the Nah, the @At, and the keh-Topli. The alienness of these species disorients the reader. Jemisin integrates Mullein into the City Enduring and shows her interacting with people of all species as people. She wears casual clothing; she goes shopping; she buys food from street vendors. Jemisin uses an intelligence briefing to define the Trilogy:

The Trilogy consists of three species: two biologically evolved, one artificially evolved. The Nah are endogamous aerial pursuit predators analogous to Earth's primates. The @At are optionally-corporeal cybernetic symbiotes. The keh-

Topli are carnivorous ambulatory social plants. Official strife between these three species ended with Burnover. Significant unofficial rivalry continues. (Jemisin and Campbell 103).

These alien species represent different posthuman transformations, and Jemisin uses them to create a society that mirrors the imperial metropole. The Nah are apex predators and capable of sex with human beings; the keh-Topli are a different kind of apex predator, as they prefer to consume sentient beings; the @At are embodied data. The Nah and the keh-Topli can be thought of as mutations or biological derivations of the human, and in true cyberpunk fashion, the @At reverse the normal paradigm concerning disembodied consciousness. Instead of being beings that are turned into data, they are data that turn into beings. The @At occupy both real space and cyberspace, moving through networks and electronics freely. Even the biological wetware of the Nah and keh-Topli can be hacked by the @At.

Jemisin further complicates the cultural arrangement of the City Enduring through a plot point called the “Emotion Exploit.” The Emotion Exploit, a biotechnological hack created by the @At, eliminated emotions for the Nah and keh-Topli because, “[t]hat was the problem, as the survivors [of Burnover] saw it. Getting mad” (20). Theoretically, the @At, being corporeal data, have no emotions, but Jemisin weaves in subtle clues to indicate they not be as emotionally devoid as they think. For one thing, the @At need to consume a steady stream of creative content that they cannot themselves produce. Being “perfectly rational,” they do “not” understand emotions or feelings. Yet, anger seems to filter through the exploit, and the principal antagonist, the @At Councilor @Blaze-of-Glory, is motivated by a drive for power and capable of racism. The @At refer to the

Nah, derogatorily, as “meat bags,” a term @Blaze-of-Glory uses twice in a heated discussion. And, as Mullein notes, fractious, angry, and antagonistic are “what they’re like *without* emotions” (22), when “[n]o one in the room feels a thing,” except Mullein (20-21).

Indeed, the plot of the series revolves around the Emotion Exploit and its effects. A steady stream of a drug called Switchoff flows into the streets and the hands of the masses. Switchoff disables the emotion exploit and allows the keh-Topli and the Nah to *feel*; it enables their emotions. After a violent protest where the law enforcement of the City Enduring open fire on a group of protesters and counter-protesters, Mullein pushes the Council to hold a referendum and let the people decide if they want the Emotion Exploit or not. The past leaders of the Nah imposed the Emotion Exploit on everyone, an act of bodily colonization that highlights Empire’s propensity to turn inward when external targets for animosity and conflict are absent. The Trilogy alienates its population, and “the ‘alienation’ of the colonized, conquered aliens in so many [science fiction] stories corresponds closely to the historical dehumanization of indigenous colonized people – even, perhaps especially when those ‘aliens’ are humans themselves” (Langer 83).

By placing Mullein in the City Enduring and isolating her from everything human, Jemisin creates a situation where the humanity of the aliens must be considered. As the stranger, Mullein attempts to understand the colonizers in terms she understands. As a former soldier and law enforcement officer, Mullein understands institutional authority and power, and even the role of street-level bureaucrats in its maintenance. What she comes to understand through the course of the series is that even the nonhuman

are more human than she thinks. This posthuman reality charges the relationship between the vertical authority of the Trilogy's council, a Triad of Dictators, and people attempting to live their everyday lives.

A DYSON SWARM MEETS THE REPEATING ISLAND

Resource scarcity is an issue most interstellar science fiction resolves through technology that synthesizes biological necessities. In *Star Trek*, a *replicator* replicates the physical contents, including a container, of food and other objects by converting energy into matter. Because stellar radiation is effectively unlimited, the available energy for replication is as well. Similar technologies exist in most space opera or deep-space science fiction that contains post-scarcity economies. Post-scarcity societies tend to be utopian, like the United Federation of Planets. Even with the ongoing conflicts between the Federation and the Klingons, Romulans, and Dominion, Gene Rodenberry's universe functions better as a platform for personal and emotional conflict than military conflict.

The City Enduring is both metropole and empire simultaneously. The vast amount of material resources needed to sustain a population of twenty billion is a problem that Jemisin considers instead of handwaving. The Trilogy's civilization is described as such:

Three species in modified post-scarcity microdemocracy. Territory encompasses home system plus several dozen adjacent systems and rogue planets being robotically mined. FTL-capable. Recent history characterized by rapid progress toward complete control over time, space, matter, and reality.³³ (56)

³³ FTL is an acronym for "faster than light" travel.

The series makes no mention of the indigenous populations of the planets and systems being mined for resources. Those planets and systems provide resources the Trilogy is more than willing to take, and the cost in intelligent or sentient lives, flora, and fauna is simply unconsidered by the Trilogy. Empires consume the resources available to them and rarely considered the consequences of that consumption.

Jemisin's solution to the natural resource problem, however, demonstrates her acute awareness of the that the Trilogy oversees an empire and that the metropole, the imperial seat of power, is a key component of Empire. Without a nation or megapolis to anchor the empire, the empire lacks a cultural center. This was highly obvious during the decline of British Empire, where Englishness was replaced with Britishness and the imperial center lost its ability to continue projecting sociocultural, economic, and military control and project power over its colonial territory. Jemisin resolves the dilemma of needing to maintain a metropole despite near endless expansion by concentrating the population of the empire in the metropole and eliminating the need for organic labor to collect natural resources. Establishing the Trilogy as a post-scarcity economy that automates resource extraction from its colonial territories, Jemisin creates a situation where the human infrastructure of Empire can be consolidated in a single location.

Resolving the energy problem for a post-scarcity economy requires a more creative approach than mechanically gathering natural resources and converting it energy. According to the International Energy Agency, Earth's total electricity consumption for 2019 was 22,884 terawatt-hours ("Electricity Consumption"). The scale of terrestrial energy consumption is more enormous; a terawatt-hour is one trillion watt-hours, and 22,884 terawatt-hours is the electricity consumption of eight billion people. Between

vastly more complex technology and a population of twenty billion inhabitants, the City Enduring's energy needs are unfathomable. Mineral or organic sources of energy would not be sufficient, no matter how abundant, to sustain such a population.

Jemisin employs a classic science-fiction concept to address the energy needs of the Trilogy: the Dyson Sphere. In *Far Sector*, a central Dyson Sphere orbited by hundreds of platforms in a Dyson Swarm, but the principle is the same. The Trilogy's technology has reached the point where they can live in very close proximity to a star and use stellar radiation to power their empire. The Dyson Sphere is a massive exo-structure that surrounds a star and uses technology to convert stellar radiation into consumable energy for that structure. Mathematician and physicist Freeman Dyson formalized the definition of the Dyson Sphere in a report for the journal *Science* in 1960: "One should expect that, within a few thousand years of its entering the stage of industrial development, any intelligent species should be found occupying an artificial biosphere which completely surrounds its parent star (1667)." He continues, noting that "[t]he most likely habitat for such beings would be a dark object, having a size comparable with the Earth's orbit ... Such a dark object would be radiating as copiously as the star which is hidden inside it (1667). Although the concept of an exostructure capturing the energy radiating from a star originates in Olaf Stapledon's novel *Star Maker*, it is Freeman Dyson's definition that persists and appears regularly in science fiction.

A Dyson Swarm expands the Dyson Sphere into a swarm of plates around a Dyson Sphere and allows a civilization to occupy an unfathomably larger territory in space. The circumference of the Earth's orbit around the Sun is approximately 584 million miles (940 million kilometers), and the volume of a sphere with the same

diameter would be 2.609×10^{21} (2.609 sextillion) cubic miles or 1.0875×10^{29} (10.875 octillion cubic kilometers). The City Enduring has to unlimited energy and territory. For example, the total energy production of Sol (our sun) is 3.86×10^{26} watts (joules per second), which is roughly 650,000 times the world's annual energy consumption per second ("The Power of the Sun"). Practical restrictions aside, the arrangement Jemisin employs allows for a nearly infinite population with infinite energy and, given that the Trilogy has mastered energy-to-matter conversion, unlimited material resources.

Jemisin, conscious of the Trilogy's massive need for energy, matter, and territory, uses the Dyson swarm to create a three-axis stellar archipelago. Each plate is an island and a colony in an ever-expanding empire. The architecture of this artificial, stellar archipelago means that subsets of the population can be isolated and discarded without disrupting how Empire functions. Moreover, conceptual arrangement of a Dyson Swarm mirrors Antonio Benítez-Rojo's repeating island. Commenting on the academic and cultural "urge to systematize the [Caribbean's] political, economic, social, and anthropological dynamics," Benítez-Rojo positions the islands of the Caribbean as both heterotopia and hyperreality. The external concept of the islands of the Caribbean, and indeed the islands of the world, is a sociocultural construct imposed on the Caribbean and the world's archipelagos by the legacies and practices of Empire. Dominant cultures, that is to say white, Eurocentric cultures that continue to perpetuate Western Enlightenment Thinking conceive of the Caribbean as a place defined by "its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and impermanence; its syncretism" (Benítez-Rojo 14). Moreover, the repeating island exhibits a kind of chaos

where “it is possible to observe dynamic states or regularities that repeat themselves globally” (15).

The contact between colonial perception of the island nation and the patterns that enable that perception is critical to understanding how archipelagos and empires interact. Empires consume islands and their inhabitants, often displacing or decimating the indigenous population and transplanting their own citizens in the territory. The Caribbean experiences extreme friction between ethnic groups because one group – those from the African diaspora – were brought as slaves, and another group – those from south Asia – were later brought to administrate the territory. And mixed in with the cultural and social dynamics of two transplanted populations, a heavy colonial influence remains. The Caribbean is largely composed of nations in the Commonwealth of Nations, and the signs and signifiers of the British Empire remain visible.

In the City Enduring, each platform, each island, plays out the same friction that that exists between the Nah, the @At, and the keh-Topli in the civilization’s entirety. The repetition these platforms, these islands, create consequences in an expanding metropole that is simultaneously the seat of the empire’s identity and the frontier at its borders. Sweat shops, slave labor, drugs trafficking, person-trafficking, weapons trade, legitimate business, ethnic conflict all play out on each island and sustain an economy of emotional and creative material that allows the citizens of the City Enduring to “feel” by proxy. When coupled with the drug Switchoff, it becomes clear most of the City’s inhabitants want their emotions back. Each platform is the city in miniature, and each platform is itself. Across 20 billion inhabitants, however, only the residents of any one platform truly know its character. To the inhabitants of the hundreds, perhaps thousands

of platform, each platform is simply another place like their own, like enough that the difference can be obviated and distinction can bulldozed commonality.

Ultimately, the narrative in *Far Sector* ends with a referendum: the masses vote to discontinue the Emotion Exploit after centuries of existing as biological automata. And despite that lack of feeling before the Emotion Exploit is voted down, Syz, the Peace Captain of the City Enduring, notes, “But even through the Exploit, I feel ... such rage, sometimes. Such sadness. Just a hint. *Muted*. But enough” (46). Through the Exploit and despite its consequences, emotions still manifest, whether by using the drug Switchoff or feeling the silent emotions muted by the suppression of biological behavior, because everything a human or near-human experiences with their body intersect with biology at some point.

BURNOVER

The death of most empires arises from an inability to secure enough resources for continued growth, prompting Empire to turn its colonial apparatus inwards and to start overtly cannibalizing the human resources it possesses. Limited natural resources and resource scarcity in general create an economic situation that forces Empire to consume its own foundation. We see this now in the United States. The far-right government of the United States is dismantling its democratic institutions as the Executive Branch, that is, the President of the United States, continues to claim more and more unchecked authority. In light of the Supreme Court decision in *Trump v. United States*, 603 U.S. 593 (2024), even if the Trump administrations are illegal and unconstitutional, Trump and his administration have complete immunity from prosecution and cannot be held accountable because the Supreme Court ruled that Presidents have unlimited immunity

regarding official acts. This decision not only emboldened Trump, but it also effectively eliminated the Constitution's guardrails for a rogue presidency. Unlike the City Enduring, who spent centuries being ruled by a triad of dictators – the Council, the contemporary United States is installing, perhaps has installed, a dictator that intends to turn the nation's representative democracy, its republic, into an oligarchical kleptocracy.

The Trump administration recognizes that empires need resources, and it has been using its rhetoric to suggest military and territorial actions that would anger, and alienate, international allies. Greenland, in particular, has no value to Trump from a human capital perspective; he simply sees a place where he can personally accumulate wealth from its natural resources and then discard once it becomes a financial liability. Greenland, in fact, is a contemporary version of the repeating island. Its weather and geography are immaterial to those who seek to exploit; rather, it is simply another island, like the many thousands of islands already stripped of their resources during colonial history.

In the City Enduring, the metropole projects community through the shared history of the Burnover – the catastrophic war that destroyed the Trilogy's home worlds and forced them to collaborate to create a habitation; they act as if they are unconscious of the fact that they themselves have become the empire, mining resources from neighboring star systems and rogue planets without any consideration, or mention, of the indigenous populations that might be present. As the Trilogy advances "toward complete control over time, space, matter, and reality," its ruling class turns the imperial machinery inward. Councilor @Blaze-of-Glory (the @At councilor) stages a coup and manipulates the City Enduring's spacefaring military into striking the city itself, exploiting the

Emotion Exploit because the “rational” solution to protest and civil unrest is to forcefully silence the discontented. On the other hand, Councilor Marth of the Nah is actively subverting the laws and norms of the City Enduring to stage a revolution. Employing sweatshops, slave labor, drug trafficking, and civil unrest, Councilor Marth works to destabilize the metropole by exploiting the thin, but visible fractures that already exist in the Trilogy’s society. Cold, ration, and meticulous, Marth views revolution as a game that he and Councilor Averrup Thorn of the keh-Topli are playing against @Blaze-of-Glory.

In this game, Sojourner Mullein operates both as a lubricator and an irritant. Her presence, requested by Councilors Marth and Averrup Thorn, destabilizes the entrenched power structure by introducing a wildcard into the situation. Mullein, in a conversation with Councilor Marth, says “Power’s the same everywhere, I guess. The wealthy and influential love to live above the law” (59). Marth’s response, however, is more telling than Mullein’s recognition of one constant of two constants in Empire’s machinery.

Marth explains:

“*And* the rebels, Jo. Never forget the Rebels. Rebels are built into this game.

Powerless, perhaps faceless, but potentially a force to be reckoned with. During the occupation, most Trilogy citizens chose to follow the law. Many believed what our conquerors told us – that we deserved no freedoms. That we were too uncivilized to rule ourselves. But there were always those who insisted that the law was *wrong*.”³⁴ (Jemisin and Campbell 59)

³⁴ Emphasis in the original.

As a Green Lantern, Mallein represents galactic law. The reality, however, is her presence is a calculated gamble. Mallein notes that such individuals are “wild cards” because “they can help you or hurt you” (59). Marth views Mallein as a calculated risk, a risk that he can maneuver like a chess piece through both the political economy and the sexual economy. He manipulates the information Mallein uncovers, to expose the imperial machinery of the City Enduring, and Mallein herself to complicate herself involvement with the City Enduring and his agenda. Marth seduces Mallein to compromise her otherwise rational, neutral position on things, magnifying her value as political and social capital in the game he is playing.

The ruling class of the United States occupies a kind of fictional metropole; the empire it oversees is fragmented, filled with a multitude of cultures, peoples, and histories. The United States, because of its massive size, possesses a sort of composite metropole. The City Enduring, with hundreds of plates, is hundreds of island nations ruled by a centralized oligarchy, its triad of councilors. The United States, despite having a capitol – Washington, D.C. – has a ruling that class that uses cultural mythology to create the illusion of a metropole. The variance in the U.S. population, its combination of communities from different cultural, ethnic, social, political, and national backgrounds – its so-called melting pot – both denies the possibility of a metropole that represents that population and reinforces the reality that its actual metropole exists only for the most privileged members of white, cis-gendered, heterosexual population. And even then, that metropole, for the ruling elite and wealthy that continue to consolidate wealth and privilege at the expense of everyone else, has always been an oligarchy, a political arrangement as opposed to sociocultural identity that can be used to sustain a national or

imperial mythology. Americanness is not comparable to Englishness, because



Americanness has never been about a singular cultural identity.

The colonies were a disparate arrangement of outcasts and dissenters, criminals and debtors that paid tribute and taxes to England, to the English metropole of the British Empire. And when revolution did occur, it was because the English King – King George III – began acting outside the limits placed on the monarchy by the United Kingdom’s uncoded constitution.

CULTURAL ICONS AND PUNK ICONOGRAPHY

Sojourner Mullein’s disruptive presence threatens the political and social order of the City Enduring. Although much

of the series shows Mullein living a normal life in the City Enduring and with its inhabitants, her presence is destabilizing because she is the stranger in a stranger land.

There are no instances of speciesism or racism against Mullein in the City Enduring, but

Figure 1. Sojourner Mullein

her path to becoming a Green Lantern – her backstory –

revolves around reporting her partner, when she was a police

officer on Earth, to her higher ups. As is far too common in our reality, Mullein was pushed out and the transgressor of racial violence, her partner, was shielded from the consequences of his actions. However, Mullein becomes a Green Lantern because an Oan Guardian sees her capacity to create change and initiate revolution.

As a punk protagonist, Mullein’s Green Lantern uniform references the uniforms worn by the other human Green Lanterns. Her jacket and belt are a nod to Guy Gardner’s costume, and her glasses/mask are a tribute to Kyle Rayner’s mask and Jessica Cruz’s

transparent monocle. The black lower, though common to most Green Lanterns, draws from John Stewart's and Hal Jordan's costume, and her occasional military poncho is a riff on Alan Scott's cape. The layered references to the other Green Lanterns remind readers that Sojourner Mullein is both a singular entity and part of a group of individuals with shared responsibilities and objectives. She *is* a Green Lantern, and like the other human Green Lanterns, she operates as an agent for good and change. As intergalactic peacekeeper, Mullein draws on her experience as a police and soldier on Earth, experiences that left her disconnected from the officers and soldiers she served with. Despite trying to institute change and address systemic injustices and social disparities on Earth, Mullein could never destabilize Earth's sociocultural apparatus. As a soldier and police officer, she was one of many. As a Green Lantern, however, she becomes a destabilizing force because she is a cultural icon. Her costume, her powers, her ring (though unique) are all symbols of an institution that prizes individuality and autonomy and relies on the judgment of its agents as opposed to its authority as in institution. The Green Lantern corps is a collective of autonomous agents; each Lantern administers justice and works for peace using their own discretion. There may be shared principles, but no Lantern is obligated to make the same decisions another Lantern would. Similarly, no Lantern is required to wear the same uniform another would. In true punk fashion, Mullein does not hide her identity; she wears it proudly for all to see.

Jemisin positions Mullein as a counterhegemonic figure by completing isolating her. Mullein's autonomy extends beyond that of a typical Green Lantern because she is outside the normal jurisdiction of the Green Lantern Corps, and her presence is only permitted by request of the Trilogy. The Trilogy's hegemony, both concretely within its

own domain and metaphorically as a parallel to the American imperial apparatus, demonstrates the monolithic, vertically integrated nature of both Empire and the present political reality. The three species of the Trilogy reduce the ethnic diversity of the United States into a series of clear strata. The @At are all the oppressed and marginalized peoples who are economically and culturally disadvantaged. Their existence requires the cultural and industrial production of the Nah and the keh-Topli because the @At are embodied data and their corporeality is a projection of their digital – metaphorically spiritual – being. The keh-Topli represent the alien others of contemporary society: the migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker. The Nah are both representatives of the dominant culture and the marginal cultures deeply integrated, but not completely accepted by, the mainstream. When the Oan intelligence briefing says they are analogous to Earth's primates, it is more than just physical similarity; there are different ethnicities, nationalities, and familial histories represented in the Nah's culture.

Ultimately, however, the present United States like the Trilogy – for at least a little bit longer – is a microdemocracy. The ruling class of three representatives in the City Enduring is a parallel to the entrenched, capital driven ruling class of the United States. For the City Enduring, Councilors Marth, @Blaze-of-Glory, and Averrup Thorn have ruled for centuries, reelected repeatedly and ruling with little change – a triad of dictators, effectively. The United States is ruled by a shrinking ruling class that uses capital, race, and religion to isolate and eliminate outsiders from its ranks. Despite Donald Trump's claim to be an agent of change and an outsider, he's always been part of the predatory, oligarchical ruling class that funds the American political machine. Trump's personal political history reveals that he feigns allegiance to whatever political

entity provides the most economic benefit to him, and right now, that just so happens to be himself and his agenda to liquidate the economic and political capital of the United States for his own personal enrichment and vanity.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: THE PIONEERS

Afropunk 2024 took place on August 23rd and 24th of 2024. The focus on the music and cultural festival was “Afrofuturism through the Afropunk lens,” as noted by Brenika Banks’s headline in *The New York Amsterdam News*. The event “promoted the idea that ‘another world is possible’ for the African Diaspora” (Sango Amoda qtd. in Banks 22). According to Sango Amoda, exploring “Afrofuturism through the Afropunk lens ... means ... radically rethinking how our Blackness shows up in the future – it was important for us to galvanize our outcast and outsider Black folks” (qtd. In Bank). Banks notes that, according to Amoda, “Afropunk always represents the ‘other’ or alternative Black experience.” The experiences of the colonized, the subaltern, the Other are homogenized by the colonial apparatus; dominant cultures and master narratives compress voices, beliefs, and values into simulacra and display them as exhibits in the colonial archive. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said argues that “[t]he great cultural archive ... is where the intellectual and aesthetic investments in overseas dominion are made” (xxi). This archive, filled with the narratives of European and American colonizers, appropriates the cultural production of the colonized and folds it into the possessions of the colonizer. Punk in general, and Afropunk especially, do not reappropriate the value of their counterhegemonic cultural production; they *expropriate* the contents of the colonial archive, taking by force what had been taken from them.

Punk music has always been polyvocal, with as many subgenres and fusion genres as there are bands. The Ramones and the Clash may have some shared ideas, but both are as singular as any other punk band; punk is always its own thing. The same applies to punk science fiction. The cyberpunk of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* occupies the same web of cultural production as George Miller's post-apocalyptic desert punk and its gas punk siblings. Punk, whether music or fiction or art or subculture, relies on polyvocality to reject the homogenizing functions of the colonial apparatus. The signs and symbols of commodity culture, the aesthetics of the military-industrial complex, the history of Empire – Punk takes these hegemonic institutions and deconstructs them, disassembles them, and realigns their components into expressions that active resist, challenge, and destabilizes master narratives and dominant sociocultural institutions. Afropunk, as noted above, amplifies voices the of the outcast and outsiders of Black communities; it asserts its independence from the dominant cultural narratives shaped and distributed by European imperialism and colonialism: “The importance of Black people having the space at Afropunk to speak positivity to one another, as opposed to how mainstream society treats them, is essential” (Banks 22).

The polyvocality of Octavia E. Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, and N.K. Jemisin and Jamal Campbell lies in their Afropunk reconfigurations of mainstream science fiction. Octavia E. Butler, with novels like the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998),³⁵ and *The Patternist Series* – *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978),³⁶ *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Clay's Ark* (1984),

³⁵ *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* are called the *Earthseed* novels. The series was never completed.

³⁶ Butler did now allow *Survivor* to be reprinted.

pioneered many of the tropes and themes of biopunk and focused on the posthuman implications of genetic editing and profiling, as well as climate change and evolution. Notably, Butler recognized the stickiness of biological posthumanism and questioned the frequently utopian visions of humanity in the future. Nnedi Okorafor, in the *Binti Trilogy*, *Who Fears Death* (2010), and *Lagoon* (2014), frequently engages science fiction through cultural and spiritual pathways that challenge the rational futures suggested by science fiction entrenched in Western Enlightenment Thinking. Unlike novels like *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, Okorafor's consideration of spirituality and cultures from the African diaspora are not appropriative; rather, she draws attention to posthuman transformations that recognize the significance of culture, belief, and values in configuring individual identity. N.K Jemisin and Jamal Campbell use narrative and visual possibilities of the comic book to create a rich tableau for their storytelling. Jemisin's writing takes the stranger in the strange land and turns it into an anticolonial consideration of social and political capital. Campbell's art fuses elements of traditional four-color comics with digital painting to create an organic visual style. This visual style unites with creative panel placements and shapes to alter both the visual and narrative perspectives possible in the series.

The layering of perspectives and identities that take place in the primary texts of this study demonstrates how punk destabilizes institutional authority and dominant cultural narratives. Punk has always been concerned with posthuman transformations as a way of resisting corporate, government, and social power. Through expropriation of the signs and symbols of power, by redefining cultural iconography and symbols, punk turns the language, images, and markers of force against its wielders. The primary texts

of this study show how female protagonists and heroes in punk science fiction forcefully decenter hegemonic structures. Critically, these texts show how female characters and female bodies integrate the body into identity and challenge the Cartesian dualism of Western Enlightenment Thinking. Lilith Iyapo's body in the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* and Binti's body, through her metamorphoses and hybridization in the *Binti Trilogy*, are platforms for redefining the boundaries of the human and questioning what the integrity of the human body means. Lilith *chooses* to go through gene editing and manipulation to gain longevity, physical strength, and resistance to illness, toxins, and the environment. Binti is forced to integrate Meduse DNA into herself and become something more than human while keeping her psychosocial autonomy and individuality.

The posthuman, however, is still *human*, and the autonomy their transformations position Lilith and Binti outside the normal gender and sexual economy. Lilith reverses the patriarchal norm and becomes both the social and the biological leader of humans who choose to integrate into Oankali society. She recognizes that despite the pretense of choice, the Oankali took what they wanted; they archived the survivors' genetic library and determined that the Earth would eventually become motherships for new branches in the Oankali genetic web. Allowing the survivors to live, even once the Oankali permit a human Akjai group to exist on Mars, is only a consolation. Empire took what it wanted and left behind the illusion of self-determination. Binti, likewise, move outside the normal male-female binary, not because she ceases to be female but because she ceases to be strictly human. In her argument with Dele, where he convicts her of being a Meduse's wife, Binti fulfills her own prophecy. She arrives at the point where choosing to leave for Oomza University denies her a husband and a family in her Himba tribe.

Yet, Lilith, in the process of becoming a matriarch for her children, and Binti, in choosing to live because denying the transformation would have led only to death, both gain new layers to their identities and, ultimately, they gain awareness of the opportunity costs of their transformation.

Sojourner Mullein maintains the most agency of the three, ultimately arriving at a point where she has succeeded in her initial mission and sparked change in the Trilogy's civilization. Her presence as the sole human in the City Enduring both destabilizes the existing colonial machinery and facilitates a new, more democratic and less rigid path forward. Near the end of the series, when Mullein recites the Green Lantern oath for the first time, she does so both with the awareness that it may be her last chance to do so and the realization that she is a Green Lantern; her moment has arrived, and success or failure are in her hands.

This triad of women – Lilith, Binti, and Sojourner – reinforces the argument in the first chapter of this dissertation. Punk fiction inscribes change and the future on female bodies. The aspect of creation needed to resist Empire and push back against the dominant sociocultural narratives that shape current historical moment does not reside in male bodies; only women can create life. Lilith is the matriarch of a family hybrids and a community of human survivors and their hybrid human/Oankali offspring. Binti transforms into a being that carries the reproductive destiny of the Enyi Zinariya and her Himba family and her Meduse integration. As a Green Lantern, Mullein wields creation each time she channels her willpower through her power ring. She creates constructs and power blasts, but more importantly, Mullein channels her willpower to initiate change through her ring, and a civilization falls before her to embrace a future that leads toward

the unknown and new opportunities instead of being confined by the vertical will of a triad of dictators.

More importantly, the African American women who created these stories and the that narratives focus on the bodies and lives of women from the African diaspora continue to challenge the master narratives that entrench white supremacy and dominance in contemporary culture. Octavia Butler predicted the current political moment in *Parable of the Sower*, and she explains how Empire enables ongoing cultural and ethnic marginalization in *Xenogenesis*. Nnedi Okorafor questions the narratives that not only oppress the members of the African diaspora, she considers what the expanding global technocracy means for indigenous peoples, like the pastoralist Himba near the Kunene River in Africa. And N.K. Jemisin embraces the opportunity that Sojourner Mullein presents to defy the current political moment. Sojourner Mullein is an agent of change, but she is also a peacekeeper and former police officer and soldier. As a member of the Green Lantern Corps, an organization that thrives because of its diversity, Mullein becomes Jemisin's tool to challenge the homogenization of thought and culture of authority that debilitates America's law enforcement agencies. Instead of serving the public, American law enforcement, as evidenced by ICE and Kash Patel's FBI and any number of daily incidents of police violence by local and state law enforcement, serves authority and the dominant culture. Minorities, especially African Americans, suffer ongoing mistreatment at the hands of the street-level bureaucrats (police officers) who are supposed to protect them.

Moreover, the ongoing hostility toward DEI and efforts to create a more open and accepting American culture reflects the fears and discomfort of the white majority. The

cultural identity of the American Empire is threatened by the very diversity that makes it unique and that sustained its presence. As people of color and other marginalized groups gain visibility and agency, the white cultural center feels more and more endangered and reacts with violence, both physical and epistemological. President Trump's current administration has undertaken the task of whitewashing American history and vilifying the nonwhite communities of the United States. Immigrants in general, but undocumented Latino and Latina immigrants especially, are being painted as an existential threat to national security and American identity. As the Trump administration denies asylum seekers and refugees of color, it is creating special pathways and exemptions for white Afrikaners suffering an imaginary genocide:

Mr. Trump has made debunked claims that white farmers in South Africa are being killed in a genocide. On May 12, Mr. Trump welcomed some of those farmers into the United States as refugees. He has also expelled South Africa's ambassador to the United States and has cut off American aid. (Eligon)

These actions, when coupled with the removal of books by or about Black luminaries from military libraries,³⁷ the editing of National Park Services websites,³⁸ the continuing ramping up of hostility against DEI initiatives,³⁹ show a growing of pattern of marginalization against nonwhite Americans and immigrants.

³⁷ NPR reported "A senior Army official ordered Army libraries, including West Point, to remove all books 'with the explicit and sole purpose of directly and overtly promoting DEI, gender ideology, and critical race theory in a manner that subverts meritocracy and unity,' according to a memo sent last week by acting Assistant Secretary of the Army Derrick Anderson" (Bowman)

³⁸ According to *The New York Times*, "A National Park Service web page about the Underground Railroad appeared to have been restored on Monday to prominently show the abolitionist leader Harriet Tubman, after it had been changed in recent months to remove a large photo and quotations from her" (Ruberg).

³⁹ Per the Fortune.com web magazine, "On the heels of a January executive order ending DEI across the federal government, President Donald Trump sent a follow-up missive designed to increase scrutiny over those practices in the private sector. Federal agencies were given 120 days to work with the Attorney General to identify up to nine organizations with the "most egregious and discriminatory DEI practitioners"

Likewise, as of 19 May 2025, Kilmar Abrego Garcia remains in an El Salvadoran prison following his removal, without due process, from the United States. The Trump Administration continues to claim that Abrego Garcia is a member of the international gang MS-13, and now, Chairman Green of the House Homeland Security Committee is investigating Abrego Garcia's release during a traffic stop by the Tennessee Highway Patrol.⁴⁰ In a 9-0 decision, the United States Supreme Court decided that "[t]he order properly requires the Government to 'facilitate' Abrego Garcia's release from custody in El Salvador and to ensure that his case is handled as it would have been had he not been improperly sent to El Salvador" (*Noem v. Garcia* 3). Indeed, as *The Hill* reported on 16 April 2025, Attorney General Pam Bondi said: "He is not coming back to our country. President Bukele said he was not sending him back. That's the end of the story ... If he wanted to send him back, we would give him a plane ride back. There was no situation ever where he was going to stay in this country. None, none" (Beitsch). The Trump Administration stands in defiance of a Supreme Court order and continues to double-down on their refusal to comply.

The sociopolitical situation in the United States makes it more important than ever to recognize and study the creative, political, and social work of people of color, women, and other marginalized groups. Punk has always been about pushing back against "the machine," the very architecture and apparatus of colonial, imperial, and sociocultural power that displaces, marginalizes, and isolates anyone who is not part of

that would make them eligible for civil compliance investigations. The types of organizations targeted could include publicly traded companies, large nonprofits and foundations, and institutes of higher education with sizable endowments, among others" (Gilman).

⁴⁰ The statement on the official House Homeland Security Committee website can be found here: <https://homeland.house.gov/2025/05/12/chairman-green-investigates-release-of-alleged-gang-member-kilmar-abrego-garcia-despite-suspected-human-smuggling/>

the dominant cultural group. In the Twenty-First Century, when Empire attempts to operate in the shadows and appear clandestine, it is more important than ever to recognize that the colonial and imperial enterprise has not ended. The United States has turned its imperial machinery inward and has begun to openly recolonize its colonized populations; China and Russia continue to pursue more traditional colonial and imperial relationships with foreign nations, brokering agreements for resources, money, and markets in exchange for aid and support that the United States previously offered with few strings attached. The colonial power struggles of the Age of Exploration have given way to the economic imperialism of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, and the United States has resumed its pursuit of Manifest Destiny. Punk individuality and autonomy threatens these institutions because punk recognizes, is indeed built upon, the inherent human need to be oneself.

REFERENCES

- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Our Sister Killjoy*, 1977. Longman, 1994.
- “Akrotiri and Dhekelia.” *The World Factbook*, CIA.gov, 14 May 2025.
<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/akrotiri-and-dhekelia/>.
 Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Anarchy Online*. Funcom, 2001-2025.
- Arslanalp, Serkan et. al. “Dollar Dominance in the International Reserve System: An Update.” *IMF Blog*, Financial Markets, 11 Jun. 2024.
<https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2024/06/11/dollar-dominance-in-the-international-reserve-system-an-update>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Ashcroft, Bill. “Postcolonial Science Fiction and the Ethics of Empire.” *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction*, Eds. Zachary Kendal et al., Springer, 2020. pp. 165-185.
- Ashcroft, Bill et. al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 1989, 2nd Ed., Routledge, 2002.
- Atherton, Kelsey D. “We are on the Brink of Cyberpunk.” *Slate*, 8 April 2020.
<https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-cyberpunk-science-fiction-government-politics.html>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Banks, Brenika. “AFROPUNK BLKTOPIA Explores ‘Afrofuturism through the Afropunk Lens.’” *The New York Amsterdam News*, 29 Aug. 2024.
<https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2024/08/29/afropunk-blktopia-explore-afrofuturism/>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Beitsch, Rebecca. “Bondi Says Mistakenly Deported Man ‘Not Coming Back to Our Country.’” *The Hill*, 16 April 2025.
<https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5251491-pam-bondi-kilmar-abrego-garcia-return/>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd Ed. Trans. James E. Maraniss, Duke University Press, 1996.
- Bhabha, Homi K. “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation.” *Nation and Narration*. Kindle Ed., Ed. Homi K. Bhabha, Routledge, 2010. pp. 291-322.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester University Press, 2005.
- Bowman, Tom. “U.S. Army Libraries Target Books with a Focus on DEI or ‘Gender Ideology’ for Removal.” NPR, 15 Apr. 2025,
[https://www.npr.org/2025/04/15/nx-s1-5366122/army-libraries-books-dei-gender-ideology#:~:text=A%20senior%20Army%20official%20ordered,week%20by%20acting%20Assistant%20Secretary](https://www.npr.org/2025/04/15/nx-s1-5366122/army-libraries-books-dei-gender-ideology#:~:text=A%20senior%20Army%20official%20ordered,week%20by%20acting%20Assistant%20Secretary.). Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Brooks, Emily. “Jordan Sees ‘Another Legislative Remedy’ Besides Judicial Impeachment.” *The Hill*, 20 Mar. 2025.
<https://thehill.com/homenews/house/5205210-jordan-plans-judges-hearings/>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Bromley, A.G. "Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine, 1838," *Annals of the History of Computing*, vol. 4, no. 3, July-Sept. 1982 pp. 196-217. doi:

10.1109/MAHC.1982.10028. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Burger, Bettina. "Math and Magic: Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* Trilogy and Its Challenge to the Dominance of Western Science Fiction." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2020, pp. 364-377.

Butler, Octavia E. *Adulthood Rites*. Warner Books, 1988.

---. *Dawn*. Warner Books, 1987.

---. *Imago*. Warner Books, 1989.

---. *Lilith's Brood: The Complete Xenogenesis Trilogy*, 2000. Kindle Ed., Open Road, 2012.

---. *Parable of the Sower*, 1993. Kindle Ed., Open Road, 2012.

---. *Parable of the Talents*, 1998. Kindle Ed., Open Road, 2012.

---. *Seed to Harvest: The Patternist Series*. Grand Central, 2007

---. *Survivor*. Signet, 1978.

Cavallaro, Dani. *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, Continuum, 2000.

Cavendish, Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle. *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World*. 1666. Project Gutenberg, 23 Oct. 2024.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/51783/pg51783-images.html>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

"Chairman Green Investigates Release of Alleged Gang Member Kilmar Abrego Garcia Despite Suspected Human Smuggling." House Committee on Homeland Security, 12 May 2025. <https://homeland.house.gov/2025/05/12/chairman-green->

investigates-release-of-alleged-gang-member-kilmar-abrego-garcia-despite-suspected-human-smuggling/. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Chan, Christine and Noel Randewich. "Apple becomes the first publicly-listed U.S. company to reach a market value of \$1 trillion, a major milestone in a decade of stock gains fueled by the iconic iPhone." *Graphics*, Reuters, 2 Aug. 2018. <https://graphics.reuters.com/APPLE-STOCKS-TRILLION/010071L931X/index.html>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Closson, Troy. "Columbia Agrees to Trump's Demands after Federal Funds are Stripped." *The New York Times*, nytimes.com, 21 Mar. 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/21/nyregion/columbia-response-trump-demands.html>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Crittenden, Jack. *Beyond Individualism: Reconstituting the Liberal Self*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

Crowley, Dustin. "Binti's R/evolutionary Cosmopolitan Ecologies." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 6, no. 2, Apr. 2019, pp. 237-256.

Csiscery-Ronan, Istvan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*, 1988. Ayebia Clark, 2009.

Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*, Ed. John Richetti, Penguin Classics, 2003.

Delany, Samuel R. "Racism and Science Fiction." *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, Ed. Sheree R. Thomas, Kindle Ed., Grand Central Publishing, 2000. pp. 382-396

- “Dependences and Areas of Special Sovereignty.” Bureau of Intelligence and Research, U.S. Department of State, 17 Jan. 2024. <https://www.state.gov/dependencies-and-areas-of-special-sovereignty/>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Dyson, Freeman. “Search for Artificial Stellar Sources of Infrared Radiation.” *Science*, vol. 131, no. 3414, 3 Jun. 1960, pp. 1667-1668. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1705101>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- “Electricity Consumption.” International Energy Agency. <https://www.iea.org/reports/electricity-information-overview/electricity-consumption>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing.” The White House, Jan. 2025. www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Foster, Thomas. *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Garland, Alex, writer and director. *Ex Machina*, A24 Films LLC, 2014.
- Gibson, William. “Burning Chrome.” *Omni*, 1982. *Burning Chrome*, Gollancz, 2016.
- . *Count Zero*. Ace, 1986. Gollancz, 2016.
- . “Johnny Mnemonic.” *Omni*, 1981. *Burning Chrome*, Gollancz, 2016.
- . *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. Ace, 1988. Gollancz, 2016.
- . *Neuromancer*. Ace, 1984. Gollancz, 2016.
- . “New Rose Hotel.” *Omni*, 1984. *Burning Chrome*, Gollancz, 2016.

- Gibson, William and Bruce Sterling. *The Difference Engine*, 1990, Kindle Ed., Spectra 2011.
- Gilman, Azure. "Major Companies are Anxiously Awaiting to See Whether or Not They Will be Targeted by the Federal Government for a DEI Investigation." *Fortune*, 18 May 2025. <https://fortune.com/article/trump-dei-deadline-investigation-companies-federal-government/>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Gray, Rosie. "Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protesters: 'Some Very Fine People on Both Sides'." *The Atlantic*. 15 Aug. 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-defends-white-nationalist-protesters-some-very-fine-people-on-both-sides/537012/>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. Routledge, 1992.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 1979. Methuen and Co. Ltd. Kindle Ed. Routledge, 2002.
- Hernandez, Joe. "DOGE is Making Major Changes to the Federal Government. Is it Legal?" NPR.org, 4 Feb. 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/04/nx-s1-5286314/departments-of-government-efficiency-doge-explainer-elon-musk>. Accessed 19 May 2025.
- Hopkinson, Nalo. *Midnight Robber*, Kindle Ed., Grand Central Publishing, 2000.

---. *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Kindle Ed.

Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004.

Iyengar, Sujata. "Royalist, Romancist, Racialist: Rank, Gender, and Race in the Science

And Fiction of Margaret Cavendish." *ELH*, vol. 69, no. 3, Fall, 2002, pp. 649-

672. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30032037>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Jemisin, N.K and Jamal Campbell. *Far Sector*. Young Animal, DC Comics, 2019-2021.

TPB, 2021.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez,

Columbia University Press, 1982.

Langer, Jessica. *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*. Kindle Ed. Palgrave McMillian,

2011.

Lavender, III, Isiah. "Critical Race Theory," *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk*

Culture, Kindle Ed., Ed. Anna McFarlane et al., Taylor and Francis, 2020, pp.

308-316.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Trans. Michael Smith, 2001.

Lucas, George, director. *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. Twentieth Century Fox,

1977.

MacFarlane, Anna et al., editors. *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*,

Kindle Ed., Taylor and Francis, 2020.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial*

Contest. Routledge, 1995.

“Members and Partners.” OECD.org. Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development. <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/members-partners.html>, Accessed 19 May 2025.

Miller, Jr., Gerald Alva. *Understanding William Gibson*. eBook, University of South Carolina Press, 2016.

Miller, Walter. *A Canticle for Liebowitz*, 1959. Spectra, 1984.

“Mobile Operating System Market Share Worldwide.” Statcounter GlobalStats. <https://gs.statcounter.com/os-market-share/mobile/worldwide>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Morgan, Richard. *Altered Carbon*, Kindle Ed., Del Rey, 2002.

---. *Broken Angels*, Kindle Ed., Del Rey, 2003.

---. *Woken Furies*, Kindle Ed., Del Rey, 2005.

“NASDAQ: MSFT.” Google Finance, 19 May 2025.

<https://www.google.com/finance/quote/MSFT:NASDAQ>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Navarro, Armando. *Mexicano Political Experience in Occupied Aztlan: Struggles and Change*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

Newman, Lex, “Descartes’ Epistemology.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2023, Eds. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/descartes-epistemology/>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Noem v. Garcia, 604 U.S. ____ (2025).

Ohlheiser, Abby. "The Woman Behind "Me Too" Knew the Power of the Phrase When She Created It – 10 Years Ago." *The Washington Post*, 19 Oct. 2017.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/>.

Accessed 19 May 2025.

Okada, Mari, writer, and Tatsuyuki Nagai, director. *Mobile Suit Gundam: Iron-Blooded Orphans*, 2015-2017.

Okorafor, Nnedi. *Binti*, Kindle Ed., Tor, 2015.

---. *Binti: Home*, Kindle Ed., Tor, 2017.

---. *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, Kindle Ed., Tor, 2017.

---. *Lagoon*, Hodder, 2014.

---. *Who Fears Death*, Kindle Ed., Daw Books, 2011.

"Our History." Black Lives Matter. blacklivesmatter.com/about/#our-history. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Parvini, Sarah. "SAG-AFTRA Members Vote to Authorize Strike Against Video Game Companies." *Los Angeles Times*, online ed., 25 September 2023.

[https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-09-25/sag-aftra-strike-authorization-video-game-interactive#:~:text=SAG-](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-09-25/sag-aftra-strike-authorization-video-game-interactive#:~:text=SAG-AFTRA%20members%20voted%20overwhelmingly,contract%2C%20the%20union%20announced%20Monday)

[AFTRA%20members%20voted%20overwhelmingly,contract%2C%20the%20union%20announced%20Monday](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-09-25/sag-aftra-strike-authorization-video-game-interactive#:~:text=SAG-AFTRA%20members%20voted%20overwhelmingly,contract%2C%20the%20union%20announced%20Monday). Accessed 19 May 2025.

Patel, Vimal. "How to Define 'Antisemitism' is a Subject of Bitter Debate." *New York Times*, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com), 8 May 2024.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/08/us/antisemitism-definition-debate.html>,
Accessed 19 May 2025.

Peppers, Cathy. "Cyberspace: (A Semiotic Scrubbing of) the Final Frontier." *Bodily Discursions: Genders, Representations, Technologies*, edited by Deborah S. Wilson and Christine Moneera Laennec, SUNY Press, 1997, pp. 163-185.
EBSCOhost,
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=e000xna&AN=5449&site=ehost-live. Accessed 25 January 2021.

Rankin, Sarah. "'An Incredible Day' as Lee Statue Removed in Charlottesville." The Associated Press, 10 Jul. 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/charlottesville-robert-e-lee-statue-removed-2efbc5e13b74e2545a0f6642e2384308>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

---. "Officials: White Nationalist Rally Linked to Three Deaths." The Associated Press, 13 August 2017.
<https://apnews.com/article/b8560c3ebaac4deb9043bb695f2eb1db>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Reider, John. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, Wesleyan University Press, Kindle Ed., 2008.

---. "Empire." *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture*, edited by Anna Macfarlane, Graham J. Murphy, and Lars Schmienk, Kindle Ed., Taylor and Francis, 2020, pp. 335-342.

Roberts, Adam. *The History of Science Fiction*, Palgrave Histories of Literature, Palgrave McMillian, 2006.

Ruberg, Sara. "National Park Services Restores Web Page Featuring Harriet Tubman."

New York Times, online ed., 8 Apr. 2025.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/08/us/politics/national-park-service-harriet-tubman-underground-railroad-dei.html>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Ruh, Brian. "Japan as Cyberpunk Exoticism." *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk*

Culture, edited by Anna Macfarlane, Graham J. Murphy, and Lars Schmienk,

Kindle Ed., Taylor and Francis, 2020, pp. 401-407.

Said, Edward W.. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, 1993.

Scott, Ridley, director. *Bladerunner*, Warner Bros., 1982.

Shirow, Masamune. *Ghost in the Shell*, Kodansha, 1989-1990.

Small, Zachary and Jennifer Scheussler. "Trump Calls on Smithsonian Institution to

Promote 'American Greatness.'" *The New York Times*, online ed., 28 March

2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/28/arts/design/trump-smithsonian-institution-eo.html>)
2025/03/28/arts/design/trump-smithsonian-institution-eo.html. Accessed 19 May 2025.

Smith, Eric D. *Globalization, Utopia, and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope*. Palgrave McMillan, 2012.

Snead, James. "European Pedigrees/African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative, and

Communitality in Tutuola, Achebe and Reed." *Nation and Narration*, Kindle Ed.

Ed. Homi K. Bhaba, Routledge, 2010. pp. 231-249.

Spelljammer: Adventures in Space. Wizards of the Coast, 2024.

Spooner, James, director. *Afropunk*. Produced by Ayanna Mackins, Matthew Morgan, and James Spooner. Performances by Tamar-kali Brown, Matt Davis, Mariko Jones, and More Mitchell, 2003.

Sterling, Bruce. "African Cyberpunk." *Wired*, online ed., 6 May 2010.

<https://www.wired.com/2010/05/african-cyberpunk/>. Accessed 19 May 2025.

---. Preface. *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, Ace, 1988. pp. ix-xvi.

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*, Ed. Robert DeMaria, Jr., Penguin Classics, 2003.

Tiptree, Jr., James. "The Girl Who Was Plugged In." *New Dimensions 3*, Doubleday, 1973. *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever*, Tachyon, 2004, pp. 43-78.

Treanor, Brian. *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate*. Fordham University Press, 2007.

Trump v. United States, 603 U.S. 593 (2024).

Verne, Jules. *Around the Moon*. 1870.

---. *Around the World in Eighty Days*, Ed. and Trans. Michael Glencross, Penguin Classics, 2004.

---. *From Earth to the Moon*. 1865.

---. *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, Ed. P.W. Gogman, Trans. Frank Wrynne, Penguin Classics, 2009.

---. *Off on a Comet*. 1877.

---. *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Ed. and Trans. David Coward, Penguin Clothbound Classics, 2017.

Wankhede, Calvin. "Did You Know: Apple's Revenue Exceeds the Economic Output of Most Countries." androidauthority.com, 12 Feb. 2024.

<https://www.androidauthority.com/apple-revenue-vs-country-gdp-3412922/>.

Accessed 19 May 2025.

Watanabe, Shinichirō, director, and Yoko Kanno, composer. *Cowboy Bebop*, Sunrise, 1999.

Webb, Maureen. *Coding Democracy: How Hackers Are Disrupting Power, Surveillance and Authoritarianism*. The MIT Press, 2020.

Well, H.G. *The Great Science Fiction: The Time Machine, The Island of Doctor Moreau, The Invisible Man, The War of the Worlds, Short Stories*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2017.

World of Warcraft. Activision-Blizzard, 2004-2025.